



Afghanistan's Future: Foreign and Local Solutions for a Fought-Over Country

Alain Hanssen

In this policy brief, Alain Hanssen looks at Afghanistan's future through different national and international lenses.

In the aftermath of the international conference in Bonn and during a time when peace talks have seemed about to start for ages, it is useful to summarise various governments' views about their preferred political future for a state that in recent years has mobilised enormous amounts of energy and motivated numerous speeches, seminars, conferences, development programmes, and – of course – military interventions. Even if it is primarily for the Afghans themselves to make peace with each other, neighbouring countries also have a major influence on events there. It is important to stress that their country has long been the focus of competition between major and lesser powers. In the tradition of the Great Game between the UK and Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other countries have also come to reveal a series of hegemonic ambitions in regard to Afghanistan. These include the competition between India and Pakistan and the reciprocal demonization of the US and Iran, at least during the G.W. Bush administration.

A Switzerland in the Shadow of the Hindu Kush

From the Western perspective, and particularly from that of its most accomplished and humanistic version, which I call *our Scandinavian utopia*, the goal is a modernised Afghanistan that is at peace, democratised, and decriminalised. Its purpose is apparently to erase forever from our TV screens the horrible images of the country under Taliban rule, with its brutal theocracy, its unprecedented violence, its summary justice, and its reducing of women and children to the status of merchandise.

Westerners, especially those in Protestant countries, tend to feel that they have a mission. They strongly support anything that can move Afghanistan towards modernity, such as building democratic institutions, establishing such credible political counterbalances as a parliament, independent media, and NGOs, achieving administrative and political decentralisation, making a huge effort in regard to education and training, and establishing the infrastructure that will allow all this to work. They also tend to imagine that they can ward off poverty, the isolation of the valleys, and the ubiquitous poppy, that they can help bring about a bright and pluralistic

future coloured with saffron, pistachio, and pomegranate, and bring the country back into having a legitimate economy. The objectives are, however, somewhat different on each side of the Atlantic.

Erase the Humiliation of 9/11

For the power that decided in 2001 to engage in armed action in Afghanistan in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden, his death in 2011 significantly reduces its reasons for maintaining a massive presence there. It is impossible, furthermore, to accept the mere hypothesis that sanctuaries of international terrorism are likely to flourish again in Afghanistan, where the US has during the past 10 years lost 1,500 soldiers and spent nearly half a trillion dollars. Most of the other powers also have the same interests. This leads them to moderate their criticism of the US, which is likely to provide from four to five military bases, including Bagram, vigorous intelligence work, and regular policing of the country.

The US has, however, a wider regional interest in maintaining military bases in Afghanistan, albeit ones that are temporary – as are those it established in Korea six decades ago. They provide a powerful capability for the surveillance of Pakistan, Iran, and India, three countries where it has long been politically impossible for the US to consider having a military presence.

President Obama's speech of 22 June 2011 announcing the military withdrawal made no reference to the armies of American agronomists and teachers who a year earlier were going to come to Afghanistan to help develop it. The US budget deficit is widening. Generous and visionary policies aimed at winning people's hearts and minds have yet to produce even a fraction of the expected results. The current goals are therefore more modest and more immediately related to the national interest.

The evolution on our side of the Atlantic is similar. Given the disappointing results on the ground despite all the money spent, all the brains engaged, and all the human lives offered, the so-called Helvetic paradise in the shadow of the Hindu Kush about which the leaders in some of the capitals in northern Europe dreamed has gradually become downgraded in their planning towards what might be called a Bosnian minimum, or merely an honourable exit from the conflict. Europeans would now tend to be delighted if by 2014 they could expect an Afghan state that is relatively functional, is without major terrorist exports or secessionist movements, that does not deny women's rights and human rights in general too dramatically, that no longer needs a permanent and massive Western presence, and that contains the most extreme forms of local socio-religious conservatism – mostly Pashtun – within acceptable limits.

The Europeans, even the British, are all in trouble after 10 years of conflict into which the US dragged most of them with forced solidarity. They now wish to reduce their military presence in Afghanistan and replace it with one of support, training, and development assistance. Northern Europe will probably retain such a support presence significantly. The Scandinavians, for example, are likely to continue to address human rights, the Germans to train the police, and the British to support governance and institution-building.

Pakistan is too Close

With its conflict-centred relationship with India dominating its perspective, the Pakistani government continues to view Afghanistan as a provider of strategic depth. Indeed, Pakistan's territory is so narrow in its North that invaders from the east could cross it completely in just one day. Its government therefore perceives a need for a fallback area and considers it to be important to do

everything it can to ensure that the government in Kabul is both weak and an ally.

In addition to this geostrategic imperative, a bit outdated in my view, no Afghan government has recognised – or is likely to recognise soon – the Durand Line that separates the two countries, as it divides the traditional territory of the Pashtuns, Afghanistan's dominant ethnic group, and which traditionally provides its head of state. It also unacceptably carves up the original seventeenth-century Afghan kingdom.

The Pakistani government has found it necessary since 2008 to intervene militarily against the *Pakistani* Taliban, because a group that took this name began to challenge and harass it. This did not, however, fundamentally change the major political realities. During the 1980s the Pakistani intelligence services had, with the support of their American colleagues, encouraged the establishment of what became the *Afghan* Taliban. It should be noted that this national adjective designates the area of military activity and not the nationality of individual fighters. Since then they have continued to provide them with financial and material support. The unwritten rule that the Afghan Taliban does not need to worry about the Pakistani army as long as its terrorist activities remain an export product with only Afghan targets is apparently still in force.

Pakistan's general staff is currently worried about losing its control of Afghanistan and about the US and India acquiring what in its view is too much influence there. Before supporting reconciliation in Afghanistan it set conditions reminiscent of the Syrian government's recent policies toward Lebanon. They have, for example, recently attempted unsuccessfully to impose a complete reversal of alliances on the Afghan government, in which Afghanistan would have quickly closed all US bases, ended its cooperation with India, and joined a Sino-Pakistani alliance.

India: Hegemony, Trade, Stability

India is one of the strongest allies of Afghanistan's current president and his closest aides, who are mostly Tajik. India used to support Commander Massoud, and more generally supports the so-called Northern Alliance, and continues to develop its economic ties with Afghanistan, to offer its citizens large numbers of scholarships, to help diversify its sources of access to the ocean, and to reduce its dependence on Pakistan for imports.

From an Indian perspective the most desirable future for Afghanistan would be that of a country that is at peace, is a good customer, maintains its alliance with India, eliminates or at least greatly weakens the Taliban, keeps the Pashtun and Baluchis in some sort of rebellion against Pakistan and out of Islamabad's control, and generally serves as a reliable counterweight to Pakistan. The anti-India terrorist group Lashkar-e-Toiba, originally an almost exclusively Kashmiri phenomenon, today has cells in each of India's neighbouring countries and is growing at an alarming rate in Bangladesh. It is now reasonable to assume that the 2008 attacks on Mumbai may have indeed had the goal that the Indian authorities described immediately afterward, that of damaging the city's and country's embarrassing success compared to the failure and poverty that dominate the situation 800 km up the coast of the Arabian Sea.

The Indian government also wants an Afghanistan in which Islam is not too radical or internationalist, as except for the phenomenon of Naxalites Islamic radicalism is the main source of instability in the Indian federation. India is the cradle of Deobandi Islam, and views with great concern the development that some of its Muslim citizens in Rajasthan, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh are gradually falling under the influence of Salafist groups.

India's appeasement policy toward Afghanistan

and its trade priority in regard to it, conducted by the state that represents stability and democracy on the subcontinent, have many similarities to that of the West, which consequently sympathises with it. These policies have, however, a significant downside. If Afghanistan rather than Kashmir were to become confirmed as the main theatre for Indo-Pakistani rivalry it would increase Islamabad's anti-Indian hysteria and reinforce its feelings of encirclement. This explains why the Indian government has always prudently refused to get involved in the NATO-coordinated International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) military effort. It is also perhaps what led it to announce in May 2011 that it no longer opposed the reconciliation process, and therefore some form of return to power for the Taliban.

China avoids involvement in Afghanistan other than through the logical consequences of the alliances mentioned earlier. It supports Pakistan against India, but only tepidly, as it wants to discourage Islamic fundamentalism, which could galvanise its own Uighur rebels. It also definitely wants to avoid allowing Pakistan to force it into a nuclear confrontation with India. It criticises Western involvement in Afghanistan and the presence of US bases there, but not too much, as instability on its western Marches is not in its interest and it wants to import increasing quantities of the country's raw materials. Chinese engineers and workers are already working in several Afghan mines.

Saudi Arabia Defends Conservatism and the Sunnis

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) remains one of the main players in the Afghan theatre. Other than Pakistan, which invented it, the kingdom was the only state that recognised the Taliban regime, and since the US toppled the Taliban in 2001 its financial support has continued to come from the KSA.

From the Saudi perspective, the Taliban, as a

Sunni organisation in a country divided between the two main Muslim denominations and as the country's spearhead of political and religious conservatism, needs to play an important role in Afghanistan's future. Its Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which the West derided when the Taliban established it while in power, continues to function today in the KSA, with similar objectives although less brutal methods.

The KSA has, furthermore, long been a strong advocate of Afghan reconciliation, an idea that the West has also recently started to promote. It has viewed the political elimination of the Taliban that the West has sought to be contrary to its interests, as that would increase the influence of its Shi'ite rival Iran and facilitate the rise of Sufism and other unorthodox sects in South Asia.

Russia Fears Terrorism and Heroin

Russia needs a buffer zone between its Marches in Central Asia and the Middle East. Its main objective in regard to Afghanistan is to contain the potential sources of contagion that could spread terrorism into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and from there into the North Caucasus. Its preferred future scenario is for NATO to stabilise the country and the US to withdraw its bases quickly from Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its second choice would be for the conflict to become bogged down and for the West to remain in place, keeping the lid on the Islamists and violent drug traffickers.

This second scenario would also have the advantage of satisfying its prophecy that NATO would be unable to pacify Afghanistan with only half the troops that the Soviet Union and its allies had there. The Russian leadership also knows, however, that international politics is no longer a zero-sum game and that it has become too risky to celebrate their competitors' misfortunes. Russia would have much to lose if the ISAF failed completely, so its top leadership has silenced those members

of its military and political elites criticising it. Russia's collaboration with the ISAF, however, is neither enthusiastic nor devoid of ulterior motives, but it does at least collaborate in the transit of supplies through its territory.

Like India and unlike Pakistan and China, the Russian government is sceptical and suspicious about the possibility of reconciliation with the Taliban. It considers that its possible participation in peace talks would be only a tactical manoeuvre, and that its ultimate goal is still to overthrow the current government.

Russia's other major concern is to contain the trafficking of heroin from Afghanistan. Russia's consumption of Afghan heroin, estimated to be 70 tons per year, compared to 88 tons in the rest of Europe combined, has become a national scourge. Its government would like the Afghan government's efforts to combat drug trafficking to be more effective and to be one of the tasks included in the ISAF mandate. This position brings the country into a position similar to Iran's, another major victim of the flow of heroin exported from its eastern neighbour.

Iran: A Game of Balancing

The Iranian leadership's objectives in Afghanistan are complex. It maintains Iran's traditionally close linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties with the Tajiks, especially the Hazaras. Iranian influence being strong mainly in Afghanistan's North and West brings it naturally into competition with the Taliban, Pashtun, and – violently – with anti-Shiite elements as well. A Taliban massacre of Iranian diplomats and Hazara people led both countries to the brink of war in 1998. Like Russia, Iran is funding many northern initiatives, creating relatively durable political coalitions, media groups, MP lobbies, and *shuras* of all kinds.

At the same time, however, the Revolutionary Guard Corps also provides the Taliban with moderate support, as Iran's leadership considers

it to be in its interest to help maintain the Afghan conflict in order to ensure having a means of pressurizing the US. In the event of armed conflict with the Americans the Taliban would become automatic allies. The Iranians also doubt the influence and the sustainability of the government of President Karzai, their nominal ally, and need to maintain some working understanding with the local Taliban, especially in their struggle against massive immigration from Afghanistan, against their own Baluchi rebels, and against the heroin trade.

Afghan Opinions

The Taliban has organised or preserved a parallel administration in much of Afghanistan that after dark more often than not has greater authority than the one in Kabul, with shadow governors in all of the provinces and most of the districts. It has also freely distributed effective and terrifying threats called *night letters*.

Socio-politically, it openly wants to return Mullah Omar, the Emir of the Faithful, to a guardian tutelary role supervising Afghanistan's state activities. Its platform is moral rather than managerial. It hardly bothered to administer the country when it ran it alone from 1996 to 2001, so it is unlikely that it would suddenly become concerned with administration.

If it were to join the government it would probably claim one or two of such symbolic portfolios as justice or holy pilgrimage and use these to defend its principles, something that most southern Afghans would probably prefer to the current government's corruption and inefficiency. It would do everything it could to prohibit girls from going to school, clinics, or work outside the home. It would work to slow down Westernisation and modernisation, and probably be most successful at this in its Pashtun stronghold, especially in rural areas. It would maintain its strong moral conservatism,

advocating a somewhat theocratic purification of society, a return to the mythic historical values of the Qur'an, and the application of the Pashtun code of honour, the *Pashtunwali*. It would work to end the promotion of human rights, freedom of the press, and democratic and electoral parliamentarianism as sources of impiety.

It is likely that with the test of power and frequent interaction with more cosmopolitan politicians the more moderate among the Taliban's members would take control of it. It is also likely that, having had its fingers burnt, the Taliban will roughly fulfil its current commitment not to support transnational terrorism again. They will not support or provide shelter for international terrorist networks but in exceptional and sporadic circumstances.

In regard to the intractable controversy about the constitution, it is conceivable that the Taliban would tolerate the present one as long as the government does not actually enforce its articles addressing human rights. It might also permit the maintenance of some US bases, as many of the people in the North prefer, on the condition that they function with great discretion and outside Pashtun territory.

Most analysts, however, consider the Taliban to have little or no sincere interest in *participating* in power. It would, as with the communists and fascists in the early twentieth century, enter into a coalition exclusively with the hope of soon supplanting the other members and taking complete power.

The very prospect of reconciliation talks has made the ethnic groups that form the majority of the population in northern and central Afghanistan, which are the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras, extremely nervous. They have much to lose should foreign troops leave. The massive foreign presence currently allows them to

dominate the army and, to a large extent, the government, and also to maintain a certain pace of social progress. They know that they would lose much influence in the governing structures if the Pashtuns, who are more ferocious warriors, and among them the Taliban, who are more efficient ideologues, were once again to guide the country.

The warlords of today, Taliban and otherwise, will almost undoubtedly continue to dominate their valleys and do so to an even greater extent once most of the foreign troops have left, justifying this by citing the corruption and various moral perversions that have characterised the central government in Kabul.

To complete this picture of Afghanistan's prospects it would be helpful to describe some sort of detalibanised Pashtun perspective, but even the most expert observers find this to be extremely difficult to envision. The Taliban physically eliminated the maliks and other traditional leaders who did not show allegiance to them. The president's family network, bringing together the Durrani subtribe – and especially the Populzaï clan, today the country's foremost economic operator after the ISAF – is robust. It is likely, however, that only its relocated branches in Dubai and the US will survive the current president, and little alternative leadership is available.

Pending a Pashtun reconfiguration following the departure or death of President Karzai, Emir Omar, or both, it is only possible to list the ethnic group's enduring cultural characteristics. The Pashtuns will remain hyper-conservative, anti-globalisation, irredentist, generous, hospitable, spirited, vengeful, valuers of honour and bravery, people who prefer consensual collective decisions made in tribal assemblies of elders called *jirga*, concerned about their hegemony over the Afghan state, deniers of the Pakistani state's legitimacy, and incorrigible smugglers of all manner of goods.

Ten years ago Hamid Karzaï seemed to symbolise a unifying ideal. Today he essentially monitors assets and patrimony. Like most of his colleagues in South Asia his priority is not to manage the state, develop the country, or build an administration. He maintains an overall balance and tries to unify. His repeated calls for a cessation of hostilities seem sincere, but he does little to implement them.

Considering all these scenarios for Afghanistan's future, it seems reasonable to assume that it will remain allergic to any kind of centralisation in Kabul, as well as to foreign domination. It will remain the realm of insolence. Local potentates – who mostly call themselves *mujabideen*, recalling the glorious times of the struggle against the Soviets, when no rift existed between the Taliban and others – are the only ones assured of retaining their privileges and even strengthening them. The strong, centralised state about which the State Department dreamed in 2002 has not yet seen even the first steps of possible implementation.

Compromises will inevitably take place between Taliban intransigence and Western modernity and between regions and ethnic groups. The country and its neighbours will undoubtedly remain major concerns for the international community for a long time. The West's challenge will be to orchestrate its troops' departure in such a way that they will avoid having to return soon in more complicated circumstances. It is now too early to assess if the Turkish attempt to convene a regional

conference that would formalise permanent compromises among all the ambitions of the country's influential neighbours will be successful. We should welcome this endeavour and its objectives, which are a series of specific commitments with the purpose of making Afghanistan again a place for commercial transit and fruitful trade instead of the zone of confrontation for hegemonies that it has been for at least two centuries.

*Alain Hanssen is a historian and diplomat who specialises in Asian and African policy. He has been concentrating on South Asia since 2006 and visits the region regularly. He is the author of *Le désenchantement de la coopération* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989). The opinions expressed in this brief engage only the author and not Belgian Foreign Affairs or any other institution.*

The Security Policy Brief is a publication of Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

EGMONT
Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and are not those of EGMONT, Royal Institute for International Relations