



AFGHANISTAN'S UNENDING WARS

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SUMMARY

The current conflict in Afghanistan, the latest in a series of perpetual wars and episodes of civil strife over the past 40 years, is strategically stalemated. With the Taliban and other militant groups gradually gaining a grip on large areas of the countryside, the Kabul government and its international allies have recently redoubled their efforts to seek a negotiated peace agreement with insurgents to end the protracted conflict. While the Taliban are willing to negotiate with the U.S. about the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country, they continue to reject direct talks with the Afghan government for a political settlement. Even with inclusive peace talks, there is reason to question whether the Taliban's vision of a future Afghan state and society can be reconciled with a liberal, democratic constitutional order.

An alternative political pathway to a peaceful outcome is through executing better security and governance reforms. With continued support of the international community, the Afghan government may be able to provide the incentives needed to reintegrate insurgent commanders and combatants back into the sociopolitical system. All other scenarios for Afghanistan are dark, especially the prospect of a disintegration of the existing political system that could trigger a wider, more bloody civil war.

INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan is locked in a protracted stalemate, with the Afghan government largely controlling population centers and urban areas and the Taliban and other militant and criminal networks dominating or exerting influence over large swathes of the rural regions. As the international community's engagement in Afghanistan is gradually diminishing, the Afghan security forces are struggling to contain the Taliban's momentum on the battlefield and are suffering casualties at an unsustainable rate. In addition, corruption and mismanagement in the government continue to underpin the insurgency and undermine governance and stabilization efforts. Moreover, foreign support for the Taliban, particularly sanctuaries in neighboring Pakistan, remains a significant impediment to defeating or weakening the group militarily.

Although the latest talks between the United States and the Taliban in Qatar have raised hopes for the start of a peace process in Afghanistan, there are major stumbling blocks to reaching a final agreement. The Taliban have made it clear that their primary objective to negotiate with the United States is to end "foreign occupation" in Afghanistan, and they still refuse to negotiate directly with the Afghan government for a political settlement to end the conflict. So far, the insurgents have also rejected

a proposal by Kabul and Washington for a comprehensive ceasefire to jumpstart a peace process.

Furthermore, divisions between warring sides also complicate the prospects for arriving at and sustaining a peace agreement. Afghan politicians are increasingly at odds over how to pursue peace talks with the Taliban. The upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for July 2019, may further fracture the Afghan polity, as some politicians have already called for the establishment of an interim administration to lead the peace talks with the Taliban. Without a national consensus and unity, the Afghan government will be in a weaker position to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban.

Regional tensions are another obstacle. While a stable Afghanistan benefits regional security and economic connectivity, a divergence of interests between Afghanistan's neighbors, as well as geopolitical rivalries between key international players, hinders a collective effort to stabilize the country. And most importantly, it is far from clear that the broader insurgent movement fighting in Afghanistan would adhere to any agreement signed by the Taliban negotiators in Qatar. Although the Taliban remains the most formidable antigovernment force throughout the country, the emergence of an ISIS offshoot and a proliferation of regional

TIMELINE

April 1978: Communist coup; start of Islamist guerrilla campaign to bring down the Kabul government

December 1979: Red Army launches an invasion of Afghanistan

February 1989: Red Army completes its withdrawal

April 1992: Fall of the Kabul government and start of another period of civil conflict

September 1996: Taliban seizes Kabul and proclaims Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

October 2001: US launches Operation Enduring Freedom, invades Afghanistan

December 2001: Hamid Karzai selected as leader of Interim Administration at Bonn Conference

Winter 2002: Taliban establishes Quetta Shura in Pakistan to reorganize and mount insurgency

October 2006: NATO assumes responsibility for security across all of Afghanistan

September 2010: Karzai sets up High Peace Council for talks with Taliban

January 2012: Taliban agree to open office in Qatar for talks

September 2014: Afghan leaders sign a power-sharing agreement after disputed elections results

December 2014: NATO ends its combat mission, hands responsibility to Afghan forces

January 2015: NATO-led "Resolute Support" mission set up to advise and assist the Afghan forces

January 2015: Islamic State-Khorasan Province established

July 2015: Taliban admits its leader Mullah Omar died a few years ago

September 2018: U.S. appoints Zalmay Khalilzad special adviser to pursue talks with Taliban

January 2019: U.S. and Taliban agree in principle to a peace negotiation framework

militant groups in certain areas have further worsened security and complicated conflict-resolution efforts.

PHASES OF CONFLICT

The current conflict in Afghanistan is only the latest in a series of perpetual wars and episodes of civil strife that have engulfed the country over the past four decades. At least six phases of the continuous conflict can be distinguished. The first followed the communist coup in April 1978, when Islamist insurgents mounted a guerrilla campaign aimed at disrupting and ultimately bringing down the Moscow-backed government in Kabul. The Islamic-centric insurgency widely expanded and intensified in a second phase with the December 1979 military invasion of the Red Army in support of the Kabul regime, and the intervention of regional and international actors backing mujahedeen opposition forces. A third phase of civil war came with the exit of the Red Army in 1989 and a surviving communist regime facing direct combat with the insurgent groups. With the fall of the Kabul government in the spring of 1992, a fourth stage saw several of the victorious mujahedeen parties turning their weapons against one another in a destructive contest for political power in Kabul and across the country. While this fighting continued, the Taliban, a force of militant students out of the madrassas in Pakistan, began a fifth phase in fall 1994 with its slow but relentless offensive against a nearly anarchic Afghan state. A sixth phase, and the focus of this chapter, followed the U.S. military intervention to punish the

Taliban and al-Qaeda for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C.

These phases share some key elements in common. All saw the involvement of foreign actors, whether through proxies or with their participation as combatants. Each period, moreover, was marked by the leading roles of militant groups seeking a regime committed to establishing an ultra-conservative political order. Also, in every case, the forces of ethnicity contributed to intensifying the conflict, and none of these Afghan civil conflicts ended in a political settlement; to date all have been decided militarily.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of the war provides valuable lessons to analyze the present-day situation in Afghanistan, explore potential solutions to ending the war, and avoid mistakes that have exacerbated the conflict throughout different periods of civil strife in the past. In fact, almost all underlying causes of the current conflict predate the 2001 U.S. intervention.

The 1978 coup was the beginning of state failure and civil strife in Afghanistan. The regime in Kabul and its Soviet supporters carried out a brutal purge of religious leaders, civil society, intelligentsia, tribal leaders, and all domestic opposition. The new government also introduced radical political, economic, cultural, and social reforms that were largely antithetical to Afghanistan's predominantly

religious and traditional society – triggering a nationwide antigovernment and anti-Soviet rebellion.

To suppress the uprising and rescue its struggling Afghan client state, the Red Army resorted to dreadful tactics, including indiscriminate aerial strikes and depopulation strategies, sparking major internal displacement and forcing five million Afghans to take refuge in neighboring countries, predominantly in Pakistan and Iran. This period of the conflict led to the killing of about 15,000 Soviet military personnel and more than one million Afghans over the next decade.¹

Many Afghan religious fundamentalists settled in Pakistan, where they received a warm welcome and extensive support. As part of the Cold War, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and their allies provided financial aid and weapons to the *mujahedeen*. These fundamentalist leaders, who harbored strong anti-communist and anti-capitalist sentiments, created seven parties – collectively known as “the mujahedeen” – to wage war against the Kabul government and its Soviet allies. They also established close ties with transnational Sunni extremist groups, including future leaders of al-Qaeda. Indeed, most of the Taliban leaders, including Mullah Mohammad Omar, were formerly members of the mujahedeen.

Much like the current conflict, the Soviet war also culminated in a deadlock, with the Soviet and Afghan government forces holding the urban regions and insurgents commanding much of the rural areas. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he questioned the possibility of a military victory in Afghanistan. In line with

his “new thinking” foreign policy doctrine, he decided to gradually end the occupation of Afghanistan, which he had described as “the bleeding wound.”² The new Soviet leader instructed the Kabul government to negotiate peace with the opposition and form a power-sharing government. While troop drawdown did not begin until February 1988, Moscow’s announcement unnerved the Kabul government, whose survival depended on Soviet military and financial assistance. Therefore, in December 1986, Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah announced a reconciliation program designed to broaden the government’s support base and seek peace with the insurgents. He offered unilateral concessions, including a six-month ceasefire, a new constitution recognizing Islam as the state religion, the promise of general elections, a reversal of some of the socialist economic reforms, amnesty for opposition leaders, release of 16,000 political prisoners, and half of the posts in a national unity government for insurgent leaders.³

Emboldened by the Soviet decision to withdraw, however, mujahedeen leaders rejected Najibullah’s peace offer and doubled down on efforts to topple the government militarily. “The counter-revolution is aware of the strategic decision of the Soviet leadership to withdraw the Soviet troops from the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan],” a Soviet official noted. “The counter-revolution will not be satisfied with partial power today, knowing that tomorrow it can have it all.”⁴

In addition to a lack of interest and political will by the international community to bring peace to Afghanistan, the lack of sincerity about a negotiated settlement by all external parties

to the conflict also contributed to the failure. On April 14, 1988, for example, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and the Soviet Union signed the Geneva Accords, which had been under on-and-off negotiations since 1983 and were concluded only when the interlocutors agreed to a “negative symmetry” that called on Moscow to cut its military aid to the Kabul regime and Islamabad and its allies to stop interfering in Afghan affairs. As required, the Soviets had entirely withdrawn their troops by the following February. However, in what became “positive symmetry,” Moscow maintained support to the communist government, while Pakistan continued to aid the Afghan mujahedeen seeking to depose the Kabul government.⁵

One important lesson from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and its aftermath is that the announced and/or actual withdrawal of the Red Army did not encourage the insurgents to make peace with the Kabul government. Quite the opposite, and instructive for the present day, the mujahedeen intensified military operations to seize Kabul. Facing internal divisions and financial hardship after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kabul government fell to the mujahedeen in April 1992.

There followed a devastating civil war between competing armed groups that paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban in 1994 in southern Afghanistan and the seizure of Kabul in 1996.

Another important lesson from this historical experience for today is that a precipitous U.S. withdrawal now could have similar, if not more disastrous, ramifications for Afghanistan and international security. The U.S. exit could bolster the Taliban's confidence about a military victory and diminish the prospects for peace. It might also deepen internal divisions within Afghanistan, as happened with the Kabul government after the Soviet withdrawal, and most likely lead to the disintegration of the post-Taliban political system and the Afghan security forces. As in the time of the post-Soviet withdrawal, the fall of the Kabul government would most likely culminate in a nationwide civil war, rather than an abrupt takeover of power by the Taliban. Moreover, regional countries may also be expected to increase support for their proxies to secure their interests in the wake of an American pullout and disengagement from the region.



Fighters of a splinter Taliban group take part in a gathering in Zabul Province, south Afghanistan on Aug. 14, 2016. (Xinhua/Manan Arghand via Getty Images)

PRESENT DAY CONFLICT

The 2001 U.S.-led military intervention swiftly toppled the Taliban regime and helped install a new government in Kabul. However, peace and stability in post-Taliban Afghanistan proved to be short-lived as within a few years the militants regrouped and mounted a full-fledged insurgency against the Afghan government and its international supporters.⁶

Three key factors prepared the ground for the Taliban resurgence. First, three decades of war had fragmented Afghan society and crippled the country's civilian and military institutions.⁷ As a result, the new Afghan government, led by President Hamid Karzai, struggled to govern effectively and expand its writ across the country. President George W. Bush's pledge of a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan did not materialize; the country received only \$52 per capita in foreign assistance for the first two years of post-conflict reconstruction, substantially less than Bosnia (\$1,390) and Kosovo (\$814) did during similar periods in their reconstruction.⁸

Second, the United States and its allies initially had a small footprint in Afghanistan and they largely relied on local warlords and power brokers to provide security and governance, fueling corruption and lawlessness and leaving a security vacuum

that could be filled by the insurgents. Furthermore, the 2003 invasion of Iraq distracted Washington from state-building and stabilization efforts in the war-ravaged country. The Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Central Command considered the Taliban a “spent force” and diverted key military and intelligence assets to Iraq, limiting the military mission in Afghanistan to counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al-Qaeda.⁹

Third, the Taliban leadership, including the group's leader, Mullah Omar, relocated to Pakistan, where it received support from state and non-state entities to reestablish the Taliban as an insurgent movement. Two recent books – *Directorate S* by renowned journalist and author Steve Coll and *The Wrong Enemy* by New York Times correspondent Carlotta Gall – provide a chilling account of how Pakistani military and intelligence officials' support for the insurgents has prolonged the war and undercut the prospects of finding a negotiated settlement to end the Afghan conflict. In recent years, other regional countries, such as Iran and Russia, have established ties with the Taliban, effectively playing both sides as part of a calculated hedging strategy to secure their perceived interests.

DIMENSIONS OF THE CONFLICT

The ongoing war in Afghanistan is most visibly a contest for political control of the state that involves elements of ethnic resentment and local grievances, as well

as tribal and personal animosities. More essentially, it concerns an ideological struggle between two competing visions of the state. One promises a democratically elected, pluralistically tolerant, constitutionally governed Afghanistan that gives ample recognition to religious and cultural heritage. The other offers a theocratic state modeled on an idealized Islamic emirate, headed by a caliph or *Amir-ul-Muminin* (Leader of the Faithful), whose piety rather than popular election legitimizes his rule.

Arrayed against the Kabul government and its supporters are a wide cast of armed groups. Spearheading the insurgency is the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) composed of Afghan Taliban commanders, established in the winter of 2002 in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, which borders southern Afghanistan.¹⁰ Somewhat loosely organized, these Taliban are closely aligned with the more cohesive Haqqani Network, perhaps the insurgency's most effective terrorist force. QST carries out attacks against coalition and Afghan security forces, mainly in the form of suicide attacks undertaken in cooperation with Pakistani militant groups.¹¹ Also of importance as a party to the conflict is the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), established in January 2015 in eastern Afghanistan.¹² This movement emerged mainly from among dissident elements of both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, joined by foreign terrorist groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).¹³ Unlike in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan has not been along sectarian lines, but ISKP appears

determined to change that by selectively targeting the Shiite Hazara minority. The cast of anti-state players also encompasses the remnants of al-Qaeda and supporting militant groups in Pakistan, notably the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), that have also been engaged in terrorist attacks against India.¹⁴ All seek the downfall of the Kabul government and the ouster of foreign forces from Afghanistan. They have had their own agendas, however, and in some cases are in direct competition, none more so than the QST and the Haqqani Network pitted against ISIS.

On the government side are Afghanistan's security forces, composed of the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and the local armed units supported by the U.S. Special Operation Forces known as the Afghan Local Police (ALP).¹⁵ While the Afghan security forces have made significant progress in terms of their size and capabilities, they remain highly reliant on the U.S.-led coalition for auxiliary roles such as air support, intelligence, logistics, reconnaissance, and funding.

The primary foreign party to the conflict since 2001 has been the United States. But over the course of this UN-sanctioned mission, its NATO allies have also contributed to the Afghan mission by providing troops and financial assistance. Although not direct parties in the war, Pakistan, Iran, and India have felt they have a significant stake in the outcome of the conflict, as have to a lesser degree many other regional countries including Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United

Arab Emirates, Qatar, and several Central Asian states. There is a general concern among Afghanistan's neighbors that an outright Taliban victory could expand Islamic insurgency beyond the country's borders and that it would be preferable, if possible, to have an Afghanistan that is stable, peaceful, and prospering. The regional meetings dedicated in recent years to promoting the country's development attest to the widespread perception of its centrality to regional economic connectivity and stability.

Still, there is much that divides the various regional parties in their motives and degrees of involvement. Virtually all would favor seeing a negotiated political resolution of the Afghan conflict so long as their core interests are secured. They, therefore, may differ sharply on the terms of any peace settlement. Moreover, geopolitical competition between regional actors on one hand, and some regional countries' growing tensions with the United States on the other, also make it difficult to foster effective regional cooperation to stabilize Afghanistan. At the same time, there is a lingering absence of confidence among neighboring or near-neighboring states in the eventual outcome, and most have their hedging strategies for Afghanistan in the event of regime failure.

For the Taliban and other insurgent groups, establishing their own versions of an Islamic government in Afghanistan motivates them to wage war against the government and its international allies. There is a range of opinion among the Taliban leadership about how this might be achieved. The ascendant

view has long been that there is no reason to discuss compromising on their principal aims when military success remains achievable. Others in the higher leadership seem prepared, however, to explore political negotiations as an alternative means of realizing the organization's objectives.¹⁶ Despite occasional conciliatory signs to the contrary, there is little reason to believe that the Taliban would be any more willing to yield on its core beliefs.

The typical Taliban field commander and insurgent combatant are less motivated by Islamic ideology than by patriotic appeals calling for an Afghanistan free of foreign occupation and cultural influences. Many are also driven by the profits of extortion, kidnapping, smuggling, drugs, and other criminal activities.¹⁷ For many fighters alienation from the state can be traced to a sense of injustice born from contact with government agencies, including, above all, judicial institutions rife with corruption. In the absence of alternative employment opportunities, the relatively generous salary paid to foot soldiers is also a motivating factor. Nevertheless, much of the public sees the Taliban as probably less corrupt than predatory warlords and government representatives. In general, although all Afghans want a stronger economy and many hold the government responsible for not bettering their lives, anger over socio-economic conditions has not played an important role in explaining the Taliban's



A US soldier stands guard at Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan on January 23, 2018. (SHAH MARAI/AFP/Getty Images)

military gains.¹⁸ Few, if any, Afghans expect the Taliban to strengthen the economy or provide better services outside of perhaps a fairer system of justice. No settlement with the insurgency seems conceivable without addressing some of these issues.

EFFORTS FOR PEACE

The Afghan conflict has reached new heights both in terms of the extent of the Taliban's contestation nationwide and the numbers of combatants and civilians who have been killed or injured. According to a UN report, more than 10,000 civilians lost their lives or were injured in 2017,¹⁹ and the number of casualties reached a record in the first half of 2018.²⁰ According to a report released by the Global Terrorism Index in December 2018, Afghanistan surpassed Iraq to become the world's deadliest country for terrorism last year.²¹ By some estimates, at least 40 percent of the country's nearly 400 districts are either under effective Taliban control or actively contested. But while the Taliban has succeeded in gaining a grip on much of the countryside, it remains incapable of overrunning and holding provincial capitals and larger population centers.

Although at present the conflict has elements of a "hurting stalemate," so long as both sides believe that by continuing to fight they can acquire a position of sufficient leverage to shape the outcome of the conflict, the conditions that would force a compromise are absent.

While the progress in current talks between U.S. and Taliban officials in Qatar has been the most significant to date, it is not the first time that Washington or Kabul has reached out to the Taliban for peace talks. In 2003, former Afghan President Karzai tried unsuccessfully to co-opt Taliban leaders in southern Afghanistan. Two years later, he set up a reconciliation commission, which managed to reintegrate more than 7,000 former combatants over the next four years and assisted the release of hundreds of Taliban members from prison. After winning a second term in office in 2009, Karzai placed reconciliation at the top of his agenda and created the High Peace Council to expedite reconciliation efforts.

On June 6, 2010, Karzai convened Afghanistan's National Consultative Peace Council to pursue a negotiated agreement with the Taliban core leadership.²² Initially, the United States, in its desire to see fugitive Taliban head Mullah

Omar prosecuted, had little enthusiasm for a political option. But as it became increasingly clear that the American-led military surge was unlikely to bring decisive gains, interest grew among American officials in finding a solution to what seemed an unwinnable war. An interagency cell was created to explore a negotiated agreement, and the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the U.S. State Department began to actively search to establish a dialogue with credible Taliban actors. Both the Americans and Afghans foresaw negotiations that would create a power-sharing arrangement in which the Taliban would renounce violence, cut its ties to al-Qaeda, and be willing to accept the Afghan constitution.

After more than two years of behind-the-scenes discussions, individuals believed to be acting on behalf of the Taliban leadership conveyed that they were willing under certain conditions to enter direct talks. While at first resisting, the U.S. indicated that it was prepared to accede to Taliban demands that five high-profile prisoners held in Guantanamo be released.²³ In June 2013, the Taliban and U.S. representatives met in the Qatari capital of Doha, where the Taliban had opened a political office. From the outset, the Taliban made it clear that they had no interest in talking with anyone aside from the Americans. Always fearing that the U.S. might strike a deal behind his back, President Karzai had objected to formal negotiations without his government's participation. Although the U.S. had pledged that the peace process had to be Afghan-led,²⁴ it persisted and President Karzai finally gave way under the condition that the Kabul government would soon be included in

negotiations and the Taliban's political office would not be used by the Taliban to assert itself as a legitimate alternative to the Kabul government.²⁵ But the fragile negotiation process came to an abrupt end when President Karzai disavowed the talks after the Taliban office publicly declared itself as an arm of the revived Islamic emirate and vowed to continue fighting.²⁶

Prospects for initiating a negotiating process revived when the QST's purported second in command, Akhtar Mansour, apparently under heavy pressure from his handlers with the Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's intelligence service, agreed to attend a June 2015 meeting to create a "road map" to an Afghan peace. Hosted by the Pakistani government, the session was notable for the participation of not only Afghan government representatives but also ones from China and the United States. While little of substance emerged from the meeting, the parties agreed to continue the dialogue. But this incipient process promptly fell apart when it was revealed that Mullah Mansour, purportedly speaking on behalf of Mullah Omar, had hidden the fact that Omar had actually died two years earlier.²⁷ It was suspected that the Afghan intelligence service, determined to scuttle negotiations, had deliberately exposed Omar's death. Mansour's deception and his claim to Omar's leadership mantle produced immediate divisions over the issue of succession, and with several of his challengers already cool to negotiations, Mansour backed off, firmly rejecting the idea of continuing the talks.

Efforts to coax the Taliban into entering talks did not end there, however. There followed in Shanghai, Moscow, Kabul, and Tashkent a series

of regional conferences convened to indicate regional support for the Kabul government and a determination to draw the Taliban into peace discussions. Earlier conferences, beginning in Istanbul in November 2011,²⁸ had emphasized the importance of stabilizing Afghanistan as a way of unlocking the region's economic interconnectivity and growth. Importantly, although invited to attend several conferences, the Taliban repeatedly refused.

Then on Feb. 14, 2018,²⁹ in a letter addressed to the American public and U.S. Congress, the Taliban offered to reach a political agreement. The overture appeared timed for the Kabul Process for Peace and Security conference, held on Feb. 28, 2018,³⁰ and was probably influenced by an intensified U.S. military campaign under a new strategic plan announced on Aug. 21, 2017.³¹ The plan had provided for the introduction of new, looser rules of engagement on the ground and the expanded use of air power to blunt the Taliban's momentum, which had been building for several years. Above all, rather than a serious peace overture, the letter seemed to be a finely tuned reading of American disquiet over the Afghan war and designed to undermine support among the public and in Congress. In the letter and subsequent statements,³² the Taliban reiterated its position that talks could only be between Taliban representatives and American ones, excluding a Kabul government regarded as merely a puppet of the U.S.

The full weight of regional and international pressure on the Taliban was felt with President Ashraf Ghani's February 2018 proposals at the Kabul Process, a conference in the Afghan capital in which representatives from 30

countries and international organizations participated to discuss reconciliation in Afghanistan. He offered a set of unilateral concessions the government was prepared to make, including a ceasefire, release of Taliban prisoners, new elections with Taliban participation, and possible amendments to the country's constitution.³³ The Afghan government also indicated that the phased withdrawal of foreign troops might also be on the table. Some of these concessions had been offered years earlier and others were new. Unlike in the past, the Ghani government laid down no specific preconditions for negotiations, such as an immediate ceasefire. The overture was widely hailed as extremely generous – though some Afghan critics of the government thought the president might have given up all his bargaining chips. Rather than accepting or rejecting, the Taliban failed to respond to Ghani's proposals, suggesting possible discord within its senior leadership. Other messages from the Taliban seem to make clear, however, that it has not budged from its demand for the departure of foreign troops as a precondition for serious talks. While unstated, President Ghani's offers meanwhile carried the assumption that the Taliban were prepared to join the prevailing political system.

By 2015, the quest for a political formula to end the war had become more complex as ISIS and foreign terrorist movements had wrested areas of influence, if not control, inside Afghanistan. Although the Taliban has always left the impression that its aims are limited to capturing power within the country, the openly stated objective of ISIS and the other groups is the overthrow of the Kabul

regime as a stepping-stone toward extending their military power well beyond Afghanistan's borders. None are viewed as potential negotiating partners and there is every expectation that these insurgents would act to undermine a peace settlement, were one reached.

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

There are several alternative scenarios, some more plausible than others, to describe where the war may be headed over the next several years. In a "rollback scenario," improved Afghan security forces are seen as able in time to reverse the gains of the insurgents. Aided by embedded advisors, special operations forces, and heavy tactical air support, a more confident and better-equipped Afghan army and police enabled by local militias is able to degrade the Taliban's capacity to carry out coordinated attacks. The inflicting of heavy casualties among insurgents succeeds in discouraging Taliban recruitment, thinning their ranks and undermining their confidence. Pakistan also makes it more difficult for the resident insurgent leadership to operate. The Taliban's setbacks together with the encouragement of Pakistan and neighboring countries then leads it to compromise in a negotiated settlement.

In a variant of the rollback scenario, the government's military successes against the Taliban do not lead to a comprehensive agreement or grand bargain involving power sharing. Rather this scenario envisions the gradual erosion of the insurgency's strength through the disaffection of the core Taliban

leadership of field commanders and armed followers, and their reintegration into the economic, political, and social fabric of the country. While many in the higher leadership could be expected to remain irreconcilable, they would likely become a marginal, manageable security threat.

In a second "stasis scenario," the conflict remains roughly where it is today, with the Kabul government and its allies, as well as the insurgents, able to inflict damage, but neither side capable of making decisive military gains. Taliban forces and, to a lesser extent, ISIS hold sway over large portions of the countryside but continue to be denied control of provincial capitals and the larger cities. This scenario assumes the continued flow of international assistance to the Kabul government, as well as the long-term deployment of foreign troops as advisors, trainers, and special forces in a more or less open-ended commitment. That decision might be made independently of stabilizing Afghanistan were an indefinite American military presence justified as both vital to preventing global terrorist networks from taking root and furthering U.S. interests in a strategically important region.

A third "fallback scenario" finds the government's writ over the country sharply reduced to only a few major cities whose defense is heavily dependent on the remaining foreign troops. The Taliban along with ISIS and others challenging the Kabul government would have succeeded in consolidating their hold over most of the countryside. Under these conditions, however, it is problematic whether the commitment of penned-in American forces could be long sustained or whether there would be the political will in



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani shakes hands with a foreign delegate at the second Kabul Process conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on February 28, 2018. (SHAH MARAI/AFP/Getty Images)

the U.S. to keep them deployed. Nor would there be much interest in donor countries in continuing with their financial assistance.

This third scenario could also take a different course. It is conceivable that the Taliban leadership, feeling itself in a strong position militarily, would at this stage offer to conclude a political agreement. It would, however, be on terms clearly distinguishable from those sought by the Kabul government and international supporters. Rather than agreeing to be absorbed into the prevailing political order, the Taliban would instead promise to accommodate their Afghan adversaries in an Islamic emirate likely portrayed as more tolerant and inclusive. But an emirate would likely have no place for elections,

parliaments, and Western-oriented political figures such as President Ghani and current Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

A fourth “collapse scenario” envisions the disintegration of the Kabul government, whether militarily or politically, and its replacement not as in the 1990s by a Taliban military able to consolidate control over the country. Instead, the collapse scenario foresees a broadened conflict for power that pits elements of the insurgency as well as contending ethnic militias against one another, resulting in a prolonged, chaotic, and bloody civil war. It would be as well a proxy war in which Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and India pursue their separate national interests through client groups.

CONCLUSION

Even with negotiations, there appears no clear pathway toward resolution of the Afghan conflict. It is difficult to see either a military victory by the government and its allies or by the forces of the insurgency any time soon. Although many conclude that this logically means that the conflict must inevitably end with some kind of compromise political settlement, the scenarios above suggest other possible outcomes. In fact, agreements that end civil wars are more likely to enshrine one side's military victory.³⁴ For Afghanistan, it remains doubtful that a political solution to the conflict will ultimately be reached in a Geneva-style conference with a grand bargain struck among all the principal adversaries. Other conflicts also instruct us that even after the parties agree to negotiate seriously, no early end to the fighting can be expected;

this is even more likely in Afghanistan with its many diverse domestic and external stakeholders. Talks may well extend over years. It is a separate issue entirely whether any deal could be enforced, especially after the exit of foreign forces.

At present, the Taliban as the principal insurgent group is unwilling to engage in direct high-level talks with the Afghan government. Even were the senior leadership of the Taliban to agree to join the government in peace talks, a successful outcome requires that the principal interlocutors have the authority to negotiate and the capacity to keep and enforce their part of an agreement. It remains to be seen whether the government or the Taliban are able to speak with one voice and give an assurance that the terms of a settlement can be sold to a diverse leadership and rank and file. Without its once unified leadership under Mullah Omar the Taliban may have no one who



Afghanistan's former vice president/former speaker of the House of the People, Yunus Qanuni (C), and special representatives gather after the peace talks in Moscow, Russia on February 6, 2019. (Sefa Karacan/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

can rally the several power centers within the organization. On the government side, while most political factions are in principle willing to negotiate, judging from their usual inability to agree among themselves, it could be difficult to reach a consensus on the details of a peace pact with the Taliban.

Naturally, the door should always remain open to a sincere offer to negotiate from the Taliban and other insurgent groups. Willingness should also be shown to explore new political and constitutional formulations that might serve as the basis for mitigating differences between the adversaries and among Afghans more generally. There is wide support for electoral law changes and the full legalization of political parties to create more representative governance. Others argue for a strong devolution of powers of the central government as more fitting for a decentralized society and Afghanistan's history and customs.

Federalism is sometimes advocated – though mainly by outsiders – as a means to allow fuller expression of ethnic interests and convince the Taliban to accept a political solution to the conflict. In a federated state, the insurgents would in effect be ceded control of several provinces in the country's southeast. The proposal would concede the insurgency's already strong influence in those provinces and give it a political base for competing for political power nationally. But critics have questioned its feasibility in light of the overlap of ethnically identified groups geographically. Many Afghans are also resistant to federalism, seeing it either

as conceding defeat to the Taliban or a recipe for intensifying ethnic conflict and inevitably breaking up the country.

In view of the uncertain prospects for a comprehensive settlement with the Taliban, a political outcome may rest on the aforementioned process of reintegration. It envisions a strategy of eroding the insurgency's strength through formal or informal deals with individual commanders and their fighters. Through a gradual, likely loosely coordinated process involving numerous local-level deals, insurgents are effectively bought off and integrated back into communities and local economies. A reintegration process that succeeds would marginalize the hardcore Taliban leaders and steadily degrade their insurgency.

Reintegration is not a new idea and does not preclude reaching a broader settlement. But so far, attempts to arrange piecemeal agreements – which have taken a back seat in the search for a broad-based reconciliation – have made little progress. For large-scale reintegration to begin, the Kabul government must regain the public's confidence by creating the incentives for commanders and fighters to put down their weapons. In addition to assuring more basic security, there needs to be progress creating jobs, reforming the government (especially in reducing corruption), and improving the justice system. A thus-far-elusive reconciliation among Afghan political leadership may also be necessary to achieve these gains.

Reintegration depends on conveying the idea that time is on the side of the state and not the insurgents. But it requires a continued military and economic commitment by the U.S. and coalition forces, as well as the international community, to buy time for the Afghan government to create the conditions for reintegration in the absence of a comprehensive negotiated agreement. While the current odds for successful reintegration are long, the increasing possibility of a premature departure of U.S. and allied troops may make the prospects for reintegration even more remote.

The outcome of this most recent of Afghanistan's civil wars is certain to be broadly consequential. However achieved, a united, peaceful, and prospering Afghanistan is critical to the future wellbeing of an Afghan people desperate for peace. Should the current Afghan state succumb either to an Islamic theocracy or a more anarchic civil war, millions of Afghans are destined once again to become refugees. Much of the enormous human and social capital created since 2001, and gains in basic human rights and especially women's rights, are almost certainly to be lost. Also at risk in a failed Afghanistan are the security and economic aspirations of other countries in the region. The ungoverned space created by a radical Islamic regime or a chaotic civil war, as in the past, is likely to see the export of violence and insurgency outside of Afghanistan's borders. Without a more stable and secure Afghanistan serving as the crossroad for trade and energy transfers, the region cannot realize the connectivity so necessary for

its economic growth. The outcome of Afghanistan's ongoing conflict also carries global stakes. The country's stability bears most directly on international concerns about the spread of terrorism and drug trafficking. Important strategic interests involving the competition for influence and prospective power projections of the United States, Russia, and China also come into play with the endgame in Afghanistan's latest civil war.

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Cover Photo: An Afghan soldier aims his gun as he guards the area surrounding the Intercontinental Hotel during a military operation against Taliban militants on June 29, 2011. **(PEDRO UGARTE/AFP/Getty Images)**

Photo 2: Afghan Taliban militants take to the street to celebrate the ceasefire on the second day of Eid in the outskirts of Jalalabad on June 16, 2018. **(NOORULLAH SHIRZADA/AFP/Getty Images)**

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