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Afghanistan in 2017: Continuing Struggle to Define Itself¹

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Afghanistan has seen a lot of history. Since it is not easy to compress it into the space of a Working Paper, the author will focus his attention on more recent times. Beginning with the Bonn Agreement of 2001 involving many countries around the world that wanted to see stability come to the country that has seen unimaginable violence for four decades, this paper will provide a brief overview of the way politics has developed in the country over the last decade. It will then provide an overview of the economic situation, suggesting that sustained growth in the depressed economy will only come once the country controls violence. Since Afghanistan's political progress depends to considerable extent on the country's relations with Pakistan, its neighbour to the southeast, a section will examine how Kabul and

¹ The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, is dedicated to research on contemporary South Asia. It seeks to promote understanding of this vital region of the world, and to communicate knowledge and insights about it to policy makers, the business community, academia and civil society, in Singapore and beyond. As part of this ongoing process, ISAS has launched a series of commemorative essays on each of the eight South Asian countries to coincide with their respective national days. The objective is to present a snapshot of the successes and challenges of the countries in South Asia, a sub-optimally integrated region with a globalising aspiration. This third essay focuses on Afghanistan which celebrates its Independence Day on 19 August 2017.

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Islamabad are looking at each other. The paper will devote considerable space to the way the American policy is evolving in the country under the newly installed administration headed by President Donald Trump. The White House is still involved in the process of developing its approach towards the country in which the Americans intervened in 2001 and have been fighting there for 16 years. The final section of the paper examines the likely impact on the South Asian sub-continent of continued turbulence in Afghanistan.

Introduction

If by age for a nation-state, we mean the time that has elapsed during which a piece of geography gets identified with a recognisable name, Afghanistan is a much older country than its larger neighbours in South Asia. Both India and Pakistan became independent states in 1947 after the British left their Indian colony, dividing it in two parts. Pakistan was one of the two parts, giving itself a manufactured name. It was born with two wings, separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory. It was unable to keep the two wings together. In December 1971, the eastern part became the independent state of Bangladesh.

However, Afghanistan is different – it has been a nation-state for centuries. Even then, for much of the time, its borders have remained undefined. The one to the southeast is known after the name of a British bureaucrat who drew it on a map of the land he did not know well. His hand was guided by just one thought – the British should have the demonstrated capacity to govern their side of the border. Guided by this simple principle, Sir Mortimer Durand drew the border between British India and Afghanistan that came to be known by his name – the Durand Line. To understand where Afghanistan is today we need to understand the impact on the country of the drawing of this border and how it has affected its relations with Pakistan. The sections that follow provide broad overviews of the state of the Afghan polity and its economy. The author will then discuss the United States' (US) long involvement with the country and conclude with a section that examines how Afghanistan's worsening situation would impact South Asia. Unless Afghanistan stabilises, it could seriously affect South Asia, contributing to the radicalisation of the Muslim populations of that area.

When then-US President George W Bush ordered the American troops to invade Afghanistan, one part of the mission was to rid the country of the Taliban. It was the Taliban

regime in Kabul that had hosted Osama bin Laden whose organisation, Al Qaeda, had carried out the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the US. Kabul had to be punished; hence, the invasion. The other objective was to provide the country with a system of governance that would bring it into the modern world. The latter mission went under the name of “nation-building”. Neither of the two objectives has been achieved.

The State of Afghan Politics

Afghanistan was deeply set in its ways when the West under the leadership of the US moved into the country. The Western effort to guide the country towards a reasonably democratic order brought Hamid Karzai to power as president. This followed the Bonn Agreement of 2001 reached at then-capital of Germany to put an Afghan in charge of his country’s affairs. Invited to the meeting were a number of warlords who were powerful enough to disrupt the state-building process. The conveners of the meeting enacted a “big tent” strategy in order to incorporate, not alienate these non-state actors.³ As a result, a 30-member Afghan Interim Authority, headed by a chairman, Karzai, was constituted. A member of a prominent Pakhtun clan that straddled the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, he had spent a number of years in Baluchistan, a Pakistani province. He was given two terms in office after which he was required to relinquish his office and hand over the presidency to a person chosen by the people in an election. That happened in the summer of 2014 when Ashraf Ghani who had spent most of his professional life in the US, including a number of years at the World Bank, was declared the winner. Ghani, a Pakhtun, had faced Abdullah Abdullah, a Tajik, in the election who did not concede the election to his rival. That brought the US in as a mediator and John Kerry then-Secretary of State worked out a power-sharing agreement. According to this, Ghani was to be president while Abdullah would hold the newly-created office of the Chief Executive. However, Karzai did not quit politics. The former Afghan president and current antagonist to his successor’s government, likes to describe Afghan politics as a marathon. The metaphor is clear. Karzai has never stopped running, never stopped manoeuvring, and he will not. “[Ghani’s associates say] Karzai is actively undermining a vulnerable president, maintaining an alternate pole of political influence and patronage, and

³ Dipal Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

stoking protest movements that some fear could turn violent”, wrote Mujib Mashal an Afghan contributor to *The New York Times*.⁴

In accepting the deal brokered by Kerry, Ghani had committed to hold parliamentary elections by September 2016, enact sweeping electoral reforms and amend the constitution to create the position of prime minister for Abdullah. These deadlines were not met. If Ghani had hoped to unite the country under his rule from Kabul, it did not happen. Several dissenting voices were raised against him and the political system he was attempting to create. For instance, the ethnic minority, the Hazaras, gave another deadline, also for September to agree to their demand for rerouting the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India electric line so that they could also tap it for power. “On top of all that, a new protest movement, potentially more dangerous was growing just north of Kabul, calling for the government to rebury with dignity a northern bandit king who had been dead for nearly a century, shot by a firing squad. Among the people calling for the reburial and threatening protests were the northern militia commanders who have been skeptical of Ghani – they too had given him a September ultimatum.”⁵

Karzai, living in a residence next to the presidential compound, remains active, meeting a large number of people every day. He says he is after neither the collapse of the government nor a return to power. According to Mashal, “it helps to understand that Mr Karzai represents an entire network of power – national as well as local – accumulated over 13 years and beyond. That network feels that it is slowly being uprooted under Mr Ghani’s presidency, and that it could be vastly weakened if the current government survives the September deadline.” However, Ghani is not without resources. Much will depend on how many opposition figures the president can co-opt to keep Karzai at least partly on the margins. Karzai reserves his sharpest criticism for what he considers to be Ghani’s biggest sin – “cosying up ‘immensely, sadly’ to the United States and relying on it for survival.” Karzai was extremely critical of the Kerry formula for governance. “This is blatant interference to undermine the sovereignty of Afghanistan. Look at this country: What do we have other than our pride and sovereignty?

⁴ Mujib Mashal, “Afghanistan Is in Chaos. Is That What Hamid Karzai Wants?”, *The New York Times*, 5 August 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/06/world/asia/afghanistan-hamid-karzai.html>. Access on 14 August 2017.

⁵ Mujib Mashal, “Afghanistan Is in Chaos. Is That What Hamid Karzai Wants?”, op. cit.

Then some one comes – from a good place, America – stands here in our country to determine the duration of our government as he sees it fit? This is an insult.”⁶

The dissident forces continued to press against the government in 2016 and the first half of 2017. On 24 August 2016, gunmen attacked the American University of Afghanistan. Eleven people were killed in the ensuing gunfight. “Afghan police and special security forces converged on the campus, which is surrounded by high walls and is in a remote area of Kabul...A Defense official in Washington said a small contingent from the US military advisory mission based in Kabul was ‘assisting’ and ‘advising’ Afghan forces as they responded to the chaos. US forces in Afghanistan are not permitted to engage in combat.”⁷ No group claimed responsibility for the attack but the Ghani government suggested that the dreaded Haqqani group that had, for years, operated out of Pakistan was responsible for the operation.

There were suicide-bombing attacks aimed at government offices and officials on 5 September 2016. The government reported 24 people killed, including an army general, a police colonel and deputy director of Ghani’s elite protection force. The bombings were the latest in a summer-long wave of attacks on government or western targets. Zabiullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, took responsibility for the attacks.⁸

There were numerous other acts of violence that began to test the resolve of the West, in particular, the regime led by Donald Trump, America’s new president, to stay engaged in Afghanistan. On 31 May 2017, a massive blast tore through the diplomatic quarter of the Afghan capital, killing 80 to 90 people and wounding another 460. The source of the explosion was a tanker truck, which detonated during rush hour in the morning on a busy road in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood which houses embassies, businesses, banks, and supermarkets. This was the worst attack on Kabul during the 16-year civil war. “The diplomatic zone in Kabul is among the city’s most highly protected”, wrote *The Washington Post* in its coverage of the event. “Yet attackers have managed to breach its security in the past. In 2015, suspected Taliban gunmen rampaged through the area, engaging in an

⁶ Mujib Mashal, “Amid Afghan chaos, Karzai keeps his power in play”, *The New York Times*, 6 August 2016, p A1 and A7.

⁷ Pamela Constable, “11 killed, 30 hurt in attack on American University in Kabul”, *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2016, p A6.

⁸ Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, “Taliban bombings kill senior Afghan official,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 2016, p A9.

overnight gun battle with security forces. The four attackers were killed, but there were no civilian casualties.”⁹

In preparation for the meeting in Brussels in October 2016 in which about 100 governments and international agencies were to hear Ghani present his vision and track record before signaling their commitment to the country’s future, the president exchanged views with a number of foreigners. He invited a small group of foreign journalists to his palace for informal conversation. The invitees included *The Washington Post*’s Pamela Constable who then wrote a story for her newspaper titled “Afghan leader could reform himself out of power.” The main thrust of the story was that the president, having given up the traditional form of governance in his country such as practiced by his predecessor Karzai, might not succeed. “Some observers say the tension between Ghani’s need to strengthen political stability and his centralised drive to build a modern state is fast coming to a head. They suggest that the president, who wrote a scholarly book, *Fixing Failed States*, needs to learn from Karzai’s laissez-faire leadership style. Otherwise, they warn he may lose on both counts.”¹⁰ At the meeting with the journalists, “he rattled off head-spinning statistics about irrigation and living standards...Ghani’s performance seemed intended to both dazzle and disarm his small audience, something he has failed to achieve with the Afghan public. At 67, with a history of health problems, he spends 18-hour days on the job reaching for the sky with long-term regional development schemes and digging deep to root out corruption.” While there does not seem to be a resolution in sight to take care of the country’s divisive politics, there are also serious economic problems to be dealt with.

The Afghan Economic Situation

When countries that have experienced domestic turmoil move towards stability there is an immediate impact on the economy, a subject about which Ghani wrote in his above-cited book. In the early phase of a post-conflict situation, the rate of growth in the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) picks up sharply. That it has not happened in Afghanistan is one indication that potential investors are not convinced that the country is headed towards

⁹ Sayed Salahuddin and Pamela Constable, “Devastating blast kills 80 in Kabul”, *The Washington Post*, 1 June 2017, pp A1 and A8.

¹⁰ Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, London, Oxford University Press, 2009.

political stability. Violence and the lack of security remain major problems. It is estimated that civilian casualties increased by around three per cent in 2016 compared to 2015. Business sentiment remains depressed, with the number of new registrations of firms – a good indicator of future activity – remaining at the same level as in the previous year. Other proxy indicators, such as vehicle registrations, do not suggest a pick-up in economic activity.

Table 1: Growth in Gross Domestic Product

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Population (total, MM)	26.62	27.29	28.00	28.80	29.71	30.70	31.73	32.76	33.74	34.66
Population growth (annual %)	2.76	2.51	2.57	2.81	3.10	3.27	3.32	3.18	2.94	2.69
GDP (constant 2010 US\$, BN)	11.72	12.14	14.70	15.94	16.91	19.35	19.73	19.99	20.21	20.66
GDP growth (annual %)	13.74	3.61	21.02	8.43	6.11	14.43	1.96	1.31	1.11	2.23
GDP per capita (constant 2010 US\$)	440.37	444.95	524.82	553.30	569.23	630.43	621.82	610.24	599.14	596.26
Agriculture, value added (% of GDP)	30.62	25.39	30.21	27.09	24.51	24.60	23.89	23.46	21.40	21.91
Industry, value added (% of GDP)	27.34	27.46	22.58	21.86	23.47	21.85	21.15	22.33	22.95	22.68
Services, etc., value added (% of GDP)	42.03	47.15	47.22	51.05	52.02	53.55	54.96	54.21	55.65	55.41

Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank).

Table 1 shows the trend in the growth of real GDP over the last several years. After a sharp pick up in 2007 and 2008, the rate of growth declined significantly. The GDP increased marginally from 1.11 percent in 2015 to 2.23 percent in 2016. With a population growth of nearly three percent, this level of economic growth implies a decline in per capita income that is still low. This means an increase in the incidence of poverty. Growth is expected to increase to 2.4 per cent in 2017 and to reach 3.1 per cent by 2019. The latter forecast will raise the GDP increase to about the same level as the growth in population. Since income distribution is fairly skewed, the level of poverty would increase, making it easier for the insurgent groups to bring in new recruits.

Even in this depressing situation, there are some areas of significant progress. One of them is education. In 2001, when the Taliban were still in charge of the government, no girls attended

formal schools and the enrolment of boys was about one million. Net enrolment was estimated at 43 per cent for boys and only three per cent for girls. There were only 21,000 teachers in the country, most poorly-educated. The student-teacher ratio was 240. In the 15-year period since then, school enrolment has increased more than eight-fold, from one million to 8.7 million. The number of teachers has also increased eight-fold to 185,000. The enrolment of girls has increased to 39 per cent. A team of girls travelled from Afghanistan to the US to participate in the FIRST Global Challenge, an international robotics competition, in July 2017. The team won a silver medal for the Rajaâ Cherkaoui El Moursli Award for Courageous Achievement – a good indication of the progress made by the girls in Afghanistan. The team was originally denied visas to enter the US. “It took an international outcry and intervention from President Trump and other officials to allow [the] girls from an Afghan robotics team to receive visas and compete in the competition organised by First Global, a non-profit organisation.”¹¹

Table 2: Direction of Trade (2015)

	Exports (% of Total Exports)	Imports (% of Total Imports)	Trade Balance (current US\$, MM)
Pakistan	39.71	17.46	-1,119.84
China	1.78	13.45	-1,033.85
India	33.11	1.69	+58.26
UAE	4.28	4.15	-296.07
USA	0.48	3.25	-248.82

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution database

Trade is another area of relative success. With an increase in exports and slower growth in imports (due to weaker domestic demand), the trade deficit is estimated to have improved

¹¹ Niraj Choksi, “After visa denials, Afghan girls can attend robotics contest in U.S.”, *The New York Times*, 13 July 2017, p A7.

from 36.7 per cent to 35 per cent of GDP. However, it is still very large and is not sustainable, especially if the flow of foreign assistance declines. The large trade deficit continues to be financed by foreign aid. Table 2 provides an overview of how Afghanistan trades with the world. Pakistan is by far its largest trading partner. Almost 40 per cent of the country's exports go to its neighbour while it imports more than 17 percent of its needs from that country. Afghanistan runs a trade deficit of over US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion) with Pakistan that it finances from the assistance it receives from Western nations. This picture is likely to change in significant ways once the Belt and Road Initiative, launched by China, opens new trading routes.

Table 3: Distribution of Population

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Population (total, MM)	26.62	27.29	28.00	28.80	29.71	30.70	31.73	32.76	33.74	34.66
Population growth (annual %)	2.76	2.51	2.57	2.81	3.10	3.27	3.32	3.18	2.94	2.69
Urban population (% of total)	23.59	23.95	24.31	24.69	25.07	25.47	25.87	26.28	26.70	27.13
Urban population growth (annual %)	4.25	4.02	4.09	4.35	4.64	4.83	4.89	4.76	4.53	4.28

Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank)

Among the real sectors of the economy, the performance of agriculture, the largest, was mixed in 2016 – cereal production recorded a decline of nearly five per cent while fruit production, a major item of export, increased somewhat. Manufacturing, especially large scale, did not do very well as the dependence on imports continued to adversely affect investment.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

In the late 19th century, the British administration in India gave up on its effort to bring Afghanistan under its control. It lost heavily in the series of Afghan wars it fought and settled for the second-best solution – to establish its dominion over the Afghan areas it could control. A border was needed to be defined between what will be British India and what will remain

Afghan. Durand, a civil servant and diplomat, was tasked with drawing a line of demarcation. The Durand Line was imposed on Kabul in 1896. It is 2,430 kilometres long.

Durand was not concerned with keeping intact the various Pakhtun tribes that lived in the area. Several of these were divided between the two countries. Most of the Pakhtuns, the ethnic group that dominated this geographical area, had more people on the side of British India. In 2017, 70 years after Pakistan became independent, there are 45 million Pakhtuns in the world. Of them, most – 26 million – live in Pakistan, sixteen million are in Afghanistan and the remaining three million live around the globe. Those who lived in these poorly-governed areas did not respect the border even if they knew that it existed. They moved almost at will, often bringing their livestock with them.

In 1947, on the eve of the founding of Pakistan, the government in Kabul declared that it would not accept the Durand Line as the border between it and the new country to its southeast. Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan's application to become a member of the United Nations (UN). The reasoning was simple: It could not accept Pakistan's independence as long as its border with it was not defined to its satisfaction. The Durand Line was imposed on it by the powerful British. Now that they were gone, it had to be redrawn. Pakistan, of course, did not accept Kabul's position – it had many other problems associated with the partition of British India to deal with, and the status of the Durand Line was a minor issue. Even if Kabul's demand were to be accepted, what would be the basis for redrawing the border? If it had to be done on the basis of ethnicity, there were more Pakhtuns on its side of the border.

For three decades, Kabul supported the move by some protagonists to create an ethno-geographic entity called Pakhtunistan. However, Kabul did not indicate what would be its relations with this entity. The demand for the creation of Pakhtunistan died with the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979. The invasion led to a 10-year war fought by a number of militias, most supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US. The first two members of this coalition used religion to motivate the fight against the Soviet Union's occupation. The infighting among these groups, once Moscow withdrew its troops in 1989, created a vacuum that was ultimately filled by the Taliban. Since the Taliban had hosted Osama and Al Qaeda that mounted the successful 9/11 terrorist attack on the US, Washington decided to punish the regime in Kabul. The country was invaded by the Americans – the

second time in a quarter century that a foreign nation had sent in an army of occupation – and the immediate aim was quickly achieved. The Taliban regime was pushed out of Kabul and it transformed itself from a government to a dissident movement. Some in the Taliban movement went to Pakistan and, from there, they mounted attacks on the government forces and their foreign supporters – mostly Americans. Pressure was put on Islamabad to eliminate the sanctuaries from which the dissident forces were operating. Pakistan was slow to act, mostly for two reasons. It feared that the terrorists, if pressured by the military in Pakistan, would turn their weapons on Pakistan itself. Islamabad was also keen to retain its influence on Kabul which it could do by giving implicit support to the Taliban.

There was another aspect of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbour. Pakistan was the country's largest trading partner. Not only that; even for imports and exports to other countries, most of the goods and commodities flowed through the Pakistani territory. This was conducted under the framework of a transit agreement that was updated several times, most recently in 2013. In addition to these formal exchanges, both people and trade moved informally over the un-demarcated or poorly-defined border. Capital from Pakistan also moved informally over the frontier and was invested in the enterprises in Afghanistan.

American Support for Afghanistan under Trump

After a long tenure covering Pakistan, Constable (from *The Washington Post*) moved to Afghanistan and began reporting regularly for her newspaper from Kabul. In one of her despatches in 2016, she took a look at the condition in which the Americans were leaving the Afghan military to its own devices. She visited Camp Shaheen and then wrote a detailed story on what she saw. The war was being fought on two fronts, sometimes pulling in two different directions. One was the ongoing and increasingly costly conflict between the Taliban insurgents and Afghan forces. Complicating the matter was the fact that the Afghan fighting forces had been abruptly weaned from 15 years of Western funding and combat support while facing a fierce, persistent enemy. The other was an ambitious effort by the US military officials and several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners to create an independent, professional Afghan defence force. This included training fighter pilots, establishing rest and training rotations for military troops, and making sure that administrators could deliver fuel, uniforms and bullets when they were needed. The US, in

other words, was attempting to create a force that was modelled on its own. However, several problems had to be overcome. Decentralising the military bureaucracy and teaching the Afghan forces to survive without the Western largesse were a constant challenge. “Both setups encouraged dependence and fostered corruption, which is viewed by many as the single largest obstacle to effective Afghan military performance in the war effort,” she wrote.

According to the American and NATO advisers, the only way to ensure accountability and efficiency among the security forces was by instilling modern administrative methods. However, this was slowed by the low literacy rates among the Afghan troops, including many officers, and by the entrenched nepotistic practices that made it difficult to get rid of incompetent staff. In spite of the reform efforts, the casualties have been high. “Total number of US military deaths since 2001 is counted by the Pentagon at 2,375. Last year, the Afghan casualties were the highest since the war began, with about 16,000 soldiers and police officers killed. But the US military officials said Afghan forces were doing better this year. Unlike the respected air force, where more than 90 percent of service members reenlist, the attrition rate in the Afghan National Army is officially estimated at 15 to 20 per cent a year,” Constable continued in her detailed report.¹²

This was the state of affairs concerning the American involvement in Afghanistan when Trump took office in January 2017. The new president ordered a review of the situation and the options available to his administration. According to one report, “the thornier question is how Mr Trump will reconcile the split between his war cabinet – led by Defense Secretary retired General Jim Mattis and Lt. Gen. H R McMaster, the national security adviser, who both served in Afghanistan – and his political aides, among them his chief strategist, Stephen K Bannon, who argue that a major deployment would be a slippery slope to nation building, something Mr Trump has always shunned.” Senior Pentagon officials were broadly in favour of the field commanders’ request for additional troops. The international security force had about 13,000 troops, of whom about 8,400 are American soldiers. Pentagon officials said that 3,000 to 5,000 additional troops, including hundreds of Special Operation Forces, could be sent. “Such deployment would allow American advisers to train and assist a greater number of Afghan forces, and place American troops closer to the front line at lower levels in the

¹² Pamela Constable, “Trying to build a plane while flying it”, *The Washington Post*, 30 August 2016, p A6.

chain of command,” wrote two *New York Times* reporters.¹³ However, even some from the US military were not convinced that adding “boots on the ground would arrest the deteriorating situation.” John Keane, a retired army vice chief of staff, was one of those who was skeptical. “The reality is that the Taliban have the initiative,” he told *The New York Times*. “They have the momentum. They attack when they want, where they want, and the outcome is usually successful for them.”¹⁴

However, military preparedness was not the only US concern. There were serious concerns among those who occupied senior positions in the Trump administration about the quality of governance in Afghanistan. Some of them had deep experience of the Afghanistan situation. For instance, General McMaster, who is the current US National Security Advisor, was a commander in Afghanistan in 2010. Then, he headed a task force that tried to root out endemic corruption in the government in the country. “That experience, former colleagues say, has persuaded him of the need for the United States to stay involved in the country. One of his current aides described his view as ‘tempered optimism.’” According to James J Carafano, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, who advised Trump’s transition team, “Trump has the same challenge Obama did: If you walk away from Afghanistan, it’s going to be a disaster. Even if Trump’s instincts are to say, ‘This isn’t the kind of military operation I’d like to do,’ he’s caught with a strategic reality.”¹⁵ That said, there was the question of cost: The US was spending US\$3.1 billion (\$4.2 billion) a month in Afghanistan – a number, the White House aides said weighed on a president who has spoken about the need for greater burden-sharing from the NATO allies. The new president was inclined to give greater authority to his field commanders than was done by Obama, his predecessor.

In a story published on 14 June 2017, *The Washington Post* revealed that Defence Secretary Jim Mattis had told the Senate’s Armed Services Committee that he had been authorised to decide the troop level in Afghanistan. He said that “we are not winning” in the country. When asked what winning would look like, he said that it would mean a long-term US presence and Afghan security forces that were capable enough to control violence at the local levels. In the first eight months of 2016, Afghan forces suffered 15,000 casualties, including more than

¹³ Mark Landler and Eric Schmitt, “The White House is split as commanders ask for more troops in Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2017, p A8.

¹⁴ Mark Landler and Eric Schmittmay, “Trump Administration Is Split on Adding Troops in Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 23 May 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/world/europe/saudi-arabia-arms-deal-nato.html>. Accessed on 14 August 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid.

5,000 killed. Recruitment efforts were barely able to keep the Afghan security forces at their current levels, let alone growing to a size large and capable enough to project security in the country. The Afghans were not the only people that had suffered. More than 2,000 US troops had died in the 16-year old conflict. Thousands of Afghan civilians were killed as well. More than 3,000 civilians were killed in 2016, making it the deadliest year for the civilians in the country since the UN mission there began to maintain numbers.¹⁶ “Mr Trump, who has no prior government experience, leaves the impression that he is cowed by the weighty responsibility of sending more Americans into battle, and is looking out to put the onus on Mr Mattis so he has somebody to blame if things go wrong, as he did when he fingered the generals for a botched raid in Yemen in January, in which one member of the Navy SEAL was killed,” editorialised *The New York Times*.¹⁷

The struggle in Afghanistan was getting more complicated by the entry of new forces. In a dramatic move, hundreds of Islamic terrorists captured Tora Bora, the underground labyrinth that was the redoubt of Al-Qaeda leader Osama. The Islamic State forces fought and forced the Taliban out from the area.

Saving Afghanistan from Collapse: Important for South Asia

Afghanistan seems headed towards being totally destabilised mostly because Washington has not quite figured out what to do with the long-troubled country. Washington has been actively engaged in that country since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It has fought a 16-year long war, spent hundreds of billions of US dollars and lost thousands of lives. The end is not in sight and no strategy has been put in place to deal with the worsening situation.¹⁸ While the Trump administration dithers, other actors are taking advantage of the deteriorating situation. Among them are Iran and possibly the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group of Islamists.

¹⁶ Editorial, “Mr. Trump, It’s your war now”, *The New York Times*, 16 June 2017, p A26.

¹⁷ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Trump gives Pentagon authority to set Afghan force levels,” *The Washington Post*, 14 June 2017, pp A1 and A2.

¹⁸ It was the belief that the rest of South Asia should concern itself with Afghan affairs that prompted the author and his colleagues at ISAS to write a book on the troubled country. See Shahid Javed Burki, Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Riaz Hassan, *Afghanistan: The Next Phase*, Melbourne, Australia, Melbourne University Press, 2015.

A detailed report filed by the veteran journalist Carlotta Gall for *The New York Times* focuses on the increasing influence of Iran in Afghanistan. It is taking advantage of the unorthodox strategy the Trump administration has adopted towards the Middle East and other Muslim nations in this part of the world. Washington, under Trump, has decided to partner with some of the most authoritarian governments in the area. It has, for instance, lavished praise on General Fatah al-Sisi, the Egyptian President, who is presiding over an administration that is even more brutal than the one headed by Hosni Mubarak, the long-serving president who was forced out of office by what came to be called the “Arab Spring.” That upheaval was the consequence of the rise of the Arab youth who were unhappy with their situation in the restrictive political and economic systems of their countries. Washington, working with Cairo and Riyadh, will not be able to silence this group that is seeing a significant increase in its size because of the demographic revolution underway in most of the Muslim world.

Iran is exploiting a chaotic civil war in Afghanistan and the American withdrawal to create a virtual satellite state. Tehran wants to make sure that foreign forces eventually leave the neighbouring country. One way of doing that, writes Carlotta Gall, is for “Iran to aid its onetime enemies, the Taliban, to ensure a loyal proxy and also keep the country destabilized, without tipping it over. This is especially true along their shared border of more than 500 miles.”¹⁹

The fighting season in Afghanistan is at its peak at this time in the late summer of 2017 and the Taliban are making important inroads in the country. As the US wavers in its support of the country, with the Trump administration not certain what it would like to accomplish in this long-war-torn nation, the Taliban has begun to target Washington’s forces still present in the country. On 5 August 2017, two marines were killed in an ambush by the dissidents. The new American president has created enormous anxiety among those who know Afghanistan well. He had promised to develop a new strategy towards the decades-old Afghan problem as he was being advised to reverse the approach adopted by Obama in the White House. Under Obama, US/NATO forces peaked in 2009 at 140,000 troops but most of them withdrew in 2014 while the war was still hotly contested. Obama took office in January 2009, promising to end the two wars – in Afghanistan and Iraq – his predecessor had started. He ordered the pullout of troops from both countries. At this time, General John W Nicholson, the current

¹⁹ Carlotta Gall, “Iran gains ground in Afghanistan as U.S. presence wanes,” *The New York Times*, 5 August 2017, p A1 and A9.

US commander in Afghanistan on his fourth military tour in the country, commands a limited military assistance mission of about 8,400 troops that advise and train local forces and provide air combat support.

Last year, the general told a congressional committee that, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “the US campaign in Afghanistan has largely defined my service.” However, Trump is not impressed with the general’s performance. He threatened to remove him from his current position. At a tense 19 July 2017 meeting in the White House, Trump wanted the entire plan on which General Nicholson was working to be scrapped but did not indicate what would replace it. The general’s idea was to add several thousand additional troops already present in the country – not for carrying out combat missions but to more intensely train the Afghan forces. This confusion in the policy-making circles in Washington was disheartening for the Afghans. “Our biggest immediate worry is the lack of an American strategy”, Omar Daudzai, a former senior Afghan official told Constable, “We are facing political turmoil and a security crisis. Neighboring governments are meddling. We need an American commitment to support the defense forces, elections and democratic institutions. America’s reputation is at stake in Afghanistan, and if this all goes bad, America will lose its credibility.”²⁰ In fact, it would be more than the loss of American credibility.

There is consensus among policy-thinkers who have experience of Afghan affairs that military victory, if at all feasible, will not save the country from disaster. Nader Nadery, a senior aide working alongside Ghani, the beleaguered Afghan President, is clear what it would take to deal with something that, at this difficult time, appears to be an insolvable problem. “We know that building a secure, stable Afghanistan is our responsibility, but we are also fighting a war against transnational terror, and we can’t do it alone.”²¹ He and others like him are of the view that peace in the country will only be sustained by reforming what has become a corrupt political system. The ultimate aim should be to create an inclusive and representative democratic structure. The “war”, in other words, has to be fought on several fronts that include military combat, political development and social progress.

If the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates to the point at which the country’s unity is threatened, there will be a series of possible consequences for the countries to the southeast.

²⁰ Pamela Constable, “Afghan allies defend general”, *The Washington Post*, 6 August 2017, pp A1 and A12.

²¹ Ibid.

This will be the case in particular for Pakistan but also for India and possibly Bangladesh as well. If Kabul is unable to establish control over its entire territory, and a number of relatively autonomous regions representing varied interests emerge, the consequence for Pakistan is obvious and very troubling. Under this evolving scenario, the Taliban would consolidate their hold over Afghanistan's southwest. Once fully established there, they could bring about a role reversal. Since they were expelled from their country by the American intervention post-9/11, they established their centre of operations in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. Called the "Quetta Shura" after the province's capital, the Taliban launched many operations in Afghanistan, often targeting American and NATO forces. If an autonomous Taliban entity were to be established in the Helmand province where the group already has partial control, the centre of operations could move across from Pakistan to Afghanistan. From there the Afghan Taliban could launch attacks on Pakistan, targetting especially the Hazara Shiite community in Baluchistan. Attacks on the Shiites could bring about reaction from Iran, the world's largest Shiite country. Iran, as already indicated, is increasing its presence in Afghanistan.

There is known ISIS activity in the Tora Bora Mountains along the Afghan-Pakistan border and, more generally, in the Nangarhar province in the country's east. The presence of this group of Islamists could increase as it comes under pressure in Syria where the forces opposed to them are pushing into the areas they control. This is being done with the active involvement of the Americans. If the ISIS is able to consolidate its hold over eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, it will endeavour to encroach upon some parts of India that have large Muslim presence. Those parts where there are large Muslim populations such as Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh could become vulnerable to ISIS's operations. Bangladesh, South Asia's other Muslim majority country, could also become an area of ISIS interest. The ISIS claimed responsibility for the bloody attack on a café in Dhaka some months ago.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's present and its future cannot – in fact, should not – be considered in isolation. The country has already deeply affected its neighbours, Pakistan and Iran in particular. India has always been involved in Afghan affairs, in part because of the long-running rivalry with Pakistan. China is taking an interest in the country as a part of what analysts such as Robert

Blackwill and Jennifer Harris in their 2016 book have called “geoeconomics”. This is the use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical goals.²² Beijing has assigned Afghanistan an important place in its Belt and Road Initiative programme of infrastructure development involving scores of countries in three continents. Although the US is still engaged in determining what are its short- and long-term interests in Afghanistan, it appears those will be secondary – part of its policy to deal with the rapid rise of China as a global power. Russia would not like to see Afghanistan fall into the hands of Islamic extremists since that would have influence on the countries in Central Asia that were once included in the cluster of nations that made up the defunct Soviet Union. Such a development could also affect its Muslim population.

How to deal with this situation was one of the questions the three authors of the book, *Afghanistan: The Next Phase*, asked and tried to answer.²³ The book was published in 2015, and this author presented a copy to Ghani when the former spent several hours with him in Kabul in May of that year. The three authors suggested that, since the resolution of the Afghan problem would affect a number of states in the geographical neighbourhood of the country, it might be appropriate to let a group of nations get involved in moving this troubled country forward. The group should ideally include all the countries that border Afghanistan (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan and Iran) as well as those that have been involved, in one way or the other, in the country’s affairs. The latter group should include India, Russia, Turkey and the US. This “friends of Afghanistan” group of 10 countries should be mandated by the UN to manage the Afghan state over a specified period of time, say 10 years. After that time, the country’s affairs would be handed over to a constitutionally-created structure of governance. This approach runs counter to the biases of the members of the current administration in Washington. While it does not favour a nation-building strategy and is inclined to leave the Afghan nation to its own devices, it is not clear how it would like to see the US get disengaged. There are many voices in the on-going Afghan debate in America’s capital. The Trump White House is divided between two factions, with National Security Advisor McMaster seeking to bolster US troops there and give them greater freedom of action, Bannon, the White House Chief Strategist, opposing greater US involvement in Afghanistan.

²² Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.

²³ Shahid Javed Burki, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Riaz Hassan, op. cit.

Exasperated by the uncertainty this has created and noting the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, Senator John McCain said that, “We must face facts: we are losing in Afghanistan and the time is of the essence if we intend to turn the tide. We need an integrated civil-military approach to bolster US counterterrorism efforts, strengthen the capability and capacity of the Afghan government and security forces, and intensify diplomatic efforts to facilitate a negotiated peace process in Afghanistan and cooperation with regional partners.”

The main point of this analysis is to suggest that some of the moves aimed at the Muslim world, made by the US administration under Trump, have created a chain reaction that might reach the South Asian sub-continent. Afghanistan would be the conduit through which the rest of South Asia might be reached. The world to the northwest of the sub-continent is churning too rapidly for the countries of the region not to be concerned. The ripples from this churning should be guarded against before they do great damage.

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