

Afghanistan's missed opportunities and new choices

Assuming for a moment that many of Afghanistan's security problems originate outside the country's borders, the upcoming international conference on Afghanistan to be held in Istanbul on November 2 could be a unique occasion to address the many obstacles inhibiting a just and durable peace in the country. But the possibility of obtaining any tangible result from Istanbul is more remote than some may expect. Under the veneer of diplomatic nicety and rhetoric lies a set of mini-Great Game maneuvers that will put to the test the current efforts to bring about Afghan reconciliation, transition, sovereignty, and a sustainable paradigm shift in regional relations.

The Turkish initiative, backed by Afghanistan and major Western donors, will bring together a core group of leaders from 14 nations that form the "Heart of Asia" consortium, along with observers from the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, Japan and others, to try to improve region-wide security and cooperation prospects through confidence-building measures and economic integration initiatives, such as the "New Silk Road" project...

... Here are a few of the scenarios that may emerge over time after this round of international conversations about Afghanistan's future:

1. A zero-sum game using time and force. As long as the insurgency can keep up the current operational tempo and successfully use targeted killings and psychological operations that instill fear in the Afghan population, the scheduled 2014 international withdrawal of international military forces favors those forces that have the wherewithal to sustain their efforts for a power grab or prolonged proxy-led civil war. This scenario may lead to serious regional tensions and expanded transnational threats emanating from a newly unstable Afghanistan.
2. Hedging. Neighboring countries will hedge in order to unilaterally secure their interests and reinforce their armed assets in Afghanistan for any eventual reversal, or for use as leverage in an eventual grand bargain. This scenario might prevent the emergence of a secure Afghanistan and provoke internal chaos, with regional spillover effects.
3. Stalemate, leading to forced negotiations, giving way to power-sharing and a fragile coalition government. The sustainability of such a scenario is questionable, and would most probably lead to renewed fighting and instability.
4. "Fighting and talking" leading to negotiations, where red lines (such as insurgents renouncing violence, abandoning al-Qaeda, and abiding by the Afghan constitution, including its protections for women and minorities) laid out by Afghans and the United States will likely not be maintained. This would open the way for a gradual Talibanization of Afghanistan, and provoke internal ethnic and social tension.

press and women's equality, have been limited. Regional players, such as Pakistan, India, China and Iran, are patrons of the peace agreement between the former insurgents and the Afghan government.

Scenario "The Autocrat"

NATO has not succeeded militarily and political negotiations with the insurgents have failed. Karzai has taken the political initiative; he has changed the constitution and stays on in power after two legislative periods. His regime, democratic in name like the ones formerly known from Egypt or Tunisia, assumes an authoritarian style. Karzai looks for (new) national and international partners. However, the reach of the central government continues to be very limited. Therefore, in Southern and Eastern provinces Islamist groups like the Taliban have their zones of influence. Fighting occurs only occasionally.

Scenario "Back to the Future"

The jihadists, Taliban & Co, are victorious and an Islamist regime is established. Parts of the former Karzai regime, especially the warlords, integrate into this government; others have left the country or form, together with other political actors, a discordant opposition. The international community is also not unified - some states have diplomatic relations with the Islamist government, others don't. Some groups might strive for a separation of the Northern, Western and central parts of the country. This scenario is a mixture of the status quo ante 2001 and 1994/96.

Scenario "Somalia"

Neither the insurgent jihadist forces nor the Karzai government formerly backed by NATO prevail. Neither the international community nor the regional players or the Afghans have reached a political consensus. A full scale civil war is taking place and each of the parties has its respective regional and international supporters. The war has a destabilizing momentum for the whole region. Many more Afghans take refuge in neighbouring countries. For the Afghan people it is a step back into the 1990s with high numbers of casualties and lack of development, access to education and health services etc.

The narrative of NATO is that there is a high probability that scenario no 1 "Victory!" is realistic. Especially many Afghans would be extremely happy with this outcome, notably with the end of violent conflict after more than 30 years of continued fighting in various conflict configurations. However, the insurgents are more likely to have a longer breath than several NATO key members some of which have just started to get involved in yet another trouble spot, Libya. Therefore, "Forced Marriage" and "Back to the Future" seem more realistic by comparison.

The prevention of "The Autocrat" scenario is very much in the hands of the international community that is learning from the current uprisings against autocrats and dictators in the Middle East with whom it has cooperated closely over decades to contain Islamism. Furthermore, Karzai seems to be too weak to take the initiative of a political process into his hands. The worst outcome would be "Somalia", with regard to the human suffering it entails for the population, the regional instability it would cause and the helplessness of the international community. To sum up: the scenarios 1 to 5 present a ranking of desirability, not of likelihood.

There are only few certainties: The international community will lose its focal interest in Afghanistan and Afghans will lose much of its financial support. The international focus will shift to other trouble spots, like Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan, Libya, and

Western Africa. One or various of those conflicts – or new ones – will move into the centre of the world's attention.

The development of the neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan and Iran, as well as the relationship between Pakistan and India remain crucial for the domestic political setting of Afghanistan. The US will stay involved in Afghanistan, either with military bases within the framework of a security partnership, or as a political partner. China will try to support stability in Afghanistan in order to exploit natural resources (in competition with Western companies), secure an export market, and to prevent jihadism and conflict to spread in its own neighbourhood.

Corruption, criminality, and warlordism will stay for some time to come, in greater or lesser intensity – as in many other post-conflict countries. And civilian and development experts will stay for another decade or two, at least. After the good-bye date of 2014, economic and political cooperation with Afghanistan should definitely continue to sustain the efforts over the last ten years and not exclude Afghanistan from the international community once again. It has its place on the map – to its great disadvantage in the unfortunate position of a geostrategic buffer between various political zones of influence.

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