

Theses on peacemaking in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

What are the possibilities for negotiating a mutually acceptable end-state in Afghanistan among the multiplicity of domestic and foreign interests involved?

Challenges to stability in Afghanistan start from disagreement over delineation of the territory's boundaries. The Afghan state is reliant on external revenue to survive, but conflicting foreign interests mean that the provision of assistance is not seen as an objective public good but rather as partial and destabilising. While the withdrawal of foreign troops brings with it the threat of state collapse, at the same time the possibility of permanent foreign military presence risks provoking regional backlash.

Within Afghanistan, political legitimacy is contested: Pashtuns see themselves as a dispossessed majority; tribal legitimacy is dwindling; and Islamic legitimacy is overlaid with identity politics linked to different solidarity groups.

Combatants have largely rejected possibilities for peacemaking to deliver mutual gains through a win-win outcome, and so have sought to establish their military ascendancy in order to strengthen their bargaining positions. However, no party has been able to establish a sufficiently strong and sustainable status to guarantee success in negotiation, so the temptation to postpone talks indefinitely has prevailed.

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world
in various ways; the point is to change it*

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

Either he's dead or my watch has stopped!

Groucho Marx, *A Day at the Races*

Great powers currently articulate two interests that justify the allocation of resources to the stabilisation of Afghanistan:

1. Preventing international terrorist groups from establishing secure bases there.
2. Promoting the economic rise of continental and South Asia driven by the growth of China and India: 1) at least, by preventing instability in Afghanistan from threatening investments in the surrounding areas; and 2) at best, by integrating Afghanistan into those economic networks.

The most effective way to realise both of these objectives is building and sustaining an effective state in Afghanistan, which begs the questions of who is to do it and who is to pay for it?

Principles of stabilisation

The international community defines Afghanistan as the territory within the boundaries demarcated by the British and Russian empires, including through the Treaty of Gandamak of 1879 and the Durand Treaty of 1893, and as ratified in the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1901. But no Afghan government has accepted these boundaries as legitimate since the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

No ruler or government has been able to build and sustain a state within this territory solely on the basis of domestic resources. This territory has been ruled in one of three ways:

1. By empires based outside Afghanistan, which transferred resources to a local administration that lacked sovereignty – Mughals, Safavids, Shaybanids and British India.
2. By empires based in Afghanistan that extracted resources from other areas by conquest (Durranis).
3. By financial or direct military assistance from one or several foreign powers to an internationally recognised, juridically sovereign state in Afghanistan.

In principle Afghanistan could sustain a stable state funded primarily by domestic revenue if its economy produced

a surplus sufficient to finance a security establishment capable of withstanding external threats, and a government and administration with sufficient legitimacy and capacity to control internal threats.

External priorities: whose stability?

Under present economic and political realities, establishing even an unstable state in Afghanistan requires the involvement of foreign powers as aid donors and direct security providers.

Changing that economic reality in a landlocked state requires economic cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbours. Such cooperation is possible only if the political reality changes.

The presence of foreign donors or security providers, as well as economic cooperation with one or more neighbours, has the potential to threaten other powers. While the stabilisation of Afghanistan is a partial public good for the international community, the political and military means to establish such stability may pose a threat by providing a base for forces perceived as hostile. This is an example of the general phenomenon of rent seeking in the provision of public goods. Both the Soviet and US governments believed they intended to stabilise Afghanistan, but their rivals and adversaries perceived their efforts as more or less threatening, even when, as is currently the case, those neighbours also benefit from the limits to instability imposed by the American presence.

Given Afghanistan's economic and demographic profile – a population that is both poor and young – as well as its linguistic, religious, ethnic, and economic links to the populations of the neighbouring countries, virtually any neighbour of Afghanistan has the capacity to destabilise the country by offering selective benefits to client groups. Most cultivate such clients to one extent or another to hedge against consolidation of stability by a power they perceive as posing a long-term threat.

Therefore, the stabilisation of Afghanistan through any combination of a foreign military presence or assistance, foreign economic assistance, or economic development requires that no neighbour of Afghanistan perceives the constellation of forces there as hostile. In the current case, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China all want the US to stay for now but oppose an indefinite presence, which might be used against them.

Regional connectivity

The growth of China and India has led to the rapid development of connectivity projects in the regions around Afghanistan. Linking Afghanistan to these networks is the

sole way to reduce dependence on foreign assistance in favour of economic development. Connectivity, however, like stabilisation, produces partial public goods that can disproportionately benefit the producer.

China claims that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, aims at win-win cooperation for all. India and the United States, however see it as a predatory power grab and are sponsoring separate connectivity projects while contemplating alternative alliances to balance emerging China. This response threatens a new Cold War in Asia, with China and Pakistan opposing India, the US, Japan and Australia, as the Trump National Security Strategy advocates.

Regional cooperation that will help stabilise Afghanistan would require a truce between BRI and US-India projects such as the quadrilateral framework with Japan and Australia and the India-Iran-Afghanistan-Japan project to develop the Iranian port of Chabahar. Afghanistan could constitute one of the links between the two networks. Conflicts between the sponsors of the two networks would threaten Afghanistan's connection to international markets.

Foreign troops

Stabilisation of Afghanistan would also require either the withdrawal of all foreign troops, as the Taliban demands, or agreement by all relevant powers to the terms of reference of a foreign military presence that poses a threat to no one. Withdrawal presents the threat of collapse, while permanent bases stimulate regional backlash.

Among the proposals to resolve this dilemma have been: Russia's proposal to neutralise Afghanistan; China's suggestion to replace NATO'S Operation Resolute Support with a UN peacekeeping force mandated by the Security Council; Pakistan's proposal to limit or eliminate the Indian presence and partially integrate the Afghan and Pakistan security forces through joint training; and the US plan to implement its Bilateral Security Agreement with Afghanistan in such a way as to induce all neighbouring states to bandwagon with the Americans, rather than balancing against it. None of these options seem desirable or feasible at present, but all try to solve the security dilemma presented by the presence of foreign military forces.

Internal legitimacy: whose peace?

Domestic legitimacy faces a difficult conundrum. Pashtuns generally consider Afghanistan to be their state, founded and ruled by Pashtun tribes under a variety of legitimisation formulas. As they do not accept the legitimacy of the loss of

Afghan territory in 1893, they also do not accept the legitimacy of Pashtuns being outnumbered by others in their own state; if all 'Afghans' were ruled by their rightful state, Pashtuns would be a decisive majority.

“ **The state lacks any institutional way to determine the electoral outcome in a manner credible to the bulk of the population. Hence every election is contested.**”

Tribal legitimacy, as in the days of Saddozai or Muhammadzai rule, has lost normative appeal domestically and internationally, though it continues to structure the actions of groups seeking power, as it has since the time of the 14th century Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun. Islamic legitimacy is essential for any government, but there is little support for clerical rule, which can never be rule by an abstract *ulema*, but must always be rule by a particular solidarity group of *ulema*. Such groups, like the Taliban, may claim religious legitimacy but like other aspiring elites use foreign and domestic patronage and ethnic appeals to operate.

Democracy

The election of a president by direct universal suffrage attempts to arbitrate that choice of a ruler through a neutral process, but, in the absence of agreed demographic data or an administration with a minimum of impartiality, ballot box stuffing becomes an imperative. The state lacks any institutional way to determine the electoral outcome in a manner credible to the bulk of the population. Hence every election is contested.

Democracy based on one person, one vote has some normative appeal but is nearly impossible to implement in a manner acceptable for all, since how many people are eligible to vote and the accuracy of the vote count are both contested. The 2001 Bonn Agreement, the 2004 constitution, and the National Unity Government (2014–) all tried to resolve this dilemma of legitimacy one way or another, but those agreements are eroding rapidly.

Possibilities for peacemaking

The credibility of any negotiation is undermined by the difficulty of defining or even imagining an end state that would meet the minimal needs and demands of such a large number of actors – the US, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, India, Afghan urban westernised elites, Pashtun nationalists, Afghan Islamists, and non-Pashtun ethnic

leaders, for starters. Each actor tends to believe that its adversaries have no feasible proposal and are merely using talks to buy time. The temptation is to imagine that one's adversary is a phantom totally controlled by a foreign power with which one can negotiate.

Given the dependence of all Afghan actors on external assistance, it is impossible for them to reach agreement if their patrons oppose it. Therefore, the starting point must be to build sufficient international consensus as a basis for any negotiation and devise a mechanism to make a credible commitment to sustain the state into the future.

The Afghan government approach of relying on US power to force change on its neighbours risks a backlash from the Pakistan-Russia-Iran-China alignment. The Moscow

format aims at creating a regional consensus that has the disadvantage of being led by Russia, whose bilateral relations with the US make it unacceptable to the biggest actor on the scene. China's approach of simultaneously trying to work out from Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and seeking universal buy-in to the BRI, in particular by India, clashes with the US National Security Strategy.

The main combatants in the conflict do not see any possibility of joint gains from a win-win outcome. Hence they insist on bargaining only from a position of strength. But no position can be strong and permanent enough to guarantee success in negotiation, so the temptation to postpone indefinitely nearly always wins out. Irrational optimism is the common delusion of combatants, for which non-combatants pay a disproportionate price.