

Is Afghanistan on the Brink of a New Civil War?

Possible Scenarios and Influencing Factors in the Transition Process

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In July 2011 ISAF began transferring security responsibilities to the Afghan government. While NATO countries view this process with calculated optimism, four entirely negative scenarios are becoming probable. A “power oligarchy” could develop, either directly out of the current leadership (Scenario 1) or with the political participation of the Taleban (Scenario 2). It is also conceivable, however, that the country could relapse into a “civil war” after 2014, the prospective end of the ISAF mission (Scenario 3); or into a renewed “Taleban emirate” (Scenario 4). Which of these developments will occur depends on several influencing factors: the internal risks within Afghanistan; future ISAF strategy in the asymmetric war; and the nature of long-term US engagement in Afghanistan.

In July 2011 security responsibility for two provinces, two provincial capitals (including Mazar-e Sharif in the region under German command) and several districts was handed over to Afghan authorities. The international community currently has a heightened interest in obtaining assessments regarding the direction Afghanistan is likely to take during the transition process (until 2014) and beyond.

Possible scenarios

In their public assessments, both the US-dominated ISAF and the international community suggest that the transition process is on the right path. Their assess-

ments, however, are characterized by calculated optimism and based on unfounded assumptions, such as their anticipation that the Taleban will participate in constructive talks.

An unprejudiced analysis, in contrast, gives us little reason to conclude that the preconditions for a positive trend – for instance a cessation of asymmetric warfare and a transition to more effective governance – will be fulfilled in the medium term. Four negative scenarios could evolve.

In the case of Scenario 1, the current power oligarchy continues to consolidate without Taleban participation until the completion of the transition process in 2014 or until a later date.

In Scenario 2, the current power oligarchy integrates the opposing Taliban as part of the previously initiated dialogue by sharing political power with them.

Scenarios 3 and 4 are characterized by civil wars of varying intensity in the phase after 2014. Nevertheless, Scenarios 1 and 2 can also deteriorate into a civil war in the medium term.

Scenario 1: Power oligarchy without Taliban participation

President Karzai manages to continue to balance the power ambitions of co-opted regional strongmen and their clientele. Nobody gains the upper hand in this arrangement, but everyone reaps political benefit as well as both licit and illicit profits from the power cartel. A fragile oligarchical system evolves based on mutual interdependence. Taliban and other insurgent groups are not *formally* given a share of power. They indirectly control many rural areas, but without seizing important urban centres. To further provide against any contingencies, the Kabul power oligarchy pursues informal agreements with local insurgency leaders.

Furthermore, President Karzai could, by means of a constitutional amendment enacted by a *loya jirga* or with the help of extraconstitutional agreements, circumvent the constitutional ban on running for a third term and remain in office after 2014. Taking such a step, however, would provoke opposition among his current allies. It is also conceivable that Karzai the “power juggler” allows himself to be replaced by another member of the oligarchy, or that a political assassination precipitates a violent transition. Vice President Fahim might then attempt to install a new “Northern Alliance” regime.

In order to preserve their access to power and profits, ethnic and political factions have thus far maintained a minimal consensus aimed at preventing internal power struggles and organized crime from developing into civil war. The oligarchy could continue to maintain this consensus after

2014 if the “monetarization” of their political power is guaranteed, which in turn requires continued international funding, income from the drug trade and the shadow economy, and a future share in the exploitation of Afghanistan’s rich natural resources.

Scenario 2: Power-sharing between the Taliban and the old power oligarchy

The opposing factions within Afghanistan agree on a power-sharing arrangement (while preserving the territorial integrity of Afghanistan). The Taliban and other insurgent groups are *formally* integrated into the government, thus forming an extended oligarchical system. The time frame for this development depends on the pace of the dialog process with the Taliban.

In both of these power oligarchy scenarios, the political system would continue to be burdened by inefficient, corrupt governance, a fragile balance of power, rampant crime, and the constant threat of civil war. Scenario 2 would entail further risks: the “reconciled” Taliban could either be drawn into the corruption spiral themselves or destabilize the new government by effectively fighting corruption. Vindictive commanders could continue the fight against the Kabul power oligarchy.

After 2014 the Taliban could also increase military pressure on the government in order to force a power-sharing arrangement. The resultant power structure would then be dominated by the Taliban and “dressed up” so as to garner international acceptance.

Scenario 3: Civil war

Despite overriding economic and profit interests, the ethno-political polarization intensifies to such an extent that the army and the police as well as the Karzai government collapse. Local warlords and uncontrollable insurgent groups battle each other; crime spirals out of control. Central power ceases to exist even in nominal terms; it is a war of shifting alliances or one in which “everyone fights everyone”.

This development could be fuelled by several tendencies towards the end of the transition phase in 2014: The build-up of Afghan army and police the United States and ISAF proves unsustainable; the Afghan Local Police (village militias), which saw a massive expansion under ISAF commander David Petraeus in 2010, exercise arbitrary authority; political reconciliation with insurgent leaders fails. At this stage a local power struggle would be enough to spark widespread violence across Afghanistan. External actors, including neighboring countries, might be prompted to rearm their allies within Afghanistan, destabilizing the entire region.

Scenario 4: Islamic Emirate of the Taleban

Taking advantage of the drawdown of NATO troops, the Taleban take control of Kabul and large parts of the country; the Karzai government, the army and the police disintegrate; Western military trainers and the majority of civilian aid workers leave the country. A few anti-Taleban factions wage guerrilla warfare.

This extreme case could arise if US troops remaining on military bases fail to intervene in internal power struggles (or intervene too late), and/or if the non-Pashto warlords of the Northern Alliance do not resist the Taleban as robustly as expected; some of them could also join the Taleban.

This development is unlikely to transpire before 2014, as the Taleban are not in a position to achieve a comprehensive military victory as long as NATO/ISAF troops are present. After 2014, however, this scenario could become more probable, especially if the Taleban make political concessions by abandoning Al-Qaeda and guaranteeing a modicum of human rights, and provided they continue to be supported by Pakistan.

Influencing factors

When evaluating these scenarios one must take into account the experience of decades of changeable war as well as virtually unpredictable factors, which can be divided

into three categories: the internal risks within Afghanistan, the military imponderabilities of the ISAF strategy, and finally, uncertainty surrounding the long-term engagement of the United States in Afghanistan.

Within the first of these categories, two social determinants in particular could effect rapid shifts in the internal power structures. On the one hand, Afghanistan's largely nontransparent political system, marked by deeply rooted clientelism, patronage systems and weak institutions, could change quickly if traditional rivals within the power elite enter into new opportunistic agreements.

In the course of power struggles during the transition phase and repositioning for the phase after 2014, key politicians could be marginalized, exiled or even killed. On 12 July 2011 President Karzai's half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, de facto ruler of southern Afghanistan, was assassinated in Kandahar. In the short term his death can change the power balance, not only among Pashto tribes in the south but also at the national level between President Karzai and the regional strongmen he has co-opted.

On the other hand, new communication technologies have led to a certain aperture of Afghan society since 2000. Youth, in particular – according to UNDP, approximately two thirds of the population were under 25 years old in 2009 –, use mobile phones (important for illiterate youth in rural areas) or the internet (primarily educated youth in the cities) to communicate both inside and outside Afghanistan. Under these conditions opposing trends can be amplified: part of the population could press for liberalization and greater political participation, while another segment – under the influence of increasingly anti-Western sentiment – could turn to the dominant conservative-Islamic patronage systems or even join radical Islamic networks.

The imponderables in the second category arise from the US-dominated ISAF strategy. Though initially even high-ranking members of the US military public

debated the possibility of a military loss, since spring 2010 ISAF has been trying to re-establish its political authority to judge the effectiveness of the fight against insurgents. Military successes have indeed been achieved, but so far they have often been localized and short-lived. Furthermore, the targeted killing of Taleban leaders runs counter to the complementary political reconciliation process.

The transition is to be considered complete once the Afghan government has acquired the capacity to guarantee security in the country and provide basic services without outside assistance. At the moment, the necessary *qualitative* improvement in the leadership and fighting morale of the Afghan security forces (army/ANA and police/ANP) is lagging behind the regularly published statements regarding their *quantitative* growth. It is still only in exceptional cases that ANA and ANP officers are in a position to plan and execute operations on their own.

If ANA and ANP grow too quickly, their internal cohesion as “national” security organizations could suffer, increasing the risk of being drawn into the political, ethnic and tribal fragmentation of Afghanistan. Faced with a possible Taleban victory, many are already establishing tacit relations with the enemy. In some ways the situation is reminiscent of the early 1990s. The withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces in 1989 and the discontinuation of economic and military aid from Moscow after the collapse of the USSR in 1992 led to repositioning within the Afghan regime, and the regime finally collapsed.

In the third category of influencing factors, the great unknown is whether and how the United States will remain engaged in Afghanistan in the long term and whether economic interests such as the exploitation of natural resources will also play a role. What function does the United States assign to Afghanistan when it comes to pursuing its geostrategic interests in the wider surrounding region? After the draw-down of combat troops at the end of 2014,

will the United States – as it did in the case of Iraq – station a substantial military contingent in fortress-like bases (perhaps under the nominal sovereignty of Kabul)? Will these military units intervene when internal power struggles threaten stability, or will they be deployed merely as a regional intervention force in the context of Iranian or Pakistani nuclear programs? Is the United States willing and able to provide the necessary funding for these military units? Or will they confine themselves to asserting their influence on the Afghan political system through a multitude of advisors?

If the United States maintains a relatively low-threshold presence, other international actors will have an opportunity to exert greater political influence. In this case, a constellation similar to that of the 1990s could arise, when Afghan civil war factions were supported by neighbouring countries, resulting in factional conflict within Afghanistan that affected the greater region and led to the emergence of the Taleban.

In this imponderable situation Germany should, together with other European countries, take decisive action to avert a scenario similar to that in Somalia. This can only be achieved if international engagement – particularly in the field of development cooperation and institution-building – does not rapidly decline. Given the possibility that the Taleban could increase their influence, political opposition must be strengthened and mechanisms developed and established in order to ensure that these opposing forces have a say in key political decisions.

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