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BLOOD AND FAITH IN AFGHANISTAN A June 2016 Update

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Introduction

After more than a decade of struggles against al Qaeda and the Taliban, U.S. President Barack Obama hoped to extricate the United States from participating militarily in Afghanistan's counterinsurgency. But as the end of his presidency approaches in the summer of 2016, Afghanistan again faces crisis. Very few trends in the country are going well. The U.N. special envoy in Afghanistan Nicholas Haysom went so far as to state in March 2016, when briefing the U.N. Security Council, that if Afghanistan merely survives 2016, the United Nations mission in the country will consider it a success.¹ The U.S. drone killing of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in Baluchistan, Pakistan in May 2016 provides a fillip to the embattled Afghan government and may in the long-term result in fragmentation and internal withering of the Taliban. But that outcome is not guaranteed and nor likely to materialize quickly. In fact, the Taliban swiftly announced Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, a deputy to Mullah Mansour, as its new leader to avoid the tensions and chaos that had surrounded Mansour's appointment.

For more than a year and half, since the U.S. and NATO handed fighting over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Taliban has mounted and sustained its toughest military campaign in years, and the war has become bloodier than ever. Despite the Taliban's internal difficulties, its military energy shows no signs of fizzling out. It has been scoring important tactical and even strategic victories. Insecurity has increased significantly throughout the country, civilian deaths have shot up, and the Afghan security forces are taking large, and potentially unsustainable, casualties, while other ANSF deficiencies, including retention and support functions, persist. Significant portions of Afghanistan's territory, including the provincial capital of Kunduz or multiple districts of Helmand, have fallen (at least temporarily) to the Taliban over the past year and half. At the beginning of summer 2016, many other districts and provinces are under serious Taliban pressure. The influence of the particularly vicious Haqqani network within the Taliban has grown. Moreover, the Islamic State (IS) established itself in Afghanistan in 2015, although it faces multiple strong countervailing forces.

Most ominously, Afghanistan's political scene remains fractious and polarized. The National Unity Government (NUG), the formal name the government adopted, of President Ashraf Ghani and his chief executive officer and rival Abdullah Abdullah (which was created in the wake of the highly contested presidential elections of 2014) has never really found its feet. Fundamental structural problems of the government remain unaddressed, and after two years in power, the government may face its end as a result of a possible Loya Jirga assembly in the fall of 2016. If it takes place at all, the Jirga could alter the basic power arrangements in Afghanistan, and might codify or undo the president-CEO structure of the National Unity Government. Even if the Jirga does not meet, Afghanistan's leadership will face potentially debilitating crises of legitimacy, especially if the parliamentary and district elections scheduled, after a year's delay, for the fall of 2016, are postponed again.

¹ Eltaf Najafizada, "If Afghanistan Survives 2016, UN Will Consider It a Success," *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-wp-blm-afghan-nations-2c8ab8a8-ec23-11e5-a9ce-681055c7a05f-20160317-story.html>.

Afghanistan's elite has not taken any steps to heal the country's deep and broad political wounds. Instead, the dominant mode of politics is to plot the demise of the government and focus on a parochial accumulation of one's power at the expense of the country's national interest, and even the very survival of the post-2001 order. While Afghan politicians may not wish a return to a civil war, their reckless and selfish actions continually nudge the country in that direction. Out of the gamut of security, economic, geostrategic, and political challenges, it is these rapacious, predatory, and self-centered political schemes and predilections that pose by far the biggest threat to the country. This political misbehavior further underscores the country's vulnerability to the vagaries of foreign financial and military support, on which Afghanistan will be structurally dependent for years to come. In addition, regional powers may be more tempted to manipulate and exploit the country's domestic factionalism.

Struggling to deliver the promised improvements in government efficiency and reduction in corruption, President Ghani staked the two first years of his presidency on negotiations with the Taliban. In order to facilitate the negotiations, he reached out to Pakistan in a daring and politically costly gambit in the fall of 2014 and repeatedly since. Although there have been some halting steps toward starting negotiations with the Taliban since the spring of 2015, the payoff so far has been limited and Ghani's political space is shrinking. The revelation of the death of the Taliban's long-term leader Mullah Omar in July 2015 and the subsequent political struggle within the Taliban over succession and against defections and fragmentation are merely one factor inhibiting any speedy peace process. The death last month of Omar's successor, Mullah Mansour, is likely to complicate the process even more. Even when the negotiations do get under way in earnest, they are likely to take years to produce an outcome.

The international community, as well as Afghan and outside observers, long predicated a bright future for Afghanistan on the country's "young generation," consisting of educated, urban, and westernized youth who speak the language of Western NGOs and donors. Yet since 2015, many of this young generation, as well as other Afghans, have packed up and left the country, seeking asylum in Europe and not willing to suffer the physical insecurity and economic hardships of life in Afghanistan. Facing a flood of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, however, Europe (and for that matter also the United States) does not want the influx of Afghans. Paradoxically, Europe's desire to keep potential Afghan refugees in Afghanistan is perhaps the greatest motivation today for many NATO governments to stay engaged in the country. What should have been the victory march has become a desperate refugee slog.

Although most trends are difficult, Afghanistan is not on the cusp of defeat. The Afghan military has not collapsed or fragmented along ethnic lines. The Taliban is still not holding large cities nor does it have anywhere near the territorial control that the Islamic State enjoys in Iraq and Syria. The Afghan government did manage last year to boost its revenues, an important development. Even with the death of Mullah Mansour and a possible further fragmentation of the Taliban, the prospect is one of a prolonged years-long fighting at best. What then is the theory of an endgame and cessation of conflict for the Afghan government and the international community? One answer is simply hanging on and hoping for the Taliban to self-destruct and wither from within as a result of the mismanagement of its internal organization, internal fragmentation (perhaps intensified by a U.S. decapitation strategy), or extensive alienation of the Afghan population even in areas where the Afghan government is not liked. The second is

hanging on in the hope that the Taliban is willing to negotiate some tolerable power-sharing terms. The two are of course interconnected. The larger problems the Taliban faces on the battlefield—whether of its own doing or because of ANSF resistance or other insurgent challengers—the more willing it is going to be to accept a less ambitious negotiated deal. However, such an inflection point is so far nowhere near. And if the Taliban does one day seriously come to the negotiations table, an extensive fragmentation of the group at that time will only complicate and compromise negotiations.

This paper begins with a discussion of the evolving international support for Afghanistan since the formation of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan out of the 2014 presidential crisis and then provides a detailed description of the end of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and its transformation into the 2016 Resolute Support mission, and the planning for a post-2016 U.S. military and NATO presence in Afghanistan. The paper also shows how the problem of the Afghan refugees has become a key preoccupation and policy determinant of many European partners of Afghanistan. The second section describes key military developments in Afghanistan since the fall of 2014 and the intensity of the Taliban's battlefield thrust, analyzing the group's internal fragmentation and leadership struggles since the announcement of Mullah Omar's death and the U.S. killing of Mullah Mansour. Next, the paper offers an analysis of President Ghani's outreach to Pakistan and the effort to negotiate with the Taliban. The final section focuses again on the National Unity Government and more broadly the state of governance in Afghanistan, and the way it affects Taliban negotiations and the security and economy of the country.

Hanging on, barely: U.S. and European support for a shaken Afghanistan

Until the summer of 2014, U.S. support for Afghanistan remained uncertain and underspecified as to what it would look like from 2015 onward. When the Obama administration inherited the war from the administration of George W. Bush in 2009, the military situation in Afghanistan looked ominous. The Taliban and Haqqani insurgencies had expanded, and the quality of Afghan governance was steadily deteriorating. Afghanistan was experiencing its greatest insecurity since 2001 as well as intense corruption.² Despite all this, during his 2008 presidential campaign, presidential candidate Barack Obama emphasized Afghanistan as the important yet unfinished “war of necessity,” unlike the “war of choice” in Iraq that he promised to terminate as quickly as possible, implying that as president he would indeed focus on the Afghan conflict in a smarter, more focused way.

But despite the election rhetoric, from the moment the Obama administration took over, it struggled with some of the very same dilemmas that perplexed the Bush administration. Since al Qaeda was the primary source of terrorist threats against the United States, was it also necessary to continue combating the (more locally engaged) Taliban? Could an effective counterterrorism mission be prosecuted essentially by airborne and offshore assets alone? Or was it necessary to defeat the resurgent Taliban on the ground and construct a stable Afghan government? Should

² For the increase in international military casualties, Afghan civilian casualties, and the number of insurgent attacks from 2001 through 2008, see icasualties.org. See Ian Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, July 31, 2012, www.brookings.edu/~media/Programs/foreign%20policy/afghanistan%20index/index20120731.pdf.

the U.S. military engagement be intensified—with the costs to U.S. lives and taxpayers' dollars and the domestic ramifications they would entail—or should the U.S. military engagement be significantly scaled back? By the winter of 2013, strong voices in the White House argued that what happened on the ground in Afghanistan mattered only to a limited degree for the successful prosecution of the anti-al Qaeda campaign, and that the needed counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and its allies could be effectively conducted from the air, reducing the need for a foreign presence on the ground in Afghanistan itself.³

The increasingly difficult relations between the White House and then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai (who was alienated from and distrustful and provocative of Washington) only strengthened the hand of those who wanted to pull the plug on the U.S. participation in the Afghanistan war. For almost two years, Karzai had been unwilling to sign a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) between Afghanistan and the United States, an important signal to other NATO and U.S. allies in Afghanistan. Although many Afghans, including prominent elders who were hardly effusive about the United States in other circumstances, lined up behind the SOFA, Karzai was outraged by U.S./ISAF accidental killings of Afghan civilians. More importantly, he remained unpersuaded that U.S. presence in Afghanistan would help stabilize the country instead of serving what Karzai imagined were the U.S. true interests in Afghanistan: to use the country as a platform for prosecuting a New Great Game against Russia and China in Central Asia.⁴ By the spring of 2014, the White House spoke of winding down the Afghanistan war⁵—at the latest by the end of 2016 and, should the SOFA not be signed, perhaps as early as the end of 2014 with the expiration of the mandate of the United States and ISAF, who had been prosecuting the war in Afghanistan for over a decade.

Then two developments shook the White House and the U.S. Congress in the late spring and summer of 2014, reducing the pressure for withdrawal from Afghanistan. First, the virulent offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)⁶—swept through parts of Syria and Iraq, taking over many Sunni areas, and in May 2014 even threatened the capital of Iraq, Baghdad.⁷ The White House, although long determined to get out of the Iraq war and change the focus of U.S. national security policy from the Middle East to East Asia, now sprang into action, bombing ISIS targets in Iraq and mobilizing an international coalition against the re-invigorated insurgency in Iraq and Syria. Yet ISIS was able to rapidly entrenched itself in the

³ This section draws on Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2013): chapters 1 and 2.

⁴ Ibid., chapter 6. For a detailed evaluation of how the rift between President Karzai and the United States emerged and whether it was avoidable, see Ronald Neumann, “Failed Relations between Hamid Karzai and the United States: What Can We Learn?,” *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, May 20, 2015,

<http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/20/failed-relations-between-hamid-karzai-and-the-united-states-what-can-we>.

⁵ White House, Office of the press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan,” May 1, 2012, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan.

⁶ ISIS is interchangeably also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or simply as the Islamic State (IS).

⁷ See, for example, Tim Arango and Duraid Adnan, “Militants Pose Threat on Eve of National Elections in Iraq,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2014; Jim Sciutto and Greg Botelho, “Iraqis 'up against the wall' as ISIS threatens province near Baghdad,” *CNN.com*, October 10, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/10/world/meast/isis-threat/>.

Middle East and was becoming an inspiration for jihadi groups in Africa and South Asia. Soon, its branches were sprouting in India and Pakistan; and several renegade Taliban commanders also declared allegiance to ISIS. Although the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan was – and continues to be – limited (as discussed below), the White House took notice of the specter of reinvigorated jihadism there.

Second, the highly contested and fraudulent 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan ignited an intense and prolonged political crisis. By July 2014, the crisis seemed to have brought the country to the edge of major political and ethnic violence and nearly provoked a military coup, potentially sparking civil war.⁸ The White House instructed the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to go into overdrive to avert such a disaster. Thus, even when the recount of the vote in the runoff election confirmed massive fraud by the organizations of the two principal contenders—Ashraf Ghani, the former Afghan minister of finance (seen as a technocratic pro-reform Pashtun candidate), and Abdullah Abdullah, the former Afghan minister of foreign affairs (seen as a Tajik status-quo candidate)—and as neither of them was ready to accept losing, the U.S. Embassy and State Department persuaded Ghani and Abdullah to form a national unity government.⁹ The September 2014 political agreement covered the bare minimum of a deal, sketching out its mere outlines, with many details as well as deeper structural electoral and constitutional reforms left to be worked out later. They remain unresolved today.

Nonetheless, the newly sworn-in President Ghani and his so-called Chief Executive Officer Abdullah accomplished what they both highlighted as their key campaign objective: keeping the United States and other ISAF international partners in Afghanistan after 2014. Their National Unity Government (NUG) just barely beat the U.S. October 2014 deadline to sign the SOFA. The new U.S. and international military coalition mission—Operation Resolute Support—started in January 2015 and is slated to run through the end of 2016. Thus, after a decade of large-scale, offensive counterinsurgency operations, the U.S. and NATO missions in Afghanistan changed the far more limited ones of advising and training—and, in extremis, active military support of – the Afghan forces.

Given the intensity of the fighting and the specter of ISIS in the Middle East and potentially also South Asia, the U.S. government agreed not to reduce the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan for the rest of 2015, and renewed that commitment for 2016. At least until then, the United States would provide 9,800 troops, and the NATO allies another 2,000. Crucially, the White House also agreed to keep at least some U.S. military bases outside of Kabul open until the next U.S. administration took over in 2017.

The combat mandate for U.S. forces was officially restricted by the White House only to force protection and counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda, whose large bases were discovered in Afghanistan in late 2015 as the terrorist group appeared to experience a second life there.¹⁰

⁸ Author's interviews with Afghan politicians and civil society representatives and U.S., ISAF, and international diplomats and military officers, September–October 2014.

⁹ Author's interviews with international advisors, U.S. Embassy officials, representatives of other embassies in Kabul, and Afghan politicians, Kabul, Afghanistan, September 2014.

¹⁰ Eric Schmitt and David Sanger, "As U.S. Focuses on ISIS and the Taliban, Al Qaeda Reemerges," *The New York Times*, December 29, 2015.

The counterterrorism operations were also expanded to include targeting the ISIS in Afghanistan.¹¹ Yet as the security situation continued to deteriorate in 2015 and did not improve in the first part of 2016, U.S. forces in Afghanistan once again engaged in limited direct offensive operations against the Taliban as well—operations which exceeded the training, advising, and US-force protection mandates of Operation Resolute Support—even though U.S. commanders justified them in those terms.¹²

Given the precariousness of the security situation, the White House also reversed its previous decision to change the U.S. presence in Afghanistan after 2016 to a mere 1,000-soldier, embassy-level protection force.¹³ Instead, at least in 2017, by which time a new U.S. president would take over from President Obama, the United States would keep 5,600 troops in Afghanistan, the level that President Obama had originally envisioned for 2016.

Moreover, in May 2015, preceding the White House, NATO announced plans to keep a small civilian-led military mission in Afghanistan after 2016. According to the then-head of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, the post-2016 NATO mission would be deployed around a base in Kabul and used among other functions to bolster the Afghan air force and intelligence service.¹⁴ What, in 2012 diplomatic and military planning, was imagined as a “Transformational Decade” through 2024 (by which time Afghanistan would be militarily and economically capable of standing on its own feet, due to anticipated mineral revenues) became more like a “Decade of Hanging On” and hoping for a breakthrough in peace negotiations with the Taliban.

The fact that NATO member states, particularly Germany, and even Italy, were more forward-leaning than the United States in pushing for continuing military presence in Afghanistan after 2016 was a bittersweet development for Washington. Throughout much of the post-2001 military engagement in Afghanistan, it was the United States that pressed ISAF partners to contribute more troops and remove combat-restrictive caveats from their mandates—mandates which caused U.S. soldiers dub the ISAF mission as “I Saw Americans Fight.”

Nonetheless, it was not a newly discovered sense of burden-sharing that motivated Germany and other European governments to press for a U.S. and NATO military perseverance in Afghanistan after 2016, but rather the crisis of Afghan refugees flooding into Europe. In 2015, nearly 180,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Europe, many in Germany, forming the second-largest refugee group after Syrians.¹⁵ Though the migrants often suffered horrific conditions at the hand of smugglers, risking drowning and other privations on their way to Europe, and though European governments sought to send them back, the flow did not abate in the early part of 2016. In the spring of 2016, according to the United Nations, some 1,000 Afghans were leaving their homes

¹¹ Carla Babb, “US General: Major Taliban Split Emerging in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province,” *Voice of America*, March 10, 2016.

¹² Azam Ahmed and Joseph Goldstein, “Taliban Gains Pull U.S. Units Back into Fight in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2015.

¹³ Emre Peker and Margherita Stancati, “NATO Plans Civilian-Led Mission in Afghanistan After 2016,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2015.

¹⁴ Tim Craig, “NATO Hopes to Keep a Base in Afghanistan, U.S. General Says,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2015.

¹⁵ Erin Cunningham, “Europe Wants to Deport Afghan Migrants, but Kabul Is Reluctant to Accept Them,” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2016.

daily, displaced by fighting.¹⁶ (Not all would of course seek to leave Afghanistan for abroad.) With growing European domestic opposition to accepting the Afghan refugees or those from the Middle East, various European governments, including Germany, pressured the Afghan government to prevent the would-be migrants from leaving Afghanistan, reportedly even threatening to cut off aid to the Afghan government. The European governments classified the Afghan migrants as economic migrants and not refugees from insecurity, thus making them ineligible for asylum.¹⁷ Germany extensively advertised this policy in Afghanistan, while promising to help create economic opportunities for Afghans *within* Afghanistan.

Indeed, many of those fleeing Afghanistan were reacting to the combination, within Afghanistan, of rising insecurity and economic deprivation. The departure of the vast majority of Western forces not only radically shrank Afghanistan's GDP, but also eliminated tens of thousands of jobs of translators, drivers, and cultural advisers for many young Afghans. Many of the migrants who set foot to leave Afghanistan were of the "bright, young, westernized educated Afghan generation" assumed to be the transformation engine of the country. Disenchanted, they now saw little economic opportunity and showed little faith in the country's political and security developments. The 2015 Survey of the Afghan People by the Asia Foundation, conducted for the 11th consecutive year, revealed for the first time since 2015 that the majority of Afghans (57 percent) believed the country was headed in the wrong direction, with insecurity, unemployment and a poor economy, and corruption identified as the biggest problems.¹⁸ Despite Ghani's and Abdullah's campaign promises to improve the rule of law and reduce corruption, some 90 percent of Afghans continued to report corruption as a daily problem.¹⁹ Some interviews also suggested that some of the modern and presumably transformative Afghan generation would be willing to settle for some form of Taliban rule, though with limits to the Taliban's power, with the hope that the Taliban in power would be less corrupt than the post-2001 Afghan politicians.²⁰ Even if not completely representative and anecdotal, such interviews likely present a highly-skewed, situational, and fluid set of preferences. Nonetheless, they were yet another indicator that the engine of Afghan transformation, the young generation's break with the patterns of their fathers and mothers was at best highly tenuous and up for grabs.²¹

Where have all the fighters gone? ANSF and the Taliban's push

Despite the characterization by the European governments that only economic opportunism, not their personal safety, drove the Afghan migrants out of their country, security in Afghanistan did

¹⁶ "1,000 Afghans Flee Fighting Every Day: UN," *Outlook Afghanistan*, May 18, 2016, http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=15277.

¹⁷ See, for example, Angela Stanzel, "Eternally Displaced: Afghanistan's Refugee Crisis and What It Means for Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_170_-_ETERNALLY_DISPLACED_1430.pdf

¹⁸ The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2015: A Survey of the Afghan People," 2015, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Afghanistanin2015.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tim Craig, "Why Disaffected Young Afghans Are Warming to a Taliban Comeback," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2016.

²¹ See, for example, Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, "Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan: The Y Factor," USIP, January 13, 2014, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR341-Youth_Mobilization_and_Political_Constraints_in_Afghanistan.pdf.

in fact deteriorate throughout Afghanistan in 2015 and did not show signs of improving in the first half of 2016. In fact, most analysts and even Western officials expected a tough and bloody 2016.²²

According to the United Nations, 3,545 Afghan civilians were killed in 2015, with another 7,457 wounded, the highest total casualties since 2009.²³ 62 percent of civilian casualties were attributed to the Taliban and other anti-government forces, 17 percent on pro-government forces, and 2 percent on international troops, with the rest of undetermined.²⁴ These increasing civilian casualties have also intensified displacement: between January and November 2015, more than 300,000 Afghans fled their homes, a 160 percent increase compared with the same period in 2014.²⁵

Afghan security forces too also took large casualties, another ominous indicator of the security trends. Although conflicting numbers were released and hushed up, the casualty rate might have been 28 percent higher in 2015 than in 2014, a year when at least some top-level U.S. military officers considered the ANSF casualty rate unsustainable.²⁶ In 2014, more than 20,000 soldiers and support personnel were lost due to deaths and injuries as a result of combat, desertions, and discharges.²⁷ Long facing even more pressure from the Taliban than has the Afghan military, the police lost almost a quarter of its members in 2015, some 36,000, many through desertions.²⁸ For years, the police force was known to have been plagued by corruption and abusive toward civilians, while reform efforts struggled.

Indeed, the problem of desertion in ANSF was only one of the long-standing deficiencies in the force that became blatantly manifest after 2014 when ISAF handed the Afghan military a stalemated war with the Taliban, requiring the ANSF to fight on their own. The problem of soldiers going AWOL and deserting is nothing new, particularly in the tougher fighting environment of Afghanistan's south. Poor rotation and R&R practices, often undermined by corruption, with those not being able to buy themselves leave never receiving it, have been one of the causes. The increasing insecurity making it more difficult for soldiers to travel to their homes during leave is another. Western advisors have encouraged their Afghan counterparts to redress both problems.²⁹ With the Afghan economy in poor shape since 2013, signaling a steep decline in employment opportunities for Afghans, joining the ANSF is still an attractive economic option for many (apart from opium poppy cultivation). However, a high casualty rate

²² See, for example, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg cited in Erin Cunningham, "Taliban Fighters Seize Afghan Territory as NATO Chief Visits Kabul," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2016.

²³ UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Conflict*, February 2016, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_annual_report_2015_final_14_feb_2016.pdf.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "UN Launches Appeal for \$393M Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *The Associated Press*, January 27, 2016.

²⁶ Jon Harper, "US Commander: Afghan Casualties Not 'Sustainable,'" *Stars and Stripes*, November 5, 2014; and "US General: Afghan Army Being 'Rebuilt' for Taliban Battle," *The Associated Press*, January 25, 2016.

²⁷ Matthew Rosenberg and Azam Ahmed, "Figures from U.S.-led Coalition Show Heavy 2014 Losses for Afghan Army," *New York Times*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/world/figures-from-us-led-coalition-show-heavy-2014-losses-for-afghan-army.html>.

²⁸ Jessica Donati and Ehsanullah Amiri, "Afghan Police Force Struggling to Maintain Membership," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2016.

²⁹ Author's interviews with NATO officials, Kabul, September and October 2015.

not only demoralizes the force, but also makes it economically costly for many Afghan families to send their sons to the ANSF.

Still, at least until the fall of 2015, recruitment seemed to have replenished the poor retention. But since the fall of 2015, some reports have indicated that recruitment has also fallen, in part due to the Taliban putting more effective pressure on families not to send their sons to ANSF.³⁰ At least in some of the most contested areas, such as Helmand, poor recruitment and retention seem to have given rise to ghost soldiers, i.e., those on the payroll but not actually on the battlefield.³¹

Other serious deficiencies include poor logistics and planning, lack of specialty enablers such as medical evacuation teams, and deficiencies in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) plus other sustainment functions. Such capacities take a long time to develop, and ISAF did not begin adequately focusing on them until 2011, late in the process of developing the ANSF.

Determined far more by what excess goods logistics headquarters wants to get rid of rather than based on an area's needs, logistics remain a combination of Afghan tribalism, the legacy of Soviet-era bureaucracy, and U.S. legalism. The complicated system of multiple authorizations for supplies at multiple levels results in ample opportunity for corruption, with officials at various levels holding up requests until they are paid off.³² An internet-based system the United States has provided as an alternative has reduced some of the problems, but is vulnerable to electricity and signal disruption. The Taliban frequently target electricity and cell towers, particularly in areas where local operators do not pay sufficient extortion fees to the Taliban. ISR experienced a significant contraction when the Obama administration, for a variety of reasons, including the fight against ISIS in the Middle East, decided to pull significant signal intelligence assets from Afghanistan.

The lack of Afghan close-air-support assets is particularly problematic and a great boost to the insurgency. Because of counterproductive restrictions on its mandate, Resolute Support has often had to allow Taliban forces to mass and strike before air assets can come to ANSF's support. NATO officials at times suggest to their Afghan counterparts that all of these problems are far worse on the Taliban side, including no air support, and that therefore the ANSF can adapt to them.³³ Nonetheless, nursed on such enablers and support functions being previously provided by ISAF, the ANSF are not accustomed to living without them. These deficiencies greatly undermine morale and lead to poor recruitment and retention.

And there are chronic problems: Financially, the ANSF are and will be fully dependent on U.S. and other foreign funding for years to come. So far, the United States has allocated \$68 billion

³⁰ See, for example, Antonio Giustozzi and Ali Mohammad Ali, "The Afghan Army After ISAF," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)*, Briefing Paper Series, March 2016: 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 3.

³² Author's interviews with officials of Resolute Support and top Afghan officials of ANSF, Kabul, September and October 2015.

³³ *Ibid.* See also Giustozzi and Ali: 10.

toward building self-sufficient Afghan forces, 61 percent of the \$113 billion in U.S. reconstruction efforts.³⁴

Arguably, the greatest achievement of the ANSF so far is having refrained from engineering a military coup in the summer of 2014 and staying together, not fracturing along ethnic lines. Nonetheless, ethnic and patronage fragmentation of the ANSF remains a real possibility and one that may yet disastrously erupt. As Antonio Giustozzi and Ali Mohammad Ali put it in their excellent recent report, the divisions in the Afghan Ministry of Defense and security forces more broadly go beyond “former mujahedeen versus non-mujahedeen, educated versus non-educated, corrupt versus non-corrupt, pro-Ghani versus pro-Abdullah, Pashtuns versus non-Pashtuns” and among various political factions and parties; the rifts and divisions are often highly individualistic.³⁵ These forms of patronage and personal corruption have undermined unit cohesion and plague even senior-level appointments.

Moreover, politically motivated long delays in appointing and replacing ministers of defense, interior, and other top military, police, and intelligence officers have had serious debilitating effects on the ANSF. In a country like Afghanistan where institutions are weak, individual leadership has substantial effects.

Poor unit leadership at the local level, bought with money instead of based on merit, also contributed to the dramatic fall of the provincial capital Kunduz City in September 2015, to date the Taliban’s most spectacular victory and one that shook Afghanistan.

For the first time since 2001, the Taliban managed to conquer an entire province and for several days hold its capital. The psychological effect in Afghanistan was tremendous. Kunduz is vital strategic province, with major access roads to various other parts of Afghanistan's north. Moreover, those who control the roads—still the Taliban—also get major revenue from taxing travelers, which is significant along these opium-smuggling routes.

For a few days, it looked like the entire provinces of Badakshan, Takhar, and Baghlan might also fall. Many Afghans in those provinces started getting ready to leave or began moving south. If all these Northern provinces fell, the chances were high, with whispers and blatant loud talk of political coups intensifying for a number of days, that the Afghan government might fall, and perhaps the entire political system collapse. In short, potentially dangerous and deleterious political and psychological effects were far bigger than from the Taliban's other offensives. Many Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) units, led by weak or corrupt commanders, did not fight, threw down their arms, and ran away. Conversely, the boost of Taliban morale and the strengthening of its now new official leader Mullah Akbar Mansour were substantial. However, the Taliban also discredited itself with its brutality in Kunduz City.

³⁴ John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Statement before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives: Assessing the Capabilities and Effectiveness of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces,” February 12, 2016, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-16-17-TY.pdf>.

³⁵ Giustozzi and Ali: 11.

The Taliban operation to take Kunduz was very well-planned and put together over a period of months, perhaps years. Nor should the Taliban's takeover have been a surprise: From March 2015, the Taliban was upping steady pressure on the province and its capital and desperate (and weak) provincial officials were repeatedly appealing to Kabul for help. Prominently adding to the heft of the Taliban and local militias it mobilized were some 1,000 foreign fighters from Central Asia, China, and Pakistan. They overwhelmed the militias organized by the dominant local powerbrokers and the United States, as well as the government-sponsored Afghan Local Police. Moreover, the Taliban's capacities were believed to be significantly supported by Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI). Islamabad has apparently not been able or willing to sever ISI action in support of the Taliban despite a decade of pressure from the United States and more recently "engagement" (not pressure, as Chinese government diplomats point out) from China.

It took weeks for the ANSF to retake Kunduz, far longer than was expected (including by the Taliban). Months later, in the spring of 2016, the Taliban still exhibited substantial influence over the roads in Kunduz and neighboring provinces. In the weeks-long fighting, 493 civilians died and another 1,392 were wounded.³⁶

A crucial reason why the Taliban succeeded in taking over the city and large rural areas in the provinces and anchoring itself among local population is that many of the local groups, including the Pashtun minorities and communities beyond, have been alienated by years of exclusionary and rapacious politics. Such pernicious politics only intensified in March 2015 in response to Taliban's initial push to bring down the city. And in the aftermath, despite many official visits from Kabul to Kunduz and official investigations by prominent Afghan politicians, the governance and politics in the provinces has not significantly improved by the summer of 2016.³⁷

Equally, however, many of the local population groups hate the Taliban. The Taliban have engaged in revenge killings and abuses, and are spoiling for more revenge. Local Afghan Police (ALP) units and other pro-government, pro-local powerbroker, and presumably anti-Taliban militias have been a feature of "security" in Kunduz for years. Although created with the goal of fighting the Taliban, many would simply abuse the population, particularly along ethnic lines.³⁸ Showing far more intense problems than ALP units in Helmand or Kandahar, the Kunduz militias often have not been able to resist the Taliban without a strong backup from the United States, ISAF, or the Afghan National Army. Frequently, they remain beholden to highly divisive local powerbrokers, engage in predation on local communities, and abuse rival ethnic groups and tribes. Kunduz is one province where many of these highly problematic aspects of Afghan militias have been repeatedly manifest. Very fractious and discriminatory politics in that province, in neighboring Baghlan and in Badakhshan have attracted the Taliban in the first place,

³⁶ "UN: 2015 Civilian Injuries in Afghan War Worst Since 2009," *The Associated Press*, February 14, 2016.

³⁷ See, for example, Peyton Cooke and Eliza Urwin, "Security and Social Developments in Kunduz," *USIP*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/12/17/security-and-social-developments-in-kunduz>.

³⁸ See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan Field Trip Report V: The Afghan Local Police – 'It's Local, So It Must Be Good,' Or Is It?" *The Brookings Institution*, May 9, 2012; and Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence*, Chapter 8.

at times creating atypical support groups for the insurgents. In Badakhshan, for example, the local Taliban are mostly Tajik.

When the Taliban started its push on Kunduz in March 2015, both local powerbrokers and Kabul responded by creating more such militias, only compounding the problem of abuse and alienation of subgroups among the population. The people then embraced the Taliban.³⁹ Indeed, a key to the Taliban's success in taking over the city was its ability to recruit its own version of the ALP in Kunduz, part-time local fighters allowed to stay only in their village and city, unlike the Taliban regular fighters. Those same "Taliban ALP" also turned out to be a key headache for the Taliban leadership as it was often they who violated Mullah Omar's edicts against violence against civilians and invading of houses. Just like the Afghan government, the Taliban leadership was not able to maintain effective control of its local militias. The rampage of these rogue police and militia units exacerbated the polarization in the city and province and created major PR problems for the Taliban.⁴⁰

United States air support was ultimately essential in retaking Kunduz and avoiding more of Badakhshan falling into the hands of the Taliban, thus preventing a military domino effect in the north and inflaming the political crisis. It also came with a terrible price: during the fighting, the United States mistakenly bombed a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital where at least 30 patients and doctors died and more were wounded. False reports from Afghan forces on the ground that the hospital had become Taliban headquarters, reductions in IRS capacities, and malfunctioning equipment were the sources of the tragic mistake of the U.S. gunship operators.⁴¹ Despite this awful event, however, it remains vital to maintain and expand U.S. air support for the Afghan forces, including direct application of U.S. kinetic firepower beyond *in extremis* support, to prevent similar Taliban offensives. It is especially important to augment the provision of U.S. intelligence assets. Significant reductions in U.S. assistance, whether of troops, intelligence, or air support, will greatly increase the chances of another major Taliban success—like that of Kunduz, and perhaps again in Kunduz—producing political instability.

The subsequent winter of 2015-2016, like the one before, brought none of the previously-typical winter lulls in fighting. Instead, the Taliban continued a major push in the north, continually contesting territory and influence in Kunduz as well as Badakhshan and Baghlan. In January 2016, the Taliban sabotaged Baghlan's electricity pylons, cutting off Kabul from power for several weeks during a bitter-cold winter and driving home to many Kabulis relatively shielded from the Taliban violence that the fighting was no longer so distant. Violence in Kabul had been steadily on the rise before winter began: In 2015, Kabul experienced an 18 percent rise in

³⁹ For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Dubious Joys of Standing Up Militias and Building Partner Capacity: Lessons from Afghanistan and Mexico for Prosecuting Security Policy Through Proxies," The Brookings Institution, July 21, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/07/21-afghanistan-mexico-security-policy-felbabbrown>; Deedee Derksen, "The Politics of Disarmament and Rearmament in Afghanistan," *USIP*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/20/the-politics-of-disarmament-and-rearmament-in-afghanistan>.

⁴⁰ Author's interviews with RS officers, Afghan officers, northern politicians, and Afghan journalists, Kabul, October 2015.

⁴¹ See, for example, Rod Nordland, U.S. General Says Kunduz Hospital Air Strike Was 'Avoidable,'" *The New York Times*, November 25, 2015; and Matthew Rosenberg and Joseph Goldstein, "U.S. Role in Afghanistan Turns to Combat Again, With a Tragic Error," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2016.

civilian casualties,⁴² including some of the deadliest attacks, mostly attributed to the Haqqani network (in particular, an attack on August 7, 2015 that resulted in 43 dead and 312 wounded).

An even deadlier attack, again attributed to the Haqqanis, took place in April 2016. It caused even larger casualties: more than 60 dead and 300 wounded.⁴³ At first oblivious to the suffering it caused and only focused on enhancing its intimidation power, the Taliban quickly claimed the attack and then, after a resulting public outrage, distanced itself from it. Well beyond these spectacular attacks, the Taliban upped their pressure on businesses in Kabul during 2015 and escalating attacks against restaurants and hotels frequented by foreigners, successfully driving most of those businesses to shut down. It has thus forced the international community even in Kabul into an ever-shrinking space behind fortified walls, limiting its interactions with Afghans and undermining international assistance efforts by depriving them of Afghan input. Moreover, various kidnapping rings, many unrelated to the Taliban and some rumored to be related to Afghan security forces, proliferated in Kabul throughout winter 2015 and spring 2016, targeting foreigners, further reducing the operational capacity of the international community in Kabul.

A winter lull in the fighting did not occur in Afghanistan's south either. Instead, the Taliban mounted an aggressive campaign, particularly in Helmand and Uruzgan, further escalating attacks in the spring. After Kunduz, the losses in Helmand, the scene of the 2010 U.S. surge, were perhaps the most dramatic and some of the largest tactical victories for the Taliban in terms of psychological impact. After months-long pounding from the Taliban, the ANSF withdrew from several districts, including Musa Qala and Now Zad, with the Afghan 215 Corps assigned to Helmand melting away "due to incompetence, corruption, and ineffectiveness."⁴⁴ Even Rahnatullah Nabil, the former head of the Afghanistan intelligence agency who resigned in protest against government policies, characterized the morale of Afghan forces in the province as "extremely low," with discipline breaking down and "junior commanders openly defying their superiors."⁴⁵ The Taliban also overran the Sangin district, by May 2016, thus taking control or credibly contesting authority in 11 out of the province's 14 districts. For the Taliban, strengthening its influence over Helmand is important for many reasons, including because it facilitates access to the large drug revenues of the province and allows the group to develop significant political capital by sponsoring livelihoods for the rural population in the opium poppy economy.⁴⁶ By the summer of 2016, further losses in the provinces were avoided only by intensification of U.S. air support and several emergency deployments of U.S. and U.K. special operation forces and eventually an advisory battalion to assist the struggling ANSF in the province.

⁴² UNAMA, February 2016.

⁴³ See, for example, Michael Pearson, Masoud Popalzai and Zahra Ullah, "Death Toll Rises after Taliban Deadly Attack in Kabul," *CNN.com*, April 20, 2016.

⁴⁴ U.S. General Wilson Shoffner cited in "U.S. General: Afghan Army Being 'Rebuilt' for Taliban Battle," *The Associated Press*, January 25, 2016.

⁴⁵ Nabil cited in *ibid*.

⁴⁶ For details on the Taliban and drugs, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "No Easy Exit: Drugs and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan," The Brookings Institution, April 29, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2015/04/global-drug-policy/FelbabBrown--Afghanistan-final.pdf?la=en>.

It is likely that in the summer of 2016, the Taliban will significantly increase its pressure on Kandahar. The group has been preparing the ground for more than a year, gaining road control in Zabul and Uruzgan and developing bases and safehavens in Ghor. Attempting to assassinate the feared provincial police chief of Kandahar, General Abdul Raziq, will become a high priority for the Taliban. Accused of mafia-don-like behavior and severe human rights abuses,⁴⁷ Raziq has been effective in keeping the Taliban out of Kandahar City and surrounding districts. But in addition to the consolidation of criminal rackets in Kandahar under his thumb and major human rights violations, the price of greater security from the Taliban has also been bad governance and tribal discrimination. If the Taliban succeeds in assassinating Raziq, it will open up major power fights over political, economic, and criminal influence in Kandahar, and benefit from inserting itself into the resulting power fights.

Indeed, as has been the case in Afghanistan over the past decade, Taliban military efforts or those of affiliated insurgencies are not necessarily the cause of all insecurity. In many areas, Herat being a prominent example, the insecurity also crucially involves score-settling among rival powerbrokers, politicians, businessmen, and tribes trying to better position themselves within patronage networks or to get the upper hand in local power struggles over economic resources. Sometimes, such as in Balkh (where the local governor Atta Mohammad Noor has refused to step down in clear defiance of Kabul), reports of insecurity are inflated to obtain government appointments and signal to the government in Kabul that the firing of local powerbrokers would result in greater insecurity.⁴⁸ Although such violent political and economic contests may not be about the Taliban to start with, they allow the Taliban to insert itself into the local conflicts and gain crucial footholds or strengthen its local position.

Yet despite significant challenges and failures at the provincial level (like Kunduz and Helmand) by the summer 2016, the ANSF did not undergo a wholesale collapse or even quit as the Iraqi army did, for example, in facing the Islamic State in 2014. Nonetheless, the government in Kabul continued facing a difficult dilemma: should it remain spread thin throughout Afghanistan and thus be deployed in a reactive mode to the Taliban's nimble attacks, or should it pull back further from non-strategic rural areas, ceding more ground to the Taliban. The former has so far allowed the Taliban being able to dictate the tempo and areas of engagement; the latter is very politically costly. In the fall of 2015, the Afghan government attempted to escape the dilemma by significantly increasing local militias on Kabul's payroll, including the Afghan Local Police (ALP). The Afghan government asked the United States, which has been footing the bill for the ALP, to pay for at least an additional 15,000 militiamen, a 50 percent increase from the currently authorized 30,000 ALP force. In addition to generating more presumed fighters against the Taliban, such an ALP enlargement would also allow the struggling NUG to appease political opponents who have been constantly threatening to pull down the government by transferring financial resources and military and political power to them. But well aware that the NUG faced

⁴⁷ For details on Raziq and his complex role in Kandahar, see Matthieu Aikins, "Our Man in Kandahar," *The Atlantic*, November 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>; and Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence*, Chapter 5.

⁴⁸ For such thinly veiled threats and manipulation by Herat's predominant powerbroker and a key politician and warlord Ismail Khan, see, for example, "Herat Will Become Insecure within Weeks if Govt Keep Looking the Other Way: Ismail Khan," *Afghanistan Times*, April 28, 2015. On Atta and Balkh, see Jawad Sukhanyar and Rod Nordland, "'They Cannot Remove Me by Force': A Strongman on Afghan Infighting," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2016.

many problems controlling the ALP and that many of the powerbrokers would deliver no more than ghost ALP forces while pocketing the money, the United States appropriately refused to pay for such an enlargement.⁴⁹

As the 2016 summer approaches, the Taliban shows no signs of losing its momentum and the ANSF shows no signs of getting an upper hand. The prospect is one of a prolonged years-long fighting at best. What then is the theory of an endgame and cessation of conflict for the Afghan government and the international community? One answer is simply hanging on and hoping for the Taliban to self-destruct and wither from within, as a result of the mismanagement of its internal organization, internal fragmentation (perhaps intensified by a U.S. decapitation strategy) or extensive alienation of the Afghan population even in areas where the Afghan government is not liked. The second is hanging on in the hope that the Taliban is willing to negotiate some tolerable power-sharing terms. The two are, of course, interconnected. The larger problems the Taliban faces on the battlefield—whether of its own doing or because of ANSF resistance or other insurgent challengers—the more willing it is going to be to accept a less ambitious negotiated deal. Nonetheless, the question is whether it is sufficient for the ANSF to merely hang on until that moment that the Taliban self-destructs or whether the ANSF's current problems will continue sapping its morale unless it wins some significant tactical victories against the Taliban. Yet showing such tactical victories is much more difficult for the ANSF than for the Taliban, since the Taliban accrues psychological gains by taking over districts and provinces, even temporarily, but the ANSF does not get equivalent points by hanging onto districts or provinces. The decapitation policy toward Taliban commanders has so far not created a psychological impression that the Taliban is on the ropes. Nor has it objectively slowed the Taliban significantly—the insurgent group has been able to replace its command structures rather effectively.

Black and white and many shades of gray: Taliban fragmentation and its limits and the Islamic State in Afghanistan

Even so, the most significant challenge for the Taliban in years has come from its internal cohesion issues. After maintaining an impressively united structure for almost three decades, the Taliban experienced its first major fragmentation in 2014 and particularly in 2015. The fragmentation has come from two sources: The first was the emergence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. The second was the leadership succession struggle that followed the announcement of the death of the Taliban founder and leader for two and half decades, Mullah Omar.

In the latter part of 2014, the Islamic State (IS) started flying its black flag in Afghanistan. Throughout 2015, the visibility of its presence, if not its actual power, increased. The Taliban at first tried to appeal to unity and persuade the emerging IS in Afghanistan not to become a separate and hostile force. Those appeals fell on deaf ears and the Islamic State soon came to battle the Taliban in Nangarhar, Herat, and Helmand. Eastern Nangarhar in particular emerged as the strongest base of IS presence in Afghanistan and the area to which IS in the country has been mainly confined. In other parts of the country, such as the north, foreign elements, including Uzbek and Pakistani militants, including factions of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Tehrik-e-Taliban-

⁴⁹ Author's interviews with RS officials and Afghan government officials, Kabul, September and October 2015.

Pakistan (TTP), relabeled themselves IS. In addition to rebranded foreign factions, IS in Afghanistan has been composed mostly of dissatisfied Taliban commanders such as Helmand's Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim.⁵⁰

An IS growth in Afghanistan faces substantial obstacles: The group's brutality, greater than even the brutality Afghans have been subjected to for decades, generates resentment.⁵¹ The Taliban has been better able to calibrate brutality and hide or excuse the violence it perpetrates against civilians. At times, the Taliban has even temporarily reduced violence and too-restrictive edits to generate enough acceptance among local populations. Like IS in the Middle East, IS in Afghanistan has chosen to rule by sheer brutality. The Taliban has also sponsored opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and the jobs and income it provides for ordinary Afghans, thus generating political capital. IS in Afghanistan, on the other hand, has prohibited opium poppy cultivation both on grounds of ideological purity and also with the strategic goal of ensuring that the only employment available to local men is as IS foot soldiers.⁵² IS foreign elements also reduce legitimacy among often-fiercely nationalistic Afghans.

The Islamic State in Afghanistan has also drawn the attention of international actors, and the Taliban has been able to capitalize on being seen as a lesser threat by outside powers. For Russia and Iran, the Islamic State is an even greater threat than the Taliban. Russia has been rumored to engage in negotiations with the Taliban, for example, with the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry suggesting that the Russian government and the Taliban have shared intelligence against IS, a claim the Taliban denied.⁵³ At the same time, Moscow has delivered small arms to the Afghan government to fight the Taliban. The Islamic State in Afghanistan has also become a top target for the United States.

Yet the IS presence in Afghanistan, however weak, thinly-anchored, and exaggerated, also creates significant problems for the Taliban. First, it has anchored the presence of the United States in Afghanistan, reducing the desire of the White House to liquidate the U.S. military involvement in the country. Without U.S. presence and support, the ANSF would be reeling far more from the Taliban onslaught.

Second, even for the Taliban, the IS is a loose cannon. The IS has attacked Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, including a Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar. On the one hand, the IS threat to Pakistan could strengthen Pakistan's support for the Taliban. Like Russia and Iran, Pakistan could see the IS as a far greater danger than the Taliban. On the other hand,

⁵⁰ For extent of ISIS presence in Afghanistan, see, for example, Borhan Osman, "The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan: What threat does it hold?" *Afghan Analyst Network*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-shadows-of-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-what-threat-does-it-hold/>; and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Taliban Fears Over Young Recruits Attracted to ISIS in Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2015.

⁵¹ See, for example, Mujib Mashal, "Afghan ISIS Branch Makes Inroads in the Battle Against the Taliban," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2015; and Carla Babb, "US General: Major Taliban Split Emerging in Afghanistan's Helmand Province," *Voice of America*, March 10, 2016.

⁵² Shah Mahmoud Shinwari and Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistani Militants Lead IS Push Into Eastern Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, June 30, 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-pakistan-islamic-state-taliban/27102776.html>; and author's interviews with Nangarhari elders, Kabul, October 2015.

⁵³ Mustafa Sarwar, "Russia Plays Both Sides in the Afghan Conflict," *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, January 8, 2016.

perhaps the growth of the IS in Afghanistan might inadvertently accomplish what the Afghan government and the United States have long failed to do: persuade Pakistan that it can no longer distinguish between the militant groups it can manipulate for its purposes (like the Afghan Taliban) and those groups which are a direct threat to the Pakistan state and hence need to be combatted (like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan).

Third, the presence of IS forces in Afghanistan has reduced the cost of defection for dissatisfied Taliban commanders. Whereas before, defecting commanders would be easily subject to the Taliban's punishment and seen as traitors, they now face more physical protection and lesser legitimacy costs by wrapping themselves in the IS black flag. Before they were mere traitors and cowards, now they can claim to be purer than the Taliban. The IS presence in Afghanistan has also cut into the Taliban's fundraising sources abroad. If IS in Afghanistan grew, it could also cut into the Taliban's recruitment pools both in Afghanistan and abroad.

A bigger threat to the Taliban unity and cohesion has come from internal fragmentation following the revelation in July 2015 that the long-term leader and founder of the movement, Mullah Mohammad Omar, died in Pakistan in 2013. Although current and former Pakistani officials maintain that it was the Afghan intelligence services that decided to reveal the death to scuttle the budding negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, it appears that it was the Taliban itself.⁵⁴ In particular, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Omar's deputy, judged that the two-year-old cover-up of Omar's death was no longer sustainable and his support for the negotiations, for which he claimed to have Omar's blessings, required his facing the leadership succession process. The revelation has halted even the very beginnings of negotiations for more than a year so far.

The lie, as well as Mansour's swift maneuvering to take over the Taliban's leadership and sidelining of Mullah Omar's son Yaqub, whom some saw as the Taliban's new leader, generated substantial disenchantment within the movement. Yaqub and Mullah Omar's brother, Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, were alienated and at first refused to endorse Mansour's succession. Several influential Taliban leaders separated themselves from Mansour, bringing up old grudges about Taliban leaders whom Mansour sidelined over the years.⁵⁵ Accusing Mansour of being under Pakistan's thumb, some outright defected to form separate movements. Among the most significant splinter groups were factions of Abdul Qayum Zakir (the Taliban's military commander sacked by Mansour in 2014), Mullah Hassan Rahmani (former governor of Helmand during the Taliban era), and Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Mohammad Rasool (the governor of Nimroz during the Taliban era). Dadullah's faction subsequently engaged in intense and months-long military clashes with Mansour's Taliban. Like the aforementioned Rauf Khadim who had defected to the Islamic State in Khorasan, many of the defectors had previous quarrels with Mansour.

⁵⁴ Author's interviews with current and former Pakistani military officials, Islamabad and Lahore, Pakistan, May 2016; and with U.S. military and intelligence officials, Kabul, Afghanistan, October 2016.

⁵⁵ For an excellent and detailed analysis of the infighting and background of the rivalries, see, Borhan Osman, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the Post-Omar Taleban," Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 24, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/toward-fragmentation-mapping-the-post-omar-taleban/>.

The scale of defections, in fact the very act of defection, was unprecedented in the Taliban's history. The U.S. and ISAF commanders had long hoped that ISAF's decapitation and high-value-targeting policy would produce such factionalization of the Taliban, weakening the group and greatly facilitating the counterinsurgency efforts. Yet such a fragmentation did not occur as a result of the kill-and-capture policy of Taliban commanders on the Afghanistan battlefield. Did the revelation of Mullah Omar's death finally bring about this first theory of the endgame – i.e., the Taliban weakening or collapsing from within?

It did not. Mullah Mansour managed to neutralize and neuter opponents. He moved decisively to act against the defectors: appeasing and co-opting those he could, crushing those who would not come back to the fold. After much intense fighting with Mansour's Taliban, Mullah Dadullah died from battle injuries, and Rasoul took over the faction's leadership. Fighting has continued into the spring of 2016, with intense clashes in Herat in March. Yet both in Herat and Nangarhar, the Taliban appeared to be gaining the upper hand against the splinter groups.⁵⁶

So far, the infighting has not hampered the Taliban's overall anti-government operational capacity. Zakir and Rahmani were ultimately persuaded to declare their support for Mansour.⁵⁷ In the spring of 2016, Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, Omar's brother, was appointed the head of the influential Dawat wal Irshad" (the Preaching and Guidance Commission). Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub, Omar's eldest son, was appointed to the executive council, known as the Quetta Shura, and also as the military chief of 15 provinces within the structure of the Taliban's Military Commission.⁵⁸

Now, with the death of Mansour in May 2016, these uneasy truces and accommodations may unravel. It yet remains to be seen how effectively Mansour's replacement Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, a deputy to Mullah Mansour, manages internal cohesion and unity. Even if tensions and fragmenting take place, it remains whether this will signal the unraveling of the entire Taliban enterprise and whether fragmentation *ipso facto* means a reduction in violence, a more capacious ANSF, and at least some Taliban factions more inclined to negotiate. A future significant fragmentation of the Taliban, should it in fact materialize, may simply also make conflict more localized and more complicated, but not necessarily less intense.

Whether as a result of Mansour's alliance-building skills or pressure from the Pakistani intelligence services, Mansour was able to bring the Haqqani network more visibly into the fold. The Haqqanis had long declared their tribute to the leader of the Taliban, and when the United States agreed to swap five key Taliban prisoners held in Guantanamo for Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl whom the Haqqanis held, they handed him over to the Taliban for the swap right away. Nonetheless, the faction has its own independent organizational networks and influence. Yet when Mansour was elected to replace Omar, it was also immediately announced that the leader

⁵⁶ For a detailed background on the fighting in Herat, see Fabrizio Foschini, "Under the Mountain: A Preemptive Taliban Offensive in Shindand," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 20, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/under-the-mountain-a-pre-emptive-taliban-spring-offensive-in-shindand/>

⁵⁷ See, for example, Mirwais Khan and Lynne O'Donnell, "Afghan Taliban Close Ranks around New Leader," *The Associated Press*, February 5, 2016.

⁵⁸ Bill Rogio, "Taliban Appoints Mullah Omar's Brother, Son to Key Leadership Positions," *The Long War Journal*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/taliban-appoint-mullah-omars-brother-son-to-key-leadership-positions.php>.

of the Haqqani network Sirajuddin Haqqani was selected as one of his two deputies. Since then, the influence of the Haqqani network within the Taliban seems to have only grown. In May 2016, U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan characterized Sirajuddin Haqqani as increasingly running day-to-day military operations in Afghanistan and having a strong say in the appointment of the Taliban's shadow governors in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ In the wake of Mansour's death, a possible ascendance of the Haqqanis could produce an even more bloodthirsty Taliban, not its demise.

The Haqqanis within may turn out a headache for Mawlawi Akhundzada or any influential Taliban leaders who might believe that at some point, negotiations with the Afghan government will have to take place and that a long-term civil war in Afghanistan is not desirable. Purveyors of bloody urban attacks, including those in Kabul, the Haqqanis have long exhibited far less restraint in violence and far less of any pretense of minimizing civilian casualties. Nor has the faction indicated any interest in negotiations.

Challenges to Taliban unity – whether resulting from the emergence of IS presence in Afghanistan or following the death of Mullah Omar – have so far not undermined the Taliban's fighting capacity against the ANSF. The Taliban has been mostly able to counter the fragmentation and coopt or suppress major defectors. The fragmentation has thus far not weakened the Taliban on the battlefield to the point of driving the group to the negotiating table. On the contrary, the fragmentation has made negotiating more costly for the Taliban leadership: The leadership has felt compelled to outcompete the IS specter on the battlefield and proved itself as tougher than defecting Taliban commanders. The hope is that the U.S. killing of Mansour will critically weaken the Taliban, but there is no guarantee.

The negotiations joker: The Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement and its disappointments and the (non)talks with the Taliban

Striking some acceptable deal with the Taliban at the negotiating table is the second theory of victory by the Kabul government and, after years of doubts, also the United States, and one that President Ashraf Ghani early on staked his presidency. To some extent, such a prioritization was surprising since as a candidate Ghani had emphasized his technocratic skills, and had pitched his campaign around improving governance and fighting corruption. But as detailed below, the Government of National Unity proved a difficult beast to steer from the get-go; and, at least until the summer of 2016, Ghani focused most of his attention and political capital on the negotiations—seeing Pakistan as the magic key to the negotiated deal, in the same way that Karzai did.

Immediately upon assuming the presidency in September 2014, Ghani engaged in a full outreach to Pakistan. He included an official visit to Pakistan among his first foreign trips, along with visits to Saudi Arabia and China. In all three countries, he sought to obtain support for a new push for negotiations with the Taliban, identifying a negotiated settlement as a key priority of his government. Indeed, China subsequently offered its support for the negotiations and hosted Taliban delegations in Beijing. The Pakistan trip too was widely seen as positive and helpful for

⁵⁹ Mujib Mashal, "Haqqanis Steering Deadlier Taliban in Afghanistan, Officials Say," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2016.

improving Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The arguments put forth to Pakistani officials included that Pakistan could not rely on the Taliban as a trustworthy agent.⁶⁰

For some months, Ghani also managed to persuade key northern and non-Pashtun political opponents, including Abdullah, to go along with the rapprochement to Pakistan. Not all accepted the outreach, with former President Karzai a vociferous opponent of the strategy.

The possibility of counterterrorism cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan—defined by Afghanistan and its Resolute Support partners as Pakistan finally cracking down against the Haqqani network and removing the safe havens that the Taliban leadership has been enjoying in Pakistan—seemed to grow after brutal terrorist attacks in Pakistan. In December 2014, one such attack by Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP, or the Pakistani Taliban) on an army school in left 148 dead, including 132 students. Claiming that the attack was orchestrated by Maulana Fazlullah, the head of TTP from Afghanistan, Pakistan’s army chief, General Raheel Sharif, flew to Kabul to demand Afghan and U.S. cooperation against the TTP and other anti-Pakistan militants. The United States and Ghani responded positively to Pakistan’s anti-TTP cooperation request: the United States repeatedly bombed TTP targets in Afghanistan, and Ghani went so far as to divert Afghan soldiers from difficult and important fighting against the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan’s southern Helmand province in order to take on the TTP at the border with Pakistan. In Peshawar, while consoling the victims of the attack, Sharif again forswore a policy of cultivating some militants while fighting others: “We announce that there will be no differentiation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Taliban.”⁶¹ Further positive messages seemed to be coming from Pakistan throughout the spring of 2015. In April 2015, for example, Pakistani foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasneem Aslam condemned the Taliban’s “spike in violence” in its annual spring offensive in Afghanistan and added that “[Pakistan] would like to see a national reconciliation process in Afghanistan”⁶²—a public message apparently echoing what at least some Pakistani officials had also been telling the Taliban in private. In May 2015, during a visit to Kabul by Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief Raheel Sharif, the Prime Minister seemed to promise Islamabad’s full support against the Afghan Taliban, declaring that “the enemies of Afghanistan cannot be the friends of Pakistan.”⁶³

But just hours later, there was a terrorist attack on the Park Hotel in Kabul where Indian, Turkish, American, and other foreign guests were gathered for a concert. To many Afghans, the attack revealed, once again, Pakistan’s duplicity. At best, the attack showed the limitations of Pakistan’s ability to control and restrain the various militant groups to whom it has frequently provided assistance and support, making it very unlikely that Pakistan could deliver the kind of pressure on the Taliban that would force it to a negotiate deal or to decisively impede its capacity to operate militarily.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Author’s interviews with Afghan and U.S. officials, Kabul, October 2016, and former Pakistani military officials and diplomats, Islamabad and Lahore, May 2016.

⁶¹ Cited in Ismail Khan, “Pakistani Army Chief Asks Afghans to Help Find Taliban Commanders Behind Massacre,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2014.

⁶² Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Tries to Publicly Widen Gap with Taliban,” *Voice of America*, April 30, 2015.

⁶³ Rob Crilly, “American among Foreigners Killed in Kabul Hotel Attack,” *The Telegraph*, May 13, 2015.

⁶⁴ For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Get Over It: The Limits of Afghanistan-Pakistan Rapprochement,” *The Brookings Institution*, May 19, 2015; and Felbab-Brown, “Pakistan’s Relations with Afghanistan and Implications for Regional Politics.”

The Park Hotel attack also intensified the controversy of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) Ghani signed with the Pakistani delegation about establishing cooperation between the Afghan and Pakistani intelligence agencies, elements of which had often been mortal enemies in the past. Afghan CEO Abdullah claimed he was not informed of the deal beforehand, while Rahmatullah Nabil, the head of the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, said he opposed it. (This was not a surprise, as Nabil previously sought to develop control over anti-Pakistani militants such as Latif Mehsud to administer to Pakistan some of its medicine of fostering and using militant proxies. In turn, Pakistan privately demanded that Ghani remove Nabil. Along with the minister of interior, Nabil ultimately resigned in winter 2015 in protest against Ghani's policies, including outreach to Pakistan.) The backlash within Afghanistan against the MoU was widespread – and not just from the northern power groups and former President Hamid Karzai, but also from Pashtun politicians.

And indeed, the summer and fall 2015 brought only a rise in Haqqani attacks and a greater Taliban push in Afghanistan, not the reduction in violence (which Ghani was hoping would be the result of his Pakistan outreach). Even before the fall of Kunduz, Ghani was left with egg on his face domestically, facing an ever-growing disapproval from Afghan politicians, including former President Karzai, for his “appeasement” of Pakistan without getting any results for it.

Nor was Pakistan redeemed by its military operations in North Waziristan in the summer of 2014. Ironically, the United States had for years tried to persuade, cajole, and pressure the Pakistani military and intelligence services to crack down on the safe-havens of the Afghan Taliban and anti-Pakistani militants, such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in North Waziristan, believing such action would critically improve the security situation in Afghanistan by eliminating safe-havens for those who fought ISAF and the ANSF.⁶⁵ In the summer of 2014, after several dramatic terrorist attacks rocked Pakistan, the Pakistani military did so. In public announcements surrounding Operation Zarb-e-Azb (loosely meaning “strike of the prophet's sword”), the Pakistani military promised a comprehensive operation in the region and stated that it was determined “to eliminate these terrorists regardless of hue and color, along with their sanctuaries.”⁶⁶ The recapture of North Waziristan's capital of Miranshah from militants and the closing of their bases there and in surrounding areas did weaken and fracture the militants, but many Afghan Taliban networks managed to slip into Afghanistan. The Afghans argued that Pakistan allowed the Afghan Taliban networks escape on purpose; the Pakistanis maintained that the United States and Afghanistan were incompetent in preventing such an escape, and it was their failure to seal the border on the Afghan side, pointing out that anti-Pakistani terrorists, such as Mullah Fazlullah, one of TTP's leaders, also escaped into Afghanistan.

A few first elements of negotiations with the Taliban emerged in the early summer of 2015, but they did not produce enough political capital for Ghani to compensate for Taliban military pressure. The first of such signs was an unofficial and indirect Track II meeting sponsored by the international NGO The Pugwash Institute in Qatar in May 2015. It was the first such meeting

⁶⁵ For details on the evolving and enduring Pakistani policy toward militancy in Afghanistan and on the U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan triangle, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan and Implications for Regional Politics,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, May 2015.

²³ Ismail Khan and Declan Walsh, “Pakistan Military Wages Assault Against Militants,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2014.

since the suspension of talks in Qatar almost two years before in June 2013.⁶⁷ The Pugwash meeting suggested a series of non-binding confidence-building steps and concessions to the Taliban that it had long sought, including the group's ability to publicly reopen its Qatar office. Apparently, the negotiators also agreed that the Afghan constitution could be a subject of discussion in the negotiations, a move previously opposed by the Afghan government and the United States and frightening Afghan women, minorities, and civil society, all of whom fear the loss of the rights that the Afghan constitution grants them.⁶⁸ Nor was it clear at the Pugwash meeting whether the Taliban had dropped its demand that all foreign troops leave Afghanistan before it would seriously negotiate peace.⁶⁹

More significantly, the Afghan government held a formal meeting with representatives of the Taliban in Urumqi, China in late May 2015. Moreover, these representatives were apparently delivered to the negotiating table by the Pakistani ISI—a development at least slightly vindicating Ghani's outreach to Pakistan. The Taliban negotiators who attended were all believed to be closely linked to the ISI, and ISI officials were present at the meeting.⁷⁰ Delivering the Taliban to the table was a skillful move by the ISI, which in one action could please China (whom Pakistan characterizes as the all-weather, reliable friend, unlike the perfidious United States)⁷¹ and show responsiveness to Ghani, while at the same time exhibit the limits of its influence and preventively deflect pressure for delivering the Taliban more extensively in the future: The Taliban leadership subsequently expressed its unhappiness about the meeting and stated that its delegation to China was not authorized by the leadership to go. But then the announcement of Mullah Omar's death put an end to the talks throughout the winter of 2015.

Despite having little to nothing to show for his outreach to Pakistan, his efforts with the Taliban, and thus paying a large domestic political price, Ghani tried the same strategy in the spring of 2016. Once again, he reached out diplomatically to Pakistan. A series of high-level visits between Afghanistan and Pakistan followed. In a March 2016 visit to Washington for the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, Sartaj Aziz, the national security advisor to Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, became the first high-level Pakistani official to publicly admit that the Taliban leaders and their families live in Pakistan and receive medical services there. Nonetheless, while suggesting that Pakistan could "pressurize" the Taliban, he also emphasized

⁶⁷ For details on the June 2013 negotiations, the political fiasco surrounding them, and their suspension, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Political Games in the Taliban Negotiations," *The Brookings Institution*, June 19, 2013.

⁶⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Michael Semple, "Rhetoric, Ideology and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement," *USIP*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/rhetoric-ideology-and-organizational-structure-of-the-taliban-movement>;

⁶⁹ See, for example, Rod Norland, "Some Progress Is Reported in Informal Afghan-Taliban Talks," *New York Times*, May 4, 2015; and Amana Bakr and Jibril Ahmad, "Taliban, Afghan Negotiators Unable to Agree Ceasefire," *Reuters*, May 4, 2015. See also, The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [the Taliban's formal name], "Statement Delivered by the Delegation of the Political Office of the Islamic Emirate in the International Pugwash Research Conference," May 5, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/05/new-release-from-the-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-full-text-of-statement-delivered-by-the-delegation-of-the-political-office-in-the-international-pugwash-research-conference/>

⁷⁰ Margherita Stancati, "Afghans, Taliban Met in Secret China Talks," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2015.

⁷¹ See, Felbab-Brown, May 2015; and Bruce Riedel, *Deadly Embrace* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012).

the limits of Pakistan's influence over the Taliban's actions,⁷² a statement that is both a convenient excuse and a fact, making the excuse all the more irritating and effective at the same time. A so-called Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation, involving Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the United States was established for negotiations with the Taliban. The process comprised several meetings in the spring of 2016, with the hope that Pakistan would once again deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table. Yet through May 2016, the Taliban seats remained empty. The frustrated Afghan delegation went as far as to demand that the Taliban is declared an irreconcilable group, a move prevented by Chinese diplomats participating in the quadrilateral process.⁷³ Nonetheless, much to the delight of the Afghan government, Mullah Mansour was killed by a U.S. drone attack soon after. Better yet, the drone attack took place in Baluchistan, Pakistan, an area from which the United States had refrained in targeting Taliban leadership out of consideration for the political sensitivities of Pakistan. And to deliver even a stronger signal to the Pakistanis, the drone attack was executed by the U.S. military, not the CIA.⁷⁴

Mansour's presence in Baluchistan once again exposed Pakistani denials of its soft-glove approach to the Afghan Taliban. In fact, despite all the prior pronouncements by Pakistani leaders that Pakistan was now going after all terrorists after the Peshawar school TTP bombing, no tangible action by Pakistan ensued to crack down on the Taliban or the Haqqanis or make the insurgents scale back violence. Instead, as had become the pattern in Pakistan-India negotiations, seemingly encouraging meetings were followed by bloody terrorist attacks, including a particularly deadly one in Kabul in April 2016. Facing an outraged Afghan public and intense power plays by Afghan politicians seeking to bring down his government, Ghani upped his rhetoric against Islamabad and Rawalpindi (the headquarters of Pakistan's military and intelligence service), demanding that Pakistan face international accountability for its support for terrorism.⁷⁵

Afghanistan and the United States could decide to bypass Pakistan in the negotiations and seek to engage the Taliban directly without Pakistan's involvement. But it is neither clear that the Taliban would be any more receptive to the negotiations than currently (which it is not), nor that Pakistan would refrain from trying to sabotage any resulting negotiations. Pakistan in fact has more levers for affecting such sabotage than bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

President Ghani has hoped that the increased involvement of China in Afghanistan and the growth of China's economic interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan would motivate China to persuade Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table and to scale down the violence. In 2015, China faced an unprecedented number of terrorist attacks from Uighur extremists, not just in Xinjiang but also elsewhere in the country. China has also promised a massive economic development package to Pakistan of over \$40 billion, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which would fail to deliver the additional jobs to Chinese and Pakistani workers and

⁷² "Pakistan Admits that Afghan Taliban Leaders Live There," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 3, 2016.

⁷³ Author's interviews with Afghan and Pakistani officials, Islamabad, May 2016.

⁷⁴ Mark Landler and Matthew Rosenberg, "U.S. Strike on Taliban Leader Is Seen As a Message to Pakistan," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2016.

⁷⁵ Mujib Mashal, "Afghan President Demands that Pakistan Take Military Action Against Taliban," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2016.

other economic benefits if disrupted by insecurity in Pakistan. Chinese officials have indeed emphasized to Pakistan the need for safety, but so far they have maintained a *sotto voce* approach. Meanwhile, the Pakistan military has dedicated large military forces to protect the CPEC infrastructure and other investments. Whether China will ultimately get tough with Pakistan will depend on whether Chinese officials believe that Pakistan can provide sufficient security to their economic interests while continuing to distinguish between terrorist groups it cracks down on (such as TTP) and those it does not (such as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis) and whether it can do so in a way that prevents the leakage of terrorism into China.

Even if China joined the international chorus on the issue – and for the first time, Pakistan were to feel concerted pressure from the United States and China and other allies of Afghanistan on the issue—it remains unclear whether Pakistan would in fact have the capacity to take on all of the militant groups operating from its territory. In its recent security operations to stop urban chaos in the mega-city Karachi, albeit successful overall, Pakistani forces targeted predominantly only certain militant and organized crime groups, such as TTP and gangs associated with the political party Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), while not touching other militants and criminal groups, including the Afghan Taliban networks operating in Karachi.⁷⁶ Similarly, in the security operations that the Pakistani military and law enforcement agencies initiated in Punjab in the spring of 2016, only disobedient and unrestrained leaders of militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or of the Punjab Taliban, have been targeted, on the premise that Pakistan simply cannot take on all of the militants at the same time without provoking disastrous violence.⁷⁷ Nor, in the minds of many Pakistani leaders, have some of these groups lost their usefulness against India for Pakistan.

One hopeful outcome is that China and the United States might cooperate more closely on the terrorist issue and China would one day get tough with Pakistan. In this scenario, Pakistan would finally reform its behavior and go after anti-Afghanistan groups. But the chance is at least equally high that China will simply experience the same frustration with Pakistan as the United States has and that, like the United States, it will be unable or unwilling to strongly punish Pakistan in order to preserve its other large geostrategic, geo-economic, and security interests with Pakistan involving India, Iran, and access to the Arabian Sea.⁷⁸ Thus far, China gave Pakistan only a slight slap on the wrist in March 2016 when China signed a military deal with Afghanistan, worth a meager \$70 million but a signal to Pakistan nonetheless.⁷⁹

Within the U.S. policy community, Pakistan's unwillingness to provide any shred of support to Ghani and deliver tangible, if limited, desired action further shrank Washington's already-diminished support for Pakistan. The threat to deny Pakistan the previously-promised military

⁷⁶ Author's interviews with Pakistani government and law enforcement officials, journalists, businessmen, and NGO representatives, Islamabad and Karachi, Pakistan, May 2016.

⁷⁷ Author's interviews with Pakistani government and law enforcement officials, journalists, businessmen, and NGO representatives, Lahore, Pakistan, May 2016.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Andrew Small, "The China Factor," *The Cipher Brief*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/china-factor>.

⁷⁹ Jessica Donati and Ehsanullah Amiri, "China Offers Afghanistan Army Expanded Military Aid," *The World Street Journal*, March 9, 2016.

aid to buy U.S. military aircraft is one example of the loss of favor Pakistan increasingly faces in the United States.⁸⁰

Not just the outreach to Pakistan, but also the negotiations with the Taliban have many opponents in Afghanistan—both in civil society and among key Afghanistan powerbrokers. Key northern powerbrokers such as Bismullah Mohammadi, Amrullah Saleh, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Fazel Ahmad Manawi, and Atta Mohammad Nur have deep reservations about the negotiations. Some have military capacity at the ready and strong support networks with ANSF to oppose any future negotiated deal not satisfactory to them.

But possible opponents of negotiations include not merely northern non-Pashtun elites. Many prominent Pashtun politicians have much to fear from a deal with the Taliban, including not only the loss of their political and economic power, but also quite possibly their very lives. For example, General Abdul Raziq, the police chief of the province of Kandahar and the kingpin of the province, quickly voiced his strong opposition to the negotiations.⁸¹ Any deal with the Taliban will ignite a major power struggle between the Taliban in Kandahar and Raziq, if the Taliban does not succeed in killing him first before. Although Raziq does not yet have national-level power like some of Ghani's other political rivals, such as Manawi, Mohammadi, or Atta, it would be highly costly for Ghani to fully push Raziq into opposition to his government. After all, Ghani crucially depended on Raziq to help deliver the vote in Kandahar and Ghani could not easily replace Raziq there without risking a rise in insecurity in the city and province. At the same time, Raziq is a painful symbol for the Ghani government's inability so far to reduce the power abuse that characterized the Karzai era, and drove many into the hands of the Taliban, which Ghani had campaigned against.

Whenever the negotiations with the Taliban actually get under way, they are likely to last a long time. As a comparison, in Colombia, under conditions much more auspicious for the Colombian government, Bogota's negotiations with The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC), comparatively a much weaker organization than the Taliban and having far less battlefield momentum—have dragged on for over five years. In the Philippines, the negotiations between the government, again in comparison much stronger than the Afghan government, and the main faction of the Islamic separatists—the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)—took 13 years. Many other separatist and jihadist militant groups continue to fight in the Philippines and new ones have emerged.

So far, the preliminary talks have been just about getting to the negotiating table, not even about the process of negotiations. There is as yet little clarity as to the contours of an acceptable compromise for both parties. If the negotiations took place during current conditions on the battlefield, the Taliban would certainly demand a power-sharing deal. Though what kind of power-sharing? Would it seek to revise the constitution? Like the FARC in Colombia, the Taliban has little prospect of doing well in elections more than once, if it even manages to do well in one election: it has little capacity to deliver economically, even if it can ride on its anti-corruption and swift justice credentials. Its strength lies in ruling from behind and not being

⁸⁰ "Time to Put the Squeeze on Pakistan," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2016.

⁸¹ Mirwaiz Addel, "Do Not Compromise with Lives of Afghans in the Name of Peace: Gen. Raziq," *Khaama Press*, May 3, 2015.

responsible for formal governance. The Taliban will certainly demand that it can retain its military forces – whether one day they could be integrated into some constellation of ANSF is a big question mark, including whether northern politicians could tolerate any such a development or prefer to break up the ANSF. The Taliban has demanded unconditionally that U.S. and Resolute Support military forces leave Afghanistan. It has been equally steadfast in its determination that Afghanistan be ruled as an “independent Islamic system,” and has demanded the renegotiation of the Afghan constitution. It is questionable whether its promises of commitment to “civil activities” and “women’s rights in the light of Islamic rules, national interests, and values,”⁸² can be trusted, or, more precisely, whether such statements actually mean any form of moderation compared to its 1990s rule. Similarly, the Taliban has repeatedly stated that it would not interfere in other countries’ affairs or allow Afghanistan to be used for such purposes, yet it has been unwilling or unable to publicly disavow al Qaeda, for instance. A public (and also practical) rejection of global jihad will be highly costly for whomever replaces Mullah Mansour.

Indeed, within the Taliban itself and among the splinter groups from the Taliban, and, of course, from IS, there is significant opposition to negotiations. Many medium-level commanders with operational control in Afghanistan and significant military responsibility oppose a negotiated deal. Many of them have been socialized to a different set of beliefs than the top Taliban leadership and are far more internationally-oriented and anchored into the global jihadi ideology and agenda than the old school Taliban.⁸³ The U.S. policy of targeting mid-level commanders and thus seeking to disrupt the group’s command and control systems further radicalized the new replacement leadership.

However, in May 2016, it appeared that the Afghan government would have at least one negotiating success with militants—a deal with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the nominal leader of Hezb-i-Islami and one of Afghanistan’s most notorious warlords who had been living in exile in Iran for a number of years. Although that deal would deliver a psychological and political fillip to the government, it would make little difference on the battlefield. Hezb-i-Islami has not been a prominent military factor on the battlefield for a number of years, even though maintaining strong influence in particular provinces. Moreover, Hamid Karzai beefed up his political power by incorporating many members of Hezb-i-Islami into his governing circle and these gave remained powerful in the Afghan parliament and various governing structures even under the National Unity Government.

The 2016 autumn of crises: A Loya Jirga and parliamentary and district elections

Not only is there no broad societal and elite consensus on the negotiations with the Taliban, there is equally no such consensus on elemental matters of governance or appreciation by many in leadership positions of the precariousness of Afghanistan’s conditions. Afghan elites remain

⁸² Cited in “Taliban Reaffirms Authority of Its Qatar ‘Political Office,’” *The Associated Press*, January 24, 2016.

⁸³ For evolution of the Taliban, see Antonio Guistozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, “An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

deleteriously fractious and self-interested, engaged in constant brinksmanship, scheming, and plotting, with the belief that they can pursue their power plays without pushing the country over the cliff into civil war. Most of the scheming may well be merely to maximize political leverage and receive jobs for themselves and their clients as compensation for reducing political pressure, rather than in fact seeking to actually topple the Afghan government. But the constant crises and brinksmanship consume most of the political energy in the country and paralyze governance, despite popular disenchantment growing daily and without regard for the fact that Afghanistan cannot afford the same degree of non-governance as Nepal could get away with for a decade *after* the civil war ended there. In Afghanistan, an intense insurgency is burning.

At least in the immediate term, the political space for Ghani to persevere in the negotiations overtures is circumscribed by the upcoming fall 2016 parliamentary and district elections and a possible convening of a Loya Jirga (grand constitutive assembly) to decode, codify, or end the president-CEO arrangement and the Government of National Unity. As part of the NUG agreement and in its first year, Abdullah expected that the 2016 constitutional Loya Jirga would change the Afghan system into a parliamentary one, with a reformed voting system in Afghanistan reflecting that change. In the first year of the NUG, he defined his legacy calling for such a constitutional Loya Jirga.

Yet Ghani clearly prefers the existing presidential system and sees any such future constitutional Loya Jirga (if it takes place at all) as a possible mechanism to reduce Abdullah's role to that of an ordinary vice-president instead of a CEO. Such constitutional changes and the political firestorm they trigger in Afghanistan may be incorporated into the negotiations with the Taliban; conversely, they may further reduce any Afghan domestic political space for the Taliban negotiations. Nonetheless, as originally envisioned in the NUG deal, such a constitutional Loya Jirga cannot take place before parliamentary and district elections are held as they are to name a large portion of the delegates to the constitutional Loya Jirga.

First scheduled for September 2015, the district and parliamentary elections are now rescheduled for October 15, 2016. With presumably only a few months left, few security and procedural preparations have been made even though both Ghani and Abdullah campaigned on devolving power to subnational areas. Electoral reform, promised to be finalized before the elections, has been stalled since summer 2015.⁸⁴ Because of insecurity, the lack of preparation, and snow and bad weather starting in November and excluding large parts of the country from voting, the elections are likely to be postponed again at least until April 2017, if not the fall of 2017. That means that a constitutional Loya Jirga until then. The parliamentary elections are likely to be less explosive than the politics surrounding any Loya Jirga, but they too can generate a severe political crisis in Kabul.

Despite the fact that a constitutional Loya Jirga cannot take place before the parliamentary elections, some Afghan politicians still insist that the NUG pact expires by the end of September 2016. With former President Hamid Karzai foremost among them, these powerbrokers seek to use the alleged expiration of the NUG as a mechanism to end the Ghani-Abdullah government

⁸⁴ For details, see Shahmahmoud Miakhel, "In Afghanistan, No Leadership Means No Elections," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 29, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/29/in-afghanistan-no-leadership-means-no-elections/>.

and augment their own political power, even taking over the government themselves. Karzai has been proposing a traditional Loya Jirga, which he believes he can stuff with his supporters. Both Ghani and Abdullah are opposed to such a format and prefer to Jirga to that alternative. Other opposition politicians, such as Anwar al-Huq Ahadi, former finance minister, have called for rapid national presidential elections to take place before the fall 2016.⁸⁵ Although such calls have so far not gathered any steam, they are indicative of the fractious politics and fragility of existing governing arrangements.

Regardless whether or not there is any binding legal requirement to hold any Loya Jirga (and there is not), the political situation is explosive one way or another. Even the absence of a process will be used as a pretext to rock, if not altogether bring down the government. Political and ethnic sentiments will be whipped up, with street violence potentially used as a coercive political mechanism or erupting spontaneously as a result of miscalculation. Like during the long irresolution of the 2014 presidential elections, the ANSF will face a critical test in how they handle potential ethnically-based and patronage-based street violence and whether or not the ANSF they will itself hold together.

The politics surrounding the traditional Loya Jirga are about bringing the NUG down. However, even without these pressures, the Government of National Unity is deeply troubled. The chasm between the Abdullah and Ghani sides has not closed. Although the formation of the national unity government may have averted civil violence or a coup, it created in another form of paralysis. A year and half after the formation of the NUG, basic daily governance in Afghanistan persists in a debilitating and corrosive limbo. Ghani and Abdullah took months to agree on even some ministerial appointments, even as former ministers had been fired soon after inauguration. Run by deputies and stuck in uncertainty and inertia, the line ministries thus continued to stagnate as vehicles of personal enrichment rather than being reformed into effective tools for delivering public services and administration. Crucial positions such as minister of defense and attorney general were left vacant for over a year, and in some cases, filled only with acting ministers. Even as of late May 2016, the Ministry of Defense and the national intelligence agency are still run by acting heads only. Although all provincial governors were placed in an acting status by Ghani soon after he became president, almost two years later, many have still not been replaced by permanent governors. Kabul also still lacked an appointed mayor.

At the national level, Ghani has sought to deal with the governance paralysis and the awkwardness of the power-sharing arrangement by not sharing power and bypassing Abdullah. Rather than running policy through line ministries and investing in institution-building, at least early on in his administration, Ghani focused on building up the president's office. Greatly expanded, the president's office now not only formulates policy, but also seeks to direct its implementation.⁸⁶

The troubles stemming from the power-sharing arrangement and from Afghan governance in general are a forceful, if distressing, reminder that power in Afghanistan often comes from personal networks and that institutions do not function or are easily subverted by behind-the-

⁸⁵ Erin Cunningham, "Afghan Elites Calling for New Elections," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2016.

⁸⁶ For details, see, for example, Azam Ahmed, "Afghan Leader Said to Be Centralizing Power as Unity Government Plan Stalls," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2015.

scenes powerbrokers. Thus, even reform-minded and knowledgeable technocrats without strong personal networks, such as Ghani, may have a very limited implementation and governing capacity—as well as many political debts—even while formally sitting at the center of power. Building up personal networks over the difficult, complex, and long-term process of building up institutions is readily tempting.

The distribution of power in the president-CEO arrangement, of course, continues to be intensely contested by the two men and their networks. The more Ghani manages to execute policy through different channels, such as the president's office, the more the network behind Abdullah feels disempowered and frustrated, not only with Ghani, but with Abdullah himself since he can deliver less and less to his backers. And indeed, Abdullah is increasingly considered a spent force by his former northern backers who increasingly believe that rocking the government and generating crises is a far more effective way to secure government positions than relying on Abdullah to obtain them.

It is precisely this politics of brinkmanship that debilitates Afghanistan at a time of intense security challenges and economic morass. As long as manufacturing political crises and threatening to topple the government is the basis of political and economic redistribution in Afghanistan, any Loya Jirga or negotiated NUG or even collapsed NUG will not improve governance in Afghanistan or provide a way out of political paralysis. Indeed, while some Afghans believe that the Loya Jirga might end the indecisiveness and paralysis of the NUG, the odds are high that it would not. It would likely merely produce another long-lasting political crisis. Unless Afghan politicians stop behaving in narrowly self-interested predatory and rapacious ways, any new government will face many of the same problems and paralysis as the current NUG is facing.

Meanwhile, the political deadlock, subnational governance paralysis, and security uncertainties are compounding Afghanistan's bad economic predicament and have had a pronounced and lasting effect on Afghanistan's fragile economy. Domestic economic performance in 2013 and 2014 was even worse than expected, with massive economic shrinkage, large unemployment, capital flight, and a chronic as well as acute fiscal crisis as tax and custom collections plummeted. From 9 percent in 2012, Afghanistan's GDP growth shrunk to 3.7 percent in 2013 and 2 percent in 2014.⁸⁷ Afghanistan's domestic revenues declined from a peak of 11.6 percent of GDP in 2011/12 to 9.7 percent in 2013 and continued to drop in 2014.⁸⁸

Uncertain whether a new government would be formed or whether the country would be plunged into civil war, many Afghans stopped passing money to Kabul, amassing as much as possible, pressed by the need for skyrocketing bribes and having to repay debts much faster than previously.⁸⁹ Instead of 50 percent of such revenues being diverted to personal coffers or local

⁸⁷ *Afghanistan Country Economic Update*, World Bank, April 2015, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/05/15/090224b082e8582d/2_0/Rendered/PDF/Afghanistan0economic0update.pdf

⁸⁸ William Byrd, "Afghanistan's Continuing Fiscal Crisis: No End in Sight," *USIP*, Peace Brief No. 185, May 2015, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB185-Afghanistans-Continuing-Fiscal-Crisis-No-End-In-Sight.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Author's interviews with World Bank and IMF officials, Afghanistan, September and October 2014, and Washington, DC, November 2014.

patronage networks, in many cases, that portion grew to 80 percent.⁹⁰ Indeed, revenue theft in 2014 turned out to be the worst since 2001.

Combined with the fact that much of Afghanistan's previous legal economic growth was tied to the money brought in by the foreign security forces which were now leaving the country, the country was experiencing more than an acute fiscal crisis. For months, Kabul could not pay salaries to civil service workers. In addition to the structural fiscal gap of 25-40 percent of Afghanistan's GDP that the international community has had and will have to bridge in the coming years,⁹¹ the international community had to provide immediate stopgap funding of \$190 million to allow the Afghan government to cover at least some of its most politically sensitive financial obligations, such as salaries. Even so the Afghan total budget shortfall was \$537 million.⁹²

In 2015, Afghanistan's government succeeded in delivering a spectacular turnaround in revenue generation: from an eight percent drop in 2014 to a 22 percent rise in 2015. As William Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda show, only one-fifth of this revenue growth came from currency depreciation and other macroeconomic factors. More than half came from stronger and more effective tax collection efforts, including better control of corruption. Monitoring of customs and tax departments improved; corrupt managers were fired. A little less than a quarter came from new taxes, such as on cell phones⁹³—not a measure widely politically popular.

Nonetheless, major structural economic problems remain, with the overall economic outlook grim in the short term, as intensifying violence suppresses investment and augments financial and human capital flight. Unemployment hovers around 25 percent and underemployment is much higher.⁹⁴ At the same time, the NUG paralysis and political infighting have left some 25,000 government positions vacant.⁹⁵ In 2015, the value of the Afghan currency dropped by more than 20 percent, driving up the costs of imports.⁹⁶ The promise of the country's mineral wealth worth \$1 trillion and producing revenues to wean Afghanistan off dependence on foreign aid, opium poppy cultivation, and human development remains just a promise. Meanwhile, Integrity Watch Afghanistan estimates that 1,400 mines operate illegally in Afghanistan, while only 200 pay taxes to the government.⁹⁷

Economic frustration undermines the government's legitimacy and fuels, even indirectly, the insurgency and encourages politics of brinkmanship and populism. Unless the Afghan elites come to realize that not just the national interest but the very survival of the post-2001 political dispensation requires a suspension of narrow, parochial, self-interested politics and better

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Richard Hogg, Claudia Nassif, Camilo Gomez Orsorio, William Byrd, and Andrew Beath, *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013).

⁹² Byrd.

⁹³ William Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda, "Afghanistan's Revenue Turnaround in 2015," Peacebrief No. 201, *USIP*, February 2016, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB201-Afghanistans_Revenue_Turnaround_In_2015.pdf.

⁹⁴ Kristina Shevory, "Once a Bright Spot, Afghan Telecoms Face Unsustainable Losses," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2016.

⁹⁵ "25,000 Posts Still Vacant in the Afghan Government Institutions," *Khaama Press*, March 30, 2016.

⁹⁶ Craig.

⁹⁷ Research by Integrity Watch Afghanistan cited by Najafizada.

governance *and* a political opposition that is loyal to the basic interests of the country and the Afghan people.

Conclusion

Afghanistan passed a critical test in the fall of 2014, when, after an election, power was peacefully handed over to a new government. But the country continues to face a series of political tripwires. Among them are upcoming parliamentary elections and a possible Loya Jirga that may formalize (or undo) the power-sharing deal between President Ghani and CEO Abdullah. Regardless of whether or not the Loya Jirga actually takes place, it or its shadow can unleash an intense political crisis in Afghanistan. The brinkmanship politics surrounding the Jirga and the claimed expiry of the National Unity Government in September 2016, exploited by Afghan politicians to augment their political and economic power, risks unleashing street and ethnic violence. It can put a terrible strain on the ANSF, testing its capacity to maintain basic order even in areas not strongly contested by the Taliban and indeed, even to remain intact itself.. Should such street violence erupt, it also provides an immense opportunity for the Taliban to exploit militarily and politically.

Meanwhile, the power-sharing arrangement has turned out to be a stubborn beast, with governance mostly paralyzed for months. Although improving governance and fighting corruption were key campaign promises of both candidates, almost two years after the formation of the government, the Afghan people notice few improvements.

The potential major political crises come on top of the major structural challenges that Afghanistan has faced and will continue to face for years to come. The Afghan state continues to be dependent on increasingly fickle foreign support to fund large parts of its budget, including all of its military expenditures. Its economic prospects have significantly worsened compared to three years ago and remain dim for the foreseeable future. The promise of mineral resources funding the Afghan state and the development of the country has been slow to materialize.

The Taliban insurgency is more than entrenched; it has engaged in some of the most intense fighting since 2001. Insecurity has increased across the country, and a long hot 2016 summer and autumn lie ahead. Another major security crisis like the autumn 2015 fall of Kunduz City is likely. Civilian casualties continue growing, and Afghan security forces are challenged on the battlefield and suffering from sustainment problems.

After the announcement of Mullah Omar's death in July 2015, the Taliban faced its first fragmentation since its creation in the 1990s. Mullah Mansour who replaced him for the most part managed to quell dissent and reconsolidate the insurgency, even if at the cost of allowing more power within the Taliban to the less controllable Haqqani network.

Amidst this very difficult governance situation, and as a way to address some of the country's structural challenges which have been severely compounded by persisting violence, President Ghani staked his political capital on negotiations with the Taliban. In a bold move, he reached out strongly to Pakistan (often seen by Afghans as the source of all of Afghanistan's problems).

But Pakistan has not managed to persuade the Taliban to either show up seriously at the negotiating table or to reduce its violent insurgency in Afghanistan. Ghani has little to show for his pains, and his domestic political space will continue to shrink as the 2016 autumn of crises approaches.

The U.S. killing of Mansour in May 2016 may set off a new wave of Taliban fragmentation. But while the leadership replacement process may temporarily hamper Taliban attacks in Afghanistan and some years later turn out to be the inflection point that set off the Taliban's disintegration, Afghanistan still needs to brace for a bloody summer 2016. Even with the killing of Mansour, the Taliban's operational capacity has not collapsed. And extensive fragmentation one day, should the Taliban not be able to maintain effective cohesion, may merely fragment violent conflict and make it more complex, without reducing its viciousness and intensity.

Meanwhile, the killing of Mansour further delays the already distant prospect for any meaningful negotiations with the Taliban. Whenever talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban actually get under way, they are likely to last for years, well beyond 2016 when the foreign troop presence is supposed to be reduced to 5,600. Increasingly, it is imperative to direct military operations with an eye toward their impact on negotiations, such as by targeting Taliban commanders opposed to the negotiations who might defect and create splinter groups or embrace the Islamic State.

Whatever the state of (non)negotiations with the Taliban and the state of the military battlefield, governance in Afghanistan cannot persist in the condition of paralysis of the past two years or the rapacious, predatory, and self-interested behavior of Afghan powerbrokers going back to the Karzai era. Starting to deliver governance improvements is crucial for the sustainability of the Afghan state and the basic political dispensation in the country. Better governance buys time, opens up political space for the negotiations, and strengthens the government's hand in them. It also boosts the capacity of ANSF on the battlefield.

It is imperative that Afghan politicians put aside their self-interested scheming and rally behind the country to enable the government to function, or they will push Afghanistan over the brink into paralysis, intensified insurgency, and outright civil war. In addition to restraining their political and monetary ambitions and their various power plays in Kabul, they need to recognize that years of abusive, discriminatory, exclusionary governance, extensive corruption, and individual and ethnic patronage and nepotism are the crucial roots of Afghanistan's predicament. These have corroded the Afghan army and permeate the Afghan police and anti-Taliban militias. Beyond blaming Pakistan, Afghan politicians and powerbrokers need to take a hard look at their behavior in recent years and realize they have much to do to clean their own house to avoid disastrous outcomes for Afghanistan. Not all corruption or nepotism can or will disappear. But unless outright rapacious, exclusionary, and deeply predatory governance is mitigated, the root causes of the insurgency will remain unaddressed and the state-building project will have disappeared into fiefdoms and lasting conflict. At that point, even negotiations with the Taliban will not bring peace.

U.S. policy in Afghanistan faces a difficult dilemma with respect to how to demand from and stimulate in Afghan politicians and powerbrokers better political behavior and governance. The

more tentative and short-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan appears, the more do Afghan politicians, particularly those with ability to leave Afghanistan, engage in hedging and short-term power- and profit-maximizing behavior and liquidate assets to be ready for an exit. On the other hand, the more unconditional U.S. commitment appears, the more Afghan powerbrokers believe they can rock the Afghan government to extract concessions and payoffs, assuming that the United States will prevent crisis-making from being irretrievable and that Afghanistan will not slip into a civil war. Meanwhile, governance suffers, crucial state-building does not take place, and the Taliban accrues tactical victories. And one day, they may severely miscalculate and push the brinksmanship over the cliff.

Thus despite U.S. significant counterterrorism interests in Afghanistan, the criticality of Afghanistan for Pakistan, in the stability of which the United States also has crucial interests, and despite U.S. large sacrifices in Afghanistan and humanitarian interests, U.S. military presence, economic aid, and other forms of engagement should not be unconditional. If, for example, Afghan politics pushes the Afghan security forces into splintering along ethnic lines and ethnic violence in Afghanistan takes on new dimensions, it may well be the time to go out.

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