

# EUROPEAN SECURITY FORUM

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A JOINT INITIATIVE OF CEPS, IISS, DCAF AND GCSP

## THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN

### ESF WORKING PAPER NO. 34

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prepared for the 34<sup>th</sup> session of the  
**CEPS/IISS/DCAF/GCSP European Security Forum**  
**Brussels, 22 March 2010**

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ISBN 13: 978-94-6138-056-2



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# The Political Future of Afghanistan

## Working Paper No. 34 of the European Security Forum

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# Afghanistan: The day after

Radha Kumar\*

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Since the Obama administration set 2011 as the date for withdrawal from Afghanistan, speculation has been rife on whether and how the deadline will be met. Although this date is actually fuzzy – it is doubtful whether 2011 will see even the beginning of an American drawdown – it has focused attention on the critical issues for stabilisation in Afghanistan that have remained unaddressed over the past nine years.

The key goals today include

- bringing on board the Taliban of eastern and southern Afghanistan in a peace and stabilisation process,
- rolling back the spread of the Taliban in central and northern Afghanistan,
- creating a legitimate and functioning administration, and
- ensuring regional support and guarantees for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

Few if any of these goals can be achieved in a year. What 2010–11 is more likely to reveal, therefore, is the extent of international commitment to these goals. Does the international community have the political will to pursue these goals until they are achieved? What would each entail? The following sections seek to explore these questions further.

## **Bringing on board the Taliban in a peace and stabilisation process**

Whether 2011 will see an American drawdown or not depends largely on the degree of success of the ‘reconciliation’ policies of the US, Afghan, UK and Pakistan governments, which are still in development and are not necessarily the same.

Indeed, the fallout over the arrest (and rumoured release?) of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar indicates that sometimes the reconciliation policies of these governments can be at odds. From scattered reports it appears that Mullah Baradar, a senior Taliban leader and second in command of the Quetta *shura*, was a key figure in the back-channel talks between President Hamid Karzai’s government and the Taliban that were being held under Saudi aegis.

The back-channel talks of the Karzai government were supposed to be complementary to the surge policy of the Obama administration, which combined military attack with a buyout strategy seeking to win over foot soldiers and local/mid-level commanders. President Karzai had made reconciliation with the Taliban a campaign plank and his first policy commitment after re-election. In the last six months of 2009, he issued a series of invitations to the Taliban for talks; at his request the Saudi government arranged a number of meetings between his representatives and high-level go-betweens for Taliban leaders based in Pakistan.

In effect, a three-pronged strategy emerged – the Afghan government was to head attempts to negotiate with the Taliban leaders, while the international community would back buyout initiatives (targeting foot soldiers and mid-level commanders) with funds, and the US would back both prongs with military pressure to bring the Taliban into the negotiations. There appeared to be a dawning consensus on this approach; at the London conference in January

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2010, attempts to harmonise the range of international policies towards Afghanistan led to bottom-line support for the Afghan–US policy of seeking to win over foot soldiers and local/mid-level commanders.

Although the Taliban leaders based in Pakistan rubbished Karzai’s offers, they also put out their own feelers, through, for example, statements pledging that if in power they would not let Afghanistan be used for terrorist attacks on other countries. Mullah Baradar’s arrest more or less brought these initiatives to a halt and neutralised a major prong of the reconciliation strategy. It is seen in Afghanistan as a Pakistani coup brought about to reassert Pakistani control over any reconciliation process. Whether this suspicion is true or false, the arrest has certainly brought Pakistan back to the centre – any negotiations with the Taliban will have to be with Pakistan’s concurrence, if not through Pakistan.

The immediate fallout is that the Afghan government has been further weakened. President Karzai is now, more than ever before, dependent on Pakistan to pursue reconciliation with the Taliban. As a result, the international effort to ‘Afghanise’ the reconciliation is at risk of failing.

### **Back to basics – The question of Pakistan’s role**

Only the wilfully blind would deny that Pakistan has a central role to play in the stabilisation of Afghanistan. But it would be severely myopic to believe that such a role is easy to define, let alone achieve. In the past few years influential analysts have suggested a ‘grand bargain’ in which Afghanistan would be in Pakistan’s sphere of influence, with international acquiescence, and in return Pakistan would persuade the Taliban to accept and perhaps join the Afghan government. More recently, some Pakistani policy analysts have suggested a different kind of grand bargain, one in which the Taliban leadership could enter a power-sharing government in Afghanistan, with a contact group to monitor security that would comprise all of Afghanistan’s neighbours, including closely connected but not border-sharing India.

While an arrangement of this sort could act as a reassurance to neighbours, it begs the critical questions of consensus within Afghanistan, and also, significantly, within Pakistan. Not only are Pakistanis polarised over their Afghanistan policy, but also Pakistan itself is in a state of considerable instability. Most policy prescriptions rest on the assumption that Pakistan is a relatively stable and consistent actor. Prior to 9/11 it might have been possible to assume that the Pakistan army was a stable actor (unlike its political parties and administration), but that assumption does not hold today even for the army. US-influenced attempts to purge radical Islamists from Pakistan’s security establishment have left a seriously divided force that unites only in a spoiler role – for strategic depth in Afghanistan, against the enemy India. The implications of this division–unity problem for an Afghan reconciliation policy are grave.

Reconciliation also has internal implications for Pakistan. A policy that strengthens the Taliban will embolden them and associated groups that destabilise the Pakistani state. In Swat, remnants of the Taliban have already come out of hiding. The Afghan/Pakistani Taliban distinction is one that many Pakistani analysts reject, but the fact remains that reconciliation might also have to include those who are termed the Pakistani Taliban. Obviously, this would entail an expanded reconciliation policy, covering the regions of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. With a bitter history of failed peace agreements in Swat and Waziristan, it is not clear whether Pakistani civil society (which ardently backed military operations against the Taliban) or mainstream, regional political parties such as the Awami National Party (which have been the chief targets of the Pakistani Taliban) will support reconciliation with groups they have come to regard as existential foes.

Today it appears that there is a very clear divide in Pakistan’s policy community, between those who back the strategic approach and those who seek a political approach. This divide is at its

clearest when it comes to analysis of the role of the peace *jirga(s)* [large assembly]. Pakistani policy analysts who were involved in back-channel efforts with the Taliban in the early years following 9/11 argue that an important opportunity to involve the Taliban leadership was missed in 2002–03, when the Grand Loya Jirga was convened, and Pakistan had worked hard behind the scenes to get the Taliban on board. They suggest that another such opportunity could be created now.

Other Pakistani analysts caution that a focus on the grand peace *jirga* should not lose sight of the district-by-district plan for reconciliation, and suggest that local peace *jirgas* that complement the local-level buyout strategy are essential building blocks to reconciliation. Theoretically, these could complement the all-Afghan peace *jirga*, which would gain both substance and input from the ground; still, much would depend on how widely they can be organised.

While a segment of the Pakistani government believes that their cooperation with the reconciliation policy should be tied to an exclusion or further restriction of India's role, there is a much greater acceptance among influential Pakistani civilians of India's presence in Afghanistan. As initiatives for regional consensus building grow, the trick is going to be how to give the yea-sayers a larger public voice than the nay-sayers.

### **Potential hitches to the reconciliation policy**

Whether Afghan society is prepared for a grand bargain with Taliban leaders is unclear. Most Afghans, including parliamentarians, would support the rehabilitation and reintegration of lower-level Taliban; but the jury is still out when it comes to figures like Sirajuddin Haqqani or even Mullah Mohammed Omar. The reintegration of former mujahidin commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is an example of how it can work – today his Hezb-e-Islami is the premier party in Afghanistan, with a number of members in parliament.

But there is also a sizable Afghan constituency that wants a professional rather than power-sharing government, with the past as a closed chapter. This constituency also supports reconciliation; however, they argue that reconciliation has to be broad-based and political conciliation is as important as reconciliation with the Taliban. And they point out that there could be a potentially negative impact for the reconciliation policy, in that Afghan disaffection with poor governance will increase if power-sharing entails an increase of warlords in power.

Managing these two divergent trends will be a challenge for the reconciliation policy. The current pledge to focus on good governance is one way to do so, although it is a formidable task given that corruption and accountability are not within the sole control of the Afghanistan government and would require coordinated efforts from all donors and investors.

Good governance is in any case a chimera when it comes to societies that have been deeply fragmented as a result of protracted conflict. The Karzai government was weak from the start and has been further weakened by a chaotic and oscillating set of international policies that have made the government more dependent on warlords rather than less. It may be that governance issues are on a back burner while the focus is on improving security through reconciliation. But as the Marjah situation indicates, governance and security have a symbiotic relationship. This is something the Taliban have grasped – witness the recent spate of killings of mayors and their deputies in the provinces.

### **Regional actors**

There is also the question of how other influential players – neighbours, regional allies or powers – relate to the reconciliation policy. Its success requires support from other regional

actors, in particular Russia, India and Iran, who were opponents of the Taliban during their years of rule.

Iran has made its opposition to reconciliation clear by staying away from the London conference, but it did attend the Turkish conference. The Iranian government has apparently sought its own buyout strategy with the Taliban in Afghanistan, but that might only be protection money. There is still no evident interlocutor with Iran on Afghanistan, which means Iran's response is still difficult to predict. Russia and China are currently playing a watching game. Most of the other neighbours feel relatively powerless.

Yet for reconciliation to work, Russia, India and Iran need to be on board, which means they need to participate in regional efforts at consensus building. In this context, Turkey made a serious mistake in excluding India from the January 2010 regional conference that it hosted on the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

Turkey's action did not take place in a vacuum. The failure to conclude a new Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement by the end of December 2009, the fact that it was Pakistan's opposition that led Turkey to exclude India and the terrorist attacks on Indians by the Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Taiba in India and Afghanistan in January and February have combined to give Pakistan's competition with India the edge over cooperation. These events would appear to be a further setback to the prospects for Indian–Pakistani support or cooperation for facilitating peace in Afghanistan.

At the same time, these developments also underline how critical India and Pakistan's joint support is – without which, it seems, Afghanistan's stabilisation will continue to be impeded. Is there anything that can be done to ease this pressure on Afghanistan's already overburdened and as yet still-nascent peace process?

Once again, international policy is at odds on the issue. The Obama administration has moved a step further than the Bush administration in welcoming India's role in Afghan reconstruction and development, and is now exploring ways in which the two countries can cooperate. The few European countries that are deeply engaged in Afghanistan appear not to have discussed the issue among themselves, let alone with Afghans, Pakistanis and Indians. This author was rather startled to see references to India as a 'spoiler' in another paper on this topic<sup>1</sup> – as far as Afghans are concerned such a description could not be further from the truth. India remains the most popular foreign country in Afghan polls and is well regarded at the local level even in Taliban areas.

The Afghan government and civil society are also committed to improving relations between the three countries; indeed, the importance of this issue for Afghanistan was evident when both the frontrunners for the presidential election made peacemaking between their country, Pakistan and India a campaign plank. As President Karzai stated at his second-term inauguration, India and Pakistan are among his top foreign-relations priorities in this presidential term. Afghans from all sectors are united on this issue – they do not want to have to choose between India and Pakistan.

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<sup>1</sup> See Fabrice Pothier, "Afghanistan: Shifting from a state of war to a political state" in R. Walliullah, F. Pothier and R. Kumar, *The Political Future of Afghanistan*, European Security Forum Working Paper No. 34, CEPS, Brussels, 2010.

## India's options

After Afghanistan itself and Pakistan, of all countries, India's security is most closely threatened by what happens in Afghanistan. With terrorist attacks on Indian civilians in Afghanistan (the latest by the Taliban in February 2010) and news now coming out that the 2008 Mumbai attacks were partly planned and organised there, India has major concerns about any return of the Taliban.

At the beginning of 2009, most Indian policy-makers and analysts would have been opposed to any deal with the Taliban; today there is support for a reconciliation policy targeting foot soldiers and field commanders, as the Indian foreign minister's remarks at the London conference made clear (with the caveat that these opportunities should be offered to *all* mujahidin, not just the Taliban).

The current position of the Indian government is in consonance with long-standing policy towards domestic insurgent groups, in which rehabilitation and reintegration is commonly offered to militants who wish to renounce violence and use constitutional means to achieve their goals.

Were the Taliban to join guarantees that India would not be attacked from Afghanistan nor would Indians be persecuted within Afghanistan, a wider constituency that favours the reconciliation policy could develop. For India, it was a confidence-booster that reconciliation was led by President Karzai, albeit with a major role for Pakistan. With the Afghan leadership now in question (Europe, especially, appears to be leaning towards Pakistani leadership of the reconciliation efforts), India might recalibrate its approach. The return of an unreconstructed Taliban, the Indian government fears, could not only turn Afghanistan back to the late 1990s, but also undermine the Pakistani state's current battle with extremism and its long-term stabilisation.

## Important but neglected aspects of stabilisation

Most observers agree that intraregional trade is a critical paving stone for peace and could provide an essential impetus to Afghanistan's economic recovery. India has offered its markets for Afghan goods, and given the size of the Indian market, this could provide rapid economic boosts for the agricultural sector in Afghanistan, on which 80% of its population depend.

But attempts to increase trade have been held hostage by mistrust in Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and India. There are two key issues that have hung fire for close to a decade now:

- the Pakistan–Afghan Transit Trade Agreement, and
- an energy corridor from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India.

Pakistan and Afghanistan signed a Transit Trade Agreement in 1965. The agreement became an issue after the Bonn agreement, when Afghanistan's new government sought land access through Pakistan for humanitarian aid, and the difficulties gathered storm when India and Afghanistan sought to use the agreement for trade. In 2009, wrangles over renegotiating elements of the agreement prevented Afghanistan from exporting its bumper crop of fruit and vegetables to India, causing large losses for Afghan farmers and setting back Afghanistan's efforts to revive its non-poppy agricultural economy. Eventually, India decided to bypass the problem by airlifting consignments for the Indian market directly from Afghanistan. In May 2009, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding for transit trade at a meeting in Washington. Under the Memorandum, the two countries committed to signing a revised Transit Trade Agreement by the end of December 2009, but talks in December foundered, and it is hoped that the agreement will be negotiated in 2010. The energy corridor is similarly stalemated.

In the meantime, Afghan analysts believe that a regional rather than bilateral framework might work best for Pakistan. The Third Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan made the point that progress on regional arrangements, such as the South Asia Free Trade Area Agreement (SAFTA) to which Afghanistan is a party, is urgently required. The conference also highlighted that there is a general consensus that SAFTA needs to be fast-tracked, especially with Afghanistan as a new member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), whose stabilisation would benefit greatly from the opening of regional markets.

It is hoped that a trade agreement covering these aspects will be agreed at the SAARC summit at the end of April 2010. But it will require concerted regional and international support to become a reality.

### **Conclusions**

The three-pronged reconciliation policy, which combines a surge–conquer–hold strategy with a buyout for the local and mid-level Taliban and calibrated negotiations with the Taliban, is still in the phase of teething pains. Trying to impose an accelerated timetable on it could be very counter-productive. Reconciliation *is* the key to stabilisation in Afghanistan – provided that it is not limited to the Taliban alone, but includes wider political and provincial reconciliation within Afghanistan. Without this wider context the risk of anti-Taliban Afghan actors mobilising their own protection will be heightened. In the rush to reconcile with the Taliban, the danger of ignoring the reaction of opposing Afghan groups, many with armed loyalties of their own, is high.

Second, the search for Pakistan to play a key role in the reconciliation process needs to be very carefully worked out, with inputs from civil society and independent analysts, so that Pakistan's own battle against extremism and Afghanistan's quest for sovereignty are not compromised.

Third, the policy of seeking regional support and guarantees from Afghanistan's neighbours requires beefing up. Each of them faces a heightened security threat from *any* policy that does not have the support of all the powerful Afghan actors. At present, Turkey appears to have taken a lead on it, but has already messed up. Admittedly, the regional actors are unlikely to accept leadership by any of those among their ranks. Yet, they are likely to respond to a series of initiatives by regional actors, especially India, Iran and China, which could be separate but interlocking.

Finally, while deadlines and timetables are important, if they are not based on the ground realities they can create further instability.

# Afghanistan: Shifting from a state of war to a political state

Fabrice Pothier\*

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After almost nine years of the campaign in Afghanistan, soldiers, diplomats and experts alike agree on at least one thing: the solution to the conflict is political and not military. Beyond that, there is little of a concrete political strategy. This was revealed yet again at the London conference last January where, despite talks of transition in Afghanistan, the international community and the Kabul government have failed to produce a realistic proposition to draw the conflict to an end. There is urgency. The clocks for the campaign in Afghanistan are ticking – the Afghan population mistrusts Kabul as well as the international community's support for the leadership of President Hamid Karzai; Afghan wealth and elites are fleeing the country at a growing pace; Western public opinion is averse to more casualties and increasingly sceptical about the mission as a whole; and, after nearly nine years, political leaders – in both Afghanistan and the West – listen more to the sirens of local politics and the power game than to principled commitment and cooperation centred on good will.

Adding to that, the latest US military surge is also the last. NATO's military footprint has reached a ceiling. It has 150,000 troops of which fewer than a third are active, deployable combat troops (US, UK, Danish, some French troops and a few special operations troops). This means that the next 12 months are the last throw of the dice on the military front and that the political front is becoming ever more important.

Yet few realistic political options have been proposed so far. That is to say, few apart from one: reconciliation, which stood as the international community's new silver bullet announced at the London conference. It consists of buying off low- to mid-level insurgents and presumably reintegrating them into Afghan society. Beyond the many serious operational problems that such an approach poses, it is also based on the false premises that Taliban insurgents (including the rank and file) are motivated by economics and not politics, and that there are 'moderate' or 'grey' Taliban members as opposed to just hard-core ones. But more fundamentally, in its haste to find short-term exit scenarios, the Western coalition has mistaken reconciliation for a political end in itself, rather than for what it is – a tactical move to defuse the insurgency.

For the negotiations with the insurgents to work as a bridge from a state of war to a political state, they need to be part of a broader process of redefining Afghanistan's institutional and political balance. Offering a few cabinet seats and local appointments to the insurgents in exchange for peace is unlikely to address the growing disconnect between ethnic balance and the power distribution, and is likely to lead to a backlash from Karzai's northern Afghanistan allies. Meanwhile, a Taliban regime is neither a desirable nor a realistic option. A process whereby all factions in Afghanistan (the disgruntled Pashto tribes, including but not only those represented by the Taliban, and those from the former Northern Alliance) take part in a legitimate process of rebalancing power and resources is a difficult yet necessary way forward for Afghanistan. Success is far from guaranteed but the alternatives – rampant conflict, weakening Afghan institutions and the fragmentation of power – are much worse. It is therefore time to shift the debate from whether we should negotiate to how and for what outcome, and place it in the broader need for political reform and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Machiavelli's

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advice to the prince was to consider time the very essence of political action, and the time for a broad process of negotiations is now.

### **Reconciliation vs. negotiations**

The London conference failed to make the leap towards the call for a full political resolution process with the insurgents and other disaffected groups. Instead, it chose to promote the narrower notion of reconciliation, i.e. buying local insurgents away from the battlefield. A special trust fund with up to \$140 million of pledges from international donors was set up. Previous attempts at reconciliation have failed to make a difference. There were technical, operational reasons for this outcome: the attempts were poorly funded, lacked real job reintegration schemes and failed to include de-radicalisation infrastructures like those developed in Indonesia or Saudi Arabia. More significantly, past failures also stemmed from a flawed reading of the nature of the Afghan insurgency.

Broken or absent local institutions and competing informal actors have meant that such a cash-for-peace scheme is almost impossible to administer, especially in conflict zones like southern Afghanistan where it would primarily be implemented. There is nothing wrong with buying peace or buying your way towards consolidating legitimate state power. A recent article on foreign affairs about the centralisation efforts of the French *ancien régime* shows how successful French kings were at co-opting the rebel-prone gentry through privileges and money. In the case of Afghanistan, however, attempts to buy actors off have always resulted in the opposite effect: parts of the central authority are dismembered and ‘given away’ to local players, whose militias maintain security instead of the national police, further reinforcing centrifugal forces that undermine the emergence of an Afghan state. This point is illustrated by President Karzai’s appointment of regional lords like Rashid Dostum or Marshal Mohammad Fahim in senior government posts, respectively as chief of the army and vice-president, to cement support in northern provinces of Afghanistan for the presidential elections.

But more fundamentally and as noted earlier, this approach to reconciliation rests on the false premises that local insurgents are driven by economics rather than politics. And that offering them economic alternatives – cash as well as jobs – will be enough to take them away from the battlefield and ultimately weaken the insurgency. This oversimplification fails to acknowledge that the core factor fuelling the insurgency from its leadership in Quetta to local commanders is a complex mix of social and political grievances. Undoubtedly, there is degree of economic opportunism within the insurgency, including the Taliban enabling the drugs industry to flourish in exchange for money and arms, or rank-and-file members receiving a monthly stipend allegedly higher than those offered in the Afghan national police or army. Yet overall the insurgency is riding on a blend of nationalistic-cum-xenophobic views (driving the foreigners and their ‘clients’ in Kabul out of the country) and reactionary Islam (preserving a traditional social order against the threat of modernisation and progress). Even at the local level, social pressure to join the insurgency is likely to play an important role. We should not underestimate the extent to which some Pashto tribes and groups have felt excluded from the power and money redistribution of post-2001 Afghanistan, and the extent to which the Taliban have masterfully leveraged the disgruntlement of some tribes and groups to consolidate their base in southern Afghanistan. Even outside the Pashto belt, in northern provinces such as Kunduz, the Taliban have proven highly effective at playing tribal subgroups against one another as well as attaching to the tribal identity that is receding, especially in the south, a Pashtu-centric political narrative advocating a traditional social order based on a combination of tribal code and

fundamental Islam.<sup>2</sup> Observers who have travelled to Taliban heartlands like rural Kandahar often remark that apart from kites and music, which are now allowed, the social order in those areas has barely changed since the Taliban were in power in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, NATO commanders believe that in parallel to the direct military pressure economic incentives might help break the insurgency's stride. Still, a deeper process of political negotiations is missing and is needed, even if the US counter-insurgency strategy manages to regain the momentum. This was the original sin in 2001 at the Bonn conference when the defeated (Taliban) and their ally (Pakistan) were absent from the political arrangements. Actually, the Bonn process produced Afghan institutions based on a *Traité-de-Versailles* mindset of rewarding the winners and excluding the losers. What is now needed is a post-Bonn process that overcomes the distinction between winners and losers, and instead outlines a win-win political process for all major Afghan factions.

### **'Too many cooks'...**

Negotiations with insurgents will inevitably involve many actors with conflicting interests; almost all actors have as many reasons to engage in negotiations as in making them fail. While many have wondered who will be the negotiating partner on the side of the Taliban – the Quetta *shura*, the Haqqani network or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – the question also stands for the other side of the negotiating table. The Kabul government plays a central role yet is not in a position to provide the security guarantees that will be crucial to a deal, while Islamabad, which so far acts more as a spoiler than a facilitator holds many security and political keys to the Quetta *shura*. The US holds the biggest sticks and carrots but cannot be the one sealing a deal. Regional powers such as India, Russia and Iran form what could be called an 'arc of sceptics'; a final outcome is unlikely to depend on them but they are in a position to upset the negotiation process. Finally, the UN and Saudi Arabia can act at different levels as facilitators – the former giving the final settlement the needed international recognition and the latter providing a venue for proximity talks as well leaning on the Taliban and Pakistani partners.

First is the central local player: the Kabul government. The conventional wisdom says that Kabul should lead the negotiation efforts. If, however, the government needs to be part of the solution, it is also in many respects one of the main impediments to a political settlement. Senior government officials, including President Karzai and those from the non-Pashto ethnic groups from northern Afghanistan (mainly the Tajiks and Uzbeks) have very little interest in seeing their formal, and more importantly, informal power networks threatened by new political players. The proposition advocated by senior members of the Afghan cabinet during the London conference that the Taliban are welcome if they abide by the constitution is a non-starter. It fails to acknowledge that the 2003 constitution born out of the Bonn process is part of the problem and needs to be reformed: the electoral system and calendar should be overhauled, the judiciary strengthened and the centralisation of power rebalanced with more resources and autonomy given to the local level. Moreover, the current Afghan institutions, particularly the office of the president, are widely considered both ineffective and lacking in credibility (as acknowledged by the current US ambassador to Kabul in candid cables to the US state secretary),<sup>3</sup> especially since

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<sup>2</sup> See the analysis of how the Taliban have leveraged broken tribal systems in southern Afghanistan to their advantage in Gilles Dorransoro's latest Carnegie paper, *Afghanistan: Searching for Political Agreement*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., April 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See the link to the leaked cables on the website of the *New York Times*, "Ambassador Eikenberry's Cables on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan" (<http://documents.nytimes.com/eikenberry-s-memos-on-the-strategy-in-afghanistan#p=1>).

the fraudulent 2009 elections. In his West Point speech in December 2009,<sup>4</sup> President Barack Obama refuted the comparison between the campaign in Afghanistan and the one in Vietnam. He omitted one obvious truth: that the Karzai government – from its ineffective and corrupt institutions and weak security forces to its low credibility among the population – shares many common features with the then US-sponsored Saigon government, and could well share its doomed fate if not reformed. The Taliban are no Vietcong, and Pakistan’s covert support is no match to that provided at the time by the Soviet Union, but it remains clear that Kabul is a weak negotiating partner. Other external players, especially the US, need to follow the twin track of strengthening Kabul while in parallel actively enabling peace negotiations, especially when the partner in Kabul is reluctant or too weak to engage.

Pakistan is the second central player in a negotiation process but not without deep ambiguities. Its tribal frontier regions, which host a larger Pashto population than that on the Afghan side, have provided the main logistical and political hubs for the Afghan Taliban insurgents, with their notorious chief, Mullah Mohammed Omar, allegedly based in Quetta. Pakistan politico-military thinking is still very much embedded in an existential struggle against India, where Afghanistan is used through the Taliban and other proxies to provide an all-vital ‘strategic depth’. The recent Taliban attacks in Kabul, which were targeted at the Indian embassy and guesthouses frequented by Indian expatriates, stand as a reminder that Afghanistan is the Western frontline in the ongoing Pakistan–Indian confrontation. Those attacks, with their sophistication and multiple-target strategy, could have not been executed without enablement from the Pakistan security apparatus. The thinking and actions of the Pakistan military – the leading institution (and economic stakeholders) in the country – remain torn between a strategy of fomenting insurgency (FOIN) on their Western flank and beyond the Durand line to one of waging counter-insurgency (COIN).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, what constitutes Pakistan’s role in a direct lethal threat to coalition troops in eastern and southern Afghanistan, also represents an opportunity to make Islamabad part of a broader political settlement. Facilitating a negotiation process between the Karzai government and the Quetta *shura* offers Islamabad the prospect of placing some its pawns in the formal political process in Afghanistan. Indeed, the capture by Pakistani forces of the deputy Afghan Taliban chief is seen by many observers as a way for Pakistan to invite itself to the negotiating table; it sends the basic message that no negotiations can be finalised without Pakistan’s involvement and assent. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the current FOIN and covert strategy can provide more strategic edge than the highly uncertain process of political settlements. The Pakistani leadership is unlikely to have forgotten the 1990s when the more the Taliban became the dominant political power in Afghanistan the less Islamabad had any leverage on the group.

The regional dimension of negotiating with the Taliban is not confined to Pakistan. Even though Iran, Russia and India are unlikely to play a major role in the negotiations, they hold stakes high enough to influence, positively or negatively, their outcome. In addition, these three countries form the arc of scepticism about negotiations with the Taliban.

Russia is the reluctant northern player in Afghanistan. Since 2001, Moscow’s approach to Afghanistan has been narrowly focused on two threats: narcotics and the spread of radical Islam

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to US White House, “Remarks by the President in an Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 1 December 2009 (retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>).

<sup>5</sup> See Haider A.H. Mullick, *Pakistan’s Security Paradox: Countering and Fomenting Insurgencies*, JSOU Report 09-0, Hurlburt Field, Florida: JSOU Press, 2009.

in former Soviet republics. Because of its ‘Afghan syndrome’, Moscow’s involvement has remained mostly technical through allowing the crossing of NATO’s non-lethal and lethal supplies from the Baltic Sea, training anti-narcotic troops in Tajikistan and supporting the former Northern Alliance. Drugs have probably been the issue on which Moscow has recently been most vocal and concerned. With a population of 2.3 million addicts, 80% of Russian suffering from HIV/AIDS also being injection drug users and 70 tonnes of Afghan heroin reaching its streets every year (this is proportionally much higher than the 88 tonnes that reach the rest of Europe), Russia is one of the main destination markets for Afghan heroin. It is little surprise then that Moscow, including more recently its drug envoy during a visit to NATO, calls for greater efforts by NATO to fight drug trafficking in and out of Afghanistan.

However legitimate, these concerns are unlikely to produce any policy shift for several reasons. First, is a failure to see that NATO, and more specifically the US and the UK, has been grossly ineffective at tackling the Afghan opium industry despite years of aggressive crop-eradication campaigns and billions of dollars poured into so-called ‘alternative development’. This approach clashes against one fundamental reality: the cost of tackling drug production in a conflict zone like southern Afghanistan, which lacks basic governance and rule of law, and implementing a functional counter-narcotics strategy is higher than the benefits. Similar regional cases like Burma show that a significant reduction in illegal opium production is possible only after a local conflict has been brought to an end.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously waging a war against an insurgency and one against the drug industry is not only a dangerous overstretch, it compromises higher stabilisation goals. Second, too great a focus has been given to fighting cultivation, the poorest segment of the opium value chain – farmers traditionally account roughly for 15% of the multibillion dollar opium industry – and too little at tackling high-end trafficking, which concentrates the most valuable, corroding and dangerous parts of the value chain.

What Moscow also overlooks is that its serious drug-consumption problem can be fought more effectively domestically with comprehensive and progressive public-health interventions, such as programmes for substitution (methadone, a rather cheap and effective substitution to heroin, widely used in Western Europe, is still illegal in Russia) and clean-needle exchange. These could be bolstered by smarter law enforcement (going after traffickers instead of users or small-time traders). But the wounds of the Soviet campaign and its humiliating withdrawal in 1989 remain prominent in the Russian political-military psyche. This is a determining factor in Russia’s reluctant involvement and in its opposition to see a return of the Taliban, even under a more acceptable political accord. Moscow additionally holds conflicting views about NATO’s presence in Afghanistan: on the one hand it wants NATO to contain a much-feared Islamist radicalism; while on the other hand a successful NATO could further upset Moscow’s influence in Central Asia. Indeed, Russia seems not to have decided yet between a minimalist post-2001 approach or a more maximalist one using vehicles like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to develop a more regional response to post-NATO Afghanistan. Still, as two experts on Russia rightly note, “[i]ronically, Russia’s negative interests in Afghanistan are more important than the positive ones”.<sup>7</sup> As a permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) member, Russia holds an important card, especially for giving greater tacit and formal support for the UN to play an active role in facilitating a political settlement.

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<sup>6</sup> A sequencing between ending conflict and countering narcotics is described in “Does Russia Want the West to Succeed in Afghanistan?” by Ekaterina Stepanova, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 61, Eurasian Strategy Project, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., September 2009.

<sup>7</sup> See Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, *Afghanistan: A View from the North*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow, 2010.

This would involve the removal of Taliban leaders from the UNSC's terrorist list. The process was started just before the London conference, probably as a show of good will, but more is likely to be required to secure a deal with the Taliban leadership. A greater role for Russia within NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), including the sharing of some intelligence briefings, could make Moscow more open to giving the UN an expanded mandate on political negotiations.

With direct security concerns in mind, India looks with nervous eyes upon the idea of bringing the Taliban into the main political fold in Afghanistan. New Delhi, which has pledged up to \$1 billion for reconstruction in Afghanistan and is deepening its commercial and diplomatic ties with Kabul, sees negotiations as potentially a victory for Pakistan. That notwithstanding, some clear security guarantees – that Indian interests and personnel in Afghanistan will not be threatened and that Islamabad will dismantle groups like Lashka-e-Taiba – could hold the key to India's acceptance of a political deal with the Taliban.

As the holder of both the biggest carrots and sticks, the US is a determining factor and player in the process. Yet the US cannot overtly lead the negotiations process and run the risk of 'de-Afghanising' the efforts. For example, until recently President Karzai was leading the efforts to engage with the Taliban, which were viewed by India as a 'confidence booster' according to regional expert Rahda Kumar.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, in light of Karzai's fundamental weakness, the US must play an active role as a stimulator of a reluctant Afghan leadership and a security guarantor to the insurgents who lay down their arms (while stopping targeted killings and imprisonment in Bagram) along with enforcing guarantees that the Taliban will refrain from targeting international personnel and representatives. The most realistic scenario is if the US, under the legitimacy of the UN, gives the negotiations the impulse they need to allow a deal to hold. This would entail bringing together in Islamabad the various reluctant players from the Karzai administration, addressing the concerns of regional sceptics like India or Russia and ultimately providing the security guarantees – no association with al-Qaeda and laying down arms against an end to targeted killings and arrests.

Finally, despite its loss of credibility after the August presidential elections, the UN remains the best-suited and most credible framework the Western coalition can use to support and enable political negotiations. But if it is to play such role, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan needs a new, reinforced mandate. The current mandate recently renewed under UNSC Resolution 1868 puts the emphasis on peacekeeping and aid coordination, with the UN largely being outweighed by the NATO ISAF and the US operations, while it provides only a limited mandate for 'political outreach'. An expanded mandate would shift priorities from peacekeeping to facilitating a peace agreement.

### **The known unknowns that can upset the political process**

Circumstances in Afghanistan have been fast evolving with an overall trend towards the degradation of political, human and security indicators. Several new factors ranging from the impact of the US military and civilian surge, targeted killings of insurgency leaders and the general elections that should take place in September 2010 could significantly alter the context in both positive and negative ways. The targeted killings and arrests of Taliban senior commanders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as Taliban military chief Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Karachi in February 2010, come with very ambivalent implications. On the one hand it exerts pressure on the Taliban leadership, disrupts its lines of command and triggers fractious

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<sup>8</sup> See the contribution by R. Kumar to this European Security Forum Working Paper No. 34, "Afghanistan – The Day After", ESF Working Paper No. 34, CEPS, Brussels, 2010.

power struggles within the movement. The Pakistan-based Taliban are known to feel more vulnerable and disrupted under the US drone attacks and Pakistan's occasional cooperation. On the other hand, vulnerability does not imply a fundamental change of ideology or approach among the core Taliban. On the contrary, the arrests or killings of Taliban operatives are likely to have a disruptive effect on the negotiations by removing the old Taliban guard, to be replaced by a lesser known and often more radical new guard, who will be less inclined to be negotiation partners. The capture of commanders like Mullah Baradar is read by some as a warning by some elements of the Pakistani security apparatus that those who contemplate negotiations will be eliminated.

A wild card would be another al-Qaeda attack against Western civilians. This wild card would render the differentiation between Taliban and al-Qaeda irrelevant. The notion of negotiations with the Taliban would become a political taboo again for a US administration too easily accused of appeasement. This was clearly the case when the Obama administration reversed its decision of sending Yemeni inmates in Guantanamo back to Yemen following the botched bombing attempt by a Nigerian student with assistance in Yemen by al-Qaeda operatives. An attack led by a Pakistan-based radical group, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, against Indian or Western targets would also significantly upset the precarious regional balance and harden India's stance towards negotiations with the Taliban.

### **Where does the deal end?**

The map of players and interests to involve in a negotiations process could not be more complex and conflicting. The question remains about what should be the objectives of the negotiations. It is unlikely that giving away a few cabinet seats or prestigious appointments will meet the Taliban's demands. Meaningful negotiations need to aim at a deeper and more comprehensive package based on three aspects: security guarantees, power-sharing and institutional arrangements. On the security guarantees, a key demand from the both the Kabul government and the international community should be a temporary cease-fire. In exchange, targeted killings and arrests would cease while negotiations start. Longer term, the security guarantees should involve a progressive de-militarisation of the Taliban groups, including the integration of the Taliban rank and file as reserve forces (with uniforms and salaries but no arms) instead of militias. For the negotiations to be part of a long-term peace-building strategy rather than a short-term exit scenario, renegotiations of the Bonn institutions involving all Afghan factions – including groups represented by opposition leader Dr Abdullah Abdullah – are essential. This step should also provide an opportunity to sustain an Afghan-led effort to reform those institutions, i.e. the office of the president and the electoral commissions, which have proven in recent elections to be dysfunctional to the point of undermining the entire nation-building effort. The concerns voiced by some experts and groups that values such as women's rights (the Afghan parliament has far more women MPs than the French one) and those of society as whole will be bargained away are legitimate. Nevertheless, these concerns miss the point that the Afghan polity has significantly shifted towards more conservative values than the West wants to recognise. The controversy in the summer 2009 over the passing of the 'rape law' as well as the condemnation of ordinary Afghans for alleged religious crimes are just a few of the many signs of a hardening of Afghan politics under President Karzai. Therefore, the introduction of Taliban leaders in the polity will not necessarily mark a significant shift. Ultimately, the redefinition of institutional balance and of Afghan values should be left to the Afghans themselves within the agreed framework of the rule of law.

Such peace negotiations are fraught with obstacles: ambiguous stakeholders like Pakistan, weak players like the Afghan government and reluctant partners like India and Russia. Yet the alternative, which will involve a war of attrition, erosion of the international resolve despite possible military success and an accelerated fragmentation of power – is hardly an option.

# Afghanistan's political-military crises and future prospects

Rahmani Waliullah\*

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Afghan political society is at a standoff. The reasons for this are both domestic and external.

Growing insurgency threatens the nation internally while regional ambitions threaten to tear the nation apart from the outside. The post-Taliban democratic state faces existential strategic threats as a consequence.

After nine years of military and political effort, national and international actors seem to have arrived at an impasse. Everyone from the president to the cabinet, to various peace commissions, to local and tribal leaders as well as *shuras*, to the international community, appreciates that time is running out.

For NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, December 2010 is a key deadline. General Stanley McChrystal, America's chief commander in Afghanistan, has said that by December of this year, the Obama administration expects there to be visible progress in stabilising the south, capacity built in the Afghan security forces and more territories ready to be transferred to the Afghan national forces. While some question this deadline, the world will be watching to see if NATO can achieve such progress in the deadlines it has been prescribed.

What Afghans not engaged in the insurgency do not want to see, however, is a peace that is forged by handing the nation over to its most extreme elements. In other words, Afghans want to reconcile with the insurgents too, but not if the cost is that once again the country should be at the mercy of the Taliban hard-liners. Reconciliation with the Taliban should not mean submission of the Afghan people to the extremists.

More than 100,000 Soviet forces could not stabilise Afghanistan as recently as the 1980s. Is it really any wonder that a domestic force of no more than 50,000 police and 70,000 soldiers is unable to stabilise the country today? Afghanistan's geographical challenges alone render these force numbers imprudent.

It has been said that perhaps the Americans have been using what they did in Japan after WWII as their model for Afghanistan. That is, the idea has been to have a demilitarised state here. Obviously, Japan was a success but unfortunately that model could not work here. Afghans are infamous for their hard-line extremism and some elements of this culture have never been able to accept the idea of foreign rule, even at their own peril.

Indeed, foreign ignorance of our traditions and ways has had devastating consequences in Afghanistan as everyone can attest to now, given the legions that have become disenfranchised from the international project because of insensitive night raids, house searches and the number of civilians who have been killed as the result of bad information, and no doubt worse informants.

Then there are the issues our neighbours have that need to be factored into the calculation. Pakistan, for example, has yet to figure out that Afghanistan is not under Islamabad's explicit control. But with billions of dollars in international aid underscoring Pakistan's belief, it is not hard to understand why Islamabad seems to have such a vested interest in our affairs and in

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making sure their assistance in the war on terror continues to be funded. Not to mention the problems the Durand line has long caused our two nations.

Pakistan has taken money out of Afghan markets by making sure that Karachi and Khyber are the main ports of entry into the country. When NATO supply lines have come under siege, it is Pakistan that has been paid the extra dollars to see that the lines are protected. Afghans suffer because they have to pay inflated prices for the goods that have to be imported. If this strategy has backfired to a certain extent – evidenced by the supply routes Afghans have alternatively forged through Iran – all the Afghans seem to have gotten out of the deal are increased concerns about Iranian influence from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and even the US.

Iran and Pakistan have always been economic and political rivals in Afghanistan. With the international community in Afghanistan now, this rivalry has intensified.

Moreover, Iran is not the only country that Pakistan does not want to see in Afghanistan. India's presence here is also deeply resented. That India has been largely helpful to Afghanistan in the past nine years, putting its efforts into various infrastructure projects, enrages Pakistan. While some experts believe that improving relations between the two countries spells relief for Afghanistan, it seems unlikely at this point that Pakistan is going to be easily persuaded that India's welcome presence in Afghanistan is anything but a threat.

Then there is the support that Pakistan gives to the Taliban. Supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan has become an institution in Pakistan and the Taliban are now at the point where it can be argued that they are able to threaten Islamabad itself.

The military establishment of Pakistan – the army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – has to date been the main supporter of the Taliban in the Pakistani government. The military establishment in Pakistan has looked to the Taliban to be their proxy force in Afghanistan. They use the Taliban to do everything, creating a sort of perverse balance to India's good work in Afghanistan.

Pakistan also uses the Taliban to ensure continued inflows of US anti-terror money. In other words, Pakistan is fully aware of how much it has earned so far in the US war on terror, and understands how very profitable a long war on terror will be. The ISI thinks that a Taliban-free Afghanistan is not in Pakistan's national interest – not with this kind of aid coming in. Pakistan's instrumentalisation of the Taliban has netted some \$11 billion over the past nine years. No wonder Pakistani army Chief General Ashfaq Kayani referred to Afghani militant commander Jalaluddin Haqqani as a strategic asset in an intercepted email in 2008. And it is this kind of money that makes certain high-profile attacks in Afghanistan will continue – especially attacks on Indians, at their embassy or on their doctors and guest workers resident here in guesthouses or even at the Kabul-Serena hotel. These attacks are to Pakistan like hitting two birds with one stone.

That is why so many former ISI officials and Pakistani political characters rally to the defence of the Taliban. They share the Taliban's extreme ideology and have shared economic interests. For example, former ISI chief General Hamid Gul is a vocal champion of the Taliban in Pakistan and one of the group's founders. So recent statements of his, for instance that the Taliban are the future of Afghanistan or his saying that the recently arrested Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar should not be handed over to Afghan or American authorities because his only crime was illegally living in Pakistan, should come as no shock. The links between the ISI and the Taliban are even older than the Taliban itself.

The Taliban came out of Pakistan's madrasahs – there are now some 38,000 madrasahs potentially cranking out Taliban members – spread all over Pakistan. Many of these madrasahs, while not Darul Uloom madrasahs per se, share the same Deobandi–Salafi interpretation of

Islam that the Taliban have. These madrasahs continue to produce new Taliban members. Until we change the curriculum and ideology in these madrasahs, they will keep turning out extremists insufficiently educated for anything but jihad. If Pakistan is trying to reform these schools, there seems to be little evidence to show for their efforts, even nine years and billions of dollars later.

One wishes our problems ended there. Admittedly, we Afghans do love to point the finger when it comes to assigning blame for all the mistakes that confound us here. But we also recognise that we share much of the blame for our condition. First – and easiest to admit – are the mistakes our own leaders have made.

Back in 2003, when the Taliban was still vanquished, we made the mistake of marginalising the warlords and mujahidin commanders who had brought the country to this point in an effort to neutralise them. After all, they had brought us civil war and then the Taliban, thanks to not knowing when it was time to lay down their arms and just get along.

Democracy might have seemed to be the natural province of technocrats, but in marginalising the warlords all our government did was create an instant class of enemies and fierce enemies at that. Kabul did not bolster its control with this move, but rather divided the country into two factions – the government versus the warlords and the mujahidin that the government had just stripped of power.

No wonder the Taliban found it easy to come back into Afghanistan. Of course they were never very far away in the first place. They only had to go as far as Pakistan to find a safe harbour, making their subsequent entry into Afghanistan all the easier.

The Taliban might seem foreign to both the foreigners and the Afghans who live in Kabul. But we can never forget the traditional appeal they have for their co-extremists and fellow tribals in other areas of the country. Their radical ideology enabled them to obtain control of 90% of the country in the 1990s; today, it continues to threaten if not 90% then at least a good swathe. It is hard to think that the same ideology that attracts suicide bombers is an ideology that can be reconciled with democracy.

While we cannot get around the ethnocentric nature of the Afghan polity, our history does provide examples of the broad ethnic landscape that we have here. Yet, regardless of whether we have lived under kingdoms, republics, communism, mujahidin or the Taliban in Afghanistan, the common denominator of all of these various regimes that have tried to subdue our people is that they have all distributed their favours along mostly tribal or ethnic lines.

During the reign of Afghan kings, the king's tribe, family and ethnicity formed the first rung of power in Afghanistan, but they also comprised the second- and third-level ranks (the *Tabaa* in Dari). Only the relatives of the king or those whom he deigned to privilege were treated as citizens. The rest were subjects and very unequal subjects at that. Centuries under this kind of rule made Afghans believe that this was how all rulers necessarily wielded power.

Afghans in effect became dehumanised. They were essentially – that is, in their own minds – either masters or slaves. There was no middle ground, no sense of basic rights and no belief that a people could hold its leaders accountable. Today, we see this played out in the legions of Afghans who think they are the subjects of this government and have little faith in a democratic government that they are told they can change at will.

The hope that a post-Taliban Afghanistan represented, that the country could somehow go forward as any modern democratic state, only infected a small percentage of the population. While educated Afghans from a particular ethnicity might have cherished a dim hope that someday soon they would be able to talk about the benefits of citizenship in their homeland – for instance equal rights and democratic governance – the new phase had trouble catching on.

Afghans could never really trust someone from outside their traditional power bases. And so when even democracy translated into the same old ethnocentric vision of power-grabbing that every other regime evidenced, Afghans were not surprised. They expected to see the ruler's friends and family in the various new ministerial posts, the judiciary and even the parliament.

And the ethnocentricity of our polity has only grown worse since the second election. The Pashtun–Tajik political rivalry has become more visible by the day: look at the ethnic makeup of the current Afghan cabinet or the parliament's actions against the Hazara and the Uzbek ministers as examples. In every key institution we can see evidence of the deep ethnic divides and discrimination that plague the unity of our nation.

The general consensus within Afghanistan is that we must have some form of political reconciliation with and reintegration of the insurgents. This idea was loudly endorsed at the London conference where the goal was set and funds were supposed to be raised and allocated for a programme.

But how exactly was this supposed to come about? Who were the Taliban with whom we were supposed to reconcile? Where would we find them? What would make them come over to the side of democracy? And what would be their price? In theory, reconciliation sounded great, but there was little to go on when it came time to actually implementing this process.

One hopes the international community does not forget the blood that they and we Afghans have shed to get our democracy even this far. It is also to be hoped that whatever peace negotiations we agree upon to go forward will not make these sacrifices in vain, as the pre-conditions the Taliban has set would seem to render them. Their insistence on the withdrawal of foreign forces will mean one thing to the Afghans who have signed up to the democracy project so far: they will be 'toast' as the Americans say. And our constitution as we know it will go and the democratic state of Afghanistan will once again become the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban. And our children will have to put away their kites in a nod to the Taliban's bizarre concept of sharia law.

Everyone assembled knows that today, nine years after the American-led invasion, Afghanistan faces a political-military crisis that may threaten our process of democratisation and the survival of Afghanistan. If the democratic project fails, we can go down from here to a failed state and nation. We could become the world's most corrupt state as opposed to its second most. Our weak democratic institutions could give way to Mullah Mohammed Omar and his kin. We could have instability in even more than half the nation. And the terrorists could come back along with their training camps and we could once again start exporting something even worse than the opium we export today.

So what do we do? How do we come up with a peace plan that will finally work? How do we get our jihadists to focus on the war against their own illiteracy and ignorance as opposed to our foreign occupiers?

The answer is that we have to stop catering to the ethnicities that want to drag us backward. We should nationalise the peace project just because the majority of us are willing to live at peace with each other. We cannot allow those who terrorise us today to keep terrorising us tomorrow, in other words. And the way to do that is to prevent handing the insurgents the reins of the nation. We have to instead nationalise all of our institutions. We have to make Afghanistan a level playing field, not the battlefield of the Pashtuns or other ethnicities or the opium field of the criminals; we have to make the nation a place where everyone has equal access by virtue of being Afghan.

We also need to convince Afghans and our international friends that the way forward is to clean up the south. For too long Helmand, Kandahar and other southern provinces have been allowed to symbolise the resurgent Taliban. We need to take these territories away from them.

The only way any of this will ultimately succeed is if we rid ourselves of the tribal and ethnocentric loyalties that compromise every institution and enterprise in this country. We will never have a functional country as long as we cling to our tribal and ethnic roots at the sacrifice of competence and transparency in our institutions.

Then we need our international friends to move Pakistan off the field here in Afghanistan, given that only those who provide them the funds that make what goes on here in Afghanistan so interesting to Pakistan can do so. Pakistan has to be made to see that there is a new game being played here, and that the ways of war are no longer relevant and must be replaced with multi-directional diplomacy and economic ties with all the region's nations – to the benefit of all. The US and Afghanistan must not be forced to choose between India and Pakistan when it comes to Afghanistan. We are not the booty for another nation. Pakistan has enough within its own borders with which to define its national security interests. Pakistan can play a larger role than India in Afghanistan to be sure, but the role has to be productive in terms of changing into a donor and not a destructive actor. That is the way to even beat India.

Then we have to strengthen our institutions. We need a strong security force to stabilise the nation, not to attack our neighbours. We need power distributed fairly, not to family members or favourites or a particular ethnicity. We need to put aside our tribal loyalties and find the best man – or woman – for each and every job in our country. We have too much work to leave it to the spoiled or the incompetent.

Instead of trying to buy the insurgents' loyalty, why not shame them? The Pashtuns have a term that is translated as disgrace or shame (*Nang*). If a Pashtun is given something for free – a donation for example – he is not supposed to accept it. It is seen as shameful to take alms when you have the ability to work. But if a Pashtun is given a short-term loan that is another story. So let us stop the alms-giving that is humiliating for many Afghans and instead start giving them access to financing so they can set up businesses and help the rest of us reclaim our nation. We Afghans, all of us, Pashtun and non-Pashtun alike, are a proud people. We do not want handouts. We want to work and be seen as equals. A programme to help us finance our enterprises would be welcome in every community.

Then we must do something about the radical mullahs and molawis who exert such control over our people, especially among the ignorant. There was a fairly successful programme in the Federally Administered Tribal Area during 1930–34 under Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, called the Muslim Pashtun Movement of the North-West Frontier of India, which might be emulated.

We need the mullahs to help convince our citizens that the true jihad in defence of Islam today is to refuse to give their hard-earned money to the Taliban, which demands protection money from them, and to refuse to give the insurgents refuge – in other words, a civilian jihad and non-violent struggle against the insurgents. If it happens, we will also be witness to a tribal awakening in Afghanistan, a story that will change the future of the country.