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AFGHANISTAN, Beyond NATO and the Drums Of War

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When Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the surprise was that Najibullah's government survived as long as three years without Soviet funding. The dreadful civil war that ensued would lay the ground for the emergence of the Taliban. While the NATO Chicago Summit prepares to send another message of optimism on the future of Afghanistan, some Afghans and internationals are now pointing to another 1989 scenario. Even the Financial Times didn't hesitate to entitle its recent May 7th editorial "Stopping a slide to Afghanistan redux" in allusion to 1989.

There are indeed plenty of signs that point to a new civil war. The fragmentation of corrupt ridden political groups, the re-arming of power brokers through local militias, the possible return of the Taliban and the destabilising hand of some foreign actors (namely Pakistan's secret service agency, the ISI, but not exclusively) have already created immense instability in the country. Without a foreign troop presence, they are all factors that could create a catastrophic recipe of civil war.

But basing analysis on past scenarios including 1989 tends to overlook many changes that have taken place in the last 10 years. The drums of war that sound from some corners must be taken with caution. With the convergence of the withdrawal of international troops, negotiations with the Taliban and presidential elections in 2014 or possibly next year Afghan power brokers are nervous throughout. Rhetoric has grown harsh and demands have become maximalist. In true Afghan tradition, conspiracy theories of every flavour abound and dire pledges delivered in a sombre tone seem fraught with loopholes.

Leading the talk of the possibility of a new civil war are the so called 'anti-Taliban'. This group includes important tadjik, uzbek and hazara leaders that until recently formed part of the broad ethnically mixed political support base that has kept Karzai in power. United around various issues including reforming the electoral law and decentralising power, these power brokers primary concern is impeding the return of the Taliban. They feel negotiations are Taliban tactics in the objective of re-establishing an Islamic emirate and demand to be included in

these talks. When I recently met Amrullah Saleh, the former government intelligence head and now a leading 'anti-Taliban', in Kabul, he warned that if the US and Karzai continue to marginalise them, "we are potentially a bigger spoiler than the Taliban".

Regional actors also acknowledge the possibility of a civil war. But unlike the US or Europe who are desperately rushing to exit (the last being France, pledged by Hollande to withdraw its combat forces by the end of this year) withdrawal is not an option. Their future is to a greater or a lesser extent invariably tied to Afghanistan, situated in the heart of the region. Conscious that many different scenarios could emerge, regional actors from Russia to Iran have adopted hedging strategies whereby some sort of contacts are maintained with all possible future leaders, including Taliban constituents.

But these same regional actors are also investing heavily in the country, creating vested interests against further conflict. Countries as diverse as Pakistan, Iran, China and India have growing economic ties with Afghanistan, including in the case of the last two, important contracts to develop significant and high quality mineral reserves. And economic links intensify human links: three flights per day link Kabul to Delhi.

Many Afghans own interest in peace should not be overlooked either. Firstly, are the power brokers, including the anti-Taliban, that dominate Afghan politics. While they would be reluctant of losing out from eventually sharing power with the Taliban, they would likely have more to lose from a conflict. After ten years dealing with a wide array of Afghan and foreign actors, even warlords whose interest were generally local before, have to a certain degree become 'institutionalised'. They are thus well placed to continue gaining from their investments and family connections in Kabul and elsewhere. With Kabul remaining the prize, it is hard to envision a scenario similar to the 1990s civil war in which regionally based war lords ripped the capital city to threads.

There are also the local actors that have benefited from the influx of foreign funds in the last 10 years. In large part due to security services contracting and reconstruction projects, these entrepreneurial Afghans have become a new elite class at the local level. While some may be happy to pick up the money and run to Dubai or Delhi as some are already doing, others will stick around. What role they may have is hard to predict, but they will not be as easily bought off as they were before.

Finally, the role of Afghanistan's massive youth population -67% of the population is younger than 25- should not be overlooked. Much like in the Arab world, this silent majority is now increasingly connected amongst each other and to the rest of the world, in this case, mostly through mobile phones and television rather than internet. Many of these youth live in cities and due to conflict, have lived in neighbouring countries such as Iran or Pakistan, giving them an entirely different worldview than their parents had in 1989 when they had likely never left their village or valley.

The Chicago NATO summit will try to send a calming message of long-term commitment to Afghanistan but it will not belie underlying nervousness. As Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network told me; "Foreigners tend to now think that if we didn't know how to fix the country, it must be doomed to fall apart". The best thing the US and Europe can do right now is to specify their economic and security commitments to Afghanistan as soon as possible. Thereafter, the countries of the region and especially Afghans themselves will be better placed to address the challenges ahead in a realistic, sustainable way.

Civil war will continue to be a plausible scenario. But 1989 should only serve as a reminder of the dangers of the international community disengaging irresponsibly from Afghanistan. In a transformed national and international context, new scenarios will be drawn.