
What direction for Afghanistan?

Possible scenarios

Introduction

Afghanistan has been in a complex and protracted conflict for over four decades. After the ejection of the Taliban regime in late 2001, violence levels, although difficult to quantify accurately, have gradually increased over the last twenty years. The Taliban are now powerful and confident. Although the Afghan government has made political, economic and developmental progress, many structural problems remain, particularly in relation to corruption.

In June 2020, the Global Peace Index 2020, from the Institute for Economics and Peace, released its 14th edition. It ranks 163 independent States according to their level of peacefulness. Afghanistan continues its position as the least peaceful country on the planet, which it took over from Syria in 2019.¹ The Global Terrorism Index of 2019 assesses that, for the first year since 2013, Islamic State are not the most deadly terrorist group; That position has now been taken by the Taliban.²

In February 2020, a one-week reduction of violence (it was not a complete ceasefire) enabled the US and the Taliban to sign a peace deal. This was intended to permit the withdrawal of American soldiers within 14 months and for talks to commence between the Taliban and the Afghan government. These talks, well over six months late, have only just begun. Violence has resumed, thus far at a lower level, but the situation is highly fragile and attack levels are increasing again.³ The Coronavirus is placing additional and serious strains on the economy and medical infrastructure. The Afghan armed forces have been seriously affected by the virus.⁴ The risk of a new implosion into civil war after a hasty US withdrawal is significant.⁵

In such a turbulent context, it is highly problematic to attempt to look ahead a few years to see where Afghanistan might end up. In 2006, Barnett Rubin was asked what changes he saw in the coming five years. He replied:

¹ 'Global Peace Index, 2020', *Institute for Economics and Peace*, June 2020,

<http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/global-peace-index/>

² 'Afghanistan', *Global Terrorism Index*, accessed 21 Nov. 2019,

<http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/terrorism-index/>

³ Tanzeem, ., 'Afghan Security Forces Suffer Bloodiest Week in 19 Years', *VoA*, 22 June 2020,

<https://www.voanews.com/usa/afghan-security-forces-suffer-bloodiest-week-19-years>

⁴ George, S., Tassal, A., and Hassan, S., 'Coronavirus sweeps through Afghanistan's security forces', *Stars and Stripes*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/coronavirus-sweeps-through-afghanistan-s-security-forces-1.635271>

⁵ Mehrdad, E., 'Afghans Celebrate Reduction in Hostilities But Fear Civil War', *The Diplomat*, 26 Feb. 2020.

"I have no idea. There are too many imponderables. If you had asked five years ago what Afghanistan would be like today, I would have been completely wrong and I don't expect that I would be right this time".⁶

Fast forward seven years. Alissa Rubin wrote an article for the *New York Times* in April 2013. She reported on the leaving speech given by the then French ambassador in Kabul, Bernard Bajolet. He frankly discussed coming problems. He said:

"I still cannot understand how we, the international community, and the Afghan government have managed to arrive at a situation in which everything is coming together in 2014 — elections, new President, economic transition, military transition and all this — whereas the negotiations for the peace process have not really started".⁷

As I try and look forward beyond 2020, through a selection of possible scenarios, it still seems that, despite the optimism generated by the commencement of face to face talks between Taliban and government, the negatives outweigh the positives. In this article, my tone will be pessimistic, and my theme is *"Perfect Storm"*.

But perhaps it is possible to take some comfort. At the time of M. Bajolet's downbeat comments, Afghanistan and the international community were looking forward anxiously to the withdrawal of NATO at the end of December 2014. This was a big transition – a reduction of 140,000 Coalition troops down to 12,000. In 2013, the parallels with the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the 1992 collapse of Najibullah's regime were stark reminders from history.⁸ There were warnings of civil war then. In 2012, Amrullah Saleh, now First Vice-President, said:

"You do not wake up one morning and the radio says it's civil war", Saleh told me. 'The ingredients are already there – under the very watchful nose of the government and the armed militias loyal to the men who operate them. Under the very watchful eyes of the international community. Under the very watchful eyes of the whole world. In Kunduz, there is already a civil war'.⁹

In the months and years after, there was no regime implosion. Financial aid, military support and training assistance continued to flow into the Afghan government. And even the relatively small international military presence – primarily, but not exclusively Americans – could still ward off the Taliban, particularly through airpower, mentoring and intelligence support for the Afghan National Army (ANA).

⁶ 'Afghanistan: Interview with regional analyst Barnet Rubin', *IRIN*, posted on Reliefweb website, 20 June 2006, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-interview-regional-analyst-barnet-rubin>

⁷ Rubin, A., 'Departing French Envoy Has Frank Words on Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 27 Apr. 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/world/asia/bernard-bajolet-leaving-afghanistan-has-his-say.html?_r=0&auth=login-email&login=email

⁸ 'NATO exit may trigger "proxy war" in Afghanistan', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 Sep. 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-exit-may-trigger-proxy-war-in-afghanistan/a-17085599>

⁹ Filkins, D., 'After America. Will civil war hit Afghanistan when the U.S. leaves?', *The New Yorker*, 2 July 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/09/after-america-2>

But the situation facing Afghanistan is now different and I believe we are in a worse situation than in 2014.¹⁰ Most crucially, the Taliban do not look as if they have genuine compromise in mind. I believe we are most likely to see more and messier violence, perhaps another 3, 4, 5 – and even 10 – years of fighting. Even if talks are taking place, it is still plausible to envisage a slow slide backwards into violence.

Perfect storm

There are a range of factors that lead me to the conclusion that more violence is coming in the medium to longer-term – perhaps the next two to five years.

The same corrosive strategic circumstances will plague Afghanistan. Central government is weak, corrupt and divided. Many local warlords and political factions are more concerned with engineering power for themselves than cooperating to make a peace deal work. The neighbouring countries can still meddle in destabilising ways. Pakistan has historically supported the Taliban. Its policies in relation to Afghanistan are still opaque. National infrastructure is badly damaged (for example education and healthcare), the economy is weak. Cultural and religious attitudes to women are hampering the education and employment of millions. None of these issues will be resolved in the next decade, making any chances of positive political advancement from peace talks fragile at best.

After the initial optimism of the reduction in violence week at the end of February, violence levels have surged. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) warned in early September 2020 that:

“Near-record violence in the country is creating an atmosphere of mistrust that risks derailing long-sought talks between the Government and the Taliban”.

The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a credible US government watchdog, describes the security situation as *“perhaps the most complex and challenging period in the last two decades”*.¹¹ The Afghanistan Analysts Network, a highly respected international group, credibly assert that the violence levels this year, far from decreasing, have risen and taken on a different character, even though reliable data has become harder to gather.

*“The US has largely stayed out of the conflict. Intra-Afghan violence, meanwhile, has carried on undiminished, although the nature and geography of the fighting has shifted. Insurgent violence has also become a little murkier, with more attacks remaining unclaimed. Moreover...although the conflict has been almost as deadly for civilians in 2020 as in 2019, the Taleban and ANSF are now downplaying their attacks, minimising rather than exaggerating their actions”.*¹²

¹⁰ ‘Former U.S. Envoys Warn Hasty Afghan Pullout Could Trigger “Total Civil War”’, *RFE/RL*, 3 Sep. 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-ex-envoys-hasty-afghan-pullout-total-civil-war-/30144924.html>

¹¹ ‘Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, *SIGAR*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-07-30qr.pdf>

¹² Clark, K., ‘War in Afghanistan: Just as much violence, but no one wants to talk about it’, *AAN Report*, 16 Aug. 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/war-in-afghanistan-in-2020-just-as-much-violence-but-no-one-wants-to-talk-about-it/>

There is still much political instability. After a flawed and bitterly disputed electoral process last year, this year, a bemused international community witnessed the bizarre sight of two Afghan leaders both inaugurating themselves as President on the same day in different parts of the Presidential palace. The rivalry between President Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the CEO is but one of the more overt indicators of competing factions on the government side. Internal squabbles risk hindering negotiations with the Taliban.

Challenging economic prospects

Economic instability and uncertainty raise long term question marks over Afghanistan's viability as a State. Kate Clark's recent paper looked at the historic and current reliance Afghanistan has on outside aid. Afghanistan is a "Rentier State", almost entirely dependent upon foreign funding, without an effective taxation system and with massive corruption and patronage.¹³ Afghanistan's economy is still flawed and struggling to get into gear. Over ten years ago, there was much trumpeted reporting of the trillions of dollars of oil, minerals and precious metal wealth under the deserts, plains and mountains of Afghanistan.¹⁴ This was to be the solution to Afghanistan's growth and financial independence. The majority of this, a decade later, is still under the ground. At any rate, although it is lining the pockets of warlords and Taliban, it is not being put to work for benefit of the Afghan people.¹⁵

The international military transition that began in 2011 has transformed into a faster and more obvious US retreat after four years of Donald Trump's leadership. The Taliban and the US are largely avoiding each striking each other. This will permit the US to withdraw quickly – something that both the Taliban and the US find convenient for their own agendas. The Afghanistan military and security forces are slowly losing key US combat support, particularly airstrikes. A rapid US military retreat and a signalled unwillingness to provide any further significant military support risks undermining peace talks and emboldening the Taliban.

The future of hundreds of thousands of armed gunmen, trained soldiers and insurgent fighters is in the balance. The demobilisation of fighters needs plausible resettlement and employment options (and the funding this entails). Without a viable Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme, thousands of unemployed fighters might drift into insurgency and terrorist groups, local warlords, militias, narco-traffickers, kidnappers or other violent criminal groups. A recent article by Stefani Glinski noted that the disbanding of the local Afghan police forces (ALP) in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan disbandment quickly saw the defection of unemployed ex-police to a nearby Taliban force.

As for Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours, the same geo-strategic issues remain. Positive and negative simultaneously. Afghanistan remains an arena for regional rivalry and

¹³ Clark, K., 'The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty and lack of democracy through the "rentier state" lens', *AAN Special Report*, May 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-causes-of-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/>

¹⁴ Alexander, A., 'Afghan mineral wealth could top \$1 trillion: Pentagon', *Reuters*, 14 June 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-minerals-idUSTRE65D00H20100614>

¹⁵ Bezhan, F., 'Exclusive: Taliban's Expanding "Financial Power" Could Make It Impervious To Pressure, Confidential NATO Report Warns', *RFE/RL*, 16 Sep. 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/exclusive-taliban-s-expanding-financial-power-could-make-it-impervious-to-pressure-secret-nato-report-warns/30842570.html>

competition to play out. Pakistan's public words should be carefully monitored - and its actions even more closely scrutinised.

"We will be nice this time..."

Echoing Bajolet *"peace negotiations have not yet begun"*, even though the Taliban and the Afghan government are now sitting down face to face, there is no evidence of serious talks or compromise. The Taliban at best have been very vague about what they want. But recent off-the-record interviews with members of the Taliban political team in Doha suggest a very confident and uncompromising line:

"The current Afghan system is totally corrupt and incapable... Now it's the Taliban's turn... Hand over the Afghan regime to the Taliban for three to five years. The Taliban will work with the international community, especially the US. We will prove that as the Taliban was a hard enemy, in the future we will be a solid and trustworthy partner'.

'The international community shouldn't be nervous...'...in return for being treated as a legitimate political entity in Afghanistan, 'we will be nice this time, more responsible in respect to international law'.

'We won't mind having even a few women [government] ministers, and we will accommodate all minorities with justice in our system'.

Another member of the Taliban's negotiation team [said] that the group, *'should be given a handy share in the system'*, suggesting leadership of *'at least five key government ministries'* and integration of the Taliban into the Afghan national security forces, all under *'an Islamic regime acceptable to all Afghans'*.

The group has already stated that it will not support a female Prime Minister, or a woman on the country's high court...

'At the moment the US and Afghan governments have no plan B', the official said. 'Only the Taliban have a plan A and B. Our plan A is a peaceful political solution, and Plan B, definitely a military takeover'".¹⁶

Other analysts, including Thomas Ruttig and Michael Semple seem to share the worrying assessment that the Taliban are uncompromisingly bent on returning to power.¹⁷ There is no ceasefire as yet and in fact violence levels may even be increasing. Taliban is stronger than

¹⁶ Yousafzai, S., and Reals, T., 'What do the Taliban want out of the long-awaited "Intra-Afghan" talks?', *CBS News*, 15 Sep. 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-taliban-intra-afghan-dialogue-talks-doha-what-does-the-taliban-want/>

¹⁷ Foxley, T., 'Berlin conference: Bleak views on Afghanistan's prospects', *Afghanhindsight* blog article, 10 June 2019, <https://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2019/06/10/berlin-conference-bleak-views-on-afghanistans-prospects/>

ever and appear increasingly tempted to attack larger provincial capitals.¹⁸ A sign that they are flexing their muscles. A ceasefire from the Taliban would be a significant breakthrough for the talks. But a ceasefire could also greatly undermine the Taliban's military capability, making fighter reluctant to start combat operations after a long pause.

There are two factors that M. Bajolet could be forgiven for not predicting. The COVID-19 pandemic is damaging Afghanistan's economy, healthcare and security. This is bad enough in itself. But, as Barnett Rubin has cautioned, this also means that the international community – the US in particular – will have much fewer financial resources and interest to spare on Afghanistan.

Donald Trump, as President of the United States, has proven erratic, incompetent, disinterested and corrupt. He is in haste to pull out American troops in order to boost his own domestic election chances. There is little attention to the post-withdrawal risks. Thomas Barfield has argued that Trump represents America and this has made the Taliban very confident – perhaps over-confident - as the US rushes to leave.

Scenario drivers

There are some key factors that will determine the direction Afghanistan will take over the next five to ten years:

- **Ceasefire** - If a credible cessation of fighting takes place early and for a sustained period, this will generate trust and confidence and allow infrastructure and the economy to develop. However, the application of military force is one of the important assets the Taliban have. It is hard to see them giving this up easily or soon.
- **International Community** - The engagement of the international community will ensure financial, political and moral support. Afghanistan must not be abandoned at this critical time. Many initiatives, for example disarmament and reintegration of fighters will require massive financial investment.
- **Neighbouring countries** - Malign actors, particularly Pakistan, can easily disrupt peace talks in a variety of political, military and economic ways.
- **Resilience of the Afghan government** - Could factions, warlords and division cause the government to fragment under the pressure of talks?
- **Resilience of the Afghan National Army** - If the Afghan military and security forces run out of money or fragment because of internal government division this could be catastrophic at such a fragile period.

¹⁸ Mashal, M., and Rahim, N., 'Taliban Stage a Major Attack, as Violence Intensifies in Northern Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/world/asia/afghanistan-attack-aybak.html>

- **Taliban motives and cohesiveness** - Do the Taliban simply envisage a return to power and no scope for significant compromise? Could factions within the Taliban cause a splintering? The possibility of hard liners joining Al Qaeda or ISKP for examples?

Scenarios

“Insurgencies with more than two clear parties involved have longer, more-violent and more-complex endings” - Connable, B and Libicki, M., *‘How Insurgencies End’*¹⁹

Wider analysis of the outcomes of insurgencies is not optimistic. Most post-World War Two insurgencies do not end in successful negotiated settlement, perhaps a quarter to a third (one study suggests only 20%).²⁰ Many deals collapse back into renewed fighting after 2-3 years. Rate of defections from one side to the other could be a key indicator of success or failure.²¹ In the case of Afghanistan, it seems as if all successful scenarios require four things – continued international support, genuine Taliban willingness to compromise, major reductions in violence (ideally a ceasefire) and for the Afghan army hold together. Conversely, scenarios with negative outcomes will be characterised by meddling neighbours, increasing terrorism (e.g. AQ, IS) and fragmented govt.

Here are four broad-brush scenarios (of many possible options) starting with a possible best case and descending to a possible worst case:

- **Scenario 1: Best case** - Taliban and Afghan government reach some form of accord based on genuine compromise. The constitution is reworked, but most human rights and democratic issues remain intact. The deal is endorsed by the population. The bulk of the Taliban reintegrate and a Taliban political movement forms. There is slow and painful economic and political improvement over decades. There will be problems, including periodic outbreaks of violence and other power plays. The key neighbouring countries play largely positive roles, politically and economically.
- **Scenario 2: Flawed compromise** - Perhaps the agreement is rushed into and agreed too early. The Taliban, government and warlords divide up government to suit their interests and power. The situation is volatile. Some slow and painful economic progress, but also large outbreaks of fighting. Perhaps the Taliban fractures.
- **Scenario 3: Stalemate** - Talks drag on but go nowhere. The military struggle between the government and the Taliban continues. The government holds on to the cities and main communication routes, remaining dependent on foreign money. Violence levels go up, but both the Taliban and the Afghan military remain willing and able to continue the fight. Parts of the country are beyond government control (in the hands of the Taliban or warlords). Perhaps the Taliban fractures.
- **Scenario 4: Slow slide into civil war** - The most dangerous outcome would be something resembling the mid-1990s, with multiple armed factions all fighting in

¹⁹ Connable, B and Libicki, M., *‘How Insurgencies End’*, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010, p.xvi.

²⁰ Connable, B and Libicki, M., *‘How Insurgencies End’*, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010, p.18.

²¹ Connable, B and Libicki, M., *‘How Insurgencies End’*, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010, p.xiv

different permutations: government versus Taliban versus warlords versus government. The Afghan army and police fragment. There is a large “Taliban-type” bloc, perhaps supported by Pakistan, operating in the Pushtun south and east. A large and fluid “*Northern Alliance*” in the north. A rump government is recognised by an international community that is unwilling to commit money or troops to assist. The government is confined to Kabul and a few other population centres.

Concluding thoughts

Over twenty years, I have seen many surges of optimism come and go. There are few “good” realistic outcomes in the current circumstances. In only the first scenario do human rights and the rights of women make any significant advance. My view is that we are slowly drifting towards more and messier fighting for several years, perhaps even five or ten (scenarios three and four). If, after this, the Afghan government, the army and the police have held together, then perhaps the Taliban might recognise the need for compromise. I do not believe that Taliban yet have sufficient incentive to compromise to make peace talks a genuine success.

I welcome any comments and thoughts on this piece. I know it is not very optimistic. I have had these scenarios briefly road-tested by two Afghanistan experts at a conference in July. One thought that scenario four (civil war) was the most likely outcome. The other thought that the outcome would begin at scenario one and then slowly descend down the numbers, once again ending at scenario four.

I sincerely hope this is not the case.



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