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Strategic Update: South Asia

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1. Of all the states of South Asia, it is Afghanistan that has experienced the most prolonged and the most severe disruption in recent years. The Communist coup of April 1978 caused massive mortality, population displacement and infrastructural damage (Maley, 2009). When the Communist regime finally collapsed in 1992 after the discontinuation of support from the USSR, the full scale of the disintegration of the structures of the state in Afghanistan was exposed. Thus, when the Taliban regime that seized Kabul in 1996 with backing from Pakistan was overthrown by Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, the challenge that confronted Afghanistan's new rulers was not simply the reassembling of a *government* but the reconstitution of a *state*. This has proved to be one of the most difficult challenges for Afghanistan's rulers in the last decade and a half.

2. Whilst on paper Afghanistan has a presidential system with a bicameral legislature as a result of the adoption of the Constitution of 2004, from an analytical perspective its political system is best seen as *neopatrimonial*, with formal institutions intertwined with networks based on a mixture of nepotism and patronage (Maley, 2013). This has contributed to serious problems of corruption, which in any case were almost inevitable as a result of a combination of bureaucratic complexity (flowing from the establishment of 29 departments of government at the Bonn conference in December 2001) and the rapid influx of donor dollars, some of which ended up being used to lubricate the clunky bureaucratic system in nefarious ways. Narcotics added further to the problem of corruption (Mansfield, 2016).

3. This system was one major factor compromising the standing of the Afghan government under President Hamed Karzai (2001-2014). Three other factors, however, also came into play. One was that the office of President of Afghanistan was overloaded, with a single person expected to be symbolic head of state, executive head of government, and a one-man mechanism of interagency coordination. A second was that President Karzai himself brought to the office a conception of politics based on networking, alliance building and patron-client relations. Yet as time went by, more and more people looked to him to take the lead in policy development and implementation, which were emphatically not his areas of strength. A third was that in order to secure the president's re-election in 2009 at a time when confidence in the direction in which the country was moving had fallen, supporters of Karzai engineered electoral fraud on an epic scale in order to return him to the presidential palace (Weidmann and Callen, 2013) – but in doing so, they compromised his ability to operate thereafter on the strength of generalised normative support, which is a stronger basis for survival than either coercion or exchange (see Saikal and Maley, 1991).

4. Adding to all these problems was the continuation of a Taliban insurgency, directed and conducted from sanctuaries in Pakistan, that threatened the stability and security of areas in Afghanistan that the insurgents managed to access. No one should underestimate the importance of these sanctuaries. The Taliban leadership, according to Farrell and Semple, 'is acutely aware that its military campaign is dependent upon retaining access to Pakistani territory' (Farrell and Semple, 2015-2016: 92). In August 2007, President Musharraf of Pakistan stated during a visit to Kabul that 'There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistani soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side' (Shah and Gall 2007). In 2011, a frustrated Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, referred to the faction of the armed opposition known as the Haqqani network as a 'veritable arm' of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (Bumiller and Perlez, 2011). And on 1 March 2016, the Pakistani Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, admitted in a presentation to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington DC that the 'leadership' of the Afghan Taliban 'is in Pakistan', something that was confirmed when a US drone strike on a vehicle in Baluchistan on 21 May 2016 killed the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour (Mashal, 2016).

5. A recent significant event which highlighted the benefit to the Taliban of external support was the fall of the northern city of Kunduz to the Taliban for a fortnight in August-September 2015. The abusive behaviour of the Taliban during the occupation attracted attention (Amnesty International, 2015; United Nations, 2015), raising real doubts as to whether they were any more appetising than they had been during their rule before 2001; but just as notable were certain features of their military activities: as the counterinsurgency expert Dr David Kilcullen put it, the attack was carried out by 'professional full-time fighters, put through rigorous training by experienced instructors in the camps in Pakistan, with uniforms, vehicles, heavy weapons, encrypted radios, and a formal command structure' (Kilcullen, 2016: 177).

6. Despite occasional suggestions to the contrary, there is a very little evidence to support the proposition that the Taliban enjoy much support within Afghanistan. A survey conducted in 2015 by The Asia Foundation offers us what is probably the best source of insight into popular opinion in Afghanistan, and it found that only 6% of respondents expressed 'a lot of sympathy' for armed opposition groups, whereas 70% expressed 'no sympathy at all' (Asia Foundation, 2015: 201). It also found, however, a considerable degree of apprehension within the population. Only 36.7% felt that the country was moving in the right direction, and 54% of respondents answered 'yes' to the question 'In your view, does ISIS/Daesh currently pose a threat to the security of your district?' (Asia Foundation, 2015: 16, 187) – although this may have been more a reflection of the success of President Ashraf Ghani in publicly warning about a looming threat from ISIS (Alokozay and Nordland, 2015). It is hardly surprising in the light of these figures that more than 200,000 Afghans sought to enter Europe as refugees during 2015 (see Maley, 2016c).

7. Afghanistan thus finds itself on a knife-edge (Maley, 2016a). Nonetheless, while the dangers that it faces are very considerable, it is not inevitable that the

enterprise of transformation in the country will fail. Afghanistan has not been well-served by the kind of Orientalism that sees it as rigid and unchanging, essentially the 19th-century translated to the 21st. On the contrary, Afghanistan has been more dramatically affected by the forces of globalisation in the first fifteen years of the 21st century than almost any other country (see Mohammadi, 2014). The combination of the onslaught of globalisation with a notably young population means that the task for the Taliban in trying to secure control of Afghanistan is much more arduous than was the case in the late 1990s when nearly everyone else was exhausted. In addition, it has some extremely sophisticated leaders, an abundance of marketable natural resources (Shroder, 2014), and a number of supporters in the wider world, including the United States, but also, in its region, India, Iran and – somewhat more ambiguously – China.

8. How might those interested in the well-being of Afghanistan best promote a positive outcome? One argument that has received much traction in recent years has been the proposition that stability might best be returned to Afghanistan by negotiations with the Taliban. The very fact, however, that these ideas have been in circulation for the best part of a decade (see Maley 2007; Maley 2015) with nothing whatever to show for them should draw attention to some of the weaknesses of this proposition. On the whole, the Taliban themselves have shown little interest in negotiation, and their establishment of an office in Doha was manifestly an attempt to boost their status and standing rather than engage seriously with the Afghan government. There is no credible evidence that the Taliban have internalised the crucial norms of negotiating that make outcomes stick; there is no evidence of a ‘genuine Afghan societal consensus’ (see Münch and Ruttig, 2014: 36) to underpin a reconciliation process; and there is little reason to believe that a ‘negotiated settlement’ would be anything more than a Trojan horse exposing ordinary Afghans, and especially vulnerable groups such as women and sectarian minorities, to considerable danger. On the whole, Western governments for years promoted the idea of negotiations because it seemed impossible to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan when Pakistani cooperation was required in order to allow Western troops in Afghanistan to be resupplied. Now the troop numbers have shrunk dramatically, this consideration no longer applies to the same degree.

9. As a result, by far the best policy approach to stabilising Afghanistan is to continue to strike at key Taliban figures within Pakistan, and to mobilise diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to shut down the sanctuaries which are critical to the ongoing destabilisation of Afghanistan. This would actually be in *Pakistan’s* interest as well as Afghanistan’s: as the December 2014 school massacre in Peshawar made clear (Walsh, 2014), ordinary Pakistanis have paid a terrible price for the leaching into their own society of the kind of radical ideas that the Afghan Taliban supplied to the Pakistan Taliban. But it is an approach that is also defensible as a matter of principle. Sovereignty involves not only rights but duties. As the historian David Fromkin put it, writing about the outbreak of the First World War, ‘It is basic to international law that each government must keep armed forces from using its territory as a base to attack other countries. But if the government is powerless to enforce the law within its own domain – if it

cannot keep its territory from being used to harm other countries – then it forfeits its right to sovereignty in this respect, and the injured foreign country can send in its own troops to punish the guilty and to prevent further attacks’ (Fromkin, 2004: 265). This proposition speaks just as powerfully to circumstances at the beginning of the 21st century in South Asia as it did to the parties in the July crisis of 1914 that followed the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Europe.

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