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2014 and beyond



Security and Political Developments in Afghanistan in 2014 and After: Endgame or New Game

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The great uncertainties about the security and political transitions underway in Afghanistan and the country's economic outlook are likely to continue generating pervasive ambivalence in Washington, Kabul, and other capitals over how to manage the U.S. and ISAF withdrawals and their after-effects. Many Afghans fear that a civil war is coming after 2014; and outmigration and capital flight are intensifying. The security, political, and economic developments in 2014 and 2015 will be critically influenced by three factors: The first key determinant is whether Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are capable of functioning at least at the level of their 2013 performance while improving "tail" (e.g., logistical and specialty enablers) support and reducing casualty levels. The second factor is whether Afghanistan signs the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States, enabling a continued presence in Afghanistan of a small contingent of U.S. forces after 2014 and allowing other coalition countries to make similar commitments. The posture and mission of the U.S. and coalition deployments and international financial support for Afghanistan will also be of critical importance. Third, Afghan presidential elections in 2014 will deeply influence the political, security, and economic developments in Afghanistan for years to come. All three of these factors will also profoundly effect any future negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Moreover, Afghanistan's impending economic downturn will have both immediate and medium-term repercussions for Afghanistan's stability. Although a detailed discussion of external influences from neighboring countries and regional powers on Afghanistan's security and stability is not within the remit of this paper, it nonetheless needs to be recognized that Afghanistan's regional environment

will critically intensify or reduce internal conflicts within Afghanistan, helping to stabilize the country or fuel conflict dynamics.

The State of Afghan National Security Forces, the State of the Taliban, and the Return of the Warlords

The ANSF: Staying Together and Fighting On?

During 2013, the security situation in Afghanistan was dominated by the continuing withdrawal of Western forces, the handover of security responsibility to the ANSF, and the Taliban's campaign to discredit the ANSF. Although the Taliban failed in this main objective and the ANSF performed well tactically, Afghan forces are still plagued by many deep-seated problems, particularly on the "tail" support side.

Dramatically altering the security landscape, the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces proceeds at a speedy pace. While in 2012, there were 150,000 ISAF troops in Afghanistan, by November 2013, this number declined to approximately half, about 50,000 of them Americans. By February 2014, U.S. forces are expected to be reduced to 33,000, with full withdrawal completed later in the year - unless a BSA is signed enabling a continuing presence of U.S. forces. By the end of 2013, over 90% of 800 ISAF bases had been closed, with some handed over to the ANSF and others dismantled because the ANSF lacks the capacity to maintain all of them. As remaining Western forces redeploy toward Kabul, entire Afghan provinces lack a Western presence. Meanwhile, the ISAF is losing intelligence-gathering capacity and an in-depth picture of broader political-security developments across the country.

A crucial milestone was passed in June 2013 when the ANSF took over lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan. Despite an intense military campaign by the Taliban, the ANSF did not cede any territory. Showing increasing initiative, the ANSF performed well in tactical operations and exhibited improved planning and execution. Nonetheless, facing an intense Taliban campaign between April and October - during which the insurgents mounted 6,604 attacks in 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces including 50

suicide bombings, 1,704 shootings and shellings, 1,186 bombings, and 920 ambushes - the ANSF suffered intense casualties.¹ To safeguard morale, the Afghan military did not disclose the casualty rates for the Afghan army. The Afghan Interior Ministry revealed that 2,052 members of both the Afghan National and Local Police were killed and more than 5,000 wounded during the 2013 fighting season, compared with a combined total of 2,970 police and soldiers killed in 2012.² Such casualty rates will be difficult for the Afghan forces to sustain on a prolonged basis.

High ANSF casualty levels are partially caused by poor medical evacuation capacities. Afghan air assets are nascent, and most medevac takes place by land. Overall, the non-combat support - the tail side of ANSF capacities - continues to suffer significant deficiencies. A wicked combination of U.S. legalism, Soviet-style bureaucracy, and Afghan tribal rivalries logistics and maintenance are deeply dysfunctional and pervaded by corruption and clientelism. Intelligence and other specialty enablers continue to suffer from a myriad of problems, constituting a big hole in transition plans. The Afghan government does not have the capacity to easily redress these serious and potentially debilitating deficiencies that could critically undermine the morale and fighting capacities of the ANSF. Without external advice and oversight after 2014, many of the deleterious conditions will intensify, straining the fighting capacity of ANSF.

Not just the logistics component of the ANSF but the forces overall are fissured along ethnic and patronage lines. Whether the forces will avoid shattering after 2014 is in part a function of maintaining payments to Afghan soldiers and units, and hence of the levels of corruption and ethnic divisions within ANSF. The financing is fully dependent on foreign aid – currently US\$7 billion per year but expected to fall to somewhere between \$2billion to \$4 billion a year after 2014, with a planned reduction of ANSF size from the present 352,000 to 228,500 in 2015. How these reductions take place will determine to an important extent whether the ANSF can absorb them without disastrous consequences for their fighting capacities. To the extent that the reductions are not commensurate with the level of fighting on the battlefield and are driven by inflexible timelines

or the collapse of support for Afghanistan stabilization in the United States and international community - because of the lack of a Bilateral Security Agreement or the Afghan presidential elections having gone disastrously wrong - cuts in external funding can set off the disintegration of ANSF. And it is questionable whether the Afghan government could find alternative funding, such as from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, or India.

The Taliban: How Long Can They Keep It Up?

The capabilities of the Taliban and associated insurgent groups, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, are hardly limitless. The Taliban also struggles with logistics, particularly as disrupting the group's supply chains has been a key ISAF focus. The Taliban's fundraising and supply problems are likely to be further augmented as external support is diluted and redirected to other jihad conflicts, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Although its operations attract great media and public attention, threaten human security, and shake the confidence of the Afghan people, the Taliban's casualty levels have been high. During 2013, the group treated its foot soldiers as cannon fodder, a policy that could generate significant recruitment problems in the future, particularly if the departure of Western troops in 2014 weakens the group's capacity to mobilize on the basis of fighting an infidel occupation. Potential recruits may exhibit greater reluctance to fight a blatant civil war even though the Taliban will cloak its continuing violent campaign as jihad against an apostate government.

The insurgency has maintained an impressive capacity to replace eliminated mid-level commanders and "shadow governors," but nonetheless its operational strains are significant. Even so, an ANSF left essentially on its own after 2014 may lose much of the capacity to target and disrupt the Taliban's middle leadership.

With all the challenges the Taliban and its associated insurgents face, none of them is close to being defeated. The Taliban is still deeply entrenched in Afghanistan and its capacity to persevere with an intense insurgency is undiminished. The group has good reason to believe that the departure of

Western forces will considerably weaken the ANSF, and its military position will improve significantly.

The Warlords and Militias: Back Again

Although the upcoming 2014 presidential elections have focused Afghan political energies on Kabul, prominent former warlords and current powerbrokers, anxious to participate in the post-2014 future, have been actively attempting to refurbish and consolidate their local power bases. Powerful government officials and out-of-government powerbrokers such as Ismail Khan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, Matiullah Khan, and Abdul Razziq (some of whom are running for presidential or vice-presidential positions in the elections) have sought to oust local officials and replace them with their own loyalists, sometimes by instigating local insecurity. And those local powerbrokers not in charge of either Afghan National Police (ANP) or Afghan Local Police (ALP) units have been attempting to appropriate local ALP units or resurrect their own militias, ideally having them anointed as the ALP.

The momentum of spontaneous anti-Taliban uprisings in 2011 and 2012, such as in the Andar District of Ghazni Province and in Logar Province, seems to have fizzled out. Along with some of the rural Afghan Local Police units and even regular police units, many of these anti-Taliban forces will be up for grabs by powerbrokers. Some ALP units will also likely disintegrate in the face of inadequate logistics and funding. Others, such as those ALP units recruited from the Taliban or Hezbi-Islami, may defect back to the insurgencies. Others may turn to predation on local communities and crime. Much will depend on how a post-2014 Ministry of Interior and local government officials can maintain supplies for and control over these anti-Taliban forces and actors, who are only loosely anchored into the formal state security apparatus.

Maintaining such control and established funding, recruitment, monitoring, and other operational procedures will in fact be a massive challenge for all of Afghan security and even civilian institutions - at least in the near term. In the only weakly institutionalized and intensely patronage-

based system, entire levels of ministries and other institutions will likely face massive personnel turnover and purges after the elections. The extent to which new appointees persist with procedures the international community has sought to inculcate, or instead intensify clientelistic, corrupt, and discriminatory processes, remains to be seen, but will strongly influence both security and politics in Afghanistan. For months after the formation of a new government, contestation over positions, networks, and other spoils will consume much political energy, potentially spilling into actual violence. The new government will face tough dilemmas in balancing what powerbrokers to keep in the tent (even though their influence can hamper the functioning of the government) and which established powerbrokers to fire from key ministerial positions with the attendant risks of their becoming spoilers.

Such local contestations and turf wars are likely to persist well into 2015 and beyond, even if local powerbrokers may seek to label the instability as Taliban-instigated. As has been its modus operandi and skill, the Taliban will seek to insert itself into such local contestations. Politics in Afghanistan thus has been increasingly, though informally devolving to the local level. These re-empowered and reenergized powerbrokers will pose a major challenge for the new Afghan government, undermining its governance capacity and potentially intensifying insecurity.

Overall, both as a result of the Taliban's activity and non-Taliban contestation and infighting, the security and political picture well into 2015 is likely to be a murky environment of fluid and shifting alliances, local accommodations among a variety of actors including the Taliban (that may nonetheless be very short-lived), and unreliable deals, with turf wars potentially spilling into actual criminal, ethnic, and political violence. The Taliban will seek to make 2015 bloody so as to crack the ANSF. Amidst this great uncertainty and multiple forms of insecurity, short-term profit and power maximization objectives and hedging are likely to remain pervasive. But if in 2016 the Afghan government and its security forces have not buckled, the insecurity may start diminishing, and Afghan powerbrokers as well as ordinary citizens may adopt longer-term horizons and more stable deals, and even the Taliban's calculus may change.

Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement and the Level and Nature of International Support after 2014

The morale and calculations of the Taliban, the ANSF, the Afghan government and power elites, and the Afghan people will be critically influenced by whether the United States and Afghanistan sign the BSA and whether some U.S. and NATO forces remain in Afghanistan after 2014. Other ISAF countries have indicated that in the absence of a BSA and U.S. presence, they would not maintain their forces in Afghanistan after 2014.

Negotiations over the BSA dominated U.S.-Afghan diplomatic relations in 2013 and will continue to do so in 2014 until the BSA is either signed or Washington has lost patience and indeed adopts the so-called zero option, pulling the plug on Afghan stabilization. U.S. diplomats had hoped to conclude negotiations by October, but that timeline and subsequent ones have been repeatedly missed. Even though about 80% of the deal had been worked out, with the Afghan side mostly getting the language it wanted, three issues in particular confounded the negotiations.³ First, Afghan negotiators demanded U.S. guarantees against Pakistan's military interference in Afghanistan - potentially obligating the U.S. to attack Pakistan - which Washington has categorically refused. Second, Afghan negotiators sought to secure firm, specific, and multi-year financial aid commitments from the U.S., a request that violates the U.S. Constitution because the Congress allocates foreign aid on a yearly basis. Third, the U.S. appears to have compromised, though exactly how is not yet clear, on its key demand that U.S. counterterrorism units targeting al-Qaeda (not the Taliban) continue to operate independently after 2014. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has sought to channel these counterterrorism operations through the ANSF, with the U.S. providing intelligence only. A nonnegotiable U.S. requirement - and one of the greatest outstanding disagreements - pertains to the legal immunity of U.S. soldiers. The Afghans have sought to eliminate it while the U.S. categorically refuses to permit any of its soldiers to remain in Afghanistan in the absence of immunity guarantees.

In late November 2013, when the U.S. believed all disagreements

had been ironed out, a loya jirga (grand council) of 3,000 Afghan public representatives, government officials, and tribal elders selected by President Karzai endorsed the BSA. Yet to the consternation of both U.S. diplomats and Afghan politicians and civil society, and to the applause of the Taliban, President Karzai still refused to sign the BSA, insisting that only the next Afghan administration to be elected in April 2014 should sign the deal. He also added new conditions for the U.S. to satisfy first – the end to all, including counterterrorist, air raids and house searches, substantial headway on peace negotiations with the Taliban, which he had unsuccessfully tried to initiate secretly on his own, and a U.S. guarantee that it would not “meddle” in Afghanistan’s 2014 presidential elections. By this last demand, Karzai of course means that the United States and the international community not meddle with any of his meddling with the elections.

The difficulties in concluding the BSA reflect the steady deterioration since 2009 of the relationship between the Obama administration and Karzai, given their vastly divergent strategic viewpoints. Karzai wants the U.S. to bring far greater pressure on Islamabad to stop providing a safehaven in Pakistan for Afghan Taliban leadership and soldiers. Karzai fails to recognize that the resilience of the Afghan insurgency is also a function of the misgovernance, corruption, criminality, and abuse perpetrated by his government and associated local or regional powerbrokers.

President Karzai’s foreign policy of brinkmanship - constantly generating crises, and visibly shopping for new friends in Russia, China, Iran, and India to use as leverage against the U.S. and NATO - has depleted the fragile support left in the U.S. for the Afghanistan effort. Yet Karzai is wedded to the strategic belief that Washington cannot walk away because America requires a platform for pursuing a “New Great Game” in Central Asia against China and Russia. But the White House seems to have identified China and East Asia, not Central Asia, as its strategic priority despite being mired in the Middle East. Thus, influential members of the Obama administration increasingly regard Afghanistan as an unwise liability, and the U.S. president has repeatedly talked of “winding down” the war in Afghanistan, or more precisely U.S. participation in it.

The Obama administration has repeatedly stressed that because of planning requirements for any post-2014 U.S. military deployment, it cannot wait to sign the BSA only after the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan (currently slated to take place in April) and until a new government is formed.⁴ Meanwhile, a number of U.S. and NATO officials have expressed skepticism that President Karzai would sign the BSA before that, and the Afghan president himself has stated that the decision whether to sign or not would be made by his successor.

And yet waiting for the successor to sign will likely involve waiting considerably beyond April 2014. Even if the elections are not delayed for security or weather reasons, the first round is unlikely to produce a winner with over 50% of the vote. Claims of fraud, demands for recount, and political bargaining may delay the second round for several weeks or months. A similar contestation of the results, political bargaining, and delays could easily take place after the second round of the elections. Even once the winner is determined, he may require weeks to form a government. Thus, it is not at all inconceivable that a new Afghan president ready to sign the BSA might not be available until October or November 2014, and it is questionable whether either the United States or NATO partners will be willing to wait that long. A United Nations extension of the current ISAF mandate may buy time and delay the deadline for total U.S. and ISAF withdrawal for a few months until 2015, but it is not clear that either Washington or Kabul is ready to accept such an interim measure or that U.N. Security Council countries such as Russia and China would consent to such a temporary deal without an explicit agreement from the Afghan government.

Even if the BSA is ultimately signed, it remains unclear how many U.S. and ISAF soldiers would remain in Afghanistan after 2014. President Obama has repeatedly stated that any post-2014 U.S. mission would be confined to counterterrorism operations (potentially targeting al Qaeda and the Haqqani network only) and limited ANSF training and advisory assistance. Nonetheless, these two missions can take on a variety of configurations, and their precise shape will be primarily determined by troop levels. While former ISAF commanders and Afghanistan experts have called for between

15,000 and 20,000 NATO soldiers, increasingly it appears that 10,000 may be the maximum, with a U.S. deployment as small as 3,000-8,000 troops. Such a small force posture greatly limits potential missions, particularly if force protection requirements and anti-al-Qaeda units consume the bulk of the deployment. It thus no longer appears feasible for the ISAF, as previously planned, to continue to provide the ANSF with capabilities after 2014 that they lack now. Any post-2014 ISAF engagement with the ANSF may be limited to corps-level and ministry advising, oversight of external financing, and Afghan special operations forces support. The security environment that the ANSF will face in 2014 and 2015 will thus be increasingly difficult.

Moreover, to the extent that the dominant U.S. objective of retaining a U.S. military force in Afghanistan is counterterrorism - defined primarily as a capacity and bases for striking terrorist targets in Pakistan or reaching into Pakistan in case of a major security meltdown which threatened the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons -, Afghanistan will not get much out of such an arrangement. Although the deal might preserve critical financial flows to Afghanistan, it would not deliver a direct military advantage to the government. At the same time, it would continue to antagonize Pakistan and worsen the already difficult Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. U.S. counterterrorism forces and bases would likely come under attack and may become either sitting ducks or be drawn again into the Afghan internal insurgency struggles. Afghanistan might not thus welcome such a deal, and Washington might not be able to sustain it.

The 2014 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections: Setting off Infighting or a Platform for Legitimacy Renewal?

Along with ISAF's departure, the 2014 presidential elections will be a defining historical moment for the country. The elections could become a platform for the renewal of a political dispensation that has become increasingly illegitimate as a result of the Afghan government's failings: incompetence, corruption, nepotism, criminality, and power abuse. Because President Karzai is constitutionally barred from running again, the elections will usher in not only a new government, but - in the country's

highly centralized, personality-based patronage system - also potentially a major transfer of power. Layers of institutions and scores of appointments could be changed by the new leadership, affecting access to political and economic resources for ethnic groups, tribes, and powerbrokers' networks.

The political energies of 2013 and early 2014 have been consumed by preparations for the elections, with a frenzy of meetings among Afghan politicians and political networks and a preoccupation with bargaining. Many Afghan politicians believe that highly contested elections would be disastrous for stability, potentially provoking violence and a prolonged political crisis. They thus have gravitated toward finding a consensus candidate or candidates, yet failed to agree on any before the October 2013 registration deadline.⁵ With Afghan political parties remaining weak, and despite some impressive civil society activism, presidential hopefuls will have to rely on their personal electoral vehicles and bargaining by powerbrokers. Ultimately, many politicians registered for the contest just to stay in the bargaining game over spoils and dispensations.

Despite its potential to resurrect the legitimacy of the Afghan political system, there are multiple ways in which the elections could trigger extensive violence: Widespread fraud could be alleged; losers could refuse to accept the results; the Taliban could escalate attacks, and ethnic Pashtuns could become disenfranchised due to insecurity.

The Taliban has rejected participating in, and the legitimacy of, the upcoming 2014 presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan, and has attacked voter registration workers. While the group is not fielding candidates, it has engaged some presidential contenders in discussions. The Taliban's counterpart Hezbi-Islami already is a significant political force within Afghanistan's official and formal political sphere and will be engaged in political bargaining related to the elections. Since the Pashtun areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan are the most violently contested and the Taliban influence there is the greatest, the government's inability to protect potential voters from Taliban attacks and reprisals and a general sense of insecurity could deter the overwhelmingly Pashtun population in those

regions from participating in the elections.

Fighting by losers in the elections - such as aggrieved Pashtun communities feeling disfranchised as a result of inadequate security at the polls or ethnic minorities losing in ethnically mixed provinces - but also by individual powerbrokers could break out. A postponement of elections on technical, weather, or security grounds (or even outright suspension of voting and extension of Karzai's rule) could also spark fighting. Interethnic violence or losers' rebellions, particularly after elections, could generate potentially untenable stress on the ANSF, already mostly left on its own to provide security for the elections and struggling with ethnic and patron-based fragmentation. Extensive fraud, widespread fighting, or prolonged political paralysis (as Afghan politicians bargaining over a political resolution come to an inconclusive result), or a refusal by Karzai to surrender power, could eviscerate any remaining support in ISAF countries for continuing assistance to Afghanistan.

One of the critical questions that the international community, such as ISAF countries, will need to determine and coordinate sufficiently in advance is whether they will become involved in any way with the political bargaining surrounding the presidential elections. The rupture of relations between the Afghan government and the United States as a result of the failed attempt by Richard Holbrooke to prevent the reelection of Hamid Karzai in 2009 is a potent deterrent against any such involvement. Yet foreign influence may well be crucial in discouraging losers from taking to the streets and cocking their weapons, or for fostering consensus building. It is also likely that non-ISAF countries, such as Iran, but potentially also Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, or Russia, will not abstain from some form of involvement in the elections, such as donations and advice, to their favored candidates. Regardless of whether ISAF countries decide to stay completely out or get involved, early coordination among them could enhance the effectiveness of their policies. The international community's involvement or noninvolvement in the post-vote bargaining will cast a long shadow on its relationship with Afghanistan much after 2014.

Negotiations with the Taliban: A Deal Nowhere in Sight

Long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan will require reconciliation and reintegration of groups and communities alienated from the country's political dispensation. Negotiations with the Taliban will thus need to produce a settlement acceptable not just to the insurgents and the Afghan government, but also to the country's ethnic minorities. Prominent Afghan northern politicians have stated that a deal that cedes too much territory and power to the Taliban would be unacceptable to them and a reason for war.⁶ For such a settlement to be truly stable, it will also require reconciliation between the Afghan people, such as women's groups, and the Afghan government and reduction in the impunity, abuse, and corruption the Afghan government and associated powerbrokers have been able to get away with over the past decade. Close-to-the-vest bargaining among Afghan powerbrokers and the Taliban may produce a deal, but it is questionable whether it can produce stability.

Nonetheless, even such a problematic narrow deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban remains elusive. Stalled since March 2012 (when the Taliban withdrew from efforts to spur talks, claiming the U.S. refusal to release key Taliban leaders from Guantánamo violated good faith), negotiations to end fighting experienced a breakthrough in June 2013. After months of efforts by diplomats, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and third-party go-betweens from various countries, the Taliban, to much fanfare, opened an office in Doha, Qatar. However, in violation of what the U.S. understood to be the Taliban's agreement, the latter exhibited its 1990s flag and other insignia at the office, televising the scene live worldwide, and sending shockwaves throughout Afghanistan. Civil society, women's groups, ethnic minorities, and even many ordinary Afghans believed that the West was about to sell them out for a fig leaf to cover the ISAF's departure. President Karzai felt threatened by the legitimacy seemingly accorded to the insurgents and the direct channels to the international community the Doha office provided them. Thinking he had secured guarantees from Washington to prevent the Taliban from staging such a public relations coup, and believing that his government would be the Taliban's principal

interlocutor, Karzai charged betrayal by Washington and abruptly withdrew from the negotiations.

Ever more distrustful, Karzai subsequently sought to engage the Taliban and Pakistan directly, bypassing the U.S. The Afghan government managed to persuade the government of recently elected Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to release one of the Taliban's key leaders, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and some 20 top Taliban operatives from house arrest in Pakistan. However, that seeming diplomatic *démarche* ultimately did not provide the Afghan government with access to Baradar, on whom it pins hopes of a negotiated deal. Frustrated, Kabul sought to deliver on its years-old threat to cultivate proxies and provide safe-havens to anti-Pakistani militants in Afghanistan as leverage against Pakistan in hopes of encouraging Islamabad to hand over Afghan Taliban leaders. However, the Pakistan Taliban leader whom Afghan intelligence picked for this ploy, Latif Mehsud, was seen as highly dangerous by Washington because he was implicated in the failed 2010 car bomb attempt in New York City's Times Square. When U.S. Special Operations Forces snatched Mehsud from an Afghan intelligence service convoy, another major crisis in the U.S.-Afghan relationship erupted.

For its part, the Taliban had long shown no willingness to engage with the Afghan government, disparaging the Karzai administration as abusive, illegitimate, and a U.S. puppet. Aside from the Doha media coup, it focused its negotiating energies on the United States, demanding changes to the Afghan Constitution, power-sharing in the national government until new elections can be held, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops. Nonetheless, during the fall and winter 2013, the Taliban apparently engaged directly with President Karzai in secret negotiations, held in such strict confidence that even the Afghan High Peace Council (a body officially designated to negotiate with the Taliban) did not know about them.⁷ Karzai's unwillingness to sign the BSA and his insistence on releasing dangerous Taliban and Haqqani fighters and terrorists from the Bagram prison, despite American pressure and fury and despite previous agreements with the United States, may have been partially motivated by his desire to appease the Taliban during those furtive talks. Nonetheless, by early 2014, the negotiations seemed to fall

apart.

The collapse of Karzai's negotiating gambit is not surprising. With the departure (or even just a radical decrease in the presence) of Western forces, the Taliban has every reason to believe that time is on its side. Even if it cannot defeat the ANSF, it will be in a stronger position on the battlefield and hence at the negotiating table with far fewer or no ISAF soldiers in Afghanistan. Just like the Doha office, its secret talks with Karzai (which the group in fact denied took place) are most likely a ploy to drag out time as well as obtain international recognition. It is also conceivable that waving the prospect of a negotiated deal in front of Karzai was the Taliban's masterful ploy to derail the BSA.

Serious negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government are most likely to occur if two conditions are met. One, the Taliban becomes persuaded that the ANSF can stand on its own and would not collapse under its further onslaught, despite a radically diminished Western presence. And two, the Afghan government enjoys far greater legitimacy than the current one - as a result of successful 2014 presidential and provincial council elections. Conversely, elections marred by violence and fraud will strengthen the Taliban's hand both on the battlefield and in negotiations. These conditions also imply that the Taliban will unlikely enter into serious negotiations any time soon, at least not before late-2015 or even 2016. In any case, such negotiations are likely to drag for years, while fighting simultaneously goes on. Meanwhile, 2014 and 2015 have a high chance of being very bloody years in Afghanistan as the Taliban tests the mettle of ANSF. Some sustained U.S. and Western presence in Afghanistan would critically stiffen ANSF's spine, as well as increase confidence in sustained U.S. funding and other assistance. Moreover, should a negotiated deal be struck, both sides, and particularly the Taliban, may have strong incentives to violate it; thus the presence of an impartial enforcer, such as a sufficiently robust U.N. force, would be desirable. Nonetheless, it is very unlikely that the international community will have an appetite for fielding such a force, conceiving of the deal instead a justification for further reductions in its involvement in Afghanistan. Thus, enforcement of any deal will most likely

have to depend on the capacity of ANSF.

Economic Downturn and Instability

The political and security transition uncertainties have already had a pronounced effect on Afghanistan's fragile economy. While general economic woes and a major shrinkage of Afghan gross domestic product (GDP) after 2014 have been anticipated, the 2013 economic performance turned out worse than expected. According to the World Bank, Afghan economic growth will contract by over 10% and is expected to reach only 3.1% in 2013 and 3.5% in 2014, down from 14.4% in 2012.⁸ Moreover, much of Afghanistan's economic growth has been tied to international aid and security spending. The economic downturn was also caused by the inability of the government to improve tax and customs collection, reduce massive corruption and diversions of both aid and public finance, and prevent capital flight. President Karzai's promise at a July 2012 donors' conference in Tokyo to increase tax revenues from 5% to 15% remains unkept.

Equally unfulfilled was the promise that the country's mineral wealth would generate revenue to wean Afghanistan off dependence on foreign aid and on illegal opium poppy for income generation, economic growth, and human development. A key mining law has been on hold for over a year. Although Chinese investors bought a number of mining licenses, including most prominently the Aynak Copper Mine concession for \$3 billion, no production has started or is likely to start soon. Much to the frustration of the Afghan government and the international community, Chinese officials cite the lack of security, debilitating corruption, and lawlessness as reasons for delaying the actual mining.⁹ A lesser, but symbolically important oil project in northern Afghanistan is also suspended. Legal agricultural production declined in 2013, even as the opium poppy industry continues to thrive. Expected to expand in 2014 and 2015 as its structural drivers remain unaddressed, opium poppy cultivation continues to provide an economic lifeline for large segments of the population and underpins much of the country's economic growth.

Other uncertainties surround the post-2014 economic aid long promised to Afghanistan. Some members of the U.S. Congress have argued that such aid hinges on whether a BSA is signed or not. Already in early 2014, the U.S. Congress allocated just \$1.1 billion in U.S. civilian assistance to Afghanistan, only 50% of what the Obama administration has originally sought. The difficult security environment also means that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will be increasingly unable to monitor its economic projects in Afghanistan. Despite the hopes and promises of an economic dividend following ISAF force reduction after 2014, Afghanistan's economic outlook remains challenging.

The causal relationship between instability and economic downturn, of course, also runs the other way. The lack of job opportunities delegitimizes the Afghan government and increases prospects for instability. With half of Afghanistan population under thirty, the risks of instability are further augmented. Also, as a consequence of the departure of Western forces and likely many Western NGOs, tens of thousands of jobs employing the Afghan young as translators, cooks, drivers, cultural advisors, and local liaisons, will evaporate. Many of Afghanistan's now educated and far more urban youth will struggle to find employment. The still primarily rural Taliban may hold little appeal for them, but it is conceivable that other Islamist movements, perhaps akin to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, will eventually come to vie for their allegiance or that they will simply come to oppose the political system and the established powerbrokers through strikes and protests. Educated, pro-Western, and impressive young Afghan civil society members located primarily in Kabul exhibited great dynamism during 2013 and they too will seek to mobilize the dissatisfied urban youth. To the extent that the Westernized reformers manage to harness the energy of the alienated young Afghans, they might acquire great influence and be able to launch crucial reforms to stabilize the country. But such an outcome is hardly guaranteed as traditional powerbrokers and their sons continue to dominate Afghan politics, and, particularly, if Western support for Afghanistan's civil society after 2014 wanes as a result of diverted attention or donor exhaustion and negligence.

The Inescapable Regional Geopolitics

The remit of this paper is to focus on Afghanistan's internal security and political dynamics in 2014 and early post-2014 future. They are, of course, inextricably linked to the regional security environment; and Afghanistan's neighbors and regional powers greatly influence the country's internal dynamics in all key realms, including the economic sphere. This paper will make only a few framing observations, without being able to provide extensive nuance and details on the most recent developments.

Visions of a New Silk Road notwithstanding, Afghanistan's external environment is hardly auspicious. Although all of Afghanistan's neighbors, including arguably Pakistan, do not wish to see Afghanistan disintegrate into a civil war and do not enjoy the prospect of continuing insecurity, a regional framework for Afghanistan's security and neutrality remains elusive.

Despite pressure from the United States and the West, Pakistan continues to sponsor – and hold on a leash – various of the insurgent factions, including the Taliban and the Haqqanis. The greater the prospect for instability after 2014, the more reluctant will Pakistan be to relinquish whatever levers on the Afghan insurgents it has. More immediately, should a deal between the Pakistani government and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) be struck in early 2014 and a discussed offensive by the Pakistani military into North Waziristan again not take place, the Pakistani military may be highly disinclined to tighten the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Afghan presidential elections. The military might be wary of alienating the TTP and jeopardizing a deal, even though Afghan and Pakistani militant violence would undermine the conduct and legitimacy of the elections. Despite recent rapprochement overtures from Islamabad, Pakistan still views India as its principal enemy and views Afghanistan through the lens of its competition with India, fearing a pro-India government in power in Kabul.

India for its part fears the return of the Taliban or a Taliban capacity to sponsor anti-India attacks and provide safe-havens to salafi groups

in Afghanistan. Unpersuaded about Afghanistan's post-2014 stability, it resents that the United States, so as not to provoke Pakistan, has assiduously tried to restrain India's security and intelligence activities in Afghanistan and modulate India's engagement in the country.¹⁰ Russia, Iran, and China share many of India's security objectives and concerns about a post-2014 Afghanistan, though their involvement varies. Also anxious about the security of its economic investments in Afghanistan, China has provided limited economic assistance, refusing to become directly militarily involved. Iran has also been hedging its bets – including to counter U.S. military presence and prevent a post-2014 U.S. military role in the country – by cultivating Afghan politicians and the Arg Place through financial payoffs and other means of influence and also by reaching out to the Taliban to some extent. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have had extensive and multifaceted engagement with the Taliban, including trying to induce the group to negotiate.

Deeply ambivalent about U.S. intentions in Afghanistan and displeased by the prospect of U.S. long-term bases there, Russia nonetheless considers a limited U.S. post-2014 presence preferable to the instability it fears would break out in Afghanistan without the BSA and a U.S. presence. Yet Russia may also contribute to Afghanistan's instability by cajoling the next Afghan government into aggressive eradication of opium poppy. Moscow identifies heroin flows from Afghanistan as a key source of Russia's drug epidemic, which is compounding its demographic crisis. The Russian government continues to be wedded to the notion that the drug abuse and associated spread of contagious diseases can be contained through poppy suppression in Afghanistan. Thus, as the prospect of legal agricultural growth, rural development, and other forms of alternative livelihoods decreasing the size of Afghanistan's drug trade remain elusive, Russia's pressure on Afghanistan to undertake intense eradication will likely grow. In the absence of alternative livelihoods, eradication, however, will only impoverish and alienate Afghan farmers, throw them into the hands of the Taliban opposing eradication, delegitimize the Afghan government, and intensify instability and the insurgency.

What a Collapse Could Look Like: Civil War, Coup, or Assassination?

If the current political order and security arrangements cannot be sustained and infighting or civil war do break out, it will become irresistible for outside actors, including Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia, the Central Asian countries, Saudi Arabia and China, to once again cultivate their favored proxies to prosecute at least their minimal objectives in Afghanistan and the region. Because of its counterterrorism and other concerns, the United States is also unlikely to refrain from sponsoring and supporting its own favored groups among the warring Afghans, even if through indirect means. Whether direct or indirect, U.S. involvement on the Afghan battlefield will intensify the conflict dynamics in some areas and perhaps reinforce some of the pockets of security elsewhere. And in turn, the outsiders' rivalries in Afghanistan will spill beyond that country and intensify their competition in other territories and functional domains.

The odds are low that a post-2014 conflict will approximate a neatly delineated war between clearly defined groups along crisply-drawn lines on the map. Unlike in the mid- and late 1990s, when the Taliban was steadily pushing its way from the south, there is unlikely to be an easily recognizable zone of battle moving north past the Shomali Plain and across the Hindu Kush. Nor will the conflict quickly escalate to the level of killing that Afghanistan experienced from the late 1970s through the 1990s. [In 1978 an estimated 40,000 Afghans were killed, followed by 80,000 in 1979. By 1987, between 1 million and 1.5 million Afghans, or about 9 percent of the population, had died in the war.¹¹ Deaths due to disease and starvation were also high among Afghan refugees. In comparison, between several thousand and 20,000 Afghans are believed to have died in 2001 as a result of the U.S. intervention.¹²]

In the case of a post-2014 civil war, the fighting can be expected to be highly localized and complex. Some locations, including perhaps in the surge areas of the south, may well remain isolated security pockets as a result of strong ANSF presence and, perhaps, sufficiently effective governance. Other places, such as the province of Balkh and most of the province Herat, also

have a chance of remaining rather stable and experiencing little fighting since key local government officials or power brokers have these areas firmly in their grip. Elsewhere, such as in parts of Kandahar and in Nangarhar, the contest may be as much between the Taliban and the Afghan National Security Forces as among various Durrani Pashtun powerbrokers linked to the Afghan government. There may also be fighting among the “new warlords” and powerbrokers who have emerged in that region over the past decade by providing services to the international community. Parts of the north, including Kunduz and Baghlan, have a high chance of blowing up into vicious ethnic conflicts. So does Ghazni in the center. Kabul would likely be among the last places to succumb to any future civil war; but if it does, the bloodbath is less likely to come from the capital being shelled from the outside, like during the 1990s, but rather from fierce street fighting. Rightly or not, many Pashtuns in Kabul feel that they were dispossessed of their land there by the influx of Tajiks after 2002, and many are poised to settle the score. A splintering of the ANSF would rapidly fan such civil war fires, with the Afghan National Police, Afghan Local Police, and other militias being the first to fall apart and start supporting rival powerbrokers.

One big question is, can whatever pockets of security, micro-deals, and micro-accommodations that might exist in such a future scenario remain sufficiently insulated from external fighting and contestation elsewhere in the country? At least some locales will be highly vulnerable to security problems leaking in from the outside. Since many patronage networks run throughout the country, there may well be only a few communities and areas in Afghanistan able to avoid being drawn into surrounding conflicts. Much will depend not only on the quality and robustness of the security forces in the areas—whether the ANSF, the ALP, or warlords’ militias—but also on the quality and robustness of local governance.

But there is also the possibility of a military coup after 2014, not a rare phenomenon in South Asia. Even with all its outstanding problems, the Afghan National Army will be the most trained institution in Afghanistan. One coup scenario could feature a revolt by the increasingly professional mid-level commanders whose promotions are frustrated by their politicized

bosses. Another possibility is that Afghan National Army commanders, or at least commanders of a particular ethnic faction within it, may well consider military rule preferable to a civil war. Given how extremely dissatisfied with the current political system many Afghans are, overwhelmingly seeing it as an exclusionary mafia rule, they may even welcome a coup. Already, calls for a strongman rule are not infrequent in Afghanistan. But the different groups at odds with each other—Ghilzai Pashtuns, Durrani Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—and the many subgroups under these broad categories are hardly likely to agree on who that strongman should be.

President Karzai is likely conscious of the coup specter at least to some extent. For a long time his relationship with the Afghan National Security Forces was at arm's length at best, despite the fact that at other times he has fired various ANSF leaders in order to break up their patronage networks and has appointed new leaders more likely to be loyal to him, or at least without the same level of independent power. The summer 2012 reshuffle of key cabinet security and intelligence posts was yet another example of his approach to controlling the ANSF. Rather than trying to develop his own strong and direct control over the Afghan National Security Forces, he has—typically—preferred to operate by dividing and co-opting his potential political rivals within the ANSF. However, in his BSA tactical maneuvers and power plays, he might have lost track of the fact that his unwillingness to sign the BSA and the prospect of a total U.S. military departure from Afghanistan threatens not only many Afghan elites and powerbrokers as well as ordinary people, but also the Afghan military. If political negotiations among presidential contenders and Afghan powerbrokers and vote recounts delay the formation of Afghan government and U.S. departure from Afghanistan seems imminent, Karzai's continued recalcitrance to sign the BSA may trigger a coup or an assassination. But should such a scenario materialize, would all political support for a sustained Western military presence in Afghanistan evaporate? Or would the United States and allied countries try to redefine such developments in a way similar to their handling of the military coup in Egypt?

Conclusion

So what the battlefield would look like in 2015 and after remains very much undetermined. The zero option of no U.S. and potentially other Western troops in Afghanistan is more alive than ever, even as many uncertainties about Afghanistan's capacity to maintain stability and hold off the Taliban and civil war remain. Clearly, the economic outlook will remain troubled for years to come. A 2014 presidential election that despite its imperfections is seen as broadly acceptable to the Afghan people would inject confidence into the country's citizens and strengthen support among the international community. Similarly, an agreed BSA between Afghanistan and the U.S. and a continued, albeit limited, presence of international forces after 2014 would help assuage and manage the fears, uncertainties, hedging, and fissiparous tendencies on the rise in Afghanistan. Neither a BSA nor an international presence will resolve the misgovernance that has characterized Afghanistan over the past decade, but they can provide an enabling environment for improving it. And they would also provide a much better platform for negotiating with the Taliban.

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- ¹ Afghan Ministry of Interior data cited in Associated Press, 'Fighting Alone, Afghans Said to Hold Taliban Back,' 3 November, 2013.
- ² Afghan Ministry of Interior data cited in Frud Bezhan, 'Afghan Security Forces Pass First Test, But Questions Remain,' Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 2 November, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan-security-forces-feature/25155931.html>.
- ³ Author's interviews with U.S. State and Defense Department officials involved in the negotiations, Kabul, July 2013, and Washington, D.C., September and October 2013.
- ⁴ See, for example, Rhodes, Ben, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications, '2014 Foreign Policy Priorities for the Obama Administration,' The Washington Foreign Press Center, Washington DC, 29 January, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/01/20140130291890.html#axzz2sZvPb9qd>.
- ⁵ Author's interviews with Afghan national and local politicians, Afghanistan, July 2013.
- ⁶ Author's interviews with northern Afghan politicians, Kabul, July 2013.
- ⁷ Ahmed, A., and Rosenberg, M., 'Karzai Arranged Secret Contacts with the Taliban,' New York Times, 3 February, 2014.
- ⁸ World Bank, 'South Asia Economic Focus: Turmoil in Global Capital Markets is a Wake-Up Call for South Asia, World Bank Says,' Press Release, October 9, 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/10/09/south-asia-economic-focus-turmoil-capital-markets-world-bank>.
- ⁹ Author's interviews with Chinese officials, Beijing, October 2013.
- ¹⁰ Author's interviews with Indian government officials, Washington, DC, Spring 2013.
- ¹¹ These numbers are drawn from Ryan Evans, 'The Once and Future Civil War in Afghanistan,' Foreign Policy.com, 26 July, 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/26/the_once_and_future_civil_war_in_afghanistan.
- ¹² Ibid.