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AFGHANISTAN 2018: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
AND REGIONAL POWER SHIFTS

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The year 2018 was characterized by parliamentary elections, held on 20 October. While the elections represented an important moment for Afghanistan's democracy, both the run up and the aftermath were characterized by confusion and insecurity, with the election results still not announced by the end of 2018. The security situation remained volatile hindering not only political processes but also the country's economic growth. Civilian casualties caused by anti-government forces remained almost at the same levels of 2017. On the external front, the last 12 months saw both a political and military shift in the US's approach to the country, partly departing from the previously announced South Asia strategy. 2018 also signalled an increase in China's engagement in Afghanistan, as well as the reiteration of the troubled relationship between Kabul and Islamabad.

1. Introduction

Two developments garnered the attention of local and international observers during the year under examination in this article. Domestically, Afghanistan's parliamentary elections, the third after the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001, saw 4 million Afghan voters casting their ballot, Taliban threats and intimidations notwithstanding. In his address to the nation, Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (hereafter indicated as Ashraf Ghani) said that «you [the Afghan people] sent a clear message to the world that you do not want violence, you demonstrated your determination through democracy. You proved to the Taliban that this nation will not surrender to anyone».¹ As some observers opined, the elections represented «a unique opportunity to conduct a credible and inclusive election and structurally entrench democratic institutions in Afghanistan».² Internationally, the United States remained the key actor in defining the present and future of Afghanistan, through engaging in negotiations with the Taliban and by announcing its intention to halve the

1. 'Ghani Thanks The Nation For Successful Elections', *Tolo News*, 21 October 2018.

2. Rafi Fazil, 'How Afghanistan's Next Elections Can Succeed', *The Diplomat*, 7 June 2018.

troops stationed in the country over the course of 2019. At the same time, Pakistan and China have continued to play an important role in shaping the Afghan political trajectory, both domestically and regionally. In order to dissect these two dimensions, as well as a wider array of domestic and international developments which characterized Afghanistan in 2018, this article proceeds as follows: section 2 focuses on domestic political developments, in particular the electoral context which characterized much of the political debate during the year under examination; section 3 moves to assessing the international politics of Afghanistan, with particular attention being paid to the role of the United States, Pakistan and China; section 4 concludes with an assessment of the socio-economic indicators and performance of Afghanistan in 2018; finally, the conclusions will be drawn in Section 5.

2. Afghanistan's 2018 parliamentary elections: amid hope and chaos

In late October 2018, Afghans went to the polls for the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of Afghanistan's bicameral system) elections, in what was the third parliamentary election of the post-Taliban era in Afghanistan. More than 2,500 candidates – including 400 women – competed for 249 seats, of which 68 were reserved for women, ten for Kuchis and one for the Hindu and Sikh communities.³ Elections were held in 33 of the 34 provinces, with the exception of Ghazni in which parliamentary elections will be held at the same time as the presidential ones. In Kandahar, elections were delayed following a Taliban attack which killed Kandahar's police chief, General Abdul Raziq, only two days before the elections.⁴ Continuity, rather than change, characterized the run up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. Most of the issues that marred the 2014 presidential elections, which resulted in the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), were still present in 2018. These included: (a) the lack of electoral reform, especially regarding the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV); (b) the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) inability to operate aloof of government interference and voter registration; (c) insecurity and the role of the Taliban in the Afghan political scenario. The ensuing parts of this section will dissect each of these issues.

3. Jelena Bjelica & Rohullah Soroush, 'Afghanistan Elections Conundrum (20): Women candidates going against the grain', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 19 October 2018.

4. 'Afghans Vote In Kandahar Elections Delayed By Violence', *Radio Free Europe*, 27 October 2018. For an assessment of the implications of this attack, see: 'Kandahar Assassinations Show Rising Taliban Strength in Afghanistan', *International Crisis Group*, 19 October 2018.

2.1. «Everything must change, for everything to stay the same»: The failure to reform the electoral system

The slogans of Afghan political parties invoking «Taghir» (change) in the run up to the 2018 elections were similar to those used by presidential candidates in the 2014 electoral round.⁵ While political parties and candidates used «change» as an appealing idea to attract voters, the Afghan political system fell short of providing the much needed reforms that were promised in the previous presidential elections. The single non-transferable vote was largely regarded as one of the main reasons behind the lack of development of political parties within the country. To understand the continuity between 2014 and 2018, and for comparative purposes, a brief contextualization of the election reform issue is in order. When forming the NUG following the presidential elections in 2014, both President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah agreed to implement electoral reforms and, to this end, a presidential decree established the Special Electoral Reform Commission (SERC), with the task of devising the reform to the electoral system that the NUG agreement promised.⁶ Two batches of recommended reforms were prepared by SERC, and a unanimous consensus was reached among SERC members that the Single Non Transferable Vote system needed to be changed. To this end, the leaders of 21 Afghan political parties organized a conference in Kabul in February 2018 to demand change to the electoral system, in order to allow political parties to have more weight in the October 2018 parliamentary elections.⁷ What the parties demanding change were proposing as an alternative was Multi-Dimensional Representation (MDR), a system entailing that a proportion of seats (100 out of 249 according to a 2015 proposal) would be reserved for political parties, while the remainder would be «open» or «at-large» seats within multi-member constituencies, thereby permitting individuals to contest.⁸ Due to time constraints, and the difficulty of reaching a compromise on such a thorny issue, the electoral system did not change and it was left to the next parliament to address this key issue in a more comprehensive way.⁹

5. Thomas Ruttig, 'Afghanistan Election Conundrum (19): A young «wave of change» for the Wolesi Jirga?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 18 October 2018.

6. Ali Yawar Adili, 'Afghanistan Election Conundrum (5): A late demand to change the electoral system', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 8 March 2018.

7. *Ibid.*

8. 'Report On November 2016 Mission To Afghanistan', *National Democratic Institute and the United States Institute for Peace*, 10 November 2016. See also: 'Reform panel wants 100 parliament seats given to parties', *Pajhwok News*, 29 August 2015.

9. Ali Yawar Adili, 'Thematic Dossier (XX): Electoral reform and the preparations for the 2018 elections', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 10 August 2018.

2.2. *The Independent Election Commission and voters ID*

In addition to the lack of electoral system reforms, there were a host of issues which affected the run up to the elections, ranging from government interference in the affairs of the election commission, to the registration of voters in the elections. In relation to the first point, the IEC lamented the government's interference in the internal matters of the commission, following a controversial proposal by President Ashraf Ghani to put the voter registration stickers on copies of national identity cards. According to Naeem Ayubzada, CEO of Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan, «the government's interference in the (election) commission and the internal problems between members of the institution will lead the election to a crisis».¹⁰ While the crisis did not *de facto* materialize, voter registration was another issue which characterized much of the preparations for the 2018 elections, right up to the days immediately preceding the vote.¹¹ In some provinces, for instance, the number of the eligible voting population was lower than the number already registered. After protests from political parties threatening to boycott the elections if the issue were not resolved, one month before the election the IEC decided to procure, ship and distribute 22,000 biometric devices to verify the identity of voters on election day.¹²

2.3. *Insecurity and government-Taliban relations*

Civilian casualties and absence of human security were a defining feature of Afghanistan throughout 2018 (on this more in section 3). Around the election period though, violence intensified. In the months preceding the elections, the Taliban had been threatening Afghan citizens that they would retaliate against those who decided to cast their ballot. In the words of a Taliban commander quoted by *Reuters*, «burning a house is a small punishment if they [Afghan citizens] are caught in supporting this U.S. operation [the elections] to prolong their stay in Afghanistan».¹³ According to the findings

10. 'Watchdogs Warn Govt Against Interfering In Elections', *Tolo News*, 16 May 2018.

11. In Spring 2018, there was also a row over the inclusion of the word «Afghan» in the new IDs. Just hours after President Ghani and First Lady Rula Ghani were given their cards on 3 May 2018, Chief Executive Abdullah held a press conference saying that the electronic ID card system was not legitimate and did not have the support of the Afghan people. See: 'CEO Slams ID Card Process, Says It Is Not «Legitimate»', *Tolo News*, 3 May 2018. For an in-depth discussion of the 'E-Tazkera row', see: Jelena Bjelica & Ali Yawar Adili, 'The E-Tazkera Rift: Yet another political crisis looming?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 22 February 2018.

12. Ali Yawar Adili, 'Afghanistan Elections Conundrum (21): Biometric verification likely to spawn host of new problems', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 19 October 2018.

13. Matin Sahak, '«If we vote, we'll be killed» - Afghan villages face election threat', *Reuters*, 28 April 2018.

of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), over the three voting days for the parliamentary elections, 435 civilian casualties (56 deaths and 379 injured) in 108 verified incidents of election-related violence were registered.¹⁴ This was the highest level of civilian harm compared to previous elections held in Afghanistan. To prevent this, the Afghan government did try to reach out to the Taliban multiple times throughout 2018. In February, President Ghani offered direct talks with the Taliban «without preconditions», an offer which was rejected by the Taliban leadership.¹⁵ A few months later, in June, Ghani declared a unilateral, nationwide ceasefire, which was unexpectedly reciprocated by the Taliban, leading to a three-day ceasefire. In this period, overlapping with Eid-al-Fitr, Afghan forces and Taliban fighters prayed together and visited areas controlled by the other.¹⁶ However, «the Taliban effectively rejected a second, conditional three-month ceasefire offered by the Afghan government in August 2018» and the attack on Kandahar's police chief in October 2018 not only cast a shadow on the electoral process, but also represented a step back in the reconciliation process.¹⁷

To add another layer of complexity to the situation, domestic fragmentation along ethnic lines was a key area in the run up to elections. The return to the country in July 2018 of the vice president of Afghanistan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, after one year of self-imposed exile in Turkey, is a case in point.¹⁸ It signified on the one hand the government's weakness in dealing with the country's warlords, while on the other, its attempt to ease tensions in Afghanistan's Northern areas, where General Dostum still enjoyed large support among the Uzbeks residing there.¹⁹

2.4. *The elections and their aftermath*

The aftermath of the elections was characterized by the severe delays in announcing the election results. As at the end of December 2018, the IEC had announced the preliminary results for 30 out of 33 provinces although, according to the election timeline, it was due to announce the pre-

14. 'Quarterly Report On The Protection Of Civilians In Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2018', *United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan*, 10 October 2018, p. 1.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Clayton Thomas, 'Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy', *Congressional Research Service*, 12 December 2018.

18. Ahmad Mohibi 'Afghanistan: A Game of Thrones', *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2018.

19. Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, '«Warlord» Afghan vice president returns from exile to ease political tension', *Deutsche Welle*, 23 July 2018.

liminary results on 10 November and the final results on 11 December.²⁰ Besides undermining the credibility of the IEC in the eyes of the population, such a delay raised concerns within the Afghan political parties about the IEC's ability to hold the presidential elections, originally scheduled in April 2019. After weeks of speculation²¹ regarding a potential postponement of the presidential elections, at the end of 2018 the IEC's chairman, Abdul Badi Sayyad, announced that the presidential elections would be postponed from the previous provisional date of 20 April.²² The reasons behind such a postponement were two-fold: first, delaying an all-important presidential election would buy the IEC some time to prepare for the elections and avoid repeating the same mistakes which occurred in the parliamentary electoral round. According to Asadullah Sadati, a member of the opposition Wahdat party, «the parliamentary election was a mess. It was not fair and transparent. We think the postponement brings more time for the election commission to prepare».²³ Second, with the ongoing negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, it was important for the Afghan leadership to be able to seize any potential opportunity stemming from such peace negotiations without being in the middle of an all-important election campaign. The role of the US in Afghanistan, as well as the wider regional dynamics involving Pakistan and China, will be the focus of the next section.

3. *The international politics of Afghanistan in 2018*

During the course of 2018, there has been a growing realization, among both regional and international actors, that stability in Afghanistan is a determining factor in the regional policies pursued by major players. On the one hand, China sees Afghanistan as an important component of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing places Kabul into the wider development-stability nexus strategy, which will be discussed in the ensuing sections of this article. On the other hand, India has been vying to extend its influence in Afghanistan to bypass Pakistan for access to Central Asia. India's stakes in Afghanistan have grown over the last year with the development of the port of Chahbahar in Iran, as a competitor to the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar. For Afghanistan, the development of Chahbahar would provide an alternative to the reliance on Karachi as the major access-point to the Indian Ocean. In addition to Indian and Chinese interests in the

20. 'IEC Criticized For Delay In Announcing Election Results', *Tolo News*, 28 December 2018.

21. See: Rod Nordland and Fatima Faizi, 'Afghanistan Considers Delaying Presidential Election', *The New York Times*, 25 November 2018.

22. 'New Date Set For Presidential Elections', *Tolo News*, 30 December 2018.

23. Mujib Mashal & Fatima Faizi, 'Afghanistan Likely to Delay Election as Trump Presses for Peace Talks', *The New York Times*, 26 December 2018.

country, the United States, Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, all have some degree of interest in Afghanistan. Russia, in particular, has demonstrated a growing and renewed interest in the Afghan scenario, nearly 30 years after its defeat and troop withdrawal in February 1989. To be sure, Russia's interests in the country are driven in part by the threat posed by the Islamic State in Afghanistan, and in part by the desire to be seen as a mediator in the peace process, a role that both Pakistan and China support. Since 2016, Russia has been willing to host meetings aimed at jumpstarting peace talks, but it was only during the year under examination that the Taliban accepted Moscow's invitation to attend an international meeting on Afghanistan, held in the Russian capital in November 2018. Importantly, both Taliban representatives and members of Afghanistan's High Peace Council were present, but not representatives of the Afghan government.²⁴ While no major breakthrough was achieved, it signalled Russia's increasingly important role as a stakeholder in shaping the future of Afghanistan. As a seasoned observer of Afghan developments Barnett Rubin opined, regional countries might have come to realize that the threat posed by Afghanistan's dependence on the United States lies in the fact that the «United States will inevitably tire of the effort to maintain stability in Afghanistan and withdraw, leaving the region with a challenge it is ill prepared to face».²⁵

While it is important to acknowledge Russia's proactive role in Afghanistan, as well as Iran's growing ties with the Taliban as an anti-America move which could potentially give Teheran an edge in a post-US Afghanistan,²⁶ in the ensuing sections the discussion focuses on three main countries, the United States, Pakistan and China, as these were the most prominent actors in Afghanistan's international relations during 2018.

3.1. *The United States in Afghanistan*

In a shift from the previous policy outlined by President Donald Trump in August 2017, the US approach to Afghanistan has developed into a two-pronged strategy, aimed at engaging the Taliban leadership on a political front, and withdrawing Afghan and US military forces to consolidate urban areas.²⁷

24. 'Afghanistan war: Taliban attend landmark peace talks in Russia', *BBC News*, 9 November 2018.

25. Barnett R. Rubin, 'Is Afghanistan Ready for Peace?', *Foreign Affairs*, 30 July 2018.

26. For an assessment of Russia's interests see: 'Why Russia and China Are Expanding Their Roles in Afghanistan', *Stratfor*, 5 September 2018; for an overview of Iran's growing ties with the Taleban, see: Michael Kugelman, 'Shutting Out Iran Will Make the Afghan War Even Deadlier', *Foreign Policy*, 16 November 2018.

27. For an assessment of President Trump's South Asia Strategy, see: Diego Abenante, 'Afghanistan 2017: Trump's «New Strategy», the Af-Pak conundrum, and the crisis of the National Unity Government', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 369-386.

From a military standpoint, the Trump administration has urged Afghan troops to retreat from sparsely populated areas of the country.²⁸ This was aimed at protecting Afghan forces from being attacked in isolated and rural areas, and to ensure that the government and the Afghan National Army (ANA) control Kabul and major urban centres such as Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz.²⁹ While it is too early to assess such a strategy, according to the latest available data produced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the district control in the country, as of July 2018, was as follows: 56% of Afghan land was under government control; 32% contested between the government and anti-government forces; and 12% (down from 13% in August 2017) was controlled by the insurgents.³⁰

Another important development which is worth noting is the Trump administration's decision in the last days of December 2018 to withdraw some 7,000 troops from the Afghan theatre. The decision came at the same time as President Trump's announced withdrawal from Syria, prompting the resignation of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis.³¹ While some saw this as a move to detach Afghan forces from Western support and therefore boost their independence, there were also concerns that such a move could have potentially undermined the already weak Afghan troops, which had suffered significant losses against the insurgents, even with high levels of American and NATO support.³²

Politically, the US's shift was all the more important since it moved the focus away from the «Afghan-led, Afghan owned» mantra which characterized the American approach to the Afghan peace process.³³ Most of the emphasis in previous attempts was to bring around the negotiating table both the Afghan government and the Taliban. The latter has always opposed such a scenario, holding the line that they would only engage in peace negotiations with the Americans, since they were the ones who toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. Against this backdrop, since July 2018, when the revised approach was being implemented, three rounds of talks between Americans and the Taliban took place. The first was in late July 2018, when American representatives met with the Taliban leadership in Doha, Qatar, where the Taliban had established an informal political office. While previous efforts of this kind had failed because the Afghan government was not

28. Thomas Gibbons-Neft & Helene Cooper, 'Newest U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan Mirrors Past Plans for Retreat', *The New York Times*, 28 July 2018.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 'Quarterly Report To The United States Congress', 30 October 2018.

31. 'U.S. to Withdraw About 7,000 Troops From Afghanistan, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 20 December 2018.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Mujib Mashal & Eric Schmitt, 'White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations', *The New York Times*, July 15, 2018.

on board and denounced such talks, the Afghan government commented that they «appreciate help and support from any side that can facilitate the peace process».³⁴ The second meeting between American Diplomats and Taliban representatives occurred in mid-October, just days before the parliamentary elections.³⁵ The October meeting was important for two reasons: first, as reported by the Wall Street Journal, Zalmay Khalilzad, the former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan nominated by secretary of state Mike Pompeo in September 2018 as special adviser on Afghanistan, stopped in Saudi Arabia to meet with the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia's Afghanistan policy has been a careful balance of standing behind Pakistan's support for the Taliban on the one hand, while on the other officially supporting the American and Afghan governments' efforts to achieve a peaceful solution.³⁶ Second, in the wake of the meeting, Afghan president Ghani «expressed concern and resistance to American officials about the prospect of talks that did not include his government» on the grounds that by excluding the Afghan government, this would only marginalize the country's leadership.³⁷ The third meeting of 2018 occurred on 17 December in the United Arab Emirates and saw the participation of a number of countries, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

According to Afghan officials, Taliban leaders based in Pakistan were part of this third round of talks, which can be interpreted as a sign that Pakistan might be using its leverage on the group to bring it to the negotiating table.³⁸

3.2. *Limited progress in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations*

On 1 January 2018, President Donald Trump said on social media that «the United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!».³⁹ This was echoed by Afghan president Ghani, who said in February 2018 that Pakistan

34. Taimoor Shah & Rod Nordland, 'U.S. Diplomats Held Face-to-Face Talks With Taliban, Insurgents Say', *The New York Times*, 28 July 2018.

35. Mujib Mashal, 'U.S. Officials Meet With Taliban Again as Trump Pushes Afghan Peace Process', *The New York Times*, 13 October 2018.

36. According to The New York Times, a former Taliban finance minister described how he travelled to Saudi Arabia for years raising cash while ostensibly on pilgrimage. See: Carlotta Gall, 'Saudi Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government', *The New York Times*, 6 December 2016.

37. Mujib Mashal, 'Afghan Leader Blindsided' by U.S. Meeting With Taliban, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 18 October 2018.

38. Mujib Mashal, 'Taliban Appear Ready to Discuss Peace Talks, Except With Afghan Officials', *The New York Times*, 17 December 2018.

39. Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, 1 January 2018 (<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/947802588174577664>).

was «the center of the Taliban».⁴⁰ These allegations stem from the fact that since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan insurgents have operated from safe havens within Pakistan. Pakistan's leverage on the Taliban was also very visible in 2018, with Islamabad allegedly playing a role in reaching a ceasefire during Eid-al-Fitr.

According to Pakistani officials quoted in the Pakistani Newspaper *Express Tribune*, «the Taliban agreed to the proposal only if China and Pakistan become guarantors», with Pakistan acting as a facilitator and China mediating between the Taliban and the Afghan government.⁴¹ To understand and contextualize these dynamics, it is important to examine the key motives of Pakistan's Afghan policy, whose roots are grounded in the country's history. Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan are best characterized by mutual distrust. There are four major determinants behind this policy.

First, the legacy of the British Raj's policy towards Afghanistan provided a blueprint for Pakistan's relations with the country. The British policy consisted primarily of keeping Afghanistan under its direct influence through interference in the country's internal affairs, including the installation of a friendly ruler.⁴² This is an approach that the Pakistani establishment has repeatedly used to ensure that it could, to a certain extent, maintain its influence in the neighbouring country.

Second, the competition over influence in Afghanistan, coupled with the Pakistani establishment's fear of a pro-India government being installed in Kabul has represented an important determinant of Pakistan's Afghan policy. In Pakistan's narrative, India is not only using its presence to expand its influence in Afghanistan, but also to fuel tensions in Pakistan's Balochistan, where the China-managed port of Gwadar, the starting point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is located.⁴³

Third, besides the India factor, another element of concern of the Pakistani leadership has been the so-called Pashtun question, which emerged in 1947 following a referendum held in the North West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), inviting the Pashtuns to join India or

40. 'Pakistan Is The Center Of Taliban, Ghani Tells The Nation', *Tolo News*, 8 February 2018.

41. Kamran Yousaf, 'Afghan Eid truce backed by Pakistan, China', *The Express Tribune*, 11 June 2018. For an assessment of China's increasing role as a mediator in the Afghan conflict, see: Miwa Hirono, 'China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non Interference: The Case of Post-2014 Afghanistan', *The China Quarterly*, 2018, 2, pp. 1468-2648.

42. Rasul Bux Rais, *State, Society, and Democratic Change in Pakistan*, New York: OUP, p. 71.

43. For an analysis of the evolution of the port of Gwadar against the backdrop of Pakistan's domestic and foreign policies, see: Filippo Boni, 'Civil-military relations in Pakistan: a case study of Sino-Pakistani relations and the port of Gwadar', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 2016, Vol. 54, Issue 4, pp. 498-517.

Pakistan. The vote was overwhelmingly in favour of Pakistan.⁴⁴ Afghanistan, for its part, has always claimed that the referendum was a unilateral step taken without Afghan consultation or consent.⁴⁵

The fourth element which must be considered is the fact that Pakistan considers Afghanistan as the bridge to the commercial and energy markets represented by the Central Asian Republics (CARs).⁴⁶ After the announcement of the CPEC, Pakistan has tried to revitalize its relations with CARs, in particular with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The latter represents an important player in Pakistan's economic outreach to the region since it would be the starting point of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. The latter, connecting the energy-rich Central Asian nation with the South Asian countries, was inaugurated in February 2018, with leaders of the four countries attending its ground breaking ceremony in Serhetabat, followed by another in Herat.⁴⁷

This cursory overview of the rationale behind Pakistan's Afghan policy can help us understand the dynamics which defined the year under examination. After a capricious start, exemplified by the two quotes at the beginning of this section, in order to try and normalize relations between the two countries, Islamabad and Kabul initiated a process in February 2018 to agree on the Afghanistan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, covering the areas of military cooperation, counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, economy, trade and transit, and refugee repatriation.⁴⁸ After several rounds of talks, taking place between February and mid-May 2018, the two sides finalized an agreement on the action plan on 14 May in Islamabad.⁴⁹

In the attempt to continue to diffuse tensions between the two countries, several additional developments occurred. First, after being elected as prime minister, Imran Khan immediately referred to Afghanistan as one of his top foreign policy priorities. In his victory speech in the immediate aftermath of the election, Pakistan's new prime minister said that Pakistan would make all efforts to bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ In his words, 'if there is peace in Afghanistan, there will be peace in Pakistan. We will make every effort to achieve peace there. We want to have open

44. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox*, London: Hurst & Co., p. 153.

45. Frédéric Grare, 'Pakistan Afghanistan Relations In The Post-9/11 Era', *Carnergie Endowment for International Peace*, 29 September 2006.

46. C. Christine Fair, 'Pakistan's Relations with Central Asia: Is Past Prologue?', *Central Asian Survey*, 2008, 31 (2), pp. 201-227.

47. 'Bonhomie marks opening of TAPI gas pipeline', *Dawn*, 24 February 2018.

48. 'Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to continue talks on joint action plan', *Dawn*, 3 February 2018.

49. 'New framework for talks with Afghanistan becomes operational', *Dawn*, 15 May 2018.

50. 'Imran Khan's speech in full', *Al-Jazeera*, 26 July 2018.

borders with Afghanistan one day.⁵¹ In September 2018, Pakistan's minister for foreign affairs, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, made his first official foreign visit after taking office to Afghanistan. During this visit, he met with President Ghani, chief executive Abdullah and minister for foreign affairs Salahuddin Rabbani. The fact that the new foreign minister decided to undertake his first overseas visit to Afghanistan was largely regarded as a signal of the importance that Afghanistan will play in the new administration's foreign policy.

How far these attempts at mending fences will go remains to be seen. After all, civilian control over Pakistan's Afghan policy has been extremely limited, given that the military has always seen this as one of its key policy prerogatives. The backlash from politicians and supporters of the army, opposed to Imran Khan's promise to grant citizenship to the children of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, is a case in point. The military's stance on this issue – to repatriate refugees accused of carrying out terrorist acts within Pakistan – is in contrast with the prime minister's pledge; something which may need to be reconsidered in order not to interfere in the reserved domain of the military.⁵² In addition to this, a number of episodes which occurred during the second half of 2018 suggest that the path towards normalized relations along the two sides of the Durand Line remains difficult. First, on 22 October, President Ghani publicly stated that the assassination of the Kandahar chief of police had been planned in Pakistan.⁵³ The allegation prompted a strong response from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, which rejected the claims and called on Afghan officials to channel discussions of security concerns through the mechanism established earlier that year.⁵⁴ Alongside these developments, Pakistan's decision to build a fence along the Durand Line coupled with cross-border shelling, are also creating tensions in the relationship. In particular, the fencing of the border was initiated in 2017 and, according to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the army's media wing, is due to be completed by the end of 2019.⁵⁵ While Pakistan believes that the fencing will prevent terrorist infiltration in both directions, Afghanistan opposes Pakistan's unilateral move on the grounds that the fence goes along a border that Afghanistan does not recognize, as well as hindering trade prospects between the two countries.⁵⁶

51. *Ibid.*

52. 'Pakistan's Imran Khan skirts issue of Afghan refugees' citizenship', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2018.

53. 'Raziq's Assassination Was Plotted in Pakistan: Ghani', *Tolo News*, 23 October 2018.

54. 'Pakistan Rejects Afghan Claim Of Involvement In Kandahar Attack', *Rferl.org*, 24 October 2018.

55. 'Afghan border fence to be ready by Dec 2019: ISPR', *Dawn*, 16 December 2018.

56. 'Pakistan's Fencing of Afghan Border Remains Source of Mutual Tensions', *VOA News*, 15 October 2018.

3.3. *China and Afghanistan in 2018*

China's approach to Afghanistan in 2018 is very similar to that of the previous year and is primarily driven by China's national security interests to stabilize Xinjiang, as well as by Beijing's desire to push ahead with the development of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. All of this with an eye on how the US' announced withdrawal will unfold over the course of the coming months. The year 2018 saw an increase in China's engagement with Afghanistan, which is part of the wider shift towards a more proactive role that Beijing has sought to take in the Afghan scenario since 2014. To be clear, China has no intention of supplanting NATO or the United States. Instead, it has adopted a more multi-lateral approach to Afghanistan, in order to bring around the same table a number of actors with interests and stakes in the present and future political developments in the country. By acting as a «*primus inter pares*», China has engaged with a number of regional organizations and mechanisms (e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Heart of Asia Process) in order to promote Afghan developments as well as encourage different actors to play a role in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Further evidence of this is the establishment of the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM) which gathers together the chiefs of army staff for China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan, with a focus on the Wakhan Corridor which they all share, and is at the core of China's interests.⁵⁸

China's national security interests have revolved primarily around the stabilization of its western periphery and the prevention of the spread of terrorism to its westernmost region, Xinjiang.⁵⁹ As a Chinese scholar noted in *Asian Survey* in 2018, «the security situation in Afghanistan has an important impact on China's western border region».⁶⁰ The centrality of Afghanistan in China's calculations was exemplified by reports that appeared at the end of 2017 about China's plans to build a military base in Afghanistan's North-Eastern province of Badakhshan. While some reports quoted Afghan Defence officials providing details of the base, in August 2018 China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, denied any such development.⁶¹ Regardless, the Badakhshan area and the Wakhan corridor represent an important area for China's internal stability. Beijing

57. Raffaello Pantucci, 'China in Afghanistan: A Reluctant Leader with Growing Stakes', *ISPI Commentary*, 18 October 2018.

58. *Ibid.*

59. For more on this see: Matt Ferchen & Renny Babiarz, 'The development-stability nexus at home and abroad', *Asia Dialogue*, 5 October 2017.

60. Zhu Yongbiao, 'China's Afghanistan Policy since 9/11 Stages and Prospects', *Asian Survey*, 2018, 58 (2), p. 294.

61. For a discussion of China's plans, see: 'China's Increasing Security Buffer on Its Western Frontier', *Stratfor*, 11 January 2018; for China's rebuttal, see: 'China denies planning military base in Afghanistan', *Reuters*, 29 August 2018.

has been concerned for quite some time about Uighur fighters using the corridor to return from Syria and Iraq and see this as a direct threat to its own domestic stability.⁶²

Afghanistan is becoming increasingly important for China's Belt and Road Initiative. Although originally excluded from official BRI maps, now Afghanistan features prominently in most official documents related to the BRI. Kabul has been keen to be part of the initiative. Officials in the Afghan Ministry of Economy said that the project will help improve economic stability in the country as well as increase the connectivity both within Afghanistan and with regional countries. According to Suhrab Bahman, a spokesman for the Ministry of Economy, Afghanistan should focus «on issues inside the country. Our railway system should be established».⁶³

While the economic implications of the initiative are clear, it is also important to highlight the role that China intends to play as a mediator between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As part of China's wider efforts to improve relations between Kabul and Islamabad, at the end of December 2017, the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue was held in Beijing. On that occasion, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, noted how the three countries «share integrated interests».⁶⁴ In December 2018, the three sides met again, this time in Kabul, and the official communique stated that through such a trilateral engagement one of the aims was to enhance «the momentum of improvement of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations».⁶⁵ As China's commitment to the BRI grows, the stability of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations becomes an important bridge in the wider regional connectivity as a link between CPEC and Central Asian markets.

4. *The socio-economic conditions of Afghanistan in 2018*

Lack of security is still the major issue hindering any substantive and long-lasting progress in Afghanistan's socio-economic situation. Three main aspects are considered here: human security, economic growth and opium production.

Human security in Afghanistan remained rather precarious throughout 2018. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan's (UNAMA) report, in the period between 1 January and 30 September

62. 'China's increasing security'

63. 'Afghanistan Upbeat About China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Tolo News*, 10 June 2018.

64. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, *The 1st China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue Convenes*, 26 December 2017.

65. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministers of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan Hold Second Dialogue', 15 December 2018.

2018, there were 8,050 civilian casualties (2,798 deaths and 5,252 injured).⁶⁶ Of these, anti-government elements caused 5,243 civilian casualties (1,743 deaths and 3,500 injured), accounting for 65% of all civilian casualties. Within this 65%, 35% were attributed to Taliban, 25% to Daesh/ISKP, and 5% to unidentified anti-government elements.⁶⁷ Insecurity was not only a factor casting a shadow over the electoral process, as previous sections of this article have highlighted, but also an important aspect of the country that has hindered its economic growth throughout 2018. According to the Asian Development Bank, «drought and scant improvement in security appears to hold growth in Afghanistan» thereby revising the growth forecast from 2.5 to 2.2 in the year under examination.⁶⁸ More positive signs came from exports and the inflation rate. Exports reportedly increased in the first half of the year, benefitting from expanded air connections with India for high-value goods such as fruit.⁶⁹ Low inflation was also an important development in 2018 and this drop from 5% in 2017 to 3.5% in 2018 has been driven by declining food prices.⁷⁰

According to the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2016-2017, a report jointly produced by Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organization and the European Union, published in May 2018, the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line increased from 34% in 2007-2008 to 55% in 2016-2017. In addition to this significant increase in the poverty rate, other socio-economic issues were identified in the country's demographics – with nearly 48% of Afghanistan's population under 15 – and in the precarious security situation in parts of the country.⁷¹ This was also one of the key findings of the Asia Foundation's annual survey in Afghanistan. According to the survey, fear for personal safety remained roughly at the same level as 2017 (70.7% in 2017 and 71.1% in 2018) thereby reflecting the «public's continued concern for personal safety».⁷²

One additional aspect that is important to consider in this brief overview of the socio-economic situation of Afghanistan in 2018, is the state of narcotics production during the course of the last 12 months, in particular opium. According to the latest Afghanistan Opium Survey, an annual report produced by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) of Afghanistan in

66. 'Quarterly Report On The Protection Of Civilians In Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2018', *United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan*, 10 October 2018, p. 1.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

68. Asian Development Bank *Asian Development Outlook 2018 Update*, 2018, p. xiii.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

70. The World Bank, *The World Bank in Afghanistan. Overview*, October 2018.

71. Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17. Highlights report*, Kabul: CSO, 2018.

72. The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2018: A Survey of the Afghan People*, 4 December 2018.

collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the area in which opium poppy cultivation is present in Afghanistan «remains at very high levels despite a decrease by 20 per cent compared to 2017».⁷³ While the production of opium decreased by 29% in 2018, the report also highlights that this was primarily due to drought affecting the Northern and Western areas of the country, rather than an improvement of the rule of law in these areas.⁷⁴ As such, the progress made in this area might not necessarily translate into long-term, consolidated gains.

5. Conclusion

The political and economic situation in Afghanistan in 2018 resembled that of the previous year. The National Unity government, sworn in after the 2014 presidential elections with a mandate to deliver much needed reforms, failed in this respect and continued to lack unity. While the parliamentary elections represented an important moment for Afghanistan's democracy, the delay in announcing the results, and the consequent postponement of the 2019 presidential elections, have undermined the credibility of the whole democratic exercise. Afghanistan's regional and international environment remained in flux, with a host of actors ranging from the US to China, aiming to maximize their interests in the country.

73. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter Narcotics and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018*, November 2018, p. 14.

74. *Ibid.*