

Abubakar Siddique

Senior Correspondent covering Afghanistan and Pakistan for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

A Tapestry of Ethnicities

Afghanistan's national anthem recognizes 14 ethnic groups among the country's 27 million people: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Balochis, Turkmens, Nooristanis, Pamiris, Arabs, Gujars, Brahuis, Qizilbash, Aimaq and Pashai. Few groups are indigenous to Afghanistan; most of the larger ones have significantly greater populations in neighbouring countries. Governing a viable state with these demographics has always been a core challenge. Maintaining harmony among these groups is one of the biggest problems confronting Afghanistan today and a key determinant of whether its future is to be one of peace and reconciliation or conflict and discord.

The largest group, the Pashtuns, have many more members in neighbouring Pakistan. The Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens are much more numerous in the contiguous Central Asian countries to the north.¹ Nevertheless, as a people, Afghans do have a sense of nationhood despite their lack of a uniform national culture. Their shared history together with the country's unique historical development clearly distinguishes the various ethnic groups living in Afghanistan from those in neighbouring countries. But their ties also link Afghans with ethnic conflicts in neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan.

In the absence of accurate census data, determining the true percentages of various ethnic groups is problematic and can be contentious. Furthermore, simply defining various ethnic identities is not always easy. The idea that "ethnic groups are solid cultural units, which are divided by obvious boundaries" and have engaged in conflict for centuries is not applicable to Afghanistan.² For example, a sizeable number of Dari speakers consider themselves Pashtuns because of ethnic heritage. Some native-Pashto speakers consider Dari their second language. While the Nooristanis, Balochis, Pashai and Brahuis are distinct groups in the south and east of the country, they are identified more closely with the Pashtuns in Kabul because many of their members are bilingual.

Abubakar Siddique has spent the past decade researching and writing about security, political, humanitarian and cultural issues in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Pashtun heartland along the border region where he was born.

1. The tiny Kyrgyz minority in Afghanistan left the country during the 1980s. Few of its members have returned.
2. Schetter, Conrad, "Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan," Center for Development Studies (ZEF) University of Bonn, Germany, Working Paper 3, 2004.

Bilingualism, intermarriages, religious and political ideologies transcend ethnic boundaries. At the same time, identities and group interests are very local, often associated with a political or regional unit—a village, clan or part of the country—rather than ethnic groups. Afghanistan is a patchwork of ethnicities much like colourful Afghan carpets, which makes it difficult to see its politics purely through an ethnic prism. It also makes territorial ethno-nationalism impractical. “Afghan ethnic groups have never viewed themselves as fixed nationalities with an overriding commonality and history that would require political unity or a nation-state,” writes American anthropologist Thomas Barfield. “Instead, ethnicity in Afghanistan is essentially prenationalist, with ethnic groups holding similar economic and political interests but no common ideology or separatist aspirations.”³

An Uneven History of Ethnic Relations

Today’s group relations and aspirations were shaped and greatly influenced during the emergence of modern Afghanistan during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman (1880-1901). The Pashtuns lost their overwhelming majority at that time, because the Amir ceded the majority Pashtun population and their territories to British India, under the Durand Line treaty agreement of 1893.⁴ But his consolidation of a centralised state, pacification of the Hazarajat and resettlement of the Pashtuns into ethnically mixed northern regions established Pashtun domination in Afghanistan.⁵ Still, it was Dari-speakers, Tajiks and Qizilbash in particular, who practically ran the administration through domination of the bureaucracy. Their role was enhanced because the Pashtun kings adopted their language. The conflicts in Afghanistan were never exclusively ethnic throughout the twentieth century. They were more focused on alliance building by factions and powerbrokers. For example, the 1929 rebellion against the reformer King Amanullah Khan failed to deliver a stable replacement because of a split between the Pashtun and Tajik powerbrokers that instigated it.⁶

During the next half century, Afghanistan witnessed a stable, centralised, mostly Pashtun-dominated government, which relied on foreign assistance to bring about gradual modernisation. “Pashtunistan” — defined by some as an independent Pashtun state or autonomous region within Pakistan, but seen by others as a potentially unified state of all Pashtuns—became a key foreign policy issue for Afghanistan. This period saw concerted government efforts to grant rights to all citizens to establish more equality among them. The relative political freedoms granted under the 1964 Constitution allowed the formation of leftist and Islamist groups. At the same time, ethnicity played a more prominent role in political alignments. *Setam-e Milli* (National Oppression) emerged as a decidedly anti-Pashtun organisation whose focus was the overthrow of what they described as the Pashtun dominance of Afghanistan. On the other hand, *Afghan Millat*, a Pashtun nationalist political party, advocated greater Pashtunisation of Afghanistan and even aspired to unite all Pashtuns. Many leaders of the two major factions of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) also supported such views.⁷

The April 27 1978 communist military coup, called the Saur Revolution by its instigators, marked the end of Durrani dynasty and opened the

3. Barfield, Thomas, “Afghanistan’s Ethnic Puzzle,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2011.
4. In fact, the British had acquired many Pashtun borderland districts, including most of today’s FATA and parts of Balochistan, by forcing Amir Yaqub Khan to sign the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879 while their forces occupied Kabul.
5. Ahady, Anwar-ul-Haq, “The Decline of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 7, pp. 621-634, July 1995.
6. Barfield, *Ibid.*
7. Shola Jawid, a radical leftist (Maoist) group has also been described as sharing *Setam-e Milli*’s position on Pashtun domination. But some Afghans intellectuals point to the ethnic Pashtuns among their ranks as a proof of their commitment to Maoism.

political arena to all aspirants.⁸ The Pashtun-dominated *Khalq* faction attempted to break down the dominance of Dari by focusing on language and cultural policy. The regime recognised Uzbeki, Turkmeni, Balochi and Nooristani as official languages and promoted Pashtun culture. But such policies were reversed to the advantage of non-Pashtun groups after the December 1979 Soviet invasion, which brought the *Parcham* faction into power. During the reign of *Parcham* leader Babrak Karmal, Dari was promoted at the expense of Pashto as his regime increased the non-Pashtun representation within the military and the bureaucracy.⁹ Ethnicity also emerged as a factor of unity and division among the armed Islamist opposition to the regime. In Pakistan, Pashtun Islamists firmly controlled the resistance leadership while Iran supported the pre-dominantly Hazara Shi'a groups. In that atmosphere of internal fragmentation and external interference, President Najibullah's efforts at intra-Afghan reconciliation failed. Najibullah replaced Karmal in 1986 and had to face first the withdrawal of the Soviet army and then the collapse of the Soviet state. Western and regional apathy toward the country and fierce rivalries among the *mujahideen* and communist leaders ensured that the United Nations (UN) peace plan would collapse before taking off after Najibullah relinquished power in April 1992.

Najibullah's downfall heralded the beginning of a messy civil war and the complete dismantling of Afghan state institutions. An alliance of non-Pashtun *Parchami* officials with the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud ensured the demise of his regime, which was considerably weakened by the defection of Pashtun military officers after the Soviet army withdrew in early 1989. The Pashtuns lost influence and suffered perhaps the sharpest decline in their influence in this period. Still, the Afghan state's demise proved disastrous for all Afghan civilians irrespective of their ethnicity and political affiliation. The *mujahideen* regime was a mirage consisting of shifting alliances and conspiracies. While it claimed to be the protector of its members' various ethnicities, the leaders were amenable to external pressures and battlefield compulsions. Their struggle ultimately centred on individual survival and power grabs while often using ethnicity as a convenient cover and a powerful mobilising tool. Their main achievement until the emergence of the Taliban in late 1994 was to plunge Afghanistan deep into civil war and anarchy.

The *raison d'être* of the Taliban was to end the anarchy. But when they took on powerful non-Pashtun warlords and militias, some Afghan and international observers tended to describe them as "Pashtun nationalists" who wanted to revive a centralised Pashtun-dominated state in Afghanistan.¹⁰ In fact, one of the first Taliban acts after capturing Kabul in September 1996 was to kill Najibullah and hang his corpse on public display. According to former Taliban official Waheed Mozhdah, the Taliban justified his killing - he was an ethnic Pashtun - as an act to please Allah and not a result of ethnic and tribal differences.¹¹ However, the Taliban failed to please any segment of Afghan society after capturing Kabul in September 1996. Their rigid policies never won them overwhelming public support among the Pashtuns. The Taliban were opposed to all Pashtun political elites in the regimes preceding them. They opposed the nationalist mainstream of the old royalist regime and, unlike the communists, had no worldly focus on material development as a means of radical progress. Many Pashtun *mujahideen* commanders fought against the Taliban for years. In fact,

8. The Durrani dynasty really ended with the King's fall in 1973. But many Afghans consider President Daoud Khan as an extension of the dynasty because he was King Zahir Shah's first cousin and a political figure during his 40-year rule.
9. Nabi, Eden, "The Ethnic Factor in Soviet-Afghan relations," *Asian Survey*, March 1980, pp. 237-56.
10. While in power they never accepted the Durand Line and discouraged Pakistan from negotiating it. But they did not press the issue of Pashtunistan and remained concerned as Islamists with spreading their values and behavioural restrictions.
11. Mozhdah, Waheed, "Afghanistan under five years of the Taliban control" (In Dari, "Afghanistan Va Panj Sala Salta-e Taliban". Kabul, Maiwand Publications, 2001). I am grateful to the author for providing an unpublished English language translation.

many Kandahari *mujahideen* joined Herati Tajik (sometimes he is also identified as Farsiwan) warlord, Ismail Khan, to fight the Taliban. Senior Pashtun commanders from southern and eastern Afghanistan allied themselves with Ahmed Shah Massoud during the Taliban's stint in power. Many Pashtun *mujahideen* commanders retained their status only by joining the Taliban. Although the majority of the Taliban came from the southern Pashtun tribal confederacies of the Ghilzai and the Durrani, engaging in traditional tribal politics remained anathema to them. Many Taliban networks were organised on the notion of *andewali* (Pashto for friendship) and some of these networks manifested tribal solidarity. While they were seen as adhering to *Pashtunwali* by outsider observers, the Taliban opposed important aspects of local *narkhs*, or customary law, in various Pashtun regions. Their central objectives, to which they strongly adhered, were to implement Islamic *Shari'a* law and bring their own vision of peace to Afghanistan.

Ethnic Division and Unity since 2001

At the dawn of 21st century, the conflict in Afghanistan was seen above all as an ethnic struggle. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were seen as bankrolling a Pashtun takeover of the country by supporting the Taliban.¹² On the other hand, Iran, Russia, some Central Asian states and India supported the essentially non-Pashtun Northern Alliance,¹³ to prevent a complete Taliban victory when the fundamentalist militia already controlled more than 90 per cent of Afghanistan's territory.¹⁴ Peace-building efforts then centred on the creation of a representative administration. Most United Nations Security Council resolutions supported "the efforts of the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan to advance a peace process through political negotiations between the Afghan parties aimed at the establishment of a broad-based, multi-ethnic, and fully representative government." While the Taliban defied such resolutions, the Northern Alliance and Afghanistan's near and farther-off neighbours paid lip-service to them. In reality, all sides pushed for military advantage before committing to any political settlement. The factors that made ethnicity central to the discussion of that period were violent incidents and possible war crimes of "ethnic cleansing and ethnocide". These included violence in Kabul between 1992 and 1994; in the Shomali plains to its north between 1996 and 2001; in the Hazarajat between 1998 and 2001; and in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997 and 1998. Various warring factions perpetrated these crimes and the episodes include instances when the Hazaras, Tajiks or the Pashtuns were primary victims. Extremist networks from neighbouring countries were also involved.¹⁵

Afghanistan attracted unprecedented international attention after the September 11 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. A swift American-led military victory routed the Taliban and a much slower - and flawed - political intervention focused on delivering a "broad-based and multi-ethnic" government. Hamid Karzai, a Durrani Pashtun leader from Kandahar, was picked to lead the first transitional administration. The 30-member cabinet he led included 11 Pashtuns, 8 Tajiks, 5 Hazaras, 3 Uzbeks and 3 members of other ethnic minorities. The Taliban were then considered to be a spent force and were not even invited to the UN-brokered meeting in Bonn Germany, which delivered the interim

12. By 2000, the Saudi government likely had ended its support, though private sources of support continued.

13. Northern Alliance is the media's nomenclature for the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. It was an alliance of Shi'a and Sunni *mujahideen* leaders and included ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, a few Pashtuns and some commanders from other ethnicities, dominated however by Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhannudin Rabbani.

14. See, Saikal, Amin, "Afghanistan's ethnic conflict," *Survival*, Volume 40, Issue 2, 1998.

15. Schetter, 2004, *ibid*.

administration and a roadmap for the country's political reconstruction. The key flaw in the arrangement was that it prioritised the resolution of the ethnicised Afghan conflict. In reality, that ethnicisation did not filter down to the masses. Most, if not all, Afghans simply wanted security, good governance, basic services and transitional justice. However, the provision of these fundamental demands was relegated to secondary significance.

Thus, the new political system propped up by Washington and its allies aimed to balance ethnic relations and prevent a renewed conflict by ostensibly attempting to make the new political system more representative, open and a level playing field for all Afghans. Some of the past discrimination against certain minorities was abandoned. However, the centralised system failed to deliver governance at sub-national level. Some of these critical shortcomings were papered over by more informal means, such as elite alliances and patronage politics, which serviced those in power but delivered little in the way of political stability and development. A big part comprised of deal-making, in which appointments to key posts amounted to a distribution of political spoils. This went against the demands of many Afghans, who called for a meritocracy and for transparency.

Thus, the international intervention in fact enhanced the role of patronage politics in Afghanistan, contrary to popular Afghan expectations. By supporting the civil war era militia commanders as key power brokers, the Western intervention contributed much to strengthening the networks they ran in the name of certain ethnic and sectarian groups. In the emerging Afghan political order, ethnic politics were not defined by ethnic political parties with ethnic programs (as is the case in neighbouring Pakistan) but rather, by fluid patronage networks led by power brokers. They used ethnic, sectarian, and sub-ethnic ties to build networks, using resources obtained from a variety of sources. Some of them, for instance, did not abandon their relations with external patrons such as Tehran and Islamabad despite publicly pledging loyalty to the new political order. Such ethnic patronage networks have been critically strengthened over the period since 2001, by the distribution of contracts by Washington and its allies among influential power brokers. That in turn affected the formation of ethnic coalitions and relations among them. Elections provided an especially large opportunity for patronage politics to prosper, by enabling certain networks to assume a larger political role. Overall, patronage politics affected the formation of a political system whose formal structures coexist uneasily with the informal power structures of patronage.¹⁶

Pakistan and the Pashtun Paradox

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been clouded by the division of the Pashtun population between the two countries. Today, nearly 50 million Pashtuns count the two countries as home. There are some 15 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, while an additional 30 million to 35 million Pashtuns live in Pakistan. No Afghan government has ever formally recognised the Durand Line as a *de jure* international border. To leaders in Islamabad, nationalist Pashtuns and Balochis represented the most significant threat to Pakistan's national unity since the creation

16. I am grateful to Barnett Rubin for explaining this to me. See also, Sharan, Timor & Heathershaw, John, "Identity Politics and State building in Post-Bonn Afghanistan: The 2009 Presidential Election," *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 10, Issue 3-4, pages 297-319, 2011.

of Bangladesh in 1971. That view was further reinforced by the majority status of Pashtuns in neighbouring Afghanistan, where rulers championed the rights of Pashtuns in Pakistan and made irredentist claims of their own. Ever since the 1970s, Pakistan has responded to the threat by propping up armed Islamist clients in Afghanistan. Most of those clients were ethnic Pashtuns, so the policy addressed both internal and external political and security concerns.

Western backing in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s provided Pakistan with a golden opportunity to act on its longstanding desire to weaken Pashtun nationalism. It actively supported pan-Islamism among Afghan refugees while bankrolling Islamist parties in the border region. That resulted in a newer brand of "Pashtun Islamism", some of whose characteristics were manifested and reinforced during the Taliban's ascent to power in Afghanistan, where pan-Islamist solidarity surpassed tribalism and ethnic cohesion.¹⁷

Pakistani analysts, often taking a pro-Pakistani-military world-view, saw the Taliban as a strategic asset. In that view, the Taliban consisted of militant Sunni extremists, composed mainly of southern Afghan Pashtuns primarily loyal to, or beneficial to, Pakistan's geo-strategic interests. They were viewed both as Pakistani proxies opposing the influence of Pakistan's near and further off neighbours; and as an Islamist bulwark against Afghan nationalism and secular Pashtun ethno-nationalism within Pakistan. In addition to fighting against the pro-India, pro-Russia and pro-Iran Northern Alliance, the Taliban also opposed all moderate and progressive Pashtun groups and political leaders in Afghanistan. Extremist groups in Pakistan later emulated their intolerance for dissent among Pashtuns.

The aftermath of 9/11 did not change the Pakistani security calculus. Despite being allies of the West, Pakistani leaders openly advocated a return of the Taliban and equated them with the real representatives of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders, particularly former military dictator General Pervez Musharraf, championed Pashtun rights in Afghanistan while remaining seemingly oblivious to an expanding Taliban and Al-Qaeda insurgency in its western Pashtun regions. Islamabad gained little from what its critics dubbed as a double game. Its interference in domestic Afghan affairs made it extremely unpopular among many segments of Afghan society. Particularly damaging was the loss of Pashtun and non-Pashtun powerbrokers, who viewed Islamabad as an unreliable patron.

Pakistani support for the extremists in Afghanistan has had a significant domestic blowback. It bitterly divided the country's Pashtun population. The Taliban rule in Afghanistan in the 1990s offered sanctuaries and combat experience to Pakistani Sunni extremists. It also energised the various factions of the *Jamiat Ulam-e Islam* (JUI). But the Taliban insurgency deeply affected them by threatening the leadership of key Pashtun Islamist leaders. The Taliban regime and later the extremist insurgencies in the tribal areas were universally opposed by secular Pashtun ethno-nationalists in Pakistan, because of their political competition with the Islamists for popular votes. For them, the Taliban represented the climax of the Pakistani military's imperial over-reach. Such views were finally adopted by Western leaders as they stared at a

17. For a detailed discussion see, Rubin, Barnett and Siddique, Abubakar, "Resolving the Pakistan-Afghanistan Stalemate", Special Report 176, United States Institute of Peace, October 2006.

potential strategic debacle in Afghanistan. "In supporting these [militant] groups, the government of Pakistan, particularly the Pakistani Army, continues to jeopardise Pakistan's opportunity to be a respected and prosperous nation with genuine regional and international influence," top American military officer Michael Mullen told the Senate's Armed Services Committee on September 22, 2011. His views echoed what secular Pakistani and Afghan leaders have been saying for years. The Pashtun dynamic is expected to remain a key determinant of cooperation or competition between the two countries in the future.

The Many Wars of Balochistan

The nearly half-million Balochis and Brahuis in Afghanistan do not constitute a threat in terms of a potential major ethnic conflict in the country. Many of them speak Pashto and follow Sunni Hanafi Islam, which integrates them well into the Afghan social fabric. Afghanistan has historically supported Balochi separatist nationalists in Pakistan as part of its Pashtunistan demands. In the 1970s, Afghanistan backed a Balochi insurrection and later sheltered the insurgents. The southwestern province of Balochistan makes up nearly half of Pakistan's 800,000-square-kilometre territory, its population (nearly half of whom are Pashtun) accounts for less than 5 percent of the country's 180 million people. Balochi separatist factions headed by young leaders are now perpetuating their fifth rebellion in Pakistan's 64-year history. Islamabad crushed earlier insurgencies in 1948, 1958, 1962, and from 1973 to 1977.

Kabul partly revived its traditional support for the Balochis, as the new administration faced greater military pressure from a regrouped Taliban. Afghanistan accused Pakistan of harbouring remnants of the former Taliban regime in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province. Alleged Afghan support for the on-going Balochi insurgency in Pakistan and continued Taliban sanctuary in the region constitute another issue of discord between Islamabad and Kabul. Balochistan's long Arabian Sea shore, its borders with Afghanistan, Iran and all of Pakistan's provinces make it a regional crossroads. The region may, in the future, benefit from planned energy running pipelines across Iran, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. But for the time being it serves as a hotbed of regional rivalries and insurgent movements.

Today, Islamabad is still vigorously fighting its Balochi insurgency, occasionally diverting resources it gets from the West to confront the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. But the West still considers ending the Taliban's Pakistan sanctuaries as a top priority for salvaging their transition plans and forcing Afghan insurgents to the negotiating table. That also creates further friction in the already deteriorating relations between Islamabad and Washington. Furthermore, according to information from some Balochi activists, in their belief, one reason for the increased efforts to crush the newest insurgency in the province is so that the Afghan Taliban's sanctuaries there remain protected. Islamabad, on the other hand, has publicly accused India of supporting Balochi separatists. Islamabad has also accused Kabul of sheltering Balochi rebel leader Brahamdagh Khan Bugti for years. The unending attacks on Pakistan's tiny Hazara minority in the province are adding

tension to relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan because the bond between the Hazaras of the two countries has been strengthened by displaced Afghan Hazara who lived in exile in Quetta.

Spoiler, Friend or Adversary – Iran’s Many Facets in Afghan Divides

Many Afghan and Iranian ethnic groups belong to what regional specialists call “the Iranian peoples”, because of their ethnic and linguistic links. In modern times, Iran’s influence in Afghanistan has been helped by the Farsi language. Dari, a dialect of Iran’s national language Farsi, is Afghanistan’s lingua franca. Since the Iranian revolution, the clerical regime has added Shi’a Islam as an instrument to further their influence in Afghanistan. Iran hosted eight Shi’a Hazara organisations compared to the seven Sunni *mujahideen* organisations in Pakistan. Tehran pressured them to forge unity in 1989 and become a single political party. By and large, the Iranian support for Shi’as did not serve them well, because it pitted them against the majority Sunnis, a stance which on occasion turned them into targets for Sunni hardliners. Indeed, Tehran developed hostilities with the Taliban soon after the emergence of fundamentalist Taliban militia in mid-1990s.

Tehran immensely benefited from the overthrow of the extremist Sunni Taliban regime in Afghanistan after 9/11. However, it views the presence of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) troops as a major threat in Afghanistan. Afghan and NATO officials periodically accuse Iran of supporting the Taliban. Tehran, in their view, wants to keep the pot boiling in Afghanistan by providing arms to the insurgents. On the other hand, Tehran has held cordial relations with the various administrations President Hamid Karzai headed during the past decade. However, Tehran played the language card by supporting some Sunni Persian speakers. Some Afghan intellectuals have been alarmed by what they see as a cultural invasion of their country, as Tehran bankrolls Afghan media (some of which exclusively focuses on promoting Shi’ism) and floods the country with Persian-language literature. The increasing Iranian involvement in Afghanistan does not elevate a single ethnic group, but rather, simply pursues Tehran’s strategic interests. Like Islamabad, Iran is also watching the emerging scenario in the lead up to the 2014 NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is likely to build on its influence in Afghanistan to position itself as a major spoiler after 2014.

Reviving the Lost Connections to Central Asia

Unlike Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan’s relations with its three Central Asia neighbours, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have not seriously affected group relations inside Afghanistan. The Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens in Soviet Central Asia had little contact with their ethnic cousins in Afghanistan before the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980s. The two groups are still distinct because of their experience with different state systems. Islam emerged as an alternative to the authoritarian post-Soviet regimes in Central Asia. Some Afghan Islamists were involved in the Tajik civil war in the 1990s. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was inspired and supported by the

Afghan Taliban. Both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have provided limited support to some Afghan groups, particularly Northern Alliance factions during the civil war with the Taliban. Turkmenistan has stuck to its declared neutrality in Afghan affairs since its independence. Overall, the strategy of the post-Soviet Central Asian states has been to not support either secession or ethno-nationalism in Afghanistan. The Central Asians have focused on cultivating ethnic friends across their borders, as an insurance against the emergence of hostile groups in Afghanistan.

All Central Asian states are now exposed to a gathering threat of extremist revolts inspired and supported by the IMU and affiliated groups, which have been transformed by their alliance with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beginning in 2010, the IMU attempted to make a comeback in Central Asia on the back of its symbiotic relationship with the Taliban. The IMU's Sunni Muslim ranks of Central Asian origin made it appealing to ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, as well as other non-Pashtun communities. With the Taliban's help, the IMU carved small sanctuaries in remote regions along Afghanistan's northern border. That enabled it to train fresh recruits and strike targets in neighbouring Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan suffered major attacks in 2010. The trend continued in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 2011. In the absence of domestic reforms, economic development and regional cooperation, the threat of Islamist revolts is likely to increase across Central Asia.

Afghanistan a Bridge or Barrier to Cooperation and Development?

Afghanistan's immediate future is clouded by unease over the aftermath of NATO's departure in 2014.

The Taliban and NATO are still pushing for a decisive battlefield advantage. The West has failed to deliver a major diplomatic breakthrough in the form of pushing Afghanistan's predatory neighbours to cooperate. Afghan institutions are still too fragile, dwarfed by powerful figures controlling patronage networks. Creating too many security structures, like the loosely controlled community police, may ultimately prove disastrous. The reconciliation process, a key to the future peace in Afghanistan, has been severely setback by violence and faces an uncertain future. That confuses many Afghan power brokers. There are already reports of some commanders in northern Afghanistan arming their supporters. The merciless Ashura attacks against mostly Hazara Shi'a mourners in December 2011, presumably instigated from Pakistan, could spark the revival of sectarian conflict. A rerun of the proxy war of the 1990s is, however, the preferred framework for outside intervention in the Afghan conflict. The Afghan sides involved in such a conflict could potentially be defined along ethnic lines.

Kabul can adopt a range of policies to thwart such scenarios. President Karzai and his successors should move beyond the deal-making model and implement genuine reform. He has attracted unprecedented international support in Afghan history and he must use it for developing his country. His administration should abandon patronage politics for a meritocracy. It should not be limited to Kabul, but needs to filter down

to the provinces and districts. Such measures will be welcomed by an Afghan population victimised by all forms of corruption. Afghanistan needs to deliver a more pragmatic and flexible form of local governance. The country's current centralised constitution envisioned elected district *shuras*, or councils, which never materialised. Kabul should invest more in preserving Afghanistan's diverse cultural heritage and promote various ethnic cultures. The development of regional languages is closely related. Following the example of South Asia, Afghanistan can gradually adopt English as an official language. That is already the case in Afghan offices and businesses, thanks to the on-going international engagement in the country. It will be critical to putting an end to the rivalry between Pashto and Dari, and would do much to modernise Afghan education.

However, the key to a peaceful Afghan future is strengthening regional cooperation between Kabul and its neighbours. Future relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan can benefit from a recognised open border. It should couple with rapid economic development and political reform. That would extract the Pashtuns from a seemingly unending conflict and enable them to communicate, trade, and develop both their economy and their culture while permanently settling the question of their citizenship rights in both countries. Islamabad and Kabul can use their Pashtun (and to a lesser extent Balochi, Hazara and Nooristani) population in mutual confidence building. The people-to-people contacts, supported by the international community, would help regional cooperation. Such a process could be replicated with Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours and Iran. However, the international community should pay greater attention to the perennial problem of regional interferences in Afghanistan. A greater international focus on, and support for, promoting people-to-people contact, dialogue and trade will force reluctant regional governments to look towards cooperation as the key plank of their geo-strategic calculations. That would do much to dissuade them from supporting armed proxies inside Afghanistan in order to achieve what they think is necessary for securing their national interests.

Afterword

Afghanistan has largely avoided the doomsday scenario predicted by many in the West before the end of NATO's combat mission there in 2014, entailing the withdrawal of most alliance troops. Millions of Afghans braved threats to vote in the two rounds of controversial presidential elections that year, but they were rewarded with a somewhat dysfunctional and diarchal national unity government. Although the government manages to accommodate most of Afghanistan's strongmen and factions, it is united in name only. Since assuming office, it has been divided over policies and bargained hard over key appointments while facing rising insecurity nationwide and an economic downturn.

The government faces a major test this year as it scrambles to hold parliamentary elections and an important Loya Jirga. The grand tribal assembly is expected to amend the constitution to create the post of an executive prime minister, and politicking in the lead-up to the Loya Jirga is at risk of becoming an ethnic competition.

The Taliban's push for a battlefield advantage and their aversion to talks further test Afghan national unity. Luckily, the Taliban are no longer viewed as disgruntled Pashtuns inside and outside Afghanistan. But in the absence of a negotiated solution and their victories in southern and eastern Afghan provinces, the country could move toward a de facto partition -- with the Taliban controlling the south and their former enemies in the now defunct Northern Alliance reclaiming their northern strongholds.

Pakistan's continued covert assistance to the Afghan insurgents has so far thwarted Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's efforts to end his country's war through regional consensus. While Afghanistan's other neighbors are not helping either, growing Chinese interest and that country's role in Afghanistan is a silver lining of Afghanistan's darkly clouded future. Beijing's ambitions to revive the economies of its neighboring countries by connecting them to the 21st-century version of the Silk Road trade route and its efforts to curb separatism and Islamist radicalism in its Muslim-populated western Xinjiang region raise hopes for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Beijing is unlikely to allow Afghanistan's reversal into a safe haven for radical Islamists.

Abubakar Siddique

2016

