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### Introduction

This paper aims to explore the direction that the Afghan Taliban Movement is most likely to take in the wake of the death of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and the revelation of Mullah Omar's death before the death of the former. It examines these phenomena through looking at a set of organizational and contextual variables, and assesses whether the Taliban is likely to join the peace process initiated by the Afghan government, in the near future. The paper specifically addresses the following questions:

1. What factors led to the selection of Mullah Mansour as the supreme leader of the Taliban and selection of the Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada after the death of the former?
2. What are the opportunities and constraints for the Taliban posed by regional state and non-state actors, in the wake of recent developments (2015 and after)? How may these and the issues examined in question 1 affect the region and what happens in it; and vice versa: how might what happens in the region impact Afghanistan?
3. The paper addresses the political/soft power aspects of this issue, with reference specifically to the peace talks, beyond armed struggle; and briefly sets out the rationale for why this may become more important over time.

The paper examines the structural factors involved in the selection of the new Taliban leaders and takes stock of the structure of opportunities and constraints – particularly on the regional level – to assess future direction of the insurgency.

Part One of the paper looks at the possible factors behind the selection of the specific individuals to become the Taliban supreme leader, the *Amir-ul-Momineen* (leader of the faithful), by going beyond the immediate dynamics of power play within the Taliban leadership - something that has been explored by numerous Taliban observers in recent times. Part Two discusses the developments of the past three years on the regional level, by analyzing the policies and actions of

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the regional powers that advertently or inadvertently and directly or indirectly affect the balance of war, either in favor of the Taliban or of the current Afghan state. Finally, Part Three assesses the possibility of reaching a political settlement between the National Unity Government (NUG) and the Taliban before the term of the former ends in 2019.

## Part I

The Taliban's swift selection of their new supreme leader after the reign of the former leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was cut short by a drone strike of American forces on May 21 2016, came as a surprise to many observers. Many were also surprised that the latest transition went more smoothly than the one that preceded it. Soon after, there was considerable interest in learning more about the new leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, and the reasons behind his selection.

While some initial information about Akhundzada's background came to the light, it was immediately clear how little the outside world knows about the Taliban. There is even less information about why Akhundzada was selected, beyond the observation that he was the least controversial of all contenders. Much of the attention has been focused on what went on during the gathering of the Taliban council that selected the new leader. Little is said about how Taliban's organizational culture, history and perception of its current situation informed the decision of the council. Michael Semple has explored this question from an ideological-procedural perspective in a paper in 2014<sup>1</sup>. However, the issue can further be explored from other angles. This is an attempt in that direction.

Initial information about Akhundzada indicates that he is the antithesis of his predecessor. Mansour was much worldlier, enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, had licit and illicit businesses inside and outside of Afghanistan and ruthlessly cracked down on internal dissent. Akhundzada, on the other hand, is said to live a simple life in the truest Deobandi tradition<sup>2</sup>. He has also established a reputation for consensus-building. Borhan Osman<sup>3</sup> reports that he even has a son enlisted on the roster of Taliban's suicide bombers. This raises the question of how two individuals of such contrasting styles ended up landing the top job within the same movement. Secondly, why was Mansour's selection apparently so controversial, while Akhundzada's selection was not? It is not an easy question to answer given the secrecy surrounding the Taliban as an organization.<sup>4</sup> Very few people have firsthand information about the selection processes of both leaders, and even fewer have ever spoken about them.

In this paper, the question has been approached through studying: (i) how history and traditions of key social structures that have propped up the movement played a role in the selection process; and (ii) how Mullah Mansour and Mullah Akhundzada's abilities to mobilize specific resources for the movement led to their selection.

### Established Traditions and Existing Structures:

Afghanistan's clergy has had played a very important role in country's

1. Semple (2015)
2. Van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012)
3. See here: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taleban-in-transition-how-mansours-death-and-hibitullahs-ascension-may-affect-the-war-and-peace/>
4. See Kristian Berg Harpviken (2012)

politics – for better or worse – for a long time. Tapping in the steadfast belief of people in Islam, the clergy had, however, never directly ruled the country until 1996. Taliban’s emergence as the most cohesive, effective and militant organization of Afghan clergy for once changed their traditional role of ally/challenger to a ruler into a ruler. Afghan rulers, on the other hand, adopted different strategies to deal with the Afghan clergy with varying degrees of success. Amir Abdul Rahman Khan used brute force – as he did against almost all opponents – to deal with the dissent within the clergy. His son, Amir Habibullah Khan, executed the Mullahs who had publically opposed his relations with the British Indian Administration. However, this did not result in an end to stipends allocated to Mullahs. One of the main reasons for Mullahs to join the successful uprising against King Amanullah in 1929 was his decision to stop these stipends<sup>5</sup>. Today, Afghanistan’s mosques and Takiakhana (worship places of Shias) are exempt from paying utility bills. Prayer leaders in the mosques are on the government payroll. Their peers are in politics, business and judiciary.

The Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets provided by far the best opportunity for Afghan clergy to further assert themselves politically and militarily. Afghan mullahs and *ulema* not only joined different *jihadi* outfits but also established and sustained military-political groups that would later play an important role in the Taliban’s military and political conquests. While the Taliban certainly do not represent the entire Afghan clergy, they are surely the most organized and resourceful clergy-led organization of the past two decades. Had it not been for the international intervention of 2001, the Taliban in all likelihood would have still ruled the country. After being dethroned, the Taliban decided to wage a military campaign against the new state and its international allies. While success of the campaign in political terms is questioned, its durability in military terms cannot be ignored. The Taliban’s sustainability and dedication of its members to the movement was assumed to stem to a great extent from their loyalty to their former leader, Mullah Omar. However, the question is where that sense of loyalty comes from. Was the loyalty due to personal attributions of Mullah Omar or was it by the virtue of the position he was holding? It can be a combination of both. However, looking at it from a historical perspective, it is certainly a function of an organizational culture that seems to have formed the basis of Mufti Rasheed’s procedural regulatory framework, according to which the movement is organized and operated. This is not to dismiss other factors such as the personal skills of individual leaders and loyalties to other value systems and social institutions – affiliation to particular tribes, degree of modern education or lack of it thereof, level of exposure outside the movement, etc. It is, nonetheless, of great value to explore the origins of decision-making culture within Taliban, especially now that they have gone through two leadership transitions. It is important to investigate what procedural arrangements were in place for the selection of the new leaders and what are these procedures informed by.

To this end, it is important to take up the discussion of how Taliban leadership transitions were informed by social structural arrangements that run strongest amongst its leaders and rank and file – religious and Afghan identities being the most prominent ones. Most observers have concluded that Mullah Mansour used cooption, appeasement and extortion in his quest to become the supreme leader after the death of Mullah Omar. This is not to dismiss the willingness of a substantial

5. Chua (2014)

number of members of the Taliban movement to back his bid. He did, however, use his position as the *de facto* leader of the movement to make the position permanent. Mullah Akhundzada was also a deputy before becoming the leader. However, prior to his selection, the chances of his becoming leader were deemed to be slim by many observers, in comparison to those of more celebrated contenders, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqub,. But was he really such outlier an in the race? One way to approach this question is to look at the tradition and procedure of leadership contests in the socio-political structures that make up today's Taliban.

There is evidence that insurgencies do not come about overnight, as claimed by some in the case of the Taliban. Others have made attempts to dispel this myth by looking at the Taliban "fronts" in the battlefields of Kandahar in 1980s during the anti-Soviet *jihad*. The reality is that there are always "existing social structures"<sup>6</sup> that lend leadership, skills, mobilization and communication capabilities, and legitimacy to social movements. The existing social structures in the case of the Taliban seem to be first and foremost the Deobandi *madrassas* and mullah networks of Pakistan/Afghanistan that have either become infused in the movement, or which have allied with it ideologically and operationally over time. Most of Taliban leadership boasts some level of *madrassa* education. Many young *madrassa* students still join the movement and fight against the Afghan government. Two mullah-led *mujahideen* parties of Mawlawi Younas Khalis and Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi have been heavily represented in the movement. Mullah Omar and the founder of Haqqani network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, were members of Khalis Islamic Party in 1980s. The Mansour<sup>7</sup> family of Zurmat and Mullah Arsala Rahmani of Paktika belonged to the Islamic Revolutionary Movement of Mohammadi before joining the Taliban. One of the reasons why the Taliban have a strong presence in the predominantly non-Pashtun provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan in the northeast, is that both provinces supply a sizeable number of students to *madrassas* in Pakistan.

In that, it is worth exploring the organizational culture of selecting leaders of these solidarity networks, to put into context the factors leading to selection of Mullah Akhundzada. One such factor is seniority in clerical rank. As Van Linschoten and Kuehn put it:

*"The religious students' attitude to religious authority was mostly one of respect. They held the knowledgeable and well-educated in great esteem"*<sup>8</sup>.

*"Another factor influenced the idea of religious authority. The Deobandi tradition – and Afghan society in general – included provision for the practice of tasawwuf or Sufism. The relationship between a Sufi elder (pir) and his follower (murid) is a key element that influences how someone will progress in his studies and Sufi practices. Many Afghan religious students – particularly those in the south – were affiliated with Sufi brotherhoods and/or had pirs whom they followed. This was another aspect of the conservative nature of the Taliban. The pir-murid relationship is lasting: teacher and follower form a bond. The Taliban who passed through the madraassas during the 1980s (and, to some extent, rural Afghan in general) were imbued with a respect for those with religious knowledge"*.

6. McAdam (1982); McCarthy and Zald (1977); Van Stekelenburg, Roggeband and Bert Klandermans (2013), p.25

7. This is a different Mansour, not Akhtar Mohammad Mansour.

8. Van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012) p.25

The above may partly explain why Mullah Mansour's ascension to power was so fractious, and why Mullah Akhundzada's was so smooth. The latter commanded respect and religious authority, implying that the immaterial resource of religious knowledge is taken in higher esteem than other forms of material resources within the Taliban movement.

It is also important to note that the Taliban's second most important identity is being Afghan, then after that come their tribal and family affiliations<sup>9</sup>, which all dictate a respect for a teacher<sup>10</sup>, an elder, *speengiray*. Indeed, Afghan traditional decision-making bodies deploy almost identical selection processes to that adopted by the Taliban to select their leaders. *Shuras* and *jirgas* will typically include predominantly grey-haired, older men. The election of a principal leader will come down to his ability to command respect in the community, because of his perceived willingness and ability to create consensus and prevent conflict – other attributes are secondary<sup>11</sup>. It is obviously also important that leaders are materially and militarily powerful and are perceived to be committed to the community's interests, in addition to those of their own. Being a conservative society, mullahs are generally respected because of their importance for the preservation of the identity of the community. Mullahs have also used the opportunity to assert themselves in recent decades in politics. Many local councils include village/district mullahs. The mullahs of major mosques in the cities enjoy celebrity status and frequently give opinions on politics and society, and their opinions count. In the Taliban leadership transitions of the past year, Mullah Mansour clearly used his position as the *de facto* leader of the movement to make his selection possible – in addition to using the established procedures for selection of a leader. Mullah Akhundzada's selection, in contrast, is in large part due to established norms and traditions of the very structures that have played a key role in establishing and sustaining the Taliban. Therefore, it is obvious that leadership contestations and power play of recent times within Taliban have been based on political expediency and necessity as much as "historical accumulation"<sup>12</sup> of certain practices.

To sum up, two lessons can be drawn from the recent leadership transitions of the Taliban: Mullah Mansour's killing will certainly constraint Taliban leadership's ability to operate as effectively as in the past, it does not necessarily mean the whole movement will crumble for being rendered leaderless. Even if no clear succession strategy and plan are in place within the movement, the social structures that have helped sustain the movement – madarassa and mullah networks – will continue to supply the movement with leaders. Second, unless there is a broader national, regional and international consensus to mainstream, integrate, coopt, subjugate or eliminate the madrassa-mullah networks of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Taliban – and its sister jihadi outfits – will easily survive. The consensus will not alone be enough, it will need a sustained, well-resourced long-term effort and a comprehensive implementation strategy. Afghan clergy has weathered acute pressure in the past and it is likely to continue doing so in the foreseeable future.

### A Spiritual Leader vs. a CEO

Insurgencies depend on the mobilization of a complex web of resources to challenge their perceived oppressor. These resources can vary from participants in the movement, to cash, legitimacy, skills, leaders,

9. Van Stekelenburg, Roggeband and Bert Klandermans (2013)
10. Please see Borhan Osman's discussion how Mullah Akhundzada's position as a teachers has earned him more respect here: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taleban-in-transition-2-who-is-in-charge-of-the-taleban/>
11. Daud (2008)
12. Tilly and Tarrow (2015)

existing social structures and so on. The Taliban's current organizational composition and its violent campaign against the Afghan state require a combination of both material and immaterial resources. Taliban leaders have used their social standing, skills and connections to mobilize these resources, to continue to justify and wage violent resistance. From a resource mobilization perspective, the Taliban have mainly accommodated two types of leaders: those that bestow the movement with a high level of legitimacy in the eyes of their ranks and file; and those that contribute in generating participants, finances, weapons, revenue resources, allies and support networks. The classification is not rigidly exclusive, as the main leader will typically have to have the skills to mobilize both material and immaterial resources. However, his strength may lie more in one or in the other. The problem is that there is only one position of the supreme leader that can be held by a member of one of the abovementioned sets of leaders.

When the Taliban were in power, Mullah Mohammad Rabbani was widely assumed to manage the day-to-day affairs of the state – a *de facto* CEO. Mullah Omar provided primarily spiritual guidance and would only occasionally get involved in how state institutions operated on daily basis. After the collapse of the Taliban's emirates, Mullah Omar continued to function in the capacity of a spiritual leader. The Taliban's number two would assume the daily running of operations. Initially, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, as Omar's deputy, worked as the CEO of the movement. However, once he was arrested by the Pakistani security forces - (he remains in custody) - Mullah Mansour was promoted to the position of deputy leader. Both Mullah Baradar and Mansour had a profound knowledge of how to run the Taliban's military as well as logistical operations, how to raise and manage funds and how to run a concerted media/public relations effort. In short, they dealt with and had hands on skills in mobilizing material resources. But as transpired from the first and only round of talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the Taliban CEO did have a say in matters of policy but not the final say. This was down to Mullah Omar alone. Pushed to get an edict from Mullah Omar, Mansour forged a message in support of the peace process. As the pressure mounted from other leaders of the Taliban, Mansour had no choice but to reveal that Mullah Omar had died.

Given his limited knowledge of religious matters, Mullah Omar would typically use more authoritative religious scholars to inform the Taliban's policies. This means Mullah Omar was more concerned with the adherence of his men to a strict religious code, rather than to how the organization of these men was sustained. All the Taliban leadership is assumed to have a degree of religious education. However, not everyone is as qualified as Mullah Akhundzada, for instance. Mullah Mansour, on the other hand, was less of a religious scholar and more of an organizational operator. In the wake of his ascension to power, he managed to keep intact the faith of religious authorities, from which the Taliban derived their legitimacy. However, the historical distinction between the functions of the supreme leader and his deputy in the form of a CEO ceased to exist. Neither Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani's nor Mullah Akhundzada's promotion meant the transfer of operational responsibilities of the entire movement to them. Mansour appears to have remained in charge of all activities. However, he was shrewd

enough to allay any fears of the movement losing its religious identity by bringing Mullah Akhundzada on board, who was also used to woo the Noorzai tribe, important because of the breakaway group of Mullah Rasoul who also happens to be a Noorzai.

The relatively smoother transition from Mullah Mansour to Mullah Akhundzada could be explained by the very nature of the movement's identity, a movement in which knowledge of and strict adherence to the principles of Deobandi Islam take precedence over organizational aspects. In addition to his own exclusionary methods, Mullah Mansour's takeover was partly divisive and disruptive, because he did not command the same respect as a mullah with a proven track record of a deep knowledge of Islam. Besides, he had provoked numerous rivalries in his time as the operational manager of the movement, that would later come back to haunt him. He also could not let go of power, because of his vested interest in retaining his political standing and economic rewards that would only continue through being the most powerful man within the movement. It remains to be seen whether Mullah Akhundzada reverts to being a leader concerned primarily with tasks of guidance and oversight, or whether he too also becomes deeply involved in managing operations. But it does seem the movement has reclaimed its identity – and in effect, legitimacy from its constituents – by appointing a leader that represents the core values of the movement.

## Part II

### The Political Opportunity/Constraint Structure: Regionally-Focused

There is a long-held belief among the scholars of insurgencies<sup>13</sup> that a favorable interplay between insurgencies and the environments they operate in plays a decisive role in success and failure of that insurgency. The environment in which an insurgency operates will present constraining or enabling opportunities. It is up to the insurgency to realize opportunities and manage constraints. Insurgencies also maximize chances of success by mobilizing allies locally, nationally and externally. In today's world, the opportunity/constraint structure has increasingly become multilayered, in which external actors are becoming crucially important to insurgencies<sup>14</sup>.

It is this realization that has prompted President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan to portray the Afghan conflict as a regional phenomenon. He claims that countries of the region, including Russia and China, are sending their "misfits" to Afghanistan. Based on this understanding of the conflict dynamics, President Ghani has taken an increasingly regional approach to the Afghan peace process. On the other hand, the presence of the Taliban command and control structures in Pakistan and relations between the Taliban and regional actors for political, military and financial support further elevates the importance of regional powers (India, Iran, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia). In that regard, it is important to establish whether developments in the region are hindering or further facilitating Taliban's insurgency. Similarly, it needs to be seen how Afghanistan and its current state are affected by the actions of its powerful neighbors.

13. For example, the Taliban's success in driving defeating other groups in 1990s was partly due to infighting amongst the mujahideen groups, because of which civilians welcomed Taliban for restoring order. Another example is that of the Chechen insurgency, which resurfaced once the Soviet Union collapsed. The insurgents perceived the Russian state as weak in this period of transition, launching their campaign.
14. For more on political opportunity/constrain structure, see: Guigni (2009), Meyer (2004), Meyer et.al. (2004) and Gamson et.al. (1996), McAdam (1982)

This section uses data from ten Afghanistan Quarterly Monitoring Briefs (QMBs) of the policy research project, Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Regional Perspective (STAP-RP). The QMBs cover the whole of 2013 and 2014 and the period from December 2015 to April 2016. Events of 2015 are also considered in the content of the paper. The data presented reflects the level of support, opposition or indifference on the part of the concerned regional powers towards the Afghan state alone, not to the Taliban. Therefore, the paper works from the assumption that the higher the level of support to the Afghan state, the higher the pressure on the Taliban.

## India

India has had a consistent policy of supporting stability, economic development and broader trade in Afghanistan. It has also made sure that it has supported the positions of successive post-2001 Afghan government vis-à-vis the Taliban. For instance, India strongly sided with the Afghan government when the latter expressed its displeasure over the manner of opening the Taliban Doha office<sup>15</sup> in 2013. However, in spite of a spate of attacks against Indian interests in Afghanistan, India was initially unwilling to reciprocate by providing heavy armaments to Afghanistan<sup>16</sup> and interests in Afghanistan have largely gone unreciprocated. The final straw in this policy was rejection of Karzai's request for lethal weapons in 2013, which may have partly stemmed from India's calculation not to provoke<sup>17</sup> Pakistan.

As the attacks have continued, India's commitment to support Afghanistan economically, politically and more importantly militarily has further firmed up. From using international platforms to accuse Pakistan for harboring terrorists<sup>18</sup> to finally agreeing to provide helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF), India has proved to be the most reliable partner in the region for the Afghan state. When President Ghani came to power, there were in India about the reliability of the new Afghan government as a close ally, compared to the previous one. Those concerns were reinforced amidst President Ghani's rapprochement with Pakistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi government, on the other hand, appointed Ajit Kumar Doval as the new National Security Advisor<sup>19</sup> - a well-known hawk - indicating a more assertive India role in taking on groups such as the Taliban.

Despite New Delhi's concerns, President Ghani's rapprochement to Pakistan in 2015 meant he had to make some concessions which limited cooperation with India. Indeed, one of Ghani's first actions was to suspend a request to India for heavy weaponry which had been lodged by his predecessor.<sup>20</sup> Closer ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan and keeping India at arm's length did not sit well with Delhi but it continued the ongoing projects in a bid to wait out the Afghan-Pakistani honeymoon period.

As may have been expected, the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul soon started to sour and the latter reached out to Delhi to continue its assistance. Whilst initially cold shouldered, Delhi soon reassessed<sup>21</sup>, delivering a Mi 25 helicopter in 2015,<sup>22</sup> with three more following soon after. This was significant, because the delivery of lethal

15. See: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/taliban-qatar-office-india-draws-line-on-afghan-peace-process/1132312/>
16. See: [http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2013/deadly-triangle-afghanistan-pakistan-india-c?utm\\_expid=23328448-5&utm\\_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.brookings.edu%2Fsearch%3Fstart%3D1%26q%3Dbrookings%2Bessay](http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2013/deadly-triangle-afghanistan-pakistan-india-c?utm_expid=23328448-5&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.brookings.edu%2Fsearch%3Fstart%3D1%26q%3Dbrookings%2Bessay)
17. See: <http://www.firstpost.com/world/why-india-is-concerned-about-supplying-arms-to-afghanistan-800711.html>
18. See: [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-09-29/news/42482070\\_1\\_jammu-and-kashmir-kashmir-issue-bilateral-dialogue](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-09-29/news/42482070_1_jammu-and-kashmir-kashmir-issue-bilateral-dialogue)
19. For more about Doval, see: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ajit-doval-giant-among-spies-reports-back-for-duty-soon/article1-1223709.aspx>
20. See: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/why-did-afghanistan-just-suspend-a-request-for-heavy-weaponry-from-india/>
21. See: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-rebuffs-afghanistan-on-strategic-meet/article7592059.ece>
22. See: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/mi-25-attack-helicopter-gifted-by-india-to-afghanistan-reaches-kabul-3-more-to-follow/articleshow/50275035.cms>



capability to Afghanistan has long been a contentious issue due to objections by Pakistan. This is a key contribution to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) who are in dire need of airpower. In the absence of NATO air support, the Taliban have managed to move around in large groups and launch frontal wars in several provinces, according to Haneef Atmar, Afghanistan's National Security Advisor<sup>23</sup>.

India's military support is augmented by projection of soft power in the form of development and reconstruction projects. Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the newly-built building for the Afghan parliament in 2015. He used the occasion to deliver an impassioned and comprehensive speech, also taking direct and indirect swipes at Pakistan<sup>24</sup>. The visit signified long-term commitment of India to Afghanistan, despite the NUG's earlier snub. Modi was again in Afghanistan in June 2016 to inaugurate the \$ 290-million Salma dam in the western province of Herat. Construction of Salma dam was completed in spite of security threats and attempts to disrupt the project. The jubilation across the country with which this was met, highlighted India's growing influence achieved through development projects. This was preceded in May of the same year by signing of the Chabahar Port agreement between Afghanistan, India and Iran.

## Iran

Iran and Afghanistan were set to sign a strategic agreement whose draft was prepared in 2013. Regardless of that, Iran has supported the Afghan state politically and economically. It has also made efforts to replace Pakistan as the main linkage for transportation of goods to and from Afghanistan as it has strived to broaden its economic interests in Afghanistan. It has, at the same time, supported individual political groups at the cost of derailing Afghan state institutions. For instance, Iran was accused of providing financial support to groups loyal to it in the run up to the 2014 presidential election of Afghanistan. Despite reports in Kabul that Iran and Russia were behind further complicating the ensuing election impasse, the highest echelon of the Iranian government continued to reiterate that it would respect the result of the election and that it was prepared to cooperate and even expand relations with the incoming government.

On the other hand, Iran used to oppose Western military presence in Afghanistan, has engaged in talks with the Taliban, has invited them for conferences<sup>25</sup> and even, allegedly, supplies arms<sup>26</sup> to them. Afghan refugees have been maltreated by Iran, creating an international outcry. Afghan refugees have even been enticed or forced to fight for Syrian government. There are reportedly 8000 Afghans fighting alongside the Assad army.

Once the National Unity Government (NUG) was established in Kabul, both President Ghani and CEO Abdullah visited Tehran in 2015. As expected, Afghanistan's pro-Iran Second Deputy CEO, Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq, has visited the country multiple times. The visits seem to have had little bearing on the already ongoing relations.

Signing the agreement for developing the Chabahar port represents a real opportunity for the current Afghan government to circumvent

23. See his interview with 1TV (in Dari): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpFjlv-2TBA>

24. See the full text at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/text-of-modis-speech-to-afghan-parliament/article8029269.ece>

25. See: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/irans-hosting-of-taliban-reflects-desire-for-greater-role/2011/09/28/gIQakmw07K\\_print.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/irans-hosting-of-taliban-reflects-desire-for-greater-role/2011/09/28/gIQakmw07K_print.html)

26. See: <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/10771-kandahar-police-chief-concerned-over-pakistan-iran-intervention>

Pakistan's current monopoly over the Afghan transit trade. It also poses a real danger of further prolonging the Afghan conflict. Pakistan is not going to sit on its hands and watch India and Afghanistan increase mutual trade and have Iran join their bloc, especially after Pakistan failed – initially at least - to implement its part of the IPI gas pipeline agreement. Pakistan's ability to jeopardize regional schemes in Afghanistan can easily be projected by groups such as the Haqqani Network. Therefore, the Taliban's position becomes tenuous because of having established links with Iran. Although the situation has improved significantly in favor of the Afghan state in the last couple of years, Iran and the Taliban have enjoyed a marriage of convenience for some time now. It will be interesting to see if the Taliban will risk its relationship with Iran by addressing Pakistan's concerns. The Taliban are said to be hoping to reduce their reliance on Pakistan by reaching out to Iran. Mullah Mansour's visits to Iran are said to be part of the abovementioned strategy. However, the killing of Mullah Mansour on the way back from Iran – some say for family visit, others claim for medical reasons, indicates that Iran still has left open channels of communication with the Taliban. The fear of Daesh/IS has further strengthened Iran's resolve to continue cooperating with the Taliban on a certain level.

Daesh's creation has also has an effect on Iran's attitude towards Afghan refugees, from whom it attracts foot soldiers to fight against Western-supported opposition in Syria and, obviously, Daesh. Previously, Iran constantly harassed Afghan refugees, chided Afghan officials for the presence of American troops in Afghanistan and openly invited Afghan Taliban for meetings until mid-2014. The situation has changed considerably now. Harassment of refugees has receded, Iranian officials are tightlipped about the presence of foreign bases in Afghanistan and Taliban contacts are not as public as they used to be.

## China

China sought a safe distance from the "graveyard of the empires"<sup>27</sup> not long ago. However, China's Afghanistan policy began to change in part due to their fear of relapse of Afghanistan into the hands of Islamic extremist groups that will encourage "growth of (Uighur) Muslim extremism on Chinese territory, supported from across the border with Pakistan"<sup>28</sup>, using Afghanistan for their training and other support activities. This perception was strengthened by an incident in Xinjiang region in 2013, in which 21 people died in clashes, including 15 police officers<sup>29</sup>. The China-India counter-terrorism summit<sup>30</sup> on Afghanistan and its first public warning<sup>31</sup> in 2012 to Pakistan on activities of extremists in Pakistan pointed to a slight shift in China's views on the security in the region in 2013.

There were also reports in 2013 that Chinese officials allegedly met Taliban representatives<sup>32</sup> in order to impress upon them to deny members of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) an external breeding ground also to ensure the viability of its extractive projects after the withdrawal of the NATO troops in 2014. Publically, it was sending reassuring messages to the Afghan government. For instance, it claims to support an "*Afghan-led and owned peace*" process in Afghanistan.

27. Analysis about China's intentions for not getting involved in Afghanistan: <http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/05/chinas-afghanistan-challenge/comment-page-1/>
28. <http://www.cidobafpakproject.com/>
29. See report at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22276042>
30. See: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-11/india/38462542\\_1\\_boundary-negotiations-dai-bingguo-counter-terrorism-talks](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-11/india/38462542_1_boundary-negotiations-dai-bingguo-counter-terrorism-talks)
31. See: <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/172107/reftab/69/t/China-blames-Pakistan-trained-militants-for-attack-/Default.aspx>
32. Regarding Taliban meetings with Chinese officials, see the analysis at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/20/why\\_is\\_china\\_talking\\_to\\_the\\_taliban](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/20/why_is_china_talking_to_the_taliban)

Remarks by President Karzai in September 2013 stating that China was “quietly backing the peace process in Afghanistan”<sup>33</sup> were interpreted by observers to imply that China was working behind the scenes to convince Pakistan to play a more constructive role in Afghanistan.

Since Afghanistan neither provided major economic returns nor was it seen as an important geostrategic country, China’s interest in 2013-14 was limited to making sure Afghanistan does not relapse into a full-blown civil war, nor was it prepared to see a country completely in the realm of American influence. Thus, it always lent support to the development of Afghanistan and also urged respect for its national sovereignty at the same time. This changed with the attacks<sup>34</sup> in Tiananmen Square (October 2013) and the Kunming and Urumqi train stations (early 2014), reportedly carried out by Islamists. These resulted in a paradigm shift in China’s policy toward Afghanistan. Soon after, China’s Foreign Minister visited Kabul, and subsequently, China unexpectedly upped the tempo of its diplomatic activities in relation to Afghanistan. China planned, postponed and then finally hosted the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process ministerial meeting in October 2014<sup>35</sup>. Nonetheless, there were still lingering suspicions in Kabul that China might be willing to negotiate with the Taliban in the future, On the other hand, the Chinese government accepted to train a limited number of Afghan police personnel in its country and began to conduct a joint project with the US government to train Afghan diplomats. Finally, China has already increased its assistance to Afghanistan by many folds and has strengthened its diplomatic links on multiple levels<sup>36</sup>.

As interaction between China and Afghanistan increased progressively through 2014, China’s decision to appoint a Special Envoy for Afghanistan further strengthened the view that China was getting more involved there. Assertions from Beijing indicated that China – like Russia – was clearly concerned about the prospect of another implosion of the Afghan state. China’s domestic problems in Xinjiang<sup>37</sup> finally seemed to have a telling affect on its policy towards Afghanistan. It radically increased its diplomatic efforts in relation to the country. Some Chinese newspapers reported in 2014 that there was consensus between Kabul and Beijing on the question of extremist groups, such as ETIM. China’s policy is now to couple domestic development schemes with working together with Pakistan and Afghanistan on a regional platform<sup>38</sup> to curtail Islamic extremism<sup>39</sup>.

China was considered by Afghan and American officials to be in a position to play a key role in the peace process of Afghanistan because of its relationship with Pakistan.<sup>40</sup> China had already facilitated two Track II meetings on its soil and there were Chinese emissaries in the first direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Murree on July 7, 2015. Most importantly, China became one of the parties of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), along with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US<sup>41</sup>, which has so far failed to convince the Taliban to join the peace talks.

China went from holding secret meetings with Taliban representatives to sending high level delegations to Kabul, assigning a Special Envoy to Afghanistan, providing military training and participating in efforts to launch negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

33. See: <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2013/09/27/china-backs-afghan-us-security-pact>
34. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26402367>
35. See conference report: <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Fourth-HoA-Ministerial-Conference.pdf>
36. For detailed reports on China-Afghanistan interactions, see reports from 2013 and 2014 at: [http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/stap\\_rp/policy\\_research\\_papers/afghanistan\\_the\\_regional\\_powers\\_an\\_overview\\_of\\_2013](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/afghanistan_the_regional_powers_an_overview_of_2013) and [http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/stap\\_rp/policy\\_research\\_papers/afghanistan\\_overview\\_of\\_sources\\_of\\_tension\\_with\\_regional\\_implications\\_2014\\_\(language\)/eng-US](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/afghanistan_overview_of_sources_of_tension_with_regional_implications_2014_(language)/eng-US). For a summary of recent high-level visits by Chinese officials and figures on increase in aid, see: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan>
37. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29373158>
38. For more details, see: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13270-beijing-waivers-on-afghanistan-security-commitment.html>
39. For an overview of how low-key China’s involvement in Afghanistan was, prior to 2014, see: [http://csis.org/files/publication/120322\\_Zhao\\_ChinaAfghan\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf)
40. We have covered China’s contacts with Taliban in our previous reports. However, there are also other reports like this one: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-foreign-policy-afghanistan>
41. See the statement at: <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/joint-press-release-the-second-meeting-of-the-quadrilateral-coordination-group-qcg-of-afghanistan-pakistan-the-united-states-and-china>

Reported emergence of the Daesh is yet another alarming development for the Chinese. China – like Iran – has also stopped expressing reservations about the presence of Western troops in Afghanistan. Its partnership with the US on Afghanistan has evolved from offering joint training for a handful of Afghan diplomats to becoming a key member of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). China will not tolerate an Islamist state next door so has every intention to bring the Taliban under the framework of the current Afghan state.

## Russia

Until a few years ago, Russia claimed to maintain a hands-off approach because of its recent history with Afghanistan but was clearly concerned by the US military presence in Afghanistan. Ironically, it has actively taken part in counter-narcotics operations because of its toll on the Russian society, posing “an internal security challenge”<sup>42</sup>. Russian officers were part of a counter-narcotics operation in eastern Afghanistan in March of 2013.

Russia’s support to the counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan was negligible in 2013 but post-2014 Afghanistan was of a great concern for the Russian authorities as they, like the Chinese and Saudis, feared the rise of extremism and Afghanistan’s becoming a hotbed for international terrorism. This led to Russia’s getting increasingly involved with the countries of the region to ensure stability in Afghanistan, making Afghanistan top priority during its presidency of the UN Security Council and convening and participating in numerous multilateral and trilateral talks on Afghanistan in 2013.

Besides, Russia was also visibly concerned at the prospect of another chaos in Afghanistan that might have affected adversely<sup>43</sup> the security of Tajikistan and the rest of central Asian states bordering Afghanistan. Russians suspected based on their past experience of the Tajikistan and Uzbekistan insurgencies and the Chechen war of 1990s that its Islamist foes in the Caucuses will find renewed impetus<sup>44</sup> in the event of instability in post-2014 Afghanistan. As a result, Russia was a reliable partner to the countries with military presence in Afghanistan. It was deemed in Russia’s interest to see the international community provide Afghanistan with the resources and training to combat terrorism and international drug trade.

However, these concerns did not stop Russian officials – President Vladimir Putin in particular – from criticizing the American policy globally but also in relation to Afghanistan. However, they emphasized the fact that in Afghanistan their interests converged with those of the US and its allies. Russia and the Central Asian states are alarmed<sup>45</sup> by the increase in violence in Afghanistan. The rapid rise of Da’esh/IS in Iraq and Syria has increased the urgency on the part of the former Soviet Union states to develop solid options to blunt any threats directed at them by Islamic extremist groups. Despite Russia and the West’s relations being at the lowest level, Russia’s government (and President Putin in particular) is keen for the West to stay engaged in Afghanistan.

Russia kept a consistent non-belligerent policy towards the US and its allies’ role in Afghanistan<sup>46</sup> until 2015, when Russia’s bombing campaign

42. <http://www.cidobafpakproject.com/content/informe.pdf>

43. See: <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130528/181391339/Russia-Led-Group-to-Beef-Up-Tajik-Afghan-Border-Security.html>

44. See: <http://www.meforum.org/744/how-chechnya-became-a-breeding-ground-for-terror>

45. See: <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-afghanistan-threat/26607887.html>

46. See an account of how Russia is wary of the US presence in Afghanistan but still wants the US to be present in Afghanistan: <http://as.ucpress.edu/content/55/2/398>. For examples of cooperation and intelligence sharing see: <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=492026> and <http://www2.ewi.info/events/6th-meeting-joint-us-russia-working-group-afghan-narcotrafficking>

in Syria further widened the gap between Russia, regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the US and EU. This situation created a new dynamic in Afghanistan-Russian relations, with reports emerging of President Vladimir Putin's alleged meeting with the Taliban's leader in December 2015 in Dushanbe.<sup>47</sup> Unnamed Taliban members were reported in the media as having asserted that Putin promised financial resources, training and modern military hardware to the Taliban in the fight against Da'esh/ISIS in Afghanistan. The reports were, however, been denied by both the Taliban and by Russian officials. Nonetheless, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan said in October 2015 that his government's interests "*objectively coincide*" with those of the Taliban and that there are channels of communication between them,<sup>48</sup> reported by a credible source as having been established some two years ago<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, Russia's decision to ally with the Taliban could have been influenced by the pledging of allegiance to ISIS by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the wake of the death of Mullah Omar (the group was formerly allied to the latter). Before this, Russia had always seen the Taliban as the potential source of support to the extremist groups in Central Asia, thus imposing sanctions on the group. In response to the fall of Kunduz, Russia deployed attack and transport helicopters to a base in Tajikistan to rebuff any imminent threats, as a support for claims by the Tajikistan President that there is insecurity along 60 percent of his country's border with Afghanistan<sup>50</sup>.

President Ghani also traveled to Russia to attend the SCO summit in July 2015 and met President Putin on the sidelines. The meeting was followed by a visit by Afghanistan's first vice president to Moscow in October of 2015. However, the visit which got more press coverage was that of Afghanistan's former President, Hamid Karzai, in June of 2015. Karzai claimed during the visit that relations between the two countries were "*blossoming*".<sup>51</sup>

The trend of Russia's engagement in Afghanistan has been the opposite of that of China. Russia's engagement in 2013 was of that of support to both the international forces and the Afghan state – with occasional, symbolic digs aimed at the US<sup>52</sup>. Russia stepped in to support the US when the Pakistani government suspended transport of US military goods through its territory in the wake of Osama Bin Laden's death in Abbottabad.

The relationship, though, witnessed a downward spiral amidst the Arab Spring uprisings. Differences over Libya created further strictures. The situations of Syria and Ukraine clearly put the West and Russia on a confrontational course with each other. This, however, did not affect their partnership in Afghanistan in a major way for quite some time. In early 2016, Russia finally announced it was ceasing all cooperation with the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Soon after, NATO and Russia talks were revived. Russia once again announced that the only issue, over which there is consensus between the two sides is Afghanistan.

Subsequently, Russians supplied big arms caches to the Afghan government this year, despite the fallout with the NATO. This preceded the reported meeting of President Vladimir Putin with the Taliban's former leader, Mullah Mansour, in Tajikistan in late 2015. The meeting

47. See: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/taliban-leader-gains-vladimir-putins-help-at-secret-meeting/news-story/c212a1f20b685fae034c63ea7b-0cdeb89>
48. See: <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20151026/1029128786/russia-taliba-communication.html>
49. Waheed Mozhdza, an analyst and Taliban sympathizer, made the revelation. Mozhdza's telephone was tapped by the NDS, recording his conversations with members of the Taliban. He acted as an interlocutor of Taliban in Kabul and Russian authorities used him as one of their contacts to the insurgent group.
50. See: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-tajikistan-base-helicopters/27293028.html>
51. See: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49760>
52. For example, see: <https://www.boston-globe.com/news/world/2015/07/10/putin-criticizes-role-afghanistan-saying-security-hasn-improved/ITfpvFEOWYFMfzJnj5BxSM/story.html>

and consequent coy statements by Russian officials revealed that Russia was counting on the Taliban – in addition to the Afghan government – to blunt the Daesh threat in Afghanistan. President Putin claimed Daesh was present in 25 provinces of Afghanistan. The Taliban, on the other hand, claimed Russia had promised them funding and military support. If true and still in place, this would be a major breakthrough for the Taliban, which could sustain them for the foreseeable future. This may also quickly change however if it irks the USA too much.

### Saudi Arabia

The Saudi authorities have generally kept a distance from Afghanistan. They have not become as directly involved as Afghan governments since 2001 would have hoped. However, they have provided the space for unofficial meetings between Afghan government representatives and insurgents. President Hamid Karzai repeatedly request Saudi Arabia's active involvement in the Afghan peace process to no avail. Under his presidency, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan signed a number of agreements new that covered a broad range of areas,<sup>53</sup> from commerce to youth, culture and sports. The two countries have also signed an agreement for establishing an Islamic studies center, a mosque and a university in Kabul. The construction of the complex is estimated to cost a staggering US\$ 100 million. The mosque alone will be big enough to accommodate 10 to 20 thousand worshipers at a time.

During President Ghani's first trip to Saudi Arabia in 2014, there was also talk of a strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries. It remains to be seen what the final product will entail to assess what the future role of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan will be. 2015 saw increased interaction between Saudi and Afghan officials. The biggest turning point, however, was President Ghani's visit to Riyadh on March 16, 2015. Ghani was received at the airport by King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud himself<sup>54</sup> – an unprecedented gesture on the part of Saudis. The main outcome of Ghani's visit to the Kingdom was agreement on creating a framework for a strategic partnership. Such warm welcome by Saudi authorities to the new President of Afghanistan may have partially been down to Ghani's cordial relationship with the US and partially because Ghani's bloc managed to defeat the Abdullah Abdullah bloc in the presidential election, which is perceived by the Saudis as more pro-Iranian.

Although little is known about the exact nature of Saudi's Afghanistan policy because of the opacity of its government, revelations by the Taliban that they were pressured by the Saudis not to cause major disruptions during the 2014 presidential election point to an assertive policy of safeguarding its interests in Afghanistan. Saudis feared that Taliban's disruption of election will hit hardest the Pashtun areas, which would dent Ghani's chances and give an edge to Abdullah. According to the report in question, "*promises were also made for rewards if the Taliban complied with Saudi demands, including facilitation in future negotiations with the new president*"<sup>55</sup>. If true, Ghani owes his becoming the president partly to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This may explain Ghani's reciprocal actions in making concessions to Pakistan and supporting Saudi's military campaign in Yemen<sup>56</sup>. However, Pakistan

53. For more details, see.: <http://mfa.gov.af/en/News/19748>

54. See the report: <http://president.gov.af/en/news/42995>

55. See the full report: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW103-Violence-the-Taliban-and-Afghanistan-s-2014-Elections.pdf>

56. In Dari: <http://www.dw.com/fa-af/%D9%88%D9%84%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%B1%DA%AF%D9%87-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%BA%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF/a-18361625>

still is the most important ally in the region for Saudi Arabia despite the fallout because of Pakistan's reluctance to participate in the Yemen war. Reports suggest that Pakistan, if needed, may even be prepared to supply nuclear warheads to the Saudis based on a tacit understanding and the former's generous funding to the Pakistani nuclear program.<sup>57</sup>

President Ghani targeted Saudi Arabia – as well as China – in an effort to use its leverage over Pakistan to get the Taliban to negotiating table. Despite some promises, Saudis never seriously made an effort to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Lately, they have grown even more uninterested because of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, Saudi rivalry with Iran and the effect of dwindling crude oil prices on its economy. Therefore, they are the least important regional power for Afghanistan presently, despite having the potential to be the most powerful.

## Conclusion

Despite predictions of possible fissures within the Taliban in the wake of revelation of Mullah Omar's death, the Taliban movement has managed to maintain a high level of unity. Mullah Akhundzada's ascension similarly did not result in partial or complete fragmentation of the movement. This internal resilience is certainly a culmination of a combination of structural, political, cultural and cognitive factors. Once such factor is the relative clarity of succession procedures, levels of hierarchy and division of labor and authorities that stems from the existing practices of the socio-political structures which form the Taliban movement. Therefore, while the killing of Taliban leaders may inhibit the operational capability of the movement, it will not result in its complete dissolution. Even if the movement is disbanded voluntarily or involuntarily, the prerequisite for the reestablishment of the same movement or a similar movement in the form of *madrassa*-mullah networks will still exist, and may even thrive, should further opportunities arise. After all, *mujahideen* parties and even the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) have all survived in some shape and form for close to a half century.

Therefore, efforts to defeat the Taliban militarily and dismantle the movement altogether will prove futile in the short term. The Taliban movement's strength lies in its support network, which provides the movement with not only leadership but also foot soldiers, amongst other resources. The Taliban's depiction of being merely a puppet, playing in the hands of the Pakistani military is untrue, thus unhelpful. The movement has the potential to survive without the support of the Pakistani military. It may be considerably weakened but it will not vanish altogether.

It is also important to note that the weaknesses and shortcomings of the current Afghan state have provided the opportunity for the Taliban to garner some support in some parts of the country, or at least be tolerated because of the lack of confidence in the capacity of the state to keep the Taliban at bay. It is equally important to note that the Taliban have created and availed opportunities on the regional level too. Their contacts with China, Russia and Iran and their business ventures

57. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24823846>

in Pakistan and Gulf states have enabled the movement to create a semblance of having a degree of legitimacy outside Pakistan and Afghanistan. The five regional powers covered in this paper have not attempted to emphatically inhibit Taliban's operations. Pakistan, on the other hand, appears to have facilitated Taliban's military operations in Afghanistan and fund-raising activities across the region. Pakistan has also been considered to have facilitated links between the Taliban with countries in the region such as China.

Nonetheless, there has been a growing support for the current Afghan state in the region. The regional political opportunity structure may not be as favorable for the Taliban in the future as it is today. The longer the current Afghan state survives, the more consolidated its position on the regional level will become. The Taliban will have to join mainstream politics sooner or later, as the regional and international appetite for continuing strife in Afghanistan is waning. Joining a political process for a settlement is the only realistic course of action for both sides in the long term. For now, the Taliban will pose the greatest threat to the current Afghan state by conducting military attacks against it. It is hard to foretell how long the Taliban movement will survive. However, the clergy will remain a key constituency in the political scene of Afghanistan for quite some time to come.

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