

The Nation State and Afghanistan

By Paolo Cotta Ramusino¹

The cohesion and stability of nation-states are put under stress by linguistic, ethnic, and religious divisions within the States. Afghanistan not only has *all* of these divisions, but it also borders with other States that have linguistic, ethnic and religious affinities with different parts of Afghanistan. Most important of all, Afghanistan has a situation of conflict that has been going on for almost 40 years, during which time it has been occupied by the two major superpowers, and has had problems with neighboring countries that, incidentally, have absorbed a few million refugees from Afghanistan. Moreover, since shortly after the Soviet withdrawal, internal fighting among different groups has devastated the country. And the war continues: about 40% of the territory is out of the government's control. The Taliban, whose government was dismantled in 2001, still control significant parts of the Afghan territory. More recently, new groups of insurgents have been created, some of whom are ideologically related to Daesh-ISIS (the so-called Caliphate of Khorasan). Foreign (NATO) troops in Afghanistan are on the order of 10,000, and are bound to increase if the "new Afghan Strategy" of the U.S is in various ways implemented.

Since 2001, the international community, and particularly the US and NATO countries, have lost many lives and invested an enormous amount of money in Afghanistan. Depending on the various assumptions, one could estimate this amount to be between one and two trillion dollars—an amount that could have transformed Afghanistan into a sort of Switzerland of Central Asia. Instead, economic prospects are bleak, corruption is outrageously rampant, and a war economy dominates. To grasp what a war economy means, think about the number of bodyguards and armored-car drivers, and not just to the army, the police, and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). On the other side, in the

¹ Paolo Cotta Ramusino is Professor at the University of Milan (Italy), and Secretary General of Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. The content of this paper reflects the author's personal views and should not necessarily be seen as the views of the institutions to which he belongs. The content of this paper was presented at the Herat Security Dialogue – VI (13-14 October 2017). The author thanks the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, and particularly Dr. D. Moradian, for the kind invitation to join the Dialogue.

territories not controlled by the Government, we should also take into account the “militants’ jobs”. Hence, “normal jobs” are hardly available in Afghanistan, while illegal economic activities, like the selling of drugs and illegal trafficking of minerals, are extremely, and increasingly, relevant.

The population at large is extremely weary of war, and certainly does not appreciate the presence of foreign military forces. In particular, the civilian casualties caused by foreign military activities are a far greater source of mistrust and hostility than those caused by the Afghan national forces. Many view foreign military forces as being occupation forces. Dangers to the civilian population are in any case very real and very severe: various terrorist attacks, areas devastated by war, and civilians killed “by mistake” or intentionally.

Any prospects for “winning the war”—whether by the Taliban, other insurgent groups, the Government (that would like to control the entire Afghan territory), or foreign forces (whose counterinsurgency strategy has failed after 16 years)—are practically zero. The role of neighboring countries in the messy situation of Afghanistan is often overestimated, even though money and weapons of various origins end up in insurgents’ hands. Incidentally, some weapons are purportedly also being sold by soldiers of the Afghan armed forces to insurgent groups.

Any solution to the Afghan conundrum will not be found in the hands of neighboring countries. Pakistan, in particular, has a relatively limited role in supporting the Taliban. Roughly speaking, Pakistan is telling the Taliban that they should not operate inside Pakistan, while whatever the Taliban do outside Pakistan is basically their own business. But in any case, several political leaders of the Taliban have left Pakistan.

Nor can any solution be found by closing the Taliban office in Doha, or more generally, by punishing the Taliban political leadership, since the more they are able to control the situation on the ground, the more we can hope that a peace process with the Taliban will deliver a reliable result. The most dangerous alternative is the further spread of chaos in Afghanistan and in the region. Having a Syria 2.0 in Central and South Asia, where nuclear weapons are present, could become a global nightmare.

The Taliban have declared on several occasions that they are not looking for a monopoly of power, and that they agree that Afghanistan should never be used as a base for terrorist attacks against other countries. In other words, the Taliban would, in principle, be interested in a political solution to the present conflict. Of course, everything needs to be concretely verified, but there is the idea that a solution to the conflict could possibly be reached through hard work, and the acceptance of a compromise. After all, agreements and compromises are generally based on what can be called a win-win situation.

In any case, peace in Afghanistan is far from being an easy goal. Too many people are profiting from the “status quo”. The US and NATO are feeding the Government and people related to the Government. Moreover, some people are compiling fortunes from activities being developed in parts of the country not controlled by the Government. The selling of drugs and the illegal sale of minerals (without paying taxes) are economically rewarding. The more the conflict in Afghanistan goes on, the more we may witness the creation of other splinter groups that operate locally.

Hence, waiting for the Taliban to be weakened, and subsequently trying to impose an agreement that strongly favors the Government, the US, and NATO, is an unrealistic strategy. Most likely, the conflict would not be stopped, and chaos would increase. And the more widespread chaos becomes in Afghanistan and the region at large, the more the situation becomes risky and difficult to handle.

In particular, if Daesh-type groups were to proliferate, their sectarianism would create serious problems--with various groups inside Afghanistan (e.g., the Hazara), and with Iran. Moreover, the spread of Daesh-type groups could also create problems in Central Asian republics, in Russia, and in China, where, in particular, the Muslim population of Xinjiang could be affected.

There is a basic difference between the Taliban and Daesh-type groups. While the Taliban have a national Afghan strategy, Daesh-type groups have an international jihadi attitude. The contrasts between the Taliban and Daesh-type groups is well known, and has resulted at times in a military confrontation. The Taliban and many other countries in the region share at least this anti-Daesh attitude, that could be also used to possibly facilitate communications between the Taliban and other Afghans.

As we said, talking with the Taliban may not be an easy task, but it is a necessary step if one wants to restore peace in Afghanistan. While the Government of Afghanistan wants, in principle, to talk with the Taliban, still the message transmitted has been basically an invitation to “surrender”. The High Peace Council is, in reality, not doing much in terms of promoting dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban, on their side, were removed from power by the US, and basically want a reassurance from the US that this will not happen again. So, what the Taliban really want is to talk with the US, as well as receive guarantees about the removal of foreign troops.

This incidentally raises another issue that can be summarized as follows: the Taliban were removed from power 16 years ago and want to come back, even if in a power-sharing mode. But is it logical to expect that 20-year-old militants who are fighting on the ground want to bring back to power people who were removed 16 years ago? If this is the case, then ideological-political-religious cohesiveness must play a special role, one that would somehow overshadow the aforementioned economic benefits. The whole issue certainly needs to be further understood.

Further imminent complications are related to the upcoming electoral campaign(s) in Afghanistan. While the government obviously wants to remain in power, the opposition wants the opposite. So while the peace process will be debated, the focus will more likely be on the electoral competition rather than on building real options for peace, with corruption lurking as a way to garner support for the campaigns. This could result in an extended period of instability where any new US strategy could possibly be proven ineffective or irrelevant.

In conclusion, the prospects are not bright, but the only sensible thing to do is to facilitate, in whatever way possible, talks with the Taliban, and realize that time is not on our side.