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# CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

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External interventions as well as regional and global rivalries continue to play out in various manifestations of the contemporary “Great Game”, in the territory that covers present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. The key change witnessed in the present decade has been the extent to which conflicts further afield are affecting regional dynamics, and which impact on both countries’ relations with their neighbours, as well as on those with the five key regional powers focused upon in this project.

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The fundamental interests and goals of external players vis à vis the Afghan situation have not changed since 2011. However, their context has, inducing policy shifts that pertain to tactics rather than strategy. The question therefore arises as to what extent do these shifts allow us to imagine that “sources of tension” can be gradually transformed into “sources of détente” - or less ambitiously, as a possible “way forward”?

Most, if not all, of the sources of tension identified at the early stages of the STAP-RP remain as such, five years on, because their root causes – national rivalries, violence, poverty and weak governance in particular - have yet to be effectively tackled. In that sense, the strengthening and expansion of the writ of the state in both Afghanistan and Pakistan will be vital to ensuring domestic and regional stability.

Whilst the drivers of change are domestic, in contrast to 2011, the catalysts for upheaval are now extra-regional.

The - at times - tense relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan themselves remains critical too in this regard. Bound to one another, yet strongly disliking this inter-dependency, as of summer 2016 the potential for meaningful cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan seems significantly reduced, relative to a year earlier. None the less, like it or not, Pakistan is essential to solving the Afghanistan situation, in this complex relationship that is simultaneously based on an undeniable reality, but also founded on profound mutual misunderstandings, mistrust and lack of communication on the respective countries’ motivations vis à vis one another.

## Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the creation of a stable state remains elusive as of the time of writing.

In this ongoing “decade of transformation”, the country is still a fragile state and remains far from being capable of achieving self-reliance without continued external assistance. The level and nature of that assistance will depend on Kabul’s capacity to tackle corruption, improve its capacity to deliver services across the country, secure income generation beyond international aid, and to find a political solution to the current conflict – thus freeing the state from the heavy burden of sustaining an expensive military apparatus. In all, a state facing considerable challenges, therefore.

Yet, despite this fragility, post-Taliban Afghanistan does have a state, and one that is based on democratic principles, despite weak institutions. There is a growing realisation of the need to address the electoral process, because elections are the mainstay of contested power in the country. This delicate democracy faces internal and external challenges from both Islamic extremists and groups that see the opportunity to accede to power through democratic means. The present broad coalition of political groups, civil society and allies is key to sustaining democracy, and preventing its sacrifice to armed resistance. Gains made, such as freedom of expression, the growth of civil society and its organisations, media expansion, and the inclusion of women in development, need to be safeguarded against the opposition that they face from Islamist and traditional constituencies in Kabul politics. The rhetoric of the main political constituencies has become more and more neutral in terms of ethnicity. So far, the Kabul political system has managed to mediate ethnic tensions and avoid the emergence of any ethnic-based challenge to the government.

None the less, from the Afghan side, at present, there is a litany of problems stemming from the existing political setup in Kabul.<sup>1</sup> These include: factionalism, disfunctionality, strong differences around approaches to patronage and (failed) attempts at institution-building. These have both considerable implications for how to handle the conflict, and undermine the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces, on which the state’s survival in its present form depends.

Those challenging that state, the Taliban, have not only proved to be extremely resilient, capable of maintaining a sustained military momentum, and of extending their control over a large swathe of Afghan territory. However, this military strength is combined with political difficulties. These include: maintaining cohesiveness of the movement after the loss of both its original leader and his successor: persuading people of the legitimacy of the armed *jihād* in the wake of the departure of the main US/NATO force; controlling the ambition of *jihādists* like Al Qaeda, which are in alliance with the Taliban; and coping with the vastly superior military resources available to the Afghan government.

1. See STAP RP report of interviews in Kabul in April 2016, in which interviewees emphasise this discontent.

The continued insurgency in the country and the faltering of the latest Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) mechanism mean that a

political settlement remains elusive. None the less, unless the Taliban enter into peace talks, violent resistance will continue. And the longer the current Afghan state survives, the greater is the chance that it may become more resilient. The only hope for a solution to the conflict therefore is to further strengthen regional and international efforts to impress on all parties involved in the conflict – directly or indirectly – that there should be consequences for anyone fomenting conflict; and/ or the regional powers could resolve to ensure that the government in Kabul should not be overthrown by force.

Economically, Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on foreign aid, but also on the illicit trade of narco-trafficking. The country will need to seriously focus on generating domestic sources of revenue to support state expenditures and to provide employment opportunities for its citizens. There have been some recent encouraging signs, particularly on the regional front: (for instance, the TAPI, CASA 1000, the Salma Dam and the Chabahar Transit Route Agreement). Arguably, transit and connectivity (but not mining) remain the only realistic options for realising self-sufficiency in the short to medium term. However, the counterpoint to this is that narratives of negativity remain: Pakistan television has been showing evidence of increased Indian involvement in the region as a threat, not as a positive development.

In order to make progress, hope for the future lies in an effective response by the Kabul government to contain and eventually put an end to insurgency. This will include undermining the Taliban's confidence that they will prevail. At present, the prospect for the continuation of the conflict is a very real one. Political approaches put forward which focus on obtaining a political solution, will lose both credibility and the ability for a degree of "joined up" decision making in Kabul - critical for their success - if the Kabul institutional setup remains dysfunctional on governance, but good at rent-extraction and highly factionalised. The conflict therefore still goes on.

It is clear that simply leaving Afghanistan to its own devices will most certainly put at risk - or even reverse - the limited peace and state-building progress achieved of the past 15 years. This must be avoided. Emphasis on further burden-sharing will be key in that sense. New modalities of support, mainly a combination of remote assistance – both economic and military - from the West, and hands-on political and economic intervention by the main regional powers (Russia and China), will need to be explored in the light of the West's disengagement. This will require stronger and truly inclusive cooperation between the regional powers and the West in a context of growing competition. It will also require assistance with establishing confidence-building processes between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

So, what would it really take for a settlement to be reached between the Afghan state and the Taliban? Anatol Lieven recently suggested that to achieve this, (i) the US needs to make clear it is determined to keep troops in Afghanistan to avoid state collapse and a Taliban victory; (ii) that the Taliban would recognise it will never be granted full control over the country; (iii) that Pakistan brings to bear real pressure on the Taliban to agree to a reasonable settlement; and (iv) that the Kabul government can come up with an acceptable peace

offer. Unfortunately, it is considered that point three is unlikely to occur, and even point four is moot, being a reflection of only one view of the way forward.

## Pakistan

In mid-2016, the question arises of whether the current Pakistan approach towards Afghanistan is sustainable, or whether it has reached its limits in terms of "what can be got away with".

This approach consists of three main components:

- i. *The internal security approach* which aims to reduce or minimise violence within Pakistan itself via persuasion or cooption of the perpetrators, to join the side of the positive, or to obliterate them.
- ii. The "*business as usual diplomacy*" - the maintenance of regional and international relations, via a dialogue of positive engagement with Kabul, the US and others.
- iii. *Projecting its power over Afghanistan via the support of proxies* engaged in *jihad*, regardless of what the latter are aiming to achieve.

However, all three approaches leave many questions hanging, and lead to a focus on actual actions, rather than strategic intention. The components of the latter continue with *status quo ante*, with public indications on the Afghan war depending on safe havens in Pakistan, and a lack of serious measures against - and at times, actual support for - the Afghan Taliban, emanating from Pakistan. Within Pakistan itself, there is dislike, and questioning of this intention.<sup>2</sup> None the less, tragically there is no actual accountability for those who run strategic intent and thus the political debate, such as it is, remains oblique and mainly confined to journalists editorials.

The key question therefore, is can Pakistan maintain these three contradictory stances going forward?

From the Taliban's perspective, the movement's leadership is committed to sustaining the conflict and hence to recapturing power in Afghanistan. It will therefore continue to fight until this goal is reached - unless the power balance is substantively changed. At present, the insurgency is destabilising, because it is coming close to potentially toppling the Kabul government. Even if Pakistan's support were a sufficient condition for keeping the insurgency at its current dangerous level, there have also been tactical statements issued reflecting the balancing act being played around Pakistan being able to influence the Taliban but not guarantee their behaviour, that are mainly directed at minimising US pressure on Pakistan, possibly also indicating concern for its loss of influence in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, perhaps the most affected group of internal stakeholders (with whom the Taliban are already known to have dealings) are the most marginalised, voiceless and constrained in their exercise of agency. These are the approximately 5 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Squeezed between a rock and a hard place, since 2004 (the Constitutional Loya Jirga) they have no formal access to political participation, whether in

2. See STAP RP Pakistan focus group discussions report, March 2016
3. As an example of this, Sartaj Aziz, a senior member of Pakistan's federal cabinet in-charge of Foreign Affairs publicly stated in comments at Washington's Council on Foreign Relations think tank on March 1 2016, that that Pakistan has been hosting senior Taliban leaders, and that consequently it had "significant influence" on the movement. Aziz added that Islamabad had pressured Afghan Taliban leaders to participate in the first-ever direct talks with the Afghan government on July 7, 2015.

Pakistan or in Afghanistan, though reportedly informal channels remain open. This is an important population, for a number of reasons, including because the presence of *Tehrik e Taliban e Pakistan* (TTP) militants in Afghanistan is still an important consideration for the Pakistan army in its dealings on Afghanistan. Going forward, exploring the scope for the refugee population to become part of the solution rather than the problem, and how this may contribute to peacemaking, will be critical.

## The Regional Players & the Changing Situation

With the withdrawal of US and Western troops, the region is left to cope with an increasingly violent Afghanistan, uncertain US politics and hedging behaviour by countries in the region. Iran, for instance, has recently become active in applying such strategies, although it would in fact gain from a stabilised Afghanistan. The greater the uncertainty over stability, the greater the hedging strategies that will be applied across the region.

In fact, Iranian policy toward Afghanistan has always transcended both revolutionary ideology and religious sectarianism. For instance, throughout the *jihad* era of the 80s, Tehran cultivated Shia groups justified by the revolutionary ideology of *vilayat e faqih*, yet also maintained Sunni partners too. Iran has focused on the very “classical” goals of minimizing dangers (US encirclement) and burdens (illegal Afghan refugees on Iranian territory: now at 1.4 million), while maximizing geo-political influence. For Iran, the novel presence of ISIS /Da’esh (or its affiliated groups) in Afghanistan is particularly worrying - so much so that Tehran may be now considering the Taliban as lesser enemies, with whom it is possible to have limited cooperation, or a tacit non-aggression pact. This supplies an insight into the reasons for the visits to Iran by Mullah Mansoor, killed on his way back from the Iran border.<sup>4</sup>

Other external players such as Russia and China (see further below) are stepping up their support to the Kabul government. International anti-Taliban hostility is not as unconditional as it used to be. Iran and Russia have both established channels of communication - if not cooperation - with the Taliban. They are also showing interest in promoting a peace process on which Pakistan has failed to deliver, mainly due to its own ambiguities on the protagonists.

Saudi Arabia is, in 2016, a much less present regional power in both countries than it was in 2011. Its influence is expressed in funding for *madrassas*, mosques, and the Wahhabi-influenced religiosity in Pakistan. This remains, including because of Saudi Arabia’s proxy war with Iran, which is being played out across several regions. Distracted at present by geopolitical events outside the South and Central Asia region, particularly in Syria and Yemen, Saudi Arabia is also facing its own domestic economic problems. As the project closes, it therefore remains an interested, but a less engaged stakeholder, albeit with strong links to the Pakistan *ulema*.

Geopolitical competition with China, together with the need to prevent the growth of Islamist radicalism in Central Asia, has been the main driving factor of Russia’s Afghan policy. What is striking now however is that while competition remains, there is a certain convergence between

4. There is an interesting historical precedent here. In the aftermath of the 2001 US attack on Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, several mid-to-high level Al Qaeda individuals tried to escape through Iran and were detained their status was a half-way house between prisoners and guests. Iranian officials let it be known that on the one hand Tehran, fearing terror operations in their own territory, did not want to provoke Al Qaeda and on the other, the prisoners/guests could be used – as probably some actually were – in quid-pro-quo secret deals. This did not make the Islamic Republic an ally or supporter of Al Qaeda, but rather proved the Iranian regime’s opportunism.

Russia and China in the decision to support the Kabul government. This lies not in the unrealistic hope of a total defeat of the Taliban, but rather, via preventing the defeat of the central government and inducing the Taliban to enter a peace process based on compromise.

China has spearheaded efforts to reinvent the Silk Road through regional integration. This will be key for the future stability of both countries. But China will face the same daunting obstacles that the West has been dealing with in the past decade and a half. The success - or failure - of its vision of a truly functional "*One belt, One road*" will depend on the stability and sustainability of the Afghan and Pakistani states, among other. Only time will tell if Beijing's political craftsmanship, patience and economic progress will allow the Asian giant to steer the region towards cooperation and stability. China has, without doubt, a strong vested geopolitical and above all, economic interest in maintaining stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. One such example is that of relative restraint shown by both on recent border clashes (despite lives lost). It will consequently most likely continue working accordingly.

In the final analysis, despite all of the above, the positive changes needed for each country and for the region to reach their full potential will have to come from within. As recent state and peace-building experiences show, external actors can only catalyse positive change, not impose it. The onus is therefore on Kabul and Islamabad themselves to consolidate their respective states in order to bring stability to their immediate neighbourhood. Should they fail to do so, China's connectivity projects will remain elusive.

## **The Way Forward**

The vulnerability of the region to external negative influences will be proportional to the strength of the states that comprise it. As long as Afghanistan and Pakistan remain fragile states, conflict will thrive and their respective exposure to proxy confrontation will be dangerously high. This is particularly the case of Pakistan whether in the context of the multi-front conflict with India, the forty year old and ongoing political and security situations in FATA and Baluchistan or the steady increase in the Shia-Sunni divide. But Afghanistan is, and will be, no less vulnerable to external distorting elements, from the military calculations of both India and Pakistan - but also to those of Russia vis à vis the perceived threat of non state actors in the "*soft underbelly of the empire*" - as well as to Saudi-Iranian competition for influence in the Muslim world. Sustainable state-building and good governance hold the key to stability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan and of the region as a whole.

Supporting the survival of the Kabul government seems now to have become a point of convergence of practically all external players – including those in Europe – following the realisation that their original preferred option of a self-sustaining, robust, democratic Afghan state cannot realistically be attained, at least in the short to medium term. This convergence on the part of external actors would seem to bode well for the future.



However, once again it is seen that, whilst external players can play a role, in no way can they compensate for the fragility of the nation-state that they intend to support and strengthen. A hard lesson learned, after billions of dollars spent and thousands of casualties incurred. However, this lesson is difficult to translate into an actual shift in policy, because the economic and military unsustainability of the Kabul government still requires the continuation of a military presence in-country. The jury is still out on whether this should or should not be indefinite or open-ended: many critics of President Obama's strategy towards Afghanistan have argued that the approach of setting timetables emboldened the opposition, whilst other analysts suggest that there should be an explicit undertaking that the military presence will not be there for more than a (defined) period.

India-Pakistan relations are one of the main external factors determining the prospects for Afghan stabilization and for the viability of the Afghan state. Pakistan's deep interest in and complex relations with India stemming from the time of Partition contribute to the persistence of an existential threat narrative on the part of the latter. India's relations with Afghanistan have a long history (as is the case for Pakistan). An improved India-Pakistan relationship going forward could lead to a positive regional impact. However, despite some political changes in Delhi and Islamabad, the basic policy of both countries toward Afghanistan has not significantly altered. For India, geo-economics has always had a significant dimension, together with geo-political (and especially security) considerations, which in turn determine the country's policies, alliances, and longer-term strategies. Competition between the ports of Chabahar and Gwadar is a fact, and India clearly intends to be very active – together with both Russia and Iran – in a long-term strategy focusing on energy and trade. If the bilateral relationship with Pakistan were to really change for the better, the new initiatives around transportation routes from China and Central Asia to the Indian Ocean could take off strongly, particularly in the areas of energy and trade. Furthermore, If Pakistan ends its support for the Afghan Taliban, India may well see fit to support a power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan in which the Taliban play a significant role.

However, the problem is that the India-Pakistan relationship is not only dependent on concrete issues – such as the reported ISI support to terrorism in India – but also on the long-term strategic rivalries between the two. This is particularly relevant, given Pakistan's fear that India will take advantage of its overwhelming military and economic superiority to curtail the former's aspiration to geopolitical relevance, including in Afghanistan. As long as Pakistan fears India's intention of using Afghanistan as an asset for its strategic interests, and as long as India is convinced that Pakistan is willing to use the support of home-grown terrorist movements to further its geo-strategic aims, mutual suspicion and rivalry between the two states will continue. This will result in heavy consequences for the future prospects for Afghanistan.

Relationships between states matter. So does geographical proximity. Furthermore, in the complex inter-relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the different, but equally complex relationships between both the latter two and India, the way in which domestic sources of tension play out will make a difference to future outcomes. The domestic

impact of the sources of tension certainly matters, but equally so do the geo-strategic interests of the main involved regional powers.

New, emerging sources of tension that will affect bilateral relations, as well as communities, going forward, include those over water management. This is because of the possibility of leading to three potential confrontations: (i) between Iran and Afghanistan; (ii) between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan; between Pakistan and Afghanistan; and (iii) between India and Pakistan. It is likely that the nexus between unresolved water and border disputes in the region, (e.g the Durand Line, the seemingly perennial India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir), and security, will be fault lines with major regional implications. But it is important to note too that they could also equally be turned from challenges into opportunities. In this regard, a future decreased focus on the military dimension in Afghanistan could well lead towards a renewed attention to the economic and socio-political issues that are crucial for a constructive way forward, across the region. None the less, given the current trajectory, this unfortunately does not look likely.