CURRENT ISSUES

PÉTER MARTON, PhD

A STALEMATING STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN?

Abstract:

The article argues that the West is looking for a stalemate instead of a victory in Afghanistan, even if this statement requires further clarification in the sense of specifying what would happen to the key actors in the conceived stalemated situation. The article first provides an overview of the discourse in West about "stalemate in Afghanistan," then examines Western strategy in the light of key decision-makers' statements and noteworthy developments on the ground. It then concludes with an analysis of what sort of stalemate constitutes Western aims in Afghanistan and how it is hoped to be achieved, as well as with an assessment of the enormous difficulties this strategy faces, profoundly questioning its validity.

Keywords: Afghanistan, conflict, stalemate, US foreign policy, Taliban, insurgency, Pakistan, terrorism, al-Qaida

Introduction

A closer meaning of "stalemate" is a situation in which two parties or players deadlock each other. Neither can make a further move. In the game of chess this entails that neither can make a *legal* move, including the player who ought to move. In contrast, in conflict resolution, stalemate usually implies a mutually hurting situation, where the parties may be looking for a Way Out depending on whether they perceive that there is a mutually and sufficiently enticing opportunity, perhaps with the aid of mediation by third parties. In the negotiation process it certainly helps if they have valid spokespersons and it is important that a protracted hurting stalemate must not deepen hostility of the two parties and that they remain sensitive to the hurting nature of their situation. In a nutshell, that is how the moment may become "ripe" for conflict resolution.[1]

---

[1] ZARTMAN, William (2001): *The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments*. In: The Global Review of Ethnopolitics, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2001, p. 8-18.

In Afghanistan, not a single one of the above criteria may be present for a stalemate and a ripe moment for conflict resolution, even if momentarily the situation clearly is hurting for all involved. The puzzle investigated in this chapter is how, in spite of this, there is much talk about a stalemate in Afghanistan, and why, if there is a challenge to this, it comes mostly in the form of a defence of the Afghanistan effort alluding to how the war can still be won, even as the current Afghan government is told it should reconcile and prospectively share power with the Taliban. The reason for what at first sight may seem an odd constellation of affairs is found to lay partly in the realities of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, partly in the mundane world of electoral politics, and partly in the cognitive processes of Western decision-makers.

The discourse on "stalemate in Afghanistan"

Stalemate has become a trending word in the context of the Afghanistan conflict. Google's search engine was able to retrieve 13,600,000 hits for "Afghanistan stalemate," while Bing found 861,000 (on 12 September 2012). In the summer of 2012, the *New York Times* has even written of the family feud between Mahmoud Karzai and Shah Wali Karzai, two brothers of President Hamed Karzai, upon the latter's alleged illicit transfer of $55 million from the family company funds to his own corporation, as one where "the two sides settled into a bitter stalemate."[2] *Google Trends* measures a relative rise of search activity related to the keywords "Afghanistan, stalemate" for the period of June 2009 to May 2012.[3]

A review of one and a half years' contents[4] in the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post*, and various other major newspapers may offer a particularly illustrative sample of references to a stalemate in or related to Afghanistan. It reveals that "stalemate" is usually implied in a vague and varying sense to refer to various different confliction situations between different dyads of actors. Some of the causal mechanisms assumed to play a role in creating these

---

[2] RISEN, James (2012): *Intrigue in Karzai Family as an Afghan Era Closes*. New York Times, 4 June 2012. At http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/04/world/asia/karzai-family-moves-to-protect-its-privilege.html?pagewanted=all (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[3] From http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=Afghanistan%2C%20stalemate&cmpt=q, as retrieved on 10 October 2012.

[4] That is, since the official end of the take-off phase of the U.S. surge effort, and the beginning of troop drawdowns.

stalemates are hinted at, but no systematic attempt can be observed to link up the various different stalemates into a comprehensive assessment of the conflict complex. This may have to do with the *Matryoshka*-doll nature of the war in Afghanistan: it constitutes a set of conflicts within other conflicts escaping a narrow definition by reference to clearly delineated actors and parties.

Frequently it is the conflict between the West and the Taliban that is deemed a stalemate. Most recently, experienced residents of Kandahar, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn write in the *New York Times*, concerning the designation of the Haqqani faction within the Taliban insurgency as a terrorist organisation, which qualification will not help as "there can be no winner in the current stalemate". They base this partly on the claim that "the industrial-scale targeting of midlevel Taliban commanders in Afghanistan has led to the rise of a younger, more uncompromising generation of leaders."[5] Other observers and pundits add their say, too, to the debate. One source speaks of an impasse in a dynamic sense: gains in southern Afghanistan as a result of the surge of mostly U.S. troops to the war theatre may have pushed the insurgency to other areas.[6] Another source describes a "perpetually escalating stalemate."[7] Yet another one implies stalemate in its conventional, static sense, speaking of "a complete stalemate" on the political front while war is raging.[8] Meanwhile, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann warns that "transition has to be toward a defined goal, not a cliff over which we tumble;" in a circular argument he then claims that therefore negotiations are necessary with the insurgents, hopefully not to be broken by the "current stalemate."[9]

Contrary to these sources, reacting to press reports in February 2012 in the wake of the leaking of a classified NATO report on the situation in Afghanistan,

[5] VON LINSCHOTEN, Alex Strick and KÜHN, Felix (2012): *A Pointless Blacklisting*. New York Times, 12 September 2012. At http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/opinion/blacklisting-an-afghan-network-is-pointless.html?_r=1& (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[6] SHASHANK, Joshi (2012): *Afghanistan heads towards a messy, unresolved stalemate*. Telegraph, 19 September 2012. At http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/shashankjoshi/100181834/afghanistan-heads-towards-a-messy-unresolved-stalemate/ (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[7] STAR, Alexander (2011): *Afghanistan: What the Anthropologists Say*. New York Times, 20 November 2011. At http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/books/review/afghanistan-and-other-books-about-rebuilding-book-review.html?pagewanted=all (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[8] KHATTAK, Afrasiab (2011): *Stalemate in Afghanistan*. Dawn, 15 November 2011. At http://dawn.com/2011/11/15/stalemate-in-afghanistan/ (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[9] NEUMANN, Ronald E. (2012): *U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014*. Washington Post, 13 February 2012. At http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/us-troops-will-remain-in-afghanistan-beyond-2014/2012/02/13/gIQA3lxFOR_story.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

CIA Director David Petraeus denied that this report described a stalemate in Afghanistan: "We did a word search for the word 'stalemate' (…) it is not in there," he said,[10] even as he tried to maintain a semblance of objectivity related to the US intelligence community's own assessment of the Afghan conflict, similarly referring to a deadlocked situation (in a National Intelligence Estimate or NIE).[11] "Twice I thought the assessment was too negative… Two other times, I felt that the community was actually too positive," Petraeus related.[12] Similarly to him, Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta also attempted to counter the notion of a stalemate in the NIE, calling 2011 a "significant turning point [for the better]."[13]

As seen here, in these instances stalemate may be both *political* and *military*, *static* as well as *dynamic*, and either *mutually hurting* or *hurting to a more general collective* of e.g. "Afghans." Three of the above sources speak of a dynamic military stalemate ("insurgent leaders are replaced with ones even more committed to the fighting"; "insurgents pressured in one area merely move to another area"; "hostilities escalating and the number of violent incidents as well as combatants on both sides growing, without a change of outcome"). One source speaks of a static military stalemate whereby negotiations are necessary to bring about lasting results ("if you take the military out and there is no deal in the meantime, transition leads nowhere"), while another focuses on the political impasse ("they do not negotiate, and Afghan blood is being spilt in the meantime"). At the same time, decision-makers with personal stakes in producing military victory (Petraeus or Panetta) seek to deny that there may be a stalemate as any non-winning situation is inconvenient for them to acknowledge, even in the face of opposition to a relatively upbeat assessment by other voices within U.S. government.

Notably, this proliferation of utterances of a stalemate comes in the wake of long years throughout the course of which phrases such as "we are winning every battle, but we cannot win the war" [stalemate] and that "we have our

---

[10]MILLER, Greg (2012): *Petraeus, with plenty of practice, sticks to message*. Washington Post – Checkpoint Washington, 3 February 2012. At http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/petraeus-with-plenty-of-practice-sticks-to-message/2012/02/03/gIQA8kwJnQ_blog.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[11]IGNATIUS, David (2012): *Panetta suggests earlier Afghan withdrawal*. Washington Post – Post-Partisan, 1 February 2012. At http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/panetta-afghanistan-withdrawl-begins-and-ends-with-politics/2012/02/01/gIQAmoaliQ_blog.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[12] MILLER, 2012, *op. cit.*

[13] IGNATIUS, 2012, *op. cit.*

watches, but the Taliban has time" [a losing situation] have long become common parlance. In various locales across Afghanistan, from Now Zad in Helmand province to the Korengal valley in Kunar province, different military units have come to lethal *local* stalemates with insurgents: being able to take terrain temporarily but unable to hold all of it with less than enough men, experiencing stalemate primarily in terms of (missing) mass of manpower.[14] Other, distinct sources focus on the structure of Afghan politics and speak of a longer-term impasse in the sense of "structural anarchy" (as e.g. Reyna uses the term[15]), where "no one is truly in charge" because although "local power brokers might possess wealth, honor, a reputation for piety, abundant weaponry or powerful allies, but they [lack] the means or the will to convert those gifts into decisive authority,"[16] a constellation studied in general within the "failed state" literature.

"Stuck in a stalemate" has in the meantime become a recurring expression to describe the state of affairs facing the Pakistani military in Pakistan's borderlands,[17] where in the words of one of the sources just quoted "a witches' brew of militants" may be holding Pakistani forces at bay.

Such understanding of the difficulties faced by Pakistani troops stands in contrast with varyingly open talk of conflict with Pakistan itself. Especially in the wake of the November 2011 Mohmand incident where soldiers of Pakistan's Frontier Corps were killed in a NATO/US airstrike and Pakistan decided to close its land borders to ISAF supplies into Afghanistan, the press regularly talked of "bitter stalemate"[18] related to "countless matters" of which the November 2011 incident was but one. The structural flaws or incompatibilities

---

[14]PHILLIPS, Michael M. (2009): *Stalemate*. Wall Street Journal, 23 May 2009. At http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203771904574179672963946120.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[15]REYNA, Steve (2002): *Imagining monsters : a structural history of warfare in Chad (1968-1990)*. In: Friedman, Jonathan, ed.: Globalization, the State and Violence. Walnut Creek, Altamira, 2002.

[16] STAR, 2011, *op. cit.*

[17] See e.g. SCHMITT, Eric (2011): *U.S. Prepares for a Curtailed Relationship With Pakistan*. New York Times, 26 December 2011. At http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/world/asia/us-preparing-for-pakistan-to-restrict-support-for-afghan-war.html?pagewanted=all; and SCHMITT, Eric (2012a): *Lull in Strikes by U.S. Drones Aids Militants in Pakistan*. New York Times, 8 January 2012. At http://www.nytimes. com/2012/01/08/world/asia/lull-in-us-drone-strikes-aids-pakistan-militants.html?pagewanted=all; both downloaded on 14 January 2013.

[18] See e.g. DEYOUNG, Karen (2012): *United States, Pakistan appear to have reached a stalemate on key issues*. Washington Post, 14 June 2012. At http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/united-states-pakistan-appear-to-have-reached-a-stalemate-on-key-issues/2012/06/14/gJQAFOEYdV_story.html; and SCHMITT, Eric (2012b): *Clinton's 'Sorry' to Pakistan Ends Barrier to NATO*. New York Times, 4 July 2012. At http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/07/04/world/asia/pakistan-opens-afghan-routes-to-nato-after-us-apology. html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss; both downloaded on 14 January 2013.

of the relationship have been addressed with various telling terms such as "red lines [need to be drawn]" or that "recalculating [is needed]." Pakistani and U.S. sources have been quoted as saying that "Both countries recognize the benefits of partnering against common threats, but those must be [continuously] balanced against national interests as well" and that it may be "better to have a predictable, more focused relationship than an incredibly ambitious out-of-control relationship," respectively.[19] From the Pakistani part, demands for an all-weather partnership encounter the selective momentary interest in cooperation on the part of the United States. Reminiscent of the end of the 1980s war against the Soviet Union and its allies in Afghanistan in the wake of which Pakistani officers likened their treatment by the U.S. to being "a condom that can be flushed down the toilet," a Pakistani Muslim League (Q) politician is quoted as saying that Pakistan feels "like a rainy-day girlfriend [of the United States]."[20] Needless to say, these existing structural tensions of the relationship are aggravated by those countless other matters mentioned above, most importantly the drone campaign which is, however, key to the U.S. policy in the region: serving as it is the elimination of al-Qaida and its bases in Pakistani areas.

A further and final strand of discourse in the press about stalemate relates to the latter, pivotal conflict which itself triggered U.S. and Western involvement in the region post-9-11. The clash with radical Islamists may have produced a major degradation of the capabilities of al-Qaida, impeding it in functioning as a key node for Jihadi networks globally, but we may still be far from a similarly reassuring condition on the global level, looking across the entire Islamic world – turbulent as the latter is as a result of the "Arab Spring" and the complicated times that followed it. As a result, Ian Bremmer and David Gordon speak, with special regard to the West's uncertain attitude towards rebels in Syria, of a stalemate there that makes "rhetorical or military support for the Syrian opposition from the United States, Turkey or Saudi Arabia very difficult."[21]

In contrast to the widespread use of the term in the press, one does not encounter the word stalemate as particularly often used in academic literature. Only a few journal articles use the word at all in some context related to

---

[19] SCHMITT, 2011, *op. cit.*

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] BREMMER, Ian and GORDON, David (2012): *Battling the Qaeda Hydra*. New York Times, 28 March 2012. At http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/28/opinion/battling-the-qaeda-hydra.html?pagewanted=all (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

Afghanistan. Tondini uses the term in its most common military context and sense, while Chaudhuri and Farrell refer to a stalemate in Indo-Pakistani relations.[22] Roberts' article stands out as one addressing the issue of a *possible* stalemate in Afghanistan in more depth. He calls for alternative policies, seeing no prospect of a "clear victory [for the Kabul government]." He refers to "combining fighting and talking" as a strategy possibly leading to a stalemate which is not necessarily as bad as it is difficult in his view: given the Taliban's perception that they are in a position of future strength.[23]

This does not mean that the existing scholarly literature on Afghanistan has failed to deal with the problems of conflict resolution. To the contrary, and this speaks of the impracticality of framing the current situation as a stalemate in the sense of two parties keeping each other indirectly in check regardless of how much decision-makers and the media use the term. Providing a less than full inventory here: Bapat (2010) warns of moral hazards in the negotiation process on the side of Hamed Karzai's administration who may not be interested in seeing the U.S. leave;[24] Giustozzi (2007; 2008), MacGinty (2010) and others write of the conflict relationship between the West and the Kabul government on the one hand, and the up-to-this-day powerful commander-politicians from the former Northern Alliance on the other;[25] Nixon and Ponzio (2007) and Fänge (2010) among others address the troubled relationship between local and centralising forces in Afghanistan;[26] Tadjbakhsh (2010) as well as Schmeidl and Karokhail (2009) address the disadvantages of the neoliberal paradigm of state-building and cultural and institutional sources of resistance to it locally;[27]

---

[22] TONDINI, Matteo (2008): *From Neo-Colonialism to a 'Light-Footprint Approach': Restoring Justice Systems.* International Peacekeeping, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 237-251; CHAUDHURI, Rudra and FARRELL, Theo (2011): *Campaign disconnect: operational progress and strategic obstacles in Afghanistan, 2009–2011.* International Affairs, Vol. 87 (2).

[23] ROBERTS, Adam (2009): *Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan.* Survival, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 29-60.

[24] BAPAT (2010).

[25] GIUSTOZZI, Antonio (2007): *War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen.* International Peacekeeping, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 75-89; GIUSTOZZI, Antonio (2008): *Bureaucratic Façade and Political Realities of Disarmament and Demobilisation in Afghanistan,* in: Conflict, Security and Development, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 169-192; MAC GINTY, Roger (2010): *Warlords and the liberal peace: state-building in Afghanistan.* Conflict, Security & Development, Volume 10, Issue 4, pp. 577-598.

[26] NIXON, Hamish and PONZIO, Richard (2007): *Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement.* International Peacekeeping, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 26-40. FÄNGE, Anders (2010): *The State of the Afghan State.* Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8 January 2010. At http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100108AFaenge_paper_website_version.pdf (downloaded on 29 May 2012).

[27] TADJBAKHSH, Shahrbanou (2009): *Conflicted Outcomes and Values: (Neo)Liberal Peace in Central Asia and Afghanistan.* International Peacekeeping, Vol. 16, No. 5, pp. 635–651; SCHMEIDL, Susanne and KAROKHAIL, Masood (2009): *"Prêt-a-Porter States": How the McDonaldization of State-Building Misses the Mark in Afghanistan – A Response.* Berghof Research Center, April 2009. At http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue8_schmeidl_karokhail_comm.pdf?q=damaged (downloaded on 29 May 2012).

Marton and Hynek (2011) investigate conflicts within the state-building and security-assistance coalition itself;[28] while others such as van Bijlert (2009) or Foschini (2010), to name but a few examples, have written extensively about the extremely complicated web of local conflicts in locales such as Uruzgan and Baghlan provinces, in the south and the north of Afghanistan, respectively – including conflicts in the insurgents' own ranks and between their various factions.[29]

Needless to say, to this list of complications of the conflict *with as well as within* Pakistan be added. The latter seals the deadlock of the conflict complex, and in fact "stalemate" as a description may best fit to the U.S.-Pakistani relationship as such – the inherent constraints to what the U.S. can do in Afghanistan mean that the U.S. has to operate with certain extra-legal moves (such as plausibly deniable drone strikes and unauthorised special forces raids) at least sometimes, but choosing the timing and treading very carefully on such occasions. Notably, in these cases it is acting primarily not for the sake of a victorious resolution of the Afghan conflict but rather in the framework of its conflict with the global Jihadi movement – targeting al-Qaida as well as the faction regarded as one of its key local allies, the Haqqani faction.

Western decision-making and strategy: in the hope of constructive stalemating

President Obama made one of his key decisions about Afghanistan policy on 11 November 2009, the occasion of the eighth meeting of the Afghanistan war review process he had initiated. He pushed the curve showing planned troop-level changes to the left on the time axis, on a graph he and his team had studied and contemplated exhaustively by then. Inbound troops would first elevate the overall number of troops in the Afghan theatre and then reach a reversal or inflection point whereby it would start diminishing in the wake of the beginning of troop withdrawals, over the span of eighteen months altogether – a period the President was interested in sliding forth in time. The decision was a

---

[28]HYNEK, Nik and MARTON Péter (2011): *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction*. Routledge: London and New York.

[29]VAN BIJLERT, Martine (2009): *Unruly commanders and violent power struggles: Taliban networks in Uruzgan*. In: Giustozzi, Antonio, ed.: Decoding the new Taliban. Columbia University Press: New York, 2009, 155-178; FOSCHINI, Fabrizio (2010): *Campaign Trail 2010 (2): Baghlan - Divided we Stand*. Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7 July 2010. At http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=886 (downloaded on 29 May 2012).

calculated gamble, described as early as in December 2009 as "betting that a quick jolt of extra forces could knock the enemy back on its heels enough for the Afghans to take over the fight."[30]

By this time, the guerrilla war in Afghanistan had consistently deteriorated on a year-on-year basis since the very beginning of the Afghanistan mission. 2005 saw significant escalation as a result of a number of factors and saw the introduction of the mass use of tactics familiar from the Iraqi guerrilla war: IEDs and suicide bombings. The trend in all kinds of incidents was pointing clearly upwards. Seasonality made these curves bend up and down following the rhythm of the guerrilla season, with a relative drop in violence over the winter periods. Yet these low points registered higher and higher as time progressed. Insecurity was growing in all parts of the country, even in hitherto relatively safe, peaceful districts.

Obama inherited *this* war from the Bush administration, faced with the task of stemming the tide. More importantly, however, he had a realistic chance of dealing a decisive blow to al-Qaida, the organisation that triggered U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in the first place. The means to this end was now available in the form of drone strikes which first significantly escalated over the last year of the Bush administration. Obama himself came to office with a right-of-centre foreign policy position, with a pledge to be firm on national security issues, including the possibility of putting more pressure on Pakistan and pursuing terrorists there.

Without quite understanding how or why this would work, the brunt of the surge effort was eventually directed to southern Afghanistan, with a lesser focus on eastern Afghanistan. This may not have been an ideal allocation of forces, but over the course of the following two years the insurgency's rise was eventually arrested. Violence did remain at very high levels (higher than pre-surge levels in fact), but in some dimensions even a decrease could be observed, including in the crucial category of direct-fire incidents, possibly one of the best measures of an insurgency's vitality. Enemy-initiated attacks showed year-on-year monthly decreases from 2011 to 2012 in the crucial regions of south,

---

[30] BAKER, Peter (2009): *How Obama Came to Plan for 'Surge' in Afghanistan*. New York Times, 6 December 2012. At http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

southwest, and east.[31] Insurgents have, however, adapted to the changed circumstances with shifts in the focus of their activity, and began efforts at destabilising from the inside the very Afghan armed forces that were being built up against them, orchestrating *green-on-blue* incidents with the strategic aim of undermining "partnered" ISAF-Afghan military operations. In this, they have achieved remarkable success, even as NATO claims that perhaps only as much as 25 percent of these attacks may be truly insurgent-organised.[32] This is happening parallel to continuing defections, including straight into the insurgency's ranks,[33] and to mounting losses of the Afghan army which may have suffered fatal casualties in the order of 1,000 in 2012, a 20% increase over 2011.[34]

The dubious achievement of turning the trends in other incident categories came upon a 33,000-strong troop reinforcement by the Obama administration: 47,000 less than what the U.S. military was originally requesting.[35] The eventual decision about the surge came on 23 November 2011, and was in favour of "Option 2A" on the table, informally dubbed "Max Leverage."[36]

As part of a strategy of "fight, build, and talk", the leverage of an increased fighting force offered no better hope than an elongated time frame over which the Taliban could be engaged in negotiations, would perhaps feel the pressure to do so, but would still have the ultimate strategic advantage of its staying power in the face of the overwhelming but at the same time transient phenomenon of U.S. and coalition military presence. In the best-case, but certainly not the most realistic, scenario, the Taliban's and other insurgent groups' capabilities would be degraded sufficiently to force them to agree to a

---

[31]ISAF Monthly Data – Trends through August 2012. 24 September 2012. At http://www.isaf. nato.int/images/stories/File/20120924_NIU_ISAF_Monthly_Data-Release%20%28Final%29.pdf (downloaded on 14 January 2013), p. 4.

[32] DOHERTY, Ben and WELCH, Dylan (2012): Green-on-blue: death's colour. The Age, 31 August 2012. At http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/greenonblue-deaths-colour-20120830-253kj.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[33]MOI Downplays Security Forces Joining Insurgents. Tolo News, 24 January 2013. At http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/9195-moi-downplays-security-forces-joining-insurgents (downloaded on 25 January 2013).

[34] BESANT, Alexander (2012): Afghan soldier deaths record leveli n 2012. Global Post, 30 December 2012. At http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/afghanistan/121230/afghan-soldier-deaths-reach-record-level-2012 (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[35] LAKES, Lara (2009): Gen. McChrystal Wants Up to 80,000 More Troops, Even As He Warns About Afghan Corruption. CNS News, 14 October 2009. At http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/55442 (downloaded on 19 August 2010).

[36] BAKER, 2009, op. cit.

binding agreement, including a pledge not to work with al-Qaida and other global jihadi organisations in the future, so strategists seemed to hope.

Pakistan's role was and is equally seen as crucial in this respect. A classified report last year leaked to the BBC showed that Western intelligence services, based partly on interrogations of Taliban personnel, continue to see the ISI as "thoroughly aware of Taliban activities and the whereabouts of all senior Taliban personnel." Furthermore, according to their information "Senior Taliban representatives, such as Nasiruddin Haqqani, maintain residences in the immediate vicinity of ISI headquarters in Islamabad, Pakistan" while "The Haqqani family, for example, resides immediately west of the ISI office at the airfield in Miram Shah."[37] The hope in this respect seems to be that if the West offers Pakistan the prospect of lasting cooperation, i.e. no full abandonment upon the exit from Afghanistan, Pakistan may be interested in making sure that the Taliban, or the Haqqanis for that matter, are separated from the global jihadi movement and Afghanistan does not become the latter's base once again. In fact, the designation of the Haqqani faction as a terrorist organization already seems to point in the alternative direction of threatening Pakistan with being designated as a state sponsor of terrorism, should it not find cooperation with the West good enough a deal – although U.S. officials deny this publicly.[38] Naturally, for Pakistan calculations include not only the U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan triangular relationship but a view to the South Asian security complex and for example the growing U.S.-India partnership as well, making this a complicated choice for them.

With regard to such complications, U.S. strategy "has to keep the gunpowder dry." Besides intentions to maintain a strong Special Operations Forces presence in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, a particularly telling aspect of preparing for coming eventualities is the way some officials talk of the Prompt Global Strike (PGS) program. The latter is a dubiously feasible plan involving, in its most simple version, the use of ballistic missiles with conventional or other non-WMD warheads which could provide for the capability of striking a target within a short amount of time ("promptly," almost). Feasibility is questionable given how such missiles would fly on a

---

[37]In quotes: Excerpts from Nato report on Taliban. BBC, 1 February 2012. At http://www.bbc.co.uk/ news/world-asia-16829368 (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[38] U.S. not designating Pakistan as state sponsor of terrorism following Haqqani terror tag. ANI, 9 September 2012. At http://in.news.yahoo.com/u-not-designating-pakistan-state-sponsor-terrorism-following-072419648. html (downloaded on 9 September 2012).

trajectory over other nuclear powers' territories, risking unwanted consequences. A 2009 article in *International Security* nevertheless reckoned with the possibility of taking out "emerging, time-sensitive, soft targets, such as exposed WMD launchers, terrorist leaders, and sites of state transfers of WMD to terrorists or other states within roughly one hour of a decision to attack," unlike in the case of the 1998 strikes at training camps in Afghanistan (in the wake of the East African Embassy bombings) which took far more time to prepare and execute.[39] Others have made similar points.[40] The assumption has become so commonplace that in a 2010 piece the New York Times introduced PGS simply as "Called Prompt Global Strike, the new weapon is designed to carry out tasks like picking off Osama bin Laden in a cave, if the right one could be found."[41] In the same article, Air Force general Kevin P. Chilton is quoted as saying: "to strike a target anywhere on the globe that range from 96 hours to several hours maybe, 4, 5, 6 hours. (…) That would simply not be fast enough if intelligence arrived about a movement by Al Qaeda terrorists."[42] The preparation for such a hazardous use of military power continues to maintain the unceasing stalemate with the jihadi movement as well as with Pakistan.

In the meantime, Valid Spokespersons hardly seem to exist on the side of any of the parties involved but the United States. Hamed Karzai, in one of his interviews referred to the multi-faction insurgency by saying that one "cannot talk to an adversary whose only address is that of a suicide bomber's."[43] Taliban negotiators in Qatar, for their part, speak of Hamed Karzai's government as a party to be excluded from the first, "external" dimension of talks (with the U.S.), only to be included in the second, "internal" phase as but one of many Afghan "factions."[44] At the same time, the High Peace Council appointed by Hamed Karzai negotiates not so much on behalf of his government as such, with the predominantly Pashtun Taliban, but on the part of many of the former Northern

---

[39]SUGDEN, Bruce (2009): Speed Kills: Analyzing the Deployment of Conventional Ballistic Missiles. International Security, Vol. 34, No. 1, 113-146.

[40] U.S. not designating Pakistan as state sponsor of terrorism following Haqqani terror tag. ANI, 9 September 2012. At http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41464.pdf, p. 28.; http://csis.org/blog/case-conventional-prompt-global-strike, downloaded on 14 January 2013.

[41] SANGER, David E. and SHANKER, Thom (2010): U.S. Faces Choice on New Weapons for Fast Strikes. New York Times, 23 April 2010. At http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/world/europe/23strike.html?_r=0, (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[42] Ibid.

[43] KHATTAK, 2011, op. cit.

[44] Exclusive Interview with Top Taliban Leaders. NHK World; the full text of the interviews made exclusively by NHK; some parts were originally broadcast in "Today's Close-Up" on 6 September 2012 in Japan and on 11 September 2012 on NHK WORLD TV, in English. At http://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/english/tv/todayscloseup/index20120911.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

Alliance's elements. Former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani became the default, least opposed choice of a leader for the body at the time when the Council was set up in 2010 – and he was then murdered on 20 September 2011 by assailants coming from Pakistan who claimed to be peace envoys sent by the insurgents. His was one in a series of high profile assassinations that year of major figures opposed to the Taliban. Also questioning the usefulness of talks with insurgents is how there have been occasions in the past when false negotiators were assumed to be valid spokespersons, such as the infamous alleged shopkeeper from Quetta,[45] or when elements within the Taliban have in the past themselves denied the legitimacy as deal brokers of those who negotiated supposedly on their behalf. Meanwhile, Pakistan continues to play a dubious role, well illustrated by the incarceration of Mullah Beradar, the former military commander of the Taliban, who had earlier reportedly been involved in direct talks with Hamed Karzai[46] – and the dubiousness of Pakistan's role in turn itself stems from the difficulty of locating where the country's real power centre is (within the key military and other segments of its establishment) and how much control it exactly has over its own actions.

The Western concept of conflict resolution in Afghanistan

That talks are underway in accordance with U.S. intentions may stem on the part of the Taliban out of instrumental calculations about winning inevitably, but on the part of the U.S. they are nevertheless a logical consequence of what the U.S. feels it can and cannot do towards four key actors in the region: al-Qaida, Pakistan, the Taliban, and the Afghan government. If we portray this in a simple scheme, U.S. options relating to these actors' interests and preferences could be denoted as "D" (denial), "C" (change) and "S" (satisfy).

The United States is interested in decisively incapacitating al-Qaida (D), in containing radical Islamism in Pakistan (C), in neutralising or eliminating sources of support for jihadi organisations there (D), in offering strategic reassurance to Pakistan that it be not interested in seeking the alliance of jihadi

---

[45] CAVENDISH, Julius (2010): *Nato 'duped by impostor who posed as Taliban negotiator.'* The Independent, 24 November 2010. At http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/nato-duped-by-impostor-who-posed-as-taliban-negotiator-2142105.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[46] NELSON, Dean and FARMER, Ben (2010): *Hamid Karzai held secret talks with Mullah Baradar in Afghanistan*. Telegraph, 16 March 2010. At http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7457861/Hamid-Karzai-held-secret-talks-with-Mullah-Baradar-in-Afghanistan.html (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

organisations again (S), in stopping the Taliban from violently overthrowing the current Afghan government (D), as well as in possibly changing the Taliban into a force ready to compromise in political affairs and perhaps better respect universal human rights (C), at the same time as it expects better governance from the current Afghan government, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [GIROA] (C). This is in response to the threat of terrorism by al-Qaida, support by Pakistan to Jihadi organisations, support by Pakistan to actors (e.g. the Taliban) supporting Jihadi organisations, and support by the Taliban to jihadi organisations.

The current talks with the Taliban, combined with military pressure, can be claimed to support all of these objectives. The U.S. may be willing in the course of this to trade D for C vis-à-vis the Taliban: to stop fighting them if they change in key respects – primarily by no longer working with al-Qaida and secondly by agreeing to better respect human rights. Thinking in terms of Johan Galtung's notion of the conflict triangle, this could address one of the key Pakistani incompatibilities with U.S. intentions by making D selective in their case: they will not be denied the chance to try to assert and protect their interests through the Taliban in Afghanistan, as having a non-hostile government in Kabul is important related to fears in Pakistan's military establishment of strategic encirclement by an Indian-Afghan alliance; this of course would leave D in place as far as jihadi organisations are concerned. This constellation would in an ideal world subsequently lead to the accomplishment of C in the case of the Afghan government, and would at the same time be compatible with the accomplishment of D in the case of al-Qaida.

The trade with both the Taliban and Pakistan is a difficult one, however, and it is made more difficult by the limited time available for the U.S. to put pressure on them. But even if the vague quid-pro-quos would be possible, question marks would still remain concerning whether C in the case of the Afghan government would lead to acceptable results – both in terms of human rights and, clearly more importantly from a U.S. perspective, in terms of its compatibility with denial of sanctuary to al-Qaida.

Out of the relevant dyads in the above scheme, the U.S. faces a stalemate mostly with Pakistan (it is beyond the limitations of this chapter to address al-Qaida's strategic prospects on the global level, but the U.S. is largely winning

against al-Qaida-Central and is incapable of winning against the Taliban). U.S. drone strikes provided a major part of the solution to the primary challenge the U.S. was facing when it became involved in Afghanistan: al-Qaida's elimination. This, however, seems to reproduce the problem of incompatibility with Pakistan. Thinking once again in terms of Johan Galtung's conflict triangle, with incompatibilities on top, attitudes on the left and behaviour on the right, a circular interaction of the elements of the triad may be at the works. Drone strikes work to resolve the key U.S.-Pakistani incompatibility related to the presence of directly anti-U.S. jihadi organisations in the region, but they cause casualties, create resentment, and thus reinforce both a negative image of the U.S. in Pakistan and provide a beneficial milieu for anti-U.S. jihadi organisations within Pakistani society and within the Pakistani state and its military establishment.

Of the five actors accounted for above, the Afghan government is most deprived of autonomous agency. It depends on U.S. willingness to promote its role for access to the negotiation process –one of the sticking points in talks with representatives of the Taliban. In the wake of the 2009 elections, imperfect as they were, and with generally negative Western attitudes towards a government perceived as highly corrupt, President Karzai's administration is often targeted with surreal impulses from the West. It is often blamed for the conflict overall, and presented as a stubborn obstacle in the way of peace.

On other occasions, Karzai is offered various analogical perspectives on conflict resolution (from Tajikistan to Bosnia) to realise how he cannot be too adamant in insisting on concessions or gestures from insurgents. For example, during a September 2012 visit by politicians from Northern Ireland, UK Ambassador Richard Stagg and unionist MP Jeffrey Donaldson offered him the following insights: "you can change things, just as France and Germany did in 1945. However ghastly, however bloody, however deep the feuds, the hatreds, a moment can come, does come, when they can be addressed" (Stagg) and "You don't make peace with your friends. You have to be able to talk to the Taliban" (Donaldson).[47] Stagg and Donaldson on this occasion were also trying to create the impression that they were not interested in selling a Northern Ireland analogy as such from the point of view of neutral outsiders – with questionable

---

[47] HOPKINS, Nick (2012): *Northern Irish politicians to advise Afghan government on peace talks*. Guardian, 23 September 2012. At http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/23/northern-irish-politicians-afghan-talks?newsfeed=true (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

credibility, and more as mere formality. In the end, their comments were reminiscent of Foreign Minister William Hague's immediate reaction to Burhanuddin Rabbani's assassination in September 2011, a development indicative of the dubious use of negotiations. Hague essentially formulated a response on behalf of the Afghan government, saying: "we are confident that this will in no way reduce the determination of the government of Afghanistan to continue to work for peace and reconciliation."[48] Arguably, the example of the British sources cited here also highlights the distinct calculations of coalition partners on the side of the U.S. Even a staunch ally like the UK is more eagerly looking for a tolerable exit than the U.S., and this makes the quest for "C" vis-à-vis the Afghan government the more pronounced, even if this may not necessarily be the best route to the kind of destination envisioned above.

Conclusion

The blaming of the Afghan government and the regularly recurring utterances towards it of how it is supposed to find itself in a mutually hurting stalemate where everything must be done for conflict resolution right away may also function as convenient excuse for not trying too much to achieve lasting success in Afghanistan. If even "our Afghans" cannot function as agents of good governance – how could one have any hope in efficiently assisting Afghanistan? This seems to be the question implied and it is a message that resonates conveniently with sceptical domestic audiences. What is lost is that good governance is understood as one conceives it in a Western sense, within the current Afghan institutional framework created under decisive U.S. and Western influence, and in the face of violent challenges to the Afghan leadership's authority.

Tolerable exit for the U.S. and Western countries can, however, only be assured if the forces on the side of the Afghan government are built up to be strong enough for truly stalemating the conflict with the insurgents once they will be left largely on their own. To this end, their integrity will also have to be preserved in the face of various subversive challenges. On this hinge, the success of Western efforts at manufacturing a stalemate whereby they could escape the Afghan battlefield with a good enough deal, even as high-ranking

---

[48]*Rabbani death will not hurt Afghan reconciliation bid: Hague*. AFP, 20 September 2011. At http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jjGxKPjlUZQz603ZqegKUdQbsKtw?docId=CNG.a8a 1185f4a08d2928999ea8643dc5bd9.401 (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

military officers are in fact not optimistic about this. The New York Times recently reported that "American generals and civilian officials acknowledge that they have all but written off what was once one of the cornerstones of their strategy to end the war here: battering the Taliban into a peace deal."[49] Apparently, the hope held by many now is this: "American officials say they hope that the Taliban will find the Afghan Army a more formidable adversary than they expect and be compelled, in the years after NATO withdraws, to come to terms with what they now dismiss as a "puppet" government."[50]

Bibliography (select references)

1. FÄNGE, Anders (2010): *The State of the Afghan State*. Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8 January 2010. At http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100108AFaenge _paper_ website_version.pdf (downloaded on 29 May 2012).
2. FOSCHINI, Fabrizio (2010): *Campaign Trail 2010 (2): Baghlan - Divided we Stand*. Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7 July 2010. At http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=886 (downloaded on 29 May 2012).
3. GIUSTOZZI, Antonio (2007): *War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen*. International Peacekeeping, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 75-89.
4. GIUSTOZZI, Antonio (2008): *Bureaucratic Façade and Political Realities of Disarmament and Demobilisation in Afghanistan*, in: Conflict, Security and Development, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 169-192.
5. HYNEK, Nik and MARTON Péter (2011): *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction*. Routledge: London and New York.
6. MAC GINTY, Roger (2010): *Warlords and the liberal peace: state-building in Afghanistan*. Conflict, Security & Development, Volume 10, Issue 4, pp. 577-598.
7. NIXON, Hamish and PONZIO, Richard (2007): *Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement*. International Peacekeeping, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 26-40.
8. SCHMEIDL, Susanne and KAROKHAIL, Masood (2009): *"Prêt-a-Porter States": How the McDonaldization of State-Building Misses the Mark in Afghanistan – A Response*. Berghof Research Center, April 2009. At http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue8_schmeidl_karokhail_comm.pdf?q=d amaged (downloaded on 29 May 2012).

---

[49] ROSENBERG, Matthew and NORDLAND, Rod (2012): *U.S. Abandoning Hopes for Taliban Peace Deal*. New York Times, 2 October 2012. At http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/world/asia/us-scales-back-plans-for-afghan-peace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (downloaded on 14 January 2013).

[50] *Ibidem*.

9. TADJBAKHSH, Shahrbanou (2009): *Conflicted Outcomes and Values: (Neo)Liberal Peace in Central Asia and Afghanistan.* International Peacekeeping, Vol. 16, No. 5, pp. 635–651.

10. VAN BIJLERT, Martine (2009): *Unruly commanders and violent power struggles: Taliban networks in Uruzgan.* In: Giustozzi, Antonio, ed.: Decoding the new Taliban. Columbia University Press: New York, 2009, 155-178.