

# Significance of Stability in Afghanistan for Pakistan

By Khalid Aziz

## Introduction

The world's best armies, composed of US and NATO forces, have battled in Afghanistan against the Taliban since December 2001 and by the end of 2014, the US had spent more than \$ 1 trillion and the allies had lost numerous soldiers killed and many more injured. Pakistan has suffered considerably during this war; its financial losses amount to \$ 107 billion and more than 21,500 civilians died during the war and the related wave of terrorism. Yet the Taliban remain resilient in Afghanistan. The region has suffered immensely and the war prevents economic growth and development. At the same time misgovernance and corruption adds to its risks.

Although there is a draw-down of foreign forces in Afghanistan after December 2014, and US forces reportedly will be limited to about 10,000 troops who will provide capacity building to the ANSF and also support it in operations when necessary. Thus notwithstanding President Obama's claims, that he is ending the presence of the US troops in Afghanistan, for all practical purposes the Afghan war goes on – but in a different mode. It must also be said that it was the success of the Taliban on the battlefield that forced this revision in the withdrawal of troops scenario.

The Taliban's ability to launch shaping operations, like the one that led to the capture of the Afghan city of Kunduz for fifteen days in October 2015 was a shock to the Afghans and the international community; the New York Times reported, "The insurgents held Kunduz for just 15 days, but during that time they destroyed government offices and facilities, seized military hardware, hunted down opponents, and freed prisoners from the city's two prisons".<sup>1</sup> Why the Taliban targeted Kunduz and not any other city points to ancient rivalries that are at play in this war; the Ghiljai were settled in this region in 1885-86 when Alam Khan Nasher, a Kharoti who had rebelled against Amir Abdur Rehman, the Durrani King.

While it is simpler for the US and NATO to have an easy to understand narrative of the war as, "War on Terror," actually misleads analysis and hides the real drivers that are at play. However, due to an erroneous aggregation of causes can lead to the execution of ineffective policies; David Kilcullen an expert on insurgencies has identified this problem and has put it eloquently in his new book, "Dozens of local movements, grievances and issues have been aggregated....into a global *jihad* against the West."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rod Norland, Taliban End Takeover of Kunduz After 15 Days, The New York Times, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2015, accessed on 20.5.16; <http://nyti.ms/27H27eW>

<sup>2</sup> David Kilcullen, "BLOOD YEAR: THE UNRAVELING OF WESTERN TERRORISM," Chapter 2, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016.

The advent of ISIS in Nangarhar and cross-border raids into Pakistan by the escaped TTP elements, with safe-havens in Afghanistan, has caused further regional insecurity. While the failure of re-conciliation with the Taliban so far places a big question mark regarding the chances of peace in the region, we must not forget that other spoilers who can be best defined as *criminal entrepreneurs*, will avail themselves of any opportunity that they can find to make money by reducing the ability of the states to guard its people and interdict criminal activities like drug trafficking or gun-running that are the sources of employment and fulfillment of their ambitions that are unrequited due to lack of economic growth for a majority of people in certain parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

### **Geostrategic Considerations**

Throughout history, the heavily populated regions of what now constitute Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran had growing populations with limited resources to sustain them and were thus unable to generate incomes from trading or agriculture. On the other hand, to the South of this region lay the rich lands of the Indian sub-continent that was home to a very rich and diversified civilization and the Gangetic plain alone, generated more than 25% of the world's GDP in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – roughly equivalent to China's position today. Kings of the region only knew of two ways to accumulate resources; either through taxes or by war and appropriating resources of weaker neighbors.

Mahmud of Ghazni, a ruler of Turkish descent in Ghazni, that lies in today's Afghanistan invaded India 17 times in 27 years between 1000-1027 AD. There were other invaders like Babur, the Lodhis, and Khiljis, who came to India and established dynasties there. Another Afghan ruler Ahmed Shah Abdali, who ruled Afghanistan raided India nine times between 1747 to 1769. After the East India Company defeated the Sikhs in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sikh War of 1849 the Sikh Empire was dissolved. This brought the British close to what latter became Afghanistan and Central Asia. Britain's primary worry was to prevent Russia from threatening their 'Jewel in the Crown,' that was India.

It led to the following boundary creation in the region:

- Demarcation of Afghanistan's Northern Boundary with Russia in 1885-1888
- The Durand Line defining the boundary with India 1893-1895
- The Afghan boundary with Russia in the Pamir was delineated in 1895 settling the border between the protectorate of Bokhara and Kashmir, Chitral, Gilgit and Afghan regions of Badakshan and Wakhan.

### **Guarding the North-Western Borderland**

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<sup>3</sup> Khalid Aziz, "Country Paper on, "[Drivers of Radicalism and Extremism in Pakistan](http://bit.ly/1svgLp9)," published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Islamabad, Pp. 21-23, <http://bit.ly/1svgLp9>, accessed on 20.5.16.

British India was very active and concerned in protecting its North-West frontier from any interference from the North; being a world power she had the resources to undertake the guardianship of the North-West. However, when it decided to grant independence to the sub-continent by dividing it into Pakistan and India; Britain for some reason did not make adequate arrangements for the future of this tricky region. Was it thoughtlessness or was there any other reason for this strategic forgetfulness?

Did Britain suffer from strategic amnesia or was it a typical Imperial maneuver to keep the successor states dependent upon it for the provision of security? One answer to the mystery is available in the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1946 letter of the Governor General Lord Wavell addressed to the Secretary of State for India in London, recommended that a part of India comprising of NWFP, Baluchistan, West Punjab and Sindh may be created as another state to protect Britain's interest in this part of Asia.<sup>4</sup>

As we disaggregate the causes that have led to a continuation of hostilities in Afghanistan, we must not forget to underline the important geo-strategic feature of this region. Afghanistan, lies at an extremely important geographic location; to its East lies Pakistan, and a fifty miles long tongue of land in the Afghan Wakhan region acts as an entrant into the strategic Chinese Xinjiang province. To Afghanistan's North, lie the former Soviet Republics of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, that can become the source for future regional prosperity by exporting their abundant energy and mineral resources to Pakistan, India or Westward to the Middle-East and Europe. To its West, Afghanistan is bordered by the regional power-house of Iran, that is now emerging from years of isolation due to the sanctions imposed on it by the West. Further to Afghanistan's North lies Russia.

As the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan began in 2014, two events put the world back into a familiar Cold War pattern. These events were connected to Russia's pre-emptive annexation of Crimea a part of Ukraine and its attempt to shape events in Eastern Ukraine to prevent an expansion of NATO, that was looking eminent. Some have suggested that the US may even be happy to remain in Afghanistan to apply pressure upon Russia and on China. If the US war goal in Afghanistan was the elimination of Al Qaeda as a threat in Afghanistan this was achieved in May 2011 with the death of Osama Bin Laden. Currently the US forces are presumably following a new goal to protect the Afghan state. It is speculated that the presence of US troops in Afghanistan provides her with a pivot to influence the Chinese bid to reshape the region by making it a hub of interconnectivity to other parts of the world based on 'One Belt One Road,' (OBOR) concept.

### **Ethnic Tensions and Alignments in Afghanistan**

Dalrymple while identifying the drivers of conflict in Afghanistan has highlighted the tribal conflict that is always simmering below the surface between two of

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<sup>4</sup> Khalid Aziz, Policy Report, "Causes of Rebellion in Waziristan," (2007), RIPORT, Peshawar, P. 11, accessed on 21.5.16, URL: <http://goo.gl/x2cyH3>

Afghanistan's largest tribal confederacies. The Ghiljai are the largest confederacy in the country and ruled territories of what later became Afghanistan from 1000 AD to 1747, when they were supplanted by the competing confederacy of the Durrani in 1747.

The Ghiljai number about 13 million of whom 9 million dwell in Afghanistan; Paktia in Afghanistan is the home of the tribe but they are also found in Jalalabad, Paktika, and Khost. Its largest tribe is the Suleman Khel while the next largest are the Kharotis. The Ghiljais are mostly herdsmen and thus nomadic in their life-style, as they are in search of pasture. Some 4 million Ghiljai live in Quetta, KP and the Punjab in Pakistan. The Niazi branch of Ghiljai in Pakistan live in Bannu and Mianwali. The Ghiljai, Tanoli live in the Tanawal region of Hazara mountains.

Based on long term hydrological data available for Afghanistan and the dry Central Asian region indicates dwindling grass land commons for the last many decades. In some cases, in parts of Afghanistan, especially in the dry South, the water table has gone down, drying up the underground water channels forcing the land owners, who belong to the Durrani tribal confederacy to enclose the commons and prevent the Ghiljais from pasturing their herds. This has marginalized them economically and led many of them to find alternate livelihoods; many joined the Afghan armed forces.

It has been argued that these dire circumstances pushed the Ghiljai to launch the communist coup against Sardar Daud in 1979 in order to wrest the state's control from the Durrani-Tajik clique to improve their livelihoods. Those in the lead of the take-over of power were Ghiljais associated with the Khalqi wing of the Afghan People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). It is argued that when the 'Mujahedeen' reaction organized by West and managed through Pakistan succeeded, the Ghiljai came back in the garb of the Taliban to control the Afghan state.<sup>5</sup>

General Stanley McChrystal Commander of US/ISAF forces in Afghanistan in 2009-2010, has argued in his report to President Obama in the 'Commander's Initial Assessment,' (2009) that the ISAF commanders must understand the social and political dynamics prevailing in Afghanistan. Tribal unhappiness generates support for the insurgents and defeats the goals of the coalition.<sup>6</sup> This refers to the issue discussed above of the need to *disaggregating the problem*. And this is something that we don't hear much about except as a periodic reference to it by some insightful writer.

Within Afghanistan the 9/11 War, was diagnosed as a Pashtun rebellion against President Karzai's regime, which supported the empowerment of three ethnic groups – the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of the North. This situation prevailed from December 2001 to the middle of 2006, when his Popalzai tribe became powerful in its own right as

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<sup>5</sup> Khalid Aziz, "Need for a Pak-Afghan Treaty on Management of Joint Water Courses," Published by the Regional Institute of Policy Research & Training, Peshawar, (2007), see Pp 1-6, accessed on 21.5.16, URL: <http://goo.gl/cldKy>.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley McChrystal, Commander's Initial Assessment (2009), Pp 2-4, accessed on 20.5.16, URL: <http://on.cfr.org/1sFZ3jg>

the US surged its forces in the South and it made the Southern tribes very rich and powerful as the Karzai clan spread its patronage widely in the South through President Karzai's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai. His death at the hands of his own body-guard prompted Britain's Guardian newspaper to state, "*[His death], was the personification of modern-day Afghanistan – corrupt, treacherous, lawless, paradoxical, subservient and charming. Now with his violent death Karzai has also come to symbolize Afghanistan's enduring tragedy.*"<sup>7</sup>

The ascendancy of the non-Pashtuns prior to 2006-2007, was resented by them and helped spiral the insurgency. Although there is a counter argument to this finding that says that Karzai may have been beholden to the Tajik prior to the arrival of US troops into the South of the country when the influence of the Pashtuns re-emerged. It may be noted that once institutional changes are ushered it takes a long time to neutralize their effects. For instance, the Tajiks who constitute only 27% of the Afghan population, obtained 70% of the officer Corp jobs in the Afghan army. Although Karzai is himself a Pashtun, yet as William Dalrymple comments, his presence then was seen not more than window-dressing.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that the power sharing agreement brought the national unity government of President Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2015 brought to power a new team. Thus far, real power in Afghanistan, still lies with the dominant tribal allegiances within the institutions that occurred from 2001 to 2015. President Ashraf Ghani is an Ahmedzai, Ghiljai, who belongs to the larger Ghiljai confederation. He has begun the process of modifying the leadership in important ministries and has begun to bring in former Khalqis belonging to his tribe. He has been able to do so in the Afghan Ministries of Defence, the National Directorate of Security and the Afghan National Security Council. More changes on these lines are expected in the future. Reaction has not been long in coming from the Durrani-Tajik combine when President Ghani's brilliant move to mend bridges with Pakistan, took shape during his visit to Islamabad in November 2014.

President Ashraf Ghani took the initiative to bring about cooperation between Pakistan's premier intelligence agency the ISI and its Afghan counterpart the NDS, who signed an MoU of cooperation in May 2015. After its signing three things happened in quick succession in Kabul. In the back-drop of stringent criticism in public quarters against the MoU including criticism of the President by his subordinate Director of NDS, Mr Nabil.<sup>9</sup> He shortly there-after resigned in protest. The MoU was also condemned in the Afghan parliament and Mr. Karzai, the former Afghan President stated in India, Pakistan's obstreperous neighbor, that the MoU was an embarrassment and will not be

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<sup>7</sup> Guardian 12<sup>th</sup> July 2011, Simon Tisdall, "Ahmed Wali Karzai, the corrupt and lawless face of modern Afghanistan," <http://bit.ly/1U6haomR>, accessed on 21.5.16

<sup>8</sup> William Dalrymple, "A Deadly Triangle," Brooking Essay, March 2013, see section 2, URL <http://brook.gs/KCpOOJ>, accessed on 20.5.16

<sup>9</sup> Afghan Analysts Network, Thomas Ruttig, "Political Cleavages over Pakistan: The NDS chief's farewell", accessed on 21.5.16 URL: <http://bit.ly/241dzNJ>

allowed to remain.<sup>10</sup> A statement that would be meaningful coming from someone who still wielded power.

To embarrass Pakistan further, the NDS leaked that Mullah Omar, the recluse leader of the Taliban had died earlier but that Pakistan had kept it as a secret.<sup>11</sup> This led to an enormous back-lash against President Ashraf Ghani, who in order to retain hold over power and be relevant in Afghan politics criticized Pakistan for terrorist bombings in Kabul in August 2015.

Clearly, real power in Afghanistan still lies with the ethnic triumvirate of the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazaras, although the power is shifting now that President Ashraf Ghani has begun to bring in Ghiljai into the power structure; thus clearly a large number of the Pashtun in whose areas the war is being conducted and who have been the main target of NATO/ISAF operations is ignored. This is one big weakness in the fabric of Afghan and West's counter-insurgency efforts. It is no wonder that despite the expenditure of billions of dollars and loss of countless lives, the Taliban have not been defeated or reconciled. This absence of ethnic coherence in Afghanistan indicates that unless a solution is found to the larger issue of the tussle between the Ghiljai and the Durrani confederacy's is ended the war in some form or another is likely to continue unabated.

### **India's Presence in Afghanistan**

In his insightful essay on the drivers of war in Afghanistan, Dalrymple begins by narrating how a female Indian army officer teaching English to army cadets viewed the events; "Major Mitali Madhumita, was awakened by the ringing of her mobile phone. Mitali, a 35-year-old Indian army officer from Orissa, had been in Kabul less than a year. Fluent in Dari, the most widely spoken language in Afghanistan, she was there to teach English to the first women officer cadets to be recruited to the Afghan National Army."

"It was a sensitive posting, not so much because of gender issues as political ones: India's regional rival, Pakistan, was extremely touchy about India providing military assistance to the government in Afghanistan and had made it very clear that it regarded the presence of any Indian troops or military trainers there as an unacceptable provocation."<sup>12</sup>

India's presence in Afghanistan is viewed as a mortal threat by Pakistani strategists who would wish that it was not so; yet India remains in Afghanistan and is associated with security matters, reviving memories in the mind of the Pakistanis of a previous Cold War Era when Afghan-India cooperation against Pakistan, when they actively sponsored the irredentist Pukhtunistan movement that at times boiled over into

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<sup>10</sup> The Hindu, Suhasini Haider, "MOU with ISI dropped says Karzai", accessed on 21.5.16, URL: <http://bit.ly/27KpRyV>

<sup>11</sup> The Hindustan Times, correspondent, "Mullah Omar 'died two years ago', Taliban remain mum," accessed on 21.5.16, URL: <http://bit.ly/1OFi0Xy>.

<sup>12</sup> Brookings Institute, Brooking Essay, William Dalrymple, "Deadly Triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan & India," Section 1, accessed on 21.5.16, URL: <http://brook.gs/KCpOOJ>

hot contact with the use of Pakistan air-force and clash of militaries in Bajaur region of Pakistan in the early 1960s. Pakistan fears the re-emergence of a similar alliance and is likely to undertake counter-measures now that there is a strategic alignment also between the US, Afghanistan and India! It is therefore very worrying for Pakistani strategists to note the presence of safe-havens for Pakistani terrorists like Mullah Fazalullah and Mangal Bagh, as well as the Baluch insurgents.

## **The Benefits of Peace for Pakistan**

From the above description of the situation, and a different analysis of the drivers of conflict in Afghanistan, it is clear that peace will only come when the issues pertaining to the following class of disputed positions can be ameliorated;

- Finding a solution to the on-going conflict between the Ghiljai and the Durrani tribal confederacies
- Creating greater economic opportunities for the marginalized members of the Afghan population
- Reconciliation with the Taliban will be best achieved by bilateral negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban (or should it be conducted as peace building between the two contesting tribal confederacies?). This later is a new design and holds more promise than the QCG approach that grows out of the US's narrative of the 9/11 War on Terror and is thus flawed.
- Bridging the distrust between Pakistan and India on Afghanistan is essential and must be initiated as early as possible.
- Peace in Afghanistan can only come if the international climate remains peaceful that does not bring tension to the region related to containment of Russia or balancing China by creating new pressure points.

If we are lucky to obtain relief in the areas described above or at least begin to move in the right direction, then one can assume that the following benefits could flow for Pakistan and the region. Once peace is brought to the region the fires of extremism and radicalism will be extinguished. It must be noted that as stated earlier in this research the persons, who are benefitting most from regional unrest are the 'criminal entrepreneurs,' who want unrest in the region and weak states, so that they may conduct their trade based on *drug trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking and gun-running*. Such individuals have an interest in unrest, as it allows them to prosper at the expense of general insecurity for the majority of inhabitants.<sup>13</sup>

If relative security is created in the region, Pakistan will benefit as under:

- Increase in trade with Afghanistan that today stands at about \$2.5 billion annually

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<sup>13</sup> (Ibid) 3, P. 2

- Security will allow Pakistan and India as well as the other states in the region to multiply regional trade by linking up with China, India, S. Asian region, Central Asia, Iran and the Middle-East. This alone can generate billions dollars' worth of trade and employment opportunities leading to an average regional annual growth rate of 8-10% per year. This will transform this region and convert it into a hub of economic growth meaning a better life for all its people.
- Peace will improve the security situation in Pakistan and concomitantly reduce its security budget.
- It will expedite the completion of power projects like CASA – 1000 and the TAPI project leading to propelling of industrial growth.
- These changes will act as a catalyst for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project whose benefits will spread much further than envisaged at present.
- This design of growth can only come about with the commitment towards peace by the great powers and India and Pakistan. If peace can double Pakistan's total net assets through an 8 -10% annual growth could become a huge engine of regional growth. Naturally, its main beneficiaries are likely to be Pakistan itself as well as its neighbors Afghanistan, India, Iran and China.

It is thus obvious that peace in Afghanistan will be of immense significance to Pakistan and the region as well as its poor masses who struggle to make two ends meet.