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Afghanistan in 2018:

A Defining Moment in its Troubled History¹

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If the year's beginning is a prelude to what is likely to follow, 2018 will be a difficult year for Afghanistan. It may lay the ground on which the country is likely to travel. This paper first discusses the sources of extreme violence that greeted the dawn of 2018 and place it in the context of some developments outside the country's borders. It follows up with a brief analysis of domestic political developments that do not augur well for the future. This paper then analyses how the serious United States-Pakistan spat is likely to affect Afghanistan and concludes with a brief focus on how China's ambitions in the Asian mainland may influence the Afghan future.

¹ The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has undertaken a prognosis of the eight South Asian countries in 2018. This is both opportune and relevant, given significant developments in the region. Although it requires some crystal ball-gazing, such prognosis is important in providing an understanding of the outlook for each country. This paper is part of a series of nine papers on key development in the eight South Asian countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, this year.

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2018: A Grim Beginning

Enough happened in the closing days of 2017 and the first week of 2018 to suggest that this will be a defining year for Afghanistan. The country has wrestled with all kinds of disruptive forces that have, at times, endangered its survival as a nation state. While the Taliban had been the main opposition force ever since the entry of the United States (US) into the country in October 2001 that changed in the course of the past year. Within the space of less than a week around the beginning of 2018, the Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for two attacks on targets in Kabul. On 28 December 2017, at least 41 people were killed and dozens more injured in a bombing at a Shiite cultural centre in Kabul that also houses a news agency. The Islamic State's choice of the target is revealing. The centre had leanings towards Iran, and hosted discussions and gatherings on religious and political issues, many of them critical of the West's approach to the Middle East. The suicide bomber attacked a gathering when a couple of hundred people had gathered to discuss the role of religion in global politics. "I have little doubt that this attack deliberately targeted civilians," said Toby Lanzer, the acting head of the United Nations' (UN) mission in Afghanistan. "Today, in Kabul, we have witnessed another truly despicable crime in a year already marked by unspeakable atrocities."³ The UN had documented more than a dozen attacks since January 2016, with hundreds of Shiites dead or wounded. One of the deadliest was in October 2017 when a suicide bomber killed at least 57 worshippers in a Shiite mosque in Kabul.

Washington took note of the increasing role of the IS in the country. The IS, having lost its hold on Iraq and Syria, is focusing on other Muslim areas where local conditions may prove to be more welcoming than was the case in the Middle East. The expansion and escalation of attacks by the IS network "has caused anxiety among Afghans and raised questions about the ability of the government and foreign troops to quell the growth of the violence."⁴ The White House pledged to work with the Afghan government to rid the country of the terrorist organisation. "The enemies of Afghanistan will not succeed in their attempts to destroy the country and divide the Afghan people," said a statement issued by the American presidency.

³ "ISIS claims deadly blast at Afghan Shiite Center", Fahim Abed, Fatima Faizi and Mujib Mashal, *The New York Times*, 29 December 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/asia/afghanistan-suicide-attack.html>. Accessed on 5 January 2018.

⁴ "Explosion at Afghan funeral kills 17", *The Washington Post*, 31 December 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/explosion-at-afghan-funeral-kills-17/2017/12/31/6d07acbc-ee45-11e7-b3bf-ab90a706e175_story.html?utm_term=.de1b0ca25974. Accessed on 15 January 2018.

The followers of the IS have continued with their programme of violence all the same. On the last day of 2017, an explosion at a funeral in Nangarhar killed at least 17 civilians. The casualties included several tribal chiefs who were said to have been behind an effort to raise a force of local civilians to protect their community from affiliates of the IS. On 4 January 2017, a suicide bomber attacked a market in Kabul while the police were conducting a raid against the sale of alcohol and drugs. The market was attacked since a significant number of the members of the security force were participating in the raid. According to a report in *The Washington Post*, the attack was the result of the alienation of the country's youth who were unhappy with the quality of governance on offer. "The blast occurred in Banayee, a poor mud-brick urban village fronted by a line of shops well known to Kabul residents for selling black-market booze, narcotics and weaponry, and controlled by a local Pashtun clan. It had been immediately preceded by an unusually fierce drug bust by the city police, in which a young man was killed and many others detained", wrote the newspaper.⁵ According to a local leader, police have extorted shopkeepers in the area since the last presidential election in which Ashraf Ghani, a Pakhtun, won the presidency. The police force is beholden to Abdullah Abdullah, a Tajik, who is the president's political rival. The police claimed they found large quantities of heroin and opium, and hundreds of litres of home-made alcohol.

The IS affiliates which first emerged in 2014 have focused their attention on creating their base in the south-eastern province of Nangarhar and setting up urban cells in Kabul and some other large cities. According to one assessment, "While the group has faced intense pressure from Afghan commandos and American airstrikes on Nangarhar Province, officials have struggled to gain a clear understanding of the urban cells behind the spate of attacks claimed by the group. In the past, many of the urban attacks in places like Kabul were carried out by the Haqqani network, a lethal arm of the Taliban."⁶ Now, the IS affiliates were more active. Borhan Osman, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group who has studied militant groups in Afghanistan, said the IS has claimed seven suicide bombings in Kabul since October 2017, more than the Taliban. "As far as I can see, the leaders are veterans – they were with the Haqqani Network, the Taliban, or Al Qaeda and defected to the Islamic state in Khorasan, bringing their expertise and network. But most of those blowing themselves are the young

⁵ "A drug bust was marred by a suicide bombing in Kabul. Was it ISIS, or the 'mafia'?" Max Berak, *The Washington Post*, 7 January 2018.

⁶ "ISIS Suicide Attack Kills at Least 20 in Kabul", Fahim Abed, *The New York Times*, 4 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/world/asia/isis-kabul-suicide-attack.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2018

Salafis who are who are indoctrinated into jihadism and find Islamic State a cool political ideology seeking to dominate the world.”⁷

America’s Redefined Mission in Afghanistan

The long-awaited Donald Trump’s policy with respect to Afghanistan was announced by the American president in a speech in August 2017 delivered in the presence of military personnel at Fort Myers nears Washington. The new policy signified a number of departures from the one followed by his predecessor, President Barack Obama, while the latter was in office. He had announced the termination of America’s decade and half-long combat mission in the country. Early in his tenure, the president had ordered a surge of American troops doing the fighting in Afghanistan. However, as he approached the end of his second term, he ordered the number of troops to be drastically reduced with the few remaining providing training and supportive role to the Afghan security forces. The Americans could only get engaged if their own security was threatened but, even in that case, it could be done with the permission of the White House. All that was gone in the new policy! There was to be no time limit to the American stay in Afghanistan. More troops were to be added to support the American mission that could last for as long as the war was not won. The American commanders in the field were given the authority to work on their own, without seeking Washington’s approval. There was expectation that the Afghan government would pursue the political agenda aimed at developing an inclusive political system. Over time, this would lead to negotiations with the defeated Taliban and their incorporation into the country’s political structure.

It was clear that the policy was formulated by the people with military background who held the reins of power in the Trump administration. Retired General John Kelly was the Chief of Staff; Lieutenant General H R McMaster, still in military service, was the National Security Adviser; and retired General James “Mad Dog” Mattis was the Secretary of Defense. It was also clear that Washington did not consult with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. Pakistan had obviously not been brought into the picture. Instead, the president used harsh

⁷ “Islamic State claims deadly blast at Afghan Shiite Center”, Quoted in Fahim Abed, Fatima Faizi and Mujib Mashal, *The New York Times*, 28 December 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/asia/afghanistan-suicide-attack.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2018.

language in the role he believed Islamabad had played in prolonging the conflict. He vowed to punish Pakistan if it did not mend its ways.

The United States-Pakistan Spat

It is clear from his many pronouncements that Trump does not have much love for Pakistan. The latest evidence of this came on 4 January 2017, three days after the American leader had sent a tweet threatening Islamabad with dire consequences if it did not line up to support Washington's redefined mission in Afghanistan. "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than [US]\$33 billion [S\$43.6 billion] in aid over the last 15 years," he wrote, "and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They gave safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!"⁸

This threat was translated into action with the announcement by the State and Defense Departments that nearly all security aid to Pakistan was being frozen. Administration officials emphasised that the freeze was temporary and could be lifted if Islamabad could satisfy Washington that it had changed its behavior. "It's hard to argue that the status quo is working, so we are looking at changing it to advance our security objectives", said State Department's Director of Policy Planning. Heather Nauert, the department's spokeswoman, said the administration was still working out the process of dollar amounts that would be frozen. The suspension included about US\$1.1 billion (S\$1.46 billion) in Coalition Support Fund (CSF) which the Pentagon provides to help Pakistan meet the costs of counterterrorism operations in Pakistan. Suspension of the CSF payments could lead to a disruption of the flow of American equipment into Afghanistan. This would affect the war against the dissidents operating in the country. Pakistan's military preparedness and its ability to fight terrorists working in the country would also be compromised. Under the freeze, the US would not deliver military equipment to the country. It had already held up US\$255 million (S\$337.3 million) in State

⁸ "Trump's first 2018 tweet: Pakistan has 'given us nothing but lies & deceit'", Daniella Diaz, *CNN*, 2 January 2018. <http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/01/politics/donald-trump-2018-pakistan/index.html>. Accessed on 12 January 2018.

Department military financing. “Pakistan has the ability to get this money back in the future, but they have to take decisive action”,⁹ continued Nauert.

The reaction from Islamabad was swift. Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, said that there was a need to revisit the nature of his country’s relations with the US. In an interview with a local news network, he said that the US was “acting like neither as an ally nor a friend.” It was obvious to many with good knowledge of Afghanistan and Pakistan that these moves could be costly for the American Afghan enterprise. To take one example of an informed reaction, Richard G Olson, a former special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Obama administration, noted that the American military effort in Afghanistan was heavily reliant on Pakistan’s consent. Almost every military flight into Afghanistan, including those of attack aircraft, goes through Pakistani airspace. Most supplies travel along Pakistani roads and rails. Our choices in Afghanistan are already difficult, but if you want to make them even more difficult, continue to taunt the Pakistanis. Pakistanis could effectively shut down the war”, he told *The New York Times*.¹⁰

The same sentiment was expressed by *The New York Times* in its editorial, “But President Trump cannot afford to walk away from Pakistan, which has often provided vital intelligence and has the world’s fastest growing nuclear arsenal. Whether Pakistan will cooperate after the aid squeeze remains to be seen.” The newspaper advocated diplomacy rather than arm-twisting or use of abusive language to work with a country that could provide valuable assistance or become a major obstacle for the United States to achieve its stated objectives. What is required is “quiet negotiations, not shouting.”¹¹

⁹ “Trump, Citing Pakistan as a ‘Safe Haven’ for Terrorists, Freezes Aid”, Mark Landler And Gardiner Harris, *The New York Times*, 4 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/us/politics/trump-pakistan-aid.html>. Accessed on 12 January 2018.

¹⁰ “Trump, Citing Pakistan as ‘Safe Haven’ for Terrorists, Freezes Aid”, Mark Landler and Gardner Harris, *The New York Times*, 4 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/us/politics/trump-pakistan-aid.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2018.

¹¹ “Pakistan, the ever-troublesome ally”, *The New York Times*, editorial, 5 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/pakistan-the-endlessly-troublesome-ally.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2018.

Moving towards Sustainable Politics

While the fight against terrorist groups had intensified and was occupying the attention of the country's policymakers, they had also to implement a complex programme aimed at political development. Political development could go either of two ways in 2018 – a critical year for the country's progress towards creating a sustainable and inclusive political system. Ghani had not delivered on what he had promised when John Kerry, then-US Secretary of State, brokered a deal between Abdullah Abdullah (the other candidate in the elections held in 2014) and him. The power-sharing arrangement that was accepted by both parties laid down a timetable for moving the country in the right political direction. Elections to the national assembly were to be held within two years and an independent supervisory structure was to be put in place to oversee the next presidential election scheduled to be held in 2019. These steps had not been taken with the result that some of the powerful governors had begun to defy Ghani. Those who were defying the president were non-Pashtuns, complicating the nature of ethnic politics in the country.

On 18 December 2017, President Ghani fired Atta Muahmmad Noor, a Tajik and the powerful governor of Balkh province, who held sway over the province for 13 years and had amassed great wealth. Noor's removal came several months after Vice President Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, fled to Turkey, accused of arranging the rape and torture of a political rival in 2016. Noor called for Dostum's return and, with Deputy Chief Executive Mohammad Mohaqiq, a senior figure in the mainly Shiite Hazara community, to form what they called the Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan. The coalition was set to meet in Kandahar, a large city in the country's south, but the meeting was disrupted by Kabul when it blocked Noor and other leaders from boarding their planes bound for the city.

Noor belonged to the Jamiat-i-Islami (JI) party which held half the seats in the coalition government. The JI was headed by Salahuddin Rabbani who was foreign minister in the Ghani government. The 54-year old Noor represented the type of a political figure who could emerge in 2018 as a major challenger for the beleaguered president. According to one assessment, he was "part of a generation of former warlords who saw their regional fortunes fluctuate over the past decade, some of them being sustained or shifted to jobs in Kabul as a way to distance them from their power bases. He managed to maintain his firm grip in Balkh through a combination

of patronage, delivering infrastructure projects, and improving security while neighboring areas grew increasingly violent as Taliban made inroads.”¹² Noor refused to accept his dismissal and went on Afghan national television to announce that his “dismissal has no legal or legitimate basis. For now, we are only resorting to civil action, but if this atrocity continues, there are many other options.” This was ominous; it suggested that, in 2018, Afghanistan may move towards domestic political chaos.

The Chinese Involvement

The Pakistan-US spat, the withdrawal of the US from the global scene, in particular, from the Asian mainland, set the stage for China’s increased interest in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan government, headed by Ghani, also wished China to move into the area. Beijing had already entered this space by beginning work on the massive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and making a large investment in iron ore mining. In the closing days of 2017, China was ready to exploit the opportunity created by Trump’s America. On 16 December 2017, the Chinese hosted a trilateral meeting to lay the ground for greater collaboration among Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. The meeting, chaired by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, was attended by Salahuddin Rabbani and Khawaja Muhammad Asif, his counterparts respectively from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The three countries agreed to establish a trilateral mechanism to bring about cooperation in politics and economics. The ministers held a press conference after their meeting at which they announced that they will meet regularly. The next meeting will be held in Kabul in 2018. During the press conference, Wang announced that, “Afghanistan and Pakistan had agreed to improve bilateral relations as soon as possible and to realize harmonious co-existence, promising to resolve their concerns through comprehensive dialogue and consultation.” The Chinese minister also announced that China and Pakistan had agreed to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan. “In the long run, through Afghanistan, we will gradually connect the CPEC with the China-Western Asia Economic Corridor. According to Charlotte Gao, writing for *The*

¹² “Afghan president fires a powerful governor from post he held for 13 years”, Mujib Mashal and Najim Rahim, *The New York Times*, 18 December 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/world/asia/ashraf-ghani-attamuhammad-noor.html?mtrref=www.google.com.sg&gwh=618B288BF5E6BD689BF9CBE1D062216F&gwt=pay>. Accessed 15 January 2018.

Diplomat, “China’s active support for Pakistan and Afghanistan in multiple fields will undoubtedly challenge the United States role in the region. In addition, China and Pakistan announced that they will support the Afghan government to push forward peace talks with the Taliban.”¹³

Conclusion

There are just too many uncertainties surrounding the Afghan situation to make predictions about how 2018 would turn out for the country. There are a number of scenarios that could unfold. They range from the collapse of the Afghan state which could result from a number of factors, including the inability of the Afghan elite not only to muddle through, but also to make some progress on all fronts – political, economic and social. Or the country, in 2018, could see the beginning of the defeat of the dissident forces operating in the country. The probability of the second outcome, however, is very small.

A militarisation of the US’ approach to Afghanistan may do the opposite of what Trump’s Washington envisaged for the country. The use of air power to cow the insurgents may result in increasing the political support for them. The IS is likely to be the main beneficiary as the collateral damage done by the US will increase the support for this group. Having been beaten in Iraq and Syria, the IS is looking for other spaces in which to locate its effort. Afghanistan may offer such an opportunity.

In *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, the much-discussed book by the journalist Michael Wolff does not give much comfort that Washington would react rationally if things really fall apart in Afghanistan. “The president, while proposing the most radical departure from governing and policy norms in several generations, had few specific ideas about how to turn his themes and vitriol into policy, nor a team that could reasonably unite behind him,” wrote Wolff.¹⁴ If the situation deteriorates fast, it is hard to predict how the Trump

¹³ “Why is China holding China-Pakistan-Afghanistan dialogue now?,” Charlotte Gao, Charlotte Gao, *The Diplomat*, 27 December 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/why-is-china-holding-the-china-pakistan-afghanistan-dialogue-now/>. Accessed 15 January 2018.

¹⁴ Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, Henry Holt, 2018.

administration would react especially if the present policy leads to American casualties. A US soldier lost his life in early 2018, the first American death in several months.

On the more positive side, the Chinese involvement may lead to the creation of incentives for the various segments of the fractured Afghan ruling class to work together. It is interesting to note that the mid-December 2017 meeting among the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan had Rabbani representing Kabul. As already mentioned, he is the head of JI party whose member, Noor, governor of Balkh, province, was fired by Ghani. Noor is expected to challenge Ghani in the presidential elections of 2019.

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