Revolutionary Outcomes? How the Afghanistan conflict might evolve after 2014

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Abstract

Afghanistan’s complex conflict shows little sign of abating. This paper looks at the nature of the conflict and factors that might influence its post-2014 direction. It treats Afghanistan as a qualitative case study, using a hybrid of approaches and positions itself in the middle of historical context, civil war theory and the post-2001 political and military situation. Although disagreements within broader civil war theory make analysis of Afghanistan challenging (how to address complex conflicts and concepts of stalemate might benefit from further exploration), Charles Tilly’s work provides a fresh perspective and a flexible platform from which to view the conflict. The paper identifies areas analytically “less-travelled”: the idea that a military stalemate might be a long-term result after 2014 and that other political/military factions might also get drawn in to contest for control of the state. It found that a struggle for army loyalty is plausible and could become a further danger to the stability of the country. The international community and the Afghan population could perhaps give thought to three issues: the implications of the term “civil war”, how to consider and address the notion of stalemate after 2014 and, finally, that the Taliban might not be the only group contesting state control.

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 Revolutionary Outcomes? How the Afghanistan conflict might evolve after 2014.

Q: What changes do you see in the coming five years?

A: I have no idea. There are too many imponderables. If you had asked five years ago what Afghanistan would be like today, I would have been completely wrong and I don’t expect that I would be right this time.

Internationally acclaimed Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin, 20 June 2006.¹

1. Introduction

In September 2011 I was working as a political/military analyst in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. The headquarters is in the centre of the city, heavily populated by embassies and Afghan government buildings. It is fortified and defended by members of both Afghan and international security forces. A tempting target in its own right, the proximity of the headquarters to the US Embassy just across the road confirmed this.

On the morning of the 13th, my civilian ears detected what appeared to be someone dropping a couple of chairs on the floor above. This heralded a “complex” series of attacks across the city, with the main targets ourselves and the US Embassy. We went into security “lock down” until nine o’clock the following morning.² Amidst some understandable confusion, at one point we were told that a suicide bomber might have entered the camp.

After several coordinated suicide attacks in other parts of the city, the focus of the battle became a 13-story building site pre-selected by the insurgents that overlooked ISAF and the US Embassy. This combat appeared on Youtube within minutes.³ Unusually for the insurgents, they were armed with something more than small arms and rocket propelled

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³ I was located (suitably protected, I should add) approximately 100 metres behind the combat shown here, which took place at the edge of the motor pool I used regularly in a corner of the ISAF compound, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H47Jx2OpoRs
grenades. They had sited an 82mm recoilless rifle in the building and had a direct line of sight to ISAF and the US Embassy, making the threat very real.\(^4\)

Afghan security forces, mentored by ISAF, took the lead in the fight. Although assessments of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are quite critical, some of the rapid response troops had two or three near-identical incidents under their belt and were acquiring experience. Through night-vision equipped TV cameras, most of the ISAF headquarters was able to view the Afghan-on-Afghan battle unfold a few hundred metres away, as government forces fought their way, floor by floor, up the building. It made grim viewing. Numerous small puffs of smoke spurting from the walls denoted the impact of bullets, larger clouds showed where grenades had detonated. Night combat in a building is painfully slow and dangerous. Occasionally we would see a group of soldiers carry a dead or wounded comrade down multiple flights of stairs. Periodically, during the day and into the night, ISAF and Afghan combat helicopters would spray bullets at the building from a safe distance.

Although the media coverage was intensive for 24 hours, this was a relatively minor engagement in the scheme of things and one that has been repeated before and since in central Kabul. Thousands of civilians are still highly vulnerable, caught in the middle of a conflict that some have been experiencing for decades – and some for their whole life.\(^5\)

The incident focused my mind on some key questions. Who is winning and what does it mean? Is this a stalemate? Is this the way the Taliban can retake the country? Will the Afghan security forces really be capable of providing security after 2014?\(^6\)

2. Problem – whither the conflict post-2014?

\begin{quote}
“I still cannot understand how we...have managed to arrive at a situation in which everything is coming together in 2014 — elections, new president, economic transition, military transition and all this — whereas the negotiations for the peace process have not really started”
\end{quote}

Departing French diplomat Bernard Bajolet, Kabul, April 2013.\(^7\)


Many fear that Afghanistan is descending into a new civil war. US intelligence officials assessed in 2012 that the Taliban are confident of retaking Afghanistan once the international military presence leaves. This concern is echoed across analytical communities. The UK House of Commons Select Committee was pessimistic about progress made. Internationally respected academics, Ahmed Rashid and Thomas Ruttig were similarly negative at a conference in Copenhagen on the prospects for Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Although 2014 will be a significant landmark in the country’s future, it is difficult to judge with confidence, other than in general terms, where the country might go after this. The two ends of a spectrum of outcomes are “fragmentation” and “peace deal”. Both have been extensively commented upon. But I sense that there is potential for a stalemated conflict after 2014 and that current insurgent groups may not be the only threat the country’s stability. My intention is to explore this question:

“How might the Afghan conflict evolve after 2014?”

I will use elements of conflict theory to consider aspects of the conflict that might have an impact on Afghanistan’s future. I particularly want to engage with some of the ideas of conflict theorist Charles Tilly. Although an academic paper, I hope that it might additionally give policymakers “pause for thought”.

3. Civil war theory and Afghanistan

“How the Frightful Inadequacy of Most of the Statistics”

Laurie Nathan on civil war analysis, 2005

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10 Foust, J., ‘Five lessons we should have learned in Afghanistan: strategic issues in policy planning’, American Security Project paper, July 2012.
12 Author’s notes, http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/afghanistan-towards-2014-diis-conference-key-points/
I want to consider the nature of the conflict currently afflicting Afghanistan. To do that I will review some of the theories related to civil war generally, together with a look at two aspects – the potential for stalemate and for other powerbrokers to enter the contest to govern Afghanistan - which I find particularly relevant. This will help understand Afghanistan’s situation and allow framing of three hypotheses I intend to explore: a) Afghanistan is currently in a civil war; b) the conflict might remain in stalemate, and c) political and military contenders beyond the Taliban might form a bigger risk to stability.

Scholars of conflict appear to be in broad agreement that, since the Second World War, incidences of intrastate conflict have significantly increased across the world and such conflicts are generally more complex that wars between nations. Tilly, amongst others, asserts that: “Since World War II, civil war has displaced interstate war as the dominant setting for large-scale violent death”. Although much analysis has been undertaken it still seems apparent that definition and measurement of this form of conflict is unclear and controversial. The notable civil war theorist, Nicholas Sambanis, recognises this: “…literature on civil war has seen tremendous growth…but there is no consensus on the measurement of civil war…it is difficult, if not impossible, to define and measure civil war”. Nathan has been particularly scathing in a critique of quantative analysis:

“The greatest problem is that [they] seek to ascertain the causes of civil war without studying civil wars, and attempt to determine the motives of rebels without studying rebels and rebellions.”

A diversity of terminology appears to confirm the weakness of definitional boundaries: revolution, coup, rebellion, insurrection, civil war, guerrilla war, insurgency, terrorism and even “The Troubles” (Northern Ireland) are but a few of the terms employed to describe armed conflict taking place within the confines of a state. Most of these terms have been used in the context of intrastate conflict in Afghanistan. Many analysts simply dive in with

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the term “civil war” without feeling the need to define it any more carefully, others appear to prefer use of the term “insurgency”.  

Caution should be applied in the use of what is clearly a subjective term. Tilly observed that the “…distinction between revolutionary situations and civil wars begins to dissolve before our eyes”. Connable and Libicki describe “insurgency”, thus:

“…the violent struggle by a non-governmental armed group against its government or an interceding force, with the intent of overthrowing the current regime, expelling an interloper, gaining greater rights, or obtaining independence.”

This would seem to work well as a definition of civil war. But theorists also note that terms employed can shape perceptions, judgements and expectations. Tilly recognised this:

“…labelling a form of politics as ‘civil war’ or ‘terror’ activates and justifies certain responses on the part of external actors and because each term calls up precedents that shape the behaviour of participants, victims and third parties.”

Sambanis suggested “civil war” provokes two international reactions: “let them fight it out” and “nothing can be done”. Kalyvas doesn’t see it quite as bluntly as this, but also noted the definitional dilemma, concluding that civil wars were:

“…prone to serious semantic confusion, even contestation. The description of a conflict as a civil war carries symbolic and political weight since the term can confer or deny legitimacy to a warring party. Indeed the very use (or not) of the term is part of the conflict itself. This is why euphemisms are so common.”

As an example of some of the difficulties I have suggested in defining intrastate conflict in the context of Afghanistan, it is perhaps worth considering the Sambanis and Doyle definition of a civil war:

1. armed conflict meets all the following conditions:

2. more than 1,000 deaths overall in at least a single year;
3. challenges the sovereignty of an internationally recognized state;
4. occurs within the recognized state boundary;
5. involves the state as a principal combatant;
6. includes rebels with the ability to mount organized armed opposition to the state;
7. has parties concerned with the prospect of living together in the same political unit after the war.\(^5\)

There are problems in applying this to Afghanistan, where the conflict nature (combatants, tactics and goals) has changed several times since the late 1970s. Many insurgent groups operate from “safe havens” in Pakistan and the Taliban leadership is based there. The eastern Afghan border with western Pakistan is porous and unrecognised by the insurgents, conflicting with point four that the conflict “occurs within the recognized boundary of the state”. During parts of the 1990s, there was no recognisable state to form a “principle combatant”, conflicting with point 5. Finally, it is difficult to define what the Taliban’s ultimate perceived “end state” for Afghanistan might be, leaving it open to question whether the last aspect of the Sambanis and Doyle definition applies: the Taliban’s vision of Afghanistan may not be compatible with cooperation with other political groups. Kalyvas offers a definition of civil war as: “armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities”.\(^6\) This again becomes problematic where Afghanistan is concerned, given the fluid and shifting nature of combatants.

Outcomes and potential for stalemate

Understanding on the causes, progress and aftermath of such conflicts, whether in aid of predicting or explaining such conflict, is still limited.\(^7\) Or rather, there is a wealth of analysis identifying potential causes and influential variables, but little agreement on which causes might work best to explain particular conflicts. Dixon studied forty-six separate studies of the causes of civil war, finding there were as many as two hundred distinct


variables at play, with strong consensus of only seven. Walter suggests negotiated settlements are comparatively rare as outcomes for civil wars. She argues that, while over half of interstate wars between 1940 and 1990 were resolved through negotiation, only 20% of civil wars ended similarly: “most internal wars ended with the extermination, expulsion, or capitulation of the losing side.” Despite the effort being put in and expectations arising from the desire for a political settlement for Afghanistan, the statistics appear to weigh against such an outcome.

Fearon notes that: “The most common form of civil war in the post-World War II period has been the stalematated guerrilla war confined to a rural periphery of a low-income, post-colonial state”. But there appears to be little analysis in civil war theory of the role that a stalemate might play in civil wars. Connable and Libicki’s study followed 89 insurgencies, ranging between zero and forty years in duration and observed that “such deadlocks seldom occur”. But their sense of what a stalemate is seems to be based on physical, material and political exhaustion, which looks narrow. A stalemate is not an outcome in itself and represents a period of time in which fighting, talking or both could take place without any significant progress. In this respect, it shows up only in quantitative analysis assessing the duration of intrastate conflicts. Conflict resolution theory offers the “hurting stalemate”, whereby parties are mutually exhausted by the struggle and negotiation is preferable to going nowhere at great cost of human, political and financial capital. Clearly some forms of stalemate offer the potential for positive progress, whether in terms of dialogue or reconstruction.

Tilly, multiple sovereignty and control of the coercive means

The work of the conflict theorist, Charles Tilly, has much to offer for a study of Afghanistan’s conflict. His later work looks at the politics of collective violence – how types of political contention (from social protest, through civil wars to coups) interact and impact in different ways with different regimes. He also examines the increasing use of non-officially

constituted “violence specialists”, for which there is a plethora of nomenclature: paramilitaries, militia, death squads, irregulars, secret police, something that also suggests many areas for Afghanistan analysts to investigate.\textsuperscript{35} But, for my purposes, Tilly’s earlier work, ‘From Mobilisation to Revolution’, identifies three theoretical themes that are useful in applying to our understanding of Afghanistan in the present day.\textsuperscript{36}

There are three building blocks in ‘From Mobilisation to Revolution’ to make use of here. The first is the exploration of how a \textit{revolutionary situation} – the desire and potential for political change – transforms into a \textit{revolutionary outcome} – the actuality of regime change. Tilly argues that a \textit{situation} requires three elements: a contender (or contenders) making a competing claim for control of part or all of the state; significant numbers of the population endorsing and following this alternate claim and the inability or unwillingness of the existing regime to either suppress or embrace these contentious claims. An \textit{outcome}, in which power actually changes hands, is much less common that the existence of a \textit{situation}, requiring the defection of regime members, the development of a revolutionary armed capability and the capture of state military and political means of control.\textsuperscript{37}

This takes us to consideration of \textit{multiple sovereignty} which, for Tilly, is the “identifying feature” of a revolutionary situation. Tilly explores how rival contenders for sovereign power can emergence – an existing political faction or factions trying to subordinate other factions, the emergence of new factions or the fragmentation of dominant factions into competing pieces. In 21\textsuperscript{st} century Afghanistan alone we already have two – possibly three – different examples: the Northern Alliance coalition of contenders contesting a Taliban-controlled state (2000 to 2001); a swirl of warlords competing in the power vacuum that arose after the Taliban’s rapid defeat against a fledgling internationally backed transitional government (2001 to perhaps 2003) and the re-emergence of the Taliban as an insurgency but still offering an alternate claim to government (perhaps from around 2004 to the present). Tilly’s views very much help to remind us that \textit{multiple} does not necessarily mean one alternative contender, but two, three, four or more.

It is clear to Tilly that “control of the coercive means” is key to a revolutionary outcome:

“Control over the major organised means of coercion within the population is pivotal to the success or failure of any effort to seize power. Within all contemporary states, that means control of the armed forces.”

This has great potential relevance for Afghanistan, which has now has a huge army, created in haste by an international community that sees the force as a bulwark against the Taliban and, perhaps most important, as a means of enabling its own withdrawal. Political control of the military and its resilience on the battlefield are likely to be greatly tested in the years immediately after 2014, which will see the bulk of the international forces withdrawn, a still powerful insurgency and the potential for much political turmoil, starting first with the election scheduled for April 2014.

Tilly doesn’t offer the perfect model for Afghanistan. In many ways he was focused on the big revolutionary moments in history - and European history at that – where ideologies, ideas and intellectuals played a more important role. His understanding of popular support to contenders jars slightly with the reality of war-weary acquiescence with which the Afghan population now view most aspects (and participants) of the conflict. But he does offer a broad and flexible set of ideas within which to frame this very complex conflict. Tilly’s ideas help to lift us out of the quantitative statistical “battle” favoured by many civil war theorists, counter-insurgency students and the military. Judging Afghanistan from a “Tillian” perspective suggests to me that the Taliban might be less of a genuine contender than we think and that other possible contenders for power in Afghanistan deserves consideration, if for slightly different reasons. This is an analytical angle that I do not routinely come across and, I would argue, is probably worth exploring.

4. Methodology

I will undertake a qualitative case study using theoretical guides, particularly from the work of Charles Tilly, to explore the immediate future for Afghanistan by consideration of the nature of the current conflict and three specific hypotheses. Case studies themselves are quite a multi-purpose tool. Fry’s and Mann’s definitions of a case study are, respectively, as follows:

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“...complex examples which give an insight into the context of a problem as well as illustrating the main point”.

“...a situation of unique interest to challenge a generalised or universal assumption.”

These helpfully illustrate my intentions – I want the flexibility to be able to explore themes. Merriam offers useful case study distinctions between particularistic (focusing on a single event or phenomenon), descriptive (qualitative descriptions to analyse situations) and heuristic (illuminating understanding, discovering new meaning and confirming what is known) case studies and constructively compares these three types with Olsen’s more detailed interpretation.

There are attractive aspects in each of these three case study types and my paper will therefore represent a hybrid of these three case study approaches. I shall reflect a predominantly descriptive approach: illustrating the multi-faceted complexities of the conflict, using and presenting “vivid material” and information in a variety of ways over a large time period. From the particularist side I will be examining a specific phenomenon – the conflict in Afghanistan – attempting to illuminate the problem and challenge assumptions about the direction of the conflict. Finally, from the heuristic perspective, I shall attempt to explain Afghanistan’s situation, evaluating, summarising and concluding.

Within this essentially descriptive construct, and in order to assist in tackling a large issue, I have generated three hypotheses in order to break the subject down into smaller packages, focus my research and allow me to consider three distinct but closely inter-related issues. I will examine and discuss these, making use of civil war and insurgency theories, Afghan history and Charles Tilly’s work on conflict.

Outline of hypotheses

At present, “insurgency” seems to be the most common term applied to the current Afghan intrastate conflict, with “civil war” reserved for apocalyptic warnings for a generally

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41 Merriam, S., ‘Case studies as qualitative research’, Chapter two in *Qualitative Research for Education*, (Jossey-Bass Inc; San Francisco, 1998).
42 Merriam, S., ‘Case studies as qualitative research’, Chapter two in *Qualitative Research for Education*, (Jossey-Bass Inc; San Francisco, 1998).
unspecified, but near-future, timeframe, or to evoke the brutal and messy period of internal conflict in the 1990s. The predominance of the use of the term “insurgency” is possibly due to the dominance of the international community – and in particular, the United States military – in prosecuting the conflict and concern regarding the credibility that “civil war” might confer upon the Taliban, implying not only military but political status and capability. But many definitions of civil war suggest that this is where Afghanistan is currently located in conflict terms. Thus my initial hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:**

*Afghanistan is currently in a civil war*

A stalemate in the Afghanistan conflict over several years after 2014 is plausible but seems overlooked, analytically. Political talks have yet to begin and both military combatants remain in the field, willing to take the fight to the enemy. No obvious “winner” is yet evident. But a stalemate, although clearly unsatisfactory, can be positive or negative. If the Afghan government, populace and international community reflected more upon what a stalemate might mean, it might remove some of the unseemly haste that many actors are currently demonstrating to throw together a political deal at any cost. An element of longer-term and strategic thinking might be brought to bear. A pragmatic awareness of (and even “embracing”) the stalemate, using the time to slowly develop local and national governance and security capabilities, might be good for Afghanistan. Thus my second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:**

*After 2014, Afghanistan is likely to remain in a stalemated insurgency*

From a review of Afghan history it looks possible for additional armed and capable contenders to emerge in addition to the Taliban. With reference to Charles Tilly’s theories, I will explore the extent to which the biggest threat to Afghanistan’s future might be the emergence of *multiple sovereignties*, where other groups develop the capability, intent and support to compete for power. The 1990s civil war period in Afghanistan saw multiple armed factions (the notorious “warlords”) emerge. Hence my third hypothesis:

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Hypothesis 3:

A major risk of conflict post-2014 will be the emergence, once again, of multiple contenders for power.

There are limitations and risks inherent in single-case studies. The complex specifics of Afghanistan potentially limit the generalizable value for considering other conflicts. Nevertheless, Flyvbjerg is quite defensive of this “misunderstanding” about case study research. I believe that my study here of civil war, stalemates and multiple active political and military contenders might help in consideration of implications for other conflict areas. Syria, to name but one recent and complex example, appears to embrace the core themes I analyse here. In Egypt – arguably drifting towards a low level civil war - control of the army looks to be of crucial importance.

My personal bias in this qualitative and descriptive paper must be acknowledged. I have been closely involved in Afghanistan as a government analyst and as an independent researcher. Bias might be represented in the reports, papers and quotes I choose to employ in this paper. There is no guard against this other than to declare it at the start. I am not intentionally supporting any policy line from any government or non-government organisation.

I have found that study of civil war theory alone is insufficient to help to understand and address the issues I raise here. In keeping with the predominantly descriptive category of my case study, I shall make use of an extensive range of diverse information sources: interviews, media, internet, academic papers, historic works, government, military and NGO reports and analysis. I shall also make use of the observations, interviews, discussions and field trips from my own time spent on the ground in Afghanistan as appropriate.

5. Conflict in Afghanistan: a discussion of historical context

“...a tribe of Persians called Afghans. They hold mountains and defiles and possess considerable strength, and are mostly highwaymen...”

Ibn Battútá, Moroccan explorer, 14th century.45

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Having introduced my analytical problem – how the conflict in Afghanistan might evolve – together with my theoretical and methodological approaches, I will look briefly at Afghanistan from a historical perspective. This contextual groundwork is important for understanding the complexity of the conflictual factors still apparent today. Although Afghans as a people are referred to from as early as the 10th century, it was not until the mid-18th century that “Afghanistan” as a nation came into being. For thousands of years before this, it was a patchwork of smaller territories existing in a fluid space between three major civilisations: Persia in the west, Central Asia to the north and India to the south east. Foreign invasions of this region probably began with the Aryan tribes in approximately 1,500 B.C., pushing south from Central Asia.

As these empires (Graeco-Bactrian, Seleucid, Mauryan, Kushan, Ghaznavid and Timurid) rose and fell, so was this region culturally, ethnically and religiously chopped, shaped and reshaped (see Annex). The area now known as Afghanistan had been dissected by several invading armies even before the British Empire tried its luck, most notably (but not exclusively) by Alexander the Great (330 B.C.), the Arabs (652 A.D.) and Genghis Khan (1219 A.D.), whose conquering armies dispelled the myth beloved of Afghans that they have never been defeated and left behind strong linguistic, cultural, social and genetic traces of their presence. The city of Kandahar is believed to be named after a local linguistic corruption of the ancient Greek name of Alexander the Great, “Iskander”.

The first Afghan state was created in 1747, but internecine strife between tribes and against rulers continued to make the area turbulent. Afghanistan became the goal in the “Great Game” between the Russian and British empires, as both employed political, military and economic assets in a paranoid struggle to secure influence in a country which the Russians saw as gateway and the British saw as buffer. This competition lasted well over a hundred years and saw Britain engaged in three military campaigns (1839–42, 1878–80 and 1919) inside Afghanistan and innumerable skirmishes in and around the ill-defined border areas.

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Internecine squabbles, coups, rebellions and uprisings remained a continuous feature in the 19th and early 20th centuries, hampering all manner of state building. Abdul Rahman, the “Iron Emir”, managed, through sheer brutality, to establish his own dynasty’s central authority from 1880 to 1929. After another bloody change of dynasty, including a civil war in 1924, Barfield notes that the period 1929 to 1978 “…gave Afghanistan its longest interval of peace and internal stability…”  

But this stability was deceptive. The post-World War II environment saw the emergence of a new competition for dominance between Soviet and American “empires”. In 1979, the Soviet Union intervened to support Afghan communist proxies who were faltering in their efforts to introduce a high speed socialist “modernisation” highly inappropriate for Afghanistan. The US covertly supported the armed resistance that arose as a result of the Soviet occupation in December 1979.

The guerrilla-style resistance from a multi-factional “Jihad” became a “bleeding wound” for the Soviet Union, who withdrew in 1989. But the extensive societal and infrastructural destruction was surpassed in the ten-year civil war that was to follow. The proxy regime left by the Soviets managed, to the surprise of most, to cling on until 1992, before collapsing as the financial, military and economic aid from the Soviet Union dried up when it succumbed in the early 1990s. But the Afghan political factions could not reach agreement and soon Afghans were fighting Afghans in a confused and bloody civil war. A new group of disillusioned Pushtun students and religious fundamentalists emerged in the south to fight corrupt former Mujahideen. The group, known as the Taliban (literally “seeker of truth”), under Mullah Mohammed Omar, gained the attention and support of Pakistan military and intelligence elements who were looking for a way to regain influence – if not downright control – in Afghanistan.

The UN had a painful and bruising experience as it attempted and failed to negotiate any credible transitional government or a cessation of hostilities beyond the most temporary of ceasefires. By mid-2001 the Taliban controlled most of the country, although the civil war

by now a contest between a fluid coalition of northern ethnic groups and the southern, predominantly Pashtun, Taliban, had become a stalemate. The Taliban were never universally popular in Afghanistan. Their backward-looking, fundamentalist-driven approach was harshly and strictly applied to all aspects of life: human rights, women’s rights, education, governance and justice.\textsuperscript{57}

This stalemate was over-turned. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a US-led international military coalition combined with Afghan warlord groups on the ground to attack the Taliban, who crumbled. They melted away, either to return to their old jobs as Pashtun farmers or to retire to Pakistan to lick their wounds, regroup and reconsider.

In the immediate aftermath, a UN-brokered conference at Bonn in December 2001 laid the groundwork for an interim regime under promising compromise candidate, Hamid Karzai. This was later confirmed by elections, a constitution and extensive international assistance. Optimism was high throughout the country: in 2003, a very senior former Northern Alliance official, then highly placed in the Karzai administration, responded to my query that he had failed to mention the Taliban once in a discussion about the future challenges for Afghanistan with a curt and dismissive shake of his head, “the Taliban are gone”\textsuperscript{58}.

But well-intentioned international assistance was incoherent and wasteful, causing frustration and resentment amongst the populace. The Afghan government failed to rise to the challenges of creating an effective, nepotism- and corruption-free central administration.\textsuperscript{59} The issue of what form of governance is best for Afghans is still intensely debated, many favouring a more decentralised vision of the country.\textsuperscript{60} Taliban fighters began to re-emerge in southern and eastern power vacuums, recruitment aided by Afghan unease over the foreign military presence and the flaws of the new regime.\textsuperscript{61} From late 2005/early 2006 a new insurgency was emerging, resembling (in fact, consciously aping), the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad. Neighbouring Pakistan re-emerged as “bête noire”, regularly accused by the Afghan government and the international community of providing support to the Taliban despite


\textsuperscript{58} Author’s conversation with senior Transitional Government official, Kabul, 2003


\textsuperscript{60} Ahmad, K., ”Tribal reps call for decentralised govt”, \textit{Pajhwok News}, 26 Feb. 2012, \url{http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/02/26/tribal-reps-call-decentralised-govt}

officially committing itself to supporting the Afghan government and international reconstruction efforts.⁶²

As the insurgency grew in intensity, international counter-insurgency responses were inconsistent, unable to decisively decide on the approach that should be taken.⁶³ Many nations were unwilling or unable to effectively engage in a coherent fighting campaign, vice the aid-giving, non-conflict, activities they preferred and had planned for. Military and civilian casualties began to rise. If the 1990s civil war was decisively ended by international intervention in late 2001, by the middle of the decade, the situation in Afghanistan, by most definitions, was once again resembling civil war.

General Stanley McCRystal, ISAF commander from 2009 – 2010, ironically (and almost certainly unintentionally) echoed Gorbachev’s 1988 “bleeding wound” assessment of Afghanistan when he described operations against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan as a “bleeding ulcer”.⁶⁴ His pragmatic analysis set the tone for acknowledging the military difficulties involved.⁶⁵ The international combat effort peaked in 2010 – US President Obama resolved to reduce American troop levels from 2011 with Afghan armed forces required to fully take responsibility for internal security from 2014.⁶⁶

6. Discussion of Hypothesis 1 – Afghanistan is currently in a civil war

“You do not wake up one morning and the radio says it’s civil war...The ingredients are already there—under the very watchful nose of the government and the armed militias loyal to the men who operate them. Under the very watchful eyes of the international community...In Kunduz, there is already a civil war.”

Amrullah Saleh, Afghan government Head of Intelligence, 2004-2010.⁶⁷

There are two issues of particular note about the manner in which the conflict is described. The first is how rarely the term “civil war” is employed for the present situation, with “insurgency” seemingly preferred. The second is that the term seems to be reserved to

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describe the Afghan conflict of the 1990s or as a warning of what could happen in the future. Connable and Libicki highlight the issue of subjectivity of the terminology (“one person’s insurgency in another’s civil war”), before offering a definition of insurgency thus:

“…the violent struggle by a non-governmental armed group against its government or an interceding force, with the intent of overthrowing the current regime, expelling an interloper, gaining greater rights, or obtaining independence.”

Barfield suggests there are two identifiable types of Afghan civil war: dynastic wars of succession, lasting perhaps months and more protracted wars of regime change, normally associated with foreign intervention. He argues the former is the more common experience in Afghan history and usually involves regions of the country but not the entirety. The latter is a more recent phenomenon, usually more widespread and bloody. The British engagements in the 19th century, the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and the US-led intervention in the 21st century would fit this category.

The Taliban’s insurgency, although borrowing heavily in style, tactics and language from the 1980s insurgency (in which many of the leadership had taken part) does not have the scale, intensity and, most crucial of all, popular support of the 1979-1989 period. It wasn’t always like this. At the start of the 21st century, the Taliban were doing well, militarily controlling 90% of Afghanistan. At this point the country had been in a civil war since approximately 1992. In October 2001, US-led international attacks against the Taliban caused their rapid collapse. The civil war that emerged in the 1990s can be judged with confidence to have ended at this point. What happened since is harder to define. Much of the Taliban leadership fled to Pakistan. When it became clear they were not to be included in peace discussions, a period of regrouping and reflection took place. Taliban groups re-infiltrated back in the south and east of Afghanistan – the ethnic heartland from where they derived most of their early support – and returned to the forms of guerrilla combat with which most were familiar, being sure to “reach-out” to the population. Playing on a range of contemporary and historic concerns – Islamic, xenophobic, economic, ethnic and tribal – an insurgency developed, the

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scale of which was only really discovered when British forces deployed in strength to southern Afghanistan in 2006.  

At this stage, the insurgency was localised, but the Taliban slowly increased in confidence and capability. They developed a media section, political wing, financial commission and, most recently, a “Call and Guidance/Recruitment Commission”, intended to bring over defectors from the regime. International intelligence estimates traced the growth of the armed strength of the insurgency from the low thousands in 2005, to somewhere around 25 – 35,000 in 2013.

Most definitions of civil war demonstrate three elements: the fighting is broadly within the confines of a defined national boundary, between at least two militarily active protagonists originating from, and competing for political power within, this geographic boundary and that casualties reach certain levels (Sambanis and Doyle, Kalyvas, Singer and Small). This looks very much like Afghanistan from about 2005 to the present. But Tilly, considering revolutionary situations and outcomes, argues that it is more about the scale of power transfer at stake. For him, revolutions, civil wars and insurrections are graduations of power transfer that can greatly overlap, with revolution at the top end of the scale and insurgencies at the lower end.

Are the Taliban sufficiently viable military and political contenders to make this a civil war? Since their defeat in 2001, the Taliban have taken a while to present a challenge to the new Afghan government – recruiting, training and commanding many local groups proved difficult in the early years. The Taliban have made considerable effort to develop political credentials. In 2012, a hitherto confidential NATO assessment noted the following:

“...the Taliban leadership continued to refocus from military operations to the establishment of alternative civilian governance. The Taliban have recognized that the public has been dissatisfied with [the Afghan government] for many years, but with no ability to act as a substitute and little control over subordinate personnel, they could not generate widespread support among the population. While Taliban military operations continue to gain media

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71 See the Taliban official website, http://shahamat-english.com/
attention, their growing ability to provide essential governmental services has become a strong source of appeal for Afghans.”

Taliban media effort presents the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” as a counter to the Afghan government, which they reject as illegal. This year they announced talks with Iran over the plight of Afghan refugees. They also revealed that they were considering dialogue with the UN over civilian casualties. Their official goal is the restoration of the Emirate. But intentions are perhaps ahead of capability. Opinion polls have difficulties operating in Afghanistan and should be treated with caution, however, regular polling by the Asia Foundation regarding the level of Taliban support noted:

“A majority of respondents say they have no sympathy at all (63%), while 10% say they have a lot of sympathy and 20% say they have some level of sympathy for these groups… There has been a decline in the number of people who sympathize a lot or little with these armed opposition groups that use violence, and there has been an increase among those who have no sympathy at all for them.”

The Taliban are not widely popular although this, for Tilly, would be the key to converting a potential revolutionary situation where power is contested into an outcome where power can transfer. What seems to have happened in the 2002 – 2013 period is the mutation of the heavily defeated and fragmented Taliban regime into limited local insurgencies that evolved and expanded to fill vacuums that the new regime was unable to control. Momentum and coordination developed once it became clear just how incoherent were the Afghan government and international efforts to stabilise and rebuild the country. The Taliban certainly have natural constituencies of support in the rural areas, amongst Pushtun tribes in the south and east of the country. But this is clearly not a Jihad of anti-Soviet proportions, which Barfield describes as Afghanistan’s first (and, thus far, only) nationwide period of insurgency, despite the Taliban’s ability to reach across most of the country and into the capital.

74 NATO, ‘The State of the Taliban’, declassified report by TF-3-10 Bagram, 6 Jan 2012.
75 Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Afghan Taliban send delegation to Iran: Insurgents’ trip to Tehran presented as meeting of governments, which is likely to fuel reports of co-operation between countries’, The Guardian, 3 June 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/afghan-taliban-send-delegation-iran
Conclusions

Although definitions are a little inconclusive, I find that Afghanistan is currently in a state of civil war that began at some point after the Taliban’s defeat in late 2001, when the previous civil war ended. A noticeable leap in Taliban political and fighting capabilities took place around 2006 and casualties surged: it is plausible to suggest that the new civil war began around this time, giving us two opponents compatible with Tilly’s contested revolutionary situation, if not an actual outcome. But formal definitions are not always helpful and use of the term “insurgency” risks clouding our understanding. Some see the term as synonymous with “civil war”, others that an insurgency is but one form of civil war, others still that an insurgency is generally of a smaller scale than a civil war. I would incline to side with Fearon and Laitin here, seeing rural insurgency as a particular expression of civil war. This is primarily what we are seeing inside Afghanistan. The main distinction between use of the terms “civil war” and “insurgency” appears to be subjective, with the terms applied for reasons of perspective and political agenda, in which an insurgency is conceived as something smaller in scale and more manageable – a localised armed protest against government, rather than a credible attempt to remove or replace it.

It is tempting to ask whether it matters that Afghanistan is defined as a civil war or not. At the moment it may not. But the term recognises at least two formal combatants with pretensions to governance of the country. For Afghanistan to be in a condition of “civil war” might undermine the position of the current government by confirming that there is a valid potential alternative government system. The use of the term provides valuable propaganda. At time of writing, the Afghan government are extremely concerned that international recognition for a Taliban office in Qatar intended to facilitate talks might form a potential legitimisation of the Taliban as a viable alternative political contender. We can watch with interest to see how the use of the term evolves in the future – a conflict that becomes “someone else’s civil war” could provide the cue for international abandonment. Conversely, mindful of reported improving relations between the Taliban and Iran, as well as Pakistan’s long-documented and controversial support for the Taliban, it also becomes possible to

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envisage countries formally recognising a Taliban political contender, reinforcing the notion that Afghanistan is in a civil war.

7. Discussion of Hypothesis 2 – After 2014, Afghanistan is likely to remain a stalemate insurgency

“We are looking at a situation where the war is very likely to be stalemated with no formula for ending it.”

Stephen Biddle, GWU, January 2013.\(^\text{81}\)

I will now develop an analysis on the possible direction of the conflict. In Helmand province, in June 2008, the then commander of British forces in southern Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carlton-Smith, gave an upbeat assessment of the counter-insurgency campaign, claiming the Taliban had been “decapitated”. In London, in October, on completion of his tour of duty, he seemed to have had a change of heart:

“…Carleton-Smith said the British public should not expect ‘a decisive military victory’ and that he believed groups of insurgents would still be at large after troops pulled out. In June, he claimed that British forces had reached a "tipping point" against a weakened Taliban after their leadership was "decapitated". But on Sunday the army officer said it was time to lower expectations and focus on reducing the conflict to a level which could be managed by the Afghan army.”\(^\text{82}\)

ISAF has made strenuous efforts to defeat the Taliban-led insurgency, but a “surge” of an additional 33,000 US troops in 2010 was almost certainly the peak of this effort. The international military perspective has been that counter-insurgency takes time and incremental progress can be demonstrated.\(^\text{83}\) The international community and the Afghan population are less convinced.

*Can the government militarily defeat the Taliban?*


I suggested in the discussion of Hypothesis 1 that the Taliban have problems of support, recruitment and military and political capabilities. Government forces have a range of problems of their own. The ANSF comprises the army, police, air force, border guards, local militias and other specialist units including counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist groups. The force is still new and developing, having been created more or less from scratch. After the fall of the Taliban, the concern was to disarm the numerous armed groups controlled by warlords who presented a threat to Karzai’s interim government, which had limited coercive power of its own and depended on the international coalition. A new force, loyal to central government, was sorely needed.

Attempts to construct a new army and police force were hesitant and haphazard as plans and concepts came and went. In 2003, I had the opportunity to witness ANA training. At that time the French were teaching the Afghan officers, the British the non-commissioned officers and the Americans the soldiers. There was undoubted enthusiasm amongst many parts of the new army, but still a strong culture of entitlement and nepotism: ex-warlords expected to be given high-ranking positions without being qualified.84 An appropriate size for the ANSF, one based on cost and threat assessment, has always been a source of hot debate.85 Original targets looked for an ANSF of around 70,000 but this figure crept upwards each year. NATO now confirms that the goal for the ANSF is a force of 352,000.86 The force has been trained and equipped along Western models which conflict with Afghan attitudes to fighting, resources and educational levels.

Rapid force generation created many problems. Quality of personnel is poor, desertion commonplace and corruption widespread. The ability to maintain the force – crucial if they are to stand alone from 2013 – is limited. Casualties are high, adding to the attrition rate.87 It has proved easy to generate quantities of men willing to take money to put on a uniform, carry a gun and man a checkpoint, but harder to train them to coordinate and operate at higher levels of command. Skills such as logistics, intelligence, air support, medical, artillery,

84 Author’s field trip, 2003.
engineers and planning are crucial but much less advanced. Insurgents have infiltrated ANSF units and ISAF personnel have been killed by Afghan soldiers. The similarly low quality police are being worryingly misused:

“We have built the Afghan police into a less well-armed, less well-trained version of the Army...nobody is doing the job of actual policing—rule of law, keeping the population safe from all comers...providing justice and dispute resolution, and civil and criminal law enforcement. As a consequence, the Taliban have stepped into this gap…”

None of this suggests a force that will be able to adopt population-sensitive counter-insurgency techniques or inflict a military defeat on the Taliban any time soon.

*Can the Taliban militarily defeat the government?*

The Taliban have considerable experience in the type of warfare they have adopted. The Taliban’s fighting strength originally developed from the experiences that the first generation of Taliban – including leader Mullah Omar – underwent during the Jihad against the Soviet Union. Ahmed Rashid noted the physical impact of this:

“The Taliban leadership can boast to be the most disabled in the world today... Mullah Omar lost his right eye in 1989 when a rocket exploded close by...The war wounds of the Taliban leaders also reflect the bloody and brutal style of war that took place in and around Kandahar in the 1990s…”

Their initial rise in the south in the mid-1990s saw a tried and tested guerrilla style of fighting. Later, the “trademark” method of operating was employment of hundreds of light, highly mobile, 4 x 4 pick-up trucks. As the civil war intensified, their fighting style embraced heavy weapons – as did their opponents. The Taliban and their opponents made use of the large amounts of Soviet equipment – tanks, artillery, aircraft and rockets left behind or donated subsequently. Many so-called “battles” were decided through negotiation, once it

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had become clear, pre-combat, who was likely to win. Deals could be struck and sides changed with relative ease. This worked in the Taliban’s favour as their momentum swept them rapidly through the country, capturing Kandahar in 1994, Herat in the west in 1995, Kabul in in 1996 and Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan in 1997. The Taliban were to experience this in reverse in late 2001 as their front lines unravelled under attacks from northern Afghan Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek militias as they combined with US airpower and US Special Forces.

“Shifting allegiances among Afghan tribal armed forces were common in times of unrest and uncertainty over who would be the ruler. This risk did not disappear when a more modern army was established in the twentieth century…”

The Taliban returned to their roots and evolved into a credible, capable and powerful guerrilla force. Using a safe haven in the mountainous and rugged tribal areas of north-west Pakistan and well-honed insurgency tactics, they regrouped, rearmed and returned to Afghanistan to continue the fight. This was a slow process but resolve is still strong. A NATO report from January 2012 made the following assessment:

Taliban commanders, along with rank and file members, increasingly believe their control of Afghanistan is inevitable. Though the Taliban suffered severely in 2011, its strength, motivation, funding, and tactical proficiency remain intact. While they are weary of war, they see little hope for a negotiated peace. Despite numerous tactical setbacks, surrender is far from their collective mind-set. For the moment, they believe that continuing the fight and expanding Taliban governance are their only viable courses of action.

Taliban tactics now embrace suicide bombings and assassinations, a result of exposure to international terror techniques and the Taliban’s own links to Al Qaeda. President Karzai’s brother, Wali Karzai, a major political figure in southern Afghanistan was assassinated in July 2011. The Head of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was killed in a

suicide attack in September 2011.\textsuperscript{96} At time of writing, the Taliban appear to be stepping up their attacks on “soft” targets, such as NGOs: in May 2013, the International Organisation for Migration office in Kabul and the Red Cross compound in Jalalabad were hit by suicide attackers within a week of each other.\textsuperscript{97}

But the Taliban have problems. They are not controlling territory to any significant degree: there is no territorial conquest they can use as a bargaining tool. They are dependent upon Pakistan safe havens and are not achieving the levels of popular support appropriate to Jihadic demands, which many of the leadership would recognise as essential from their anti-Soviet experiences. Taliban fighting strength seems to have “plateaued”, neither growing nor shrinking. Membership of the Taliban is fluid. Many fighters identified as “Taliban” could just as easily return to farming, join up with a local police group or forge links with local militia commanders. Most groups of Afghan society are either opposed to the Taliban or at least waiting to see how the conflict plays itself out.\textsuperscript{98}

This suggests limitations to the military and political capabilities of the Taliban – possibly borne out by what appears to be an increasing reliance on terrorism.\textsuperscript{99} Many studies of guerrilla warfare have highlighted the transition from guerrilla fighters to organised regular forces that a rebel force must undergo in order to wrest control from a government in power.\textsuperscript{100}

It is likely the Taliban will struggle to develop the capacity to launch larger scale, conventional, attacks that could pose a real threat to the Afghan government.

If the Taliban tried to re-shape into a conventional military force, it would be fraught with danger for them: command, control, discipline and logistics become much more difficult and complex. Concentrating their forces would offer the perfect target for artillery and aircraft. The Mujahideen assault against the city of Jalalabad in 1989 with thousands of massed troops...


ended in bloody catastrophe (“…a textbook example of how not to fight a battle”), with uncoordinated, naïve, enthusiasm proving no match for a well-supplied and entrenched Afghan Army that was asked to do little beyond point a gun and shoot.\textsuperscript{101}

Is a political settlement likely?

Political settlements appear less durable than outright military victory.\textsuperscript{102} Mason et al concluded that negotiated settlements were at greater risk of collapsing in the early years after the conflict than outright military victories.\textsuperscript{103} But a political settlement is still widely touted as the only viable solution for Afghanistan’s current conflict situation.\textsuperscript{104}

“NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen…expressed cautious support for expanded political contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban. ‘I am not going to guess about motives and intentions within the Taliban leadership. However, I commend all efforts to try and find a political settlement’…”\textsuperscript{105}

Much discourse on Afghanistan – political, military, analytical, academic, media – refers to the importance of political dialogue to a peace settlement. But what becomes apparent is how many potential dialogue participants there are and the complexity of this goal. There are at least three separate insurgent groups: the Taliban themselves, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and the Haqqani Network. The latter two are smaller and more localised in reach, but operate in the same manner and reject the international presence and the Afghan government. The Afghan government is clearly key but has problems. It established a High Peace Council (HPC), comprising diverse members of Afghan society (including women, former Mujahideen and ex-Taliban), charging it with dialogue with the Taliban. President Karzai

has involved himself personally, often unhelpfully.\textsuperscript{106} But the Taliban reject the Afghan government and do not recognise the HPC, going as far as to assassinate the its head, Burhanuddin Rabbani, one of Afghanistan’s most senior religious and political figures, in 2011.\textsuperscript{107} Other political factions are believed to have initiated talks independently with the Taliban.\textsuperscript{108} Pakistan and the United States both demand a place in talks and it is generally accepted that neighbouring countries and near neighbours should all be considered to have legitimate interests. This brings Iran, Russia, India, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Arab states into the dialogue arena as “interested parties”\textsuperscript{109}

Recent historical precedent for talks between warring factions in Afghanistan is not encouraging. The UN struggled for years, without any real success, to bring factions to the table, establish ceasefires and develop transitional governments during the civil war in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{110} Efforts were continually frustrated by outbreaks of fighting, groups changing sides, agreements failing to be honoured and combat taking place between parts of the same government.

Although the Taliban now appear to have been permitted to establish a political office (in Qatar) in order to enable dialogue to commence, little appears to have taken place of substance.\textsuperscript{111} Many experienced analysts remain very pessimistic, given that there is so little clarity about who is to talk to whom, what is to be discussed, who can approve (let alone enforce) any deals and how the Afghan population might endorse any decisions.\textsuperscript{112}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[106] Dyer, G. and Kazmin, A., ‘Karzai withdrawal from Afghan peace talks leaves tough road ahead’, \textit{The Financial Times}, 19 June 2013, \url{http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d1a5df7c-d8ba-11e2-84fa-00144feab7d.html#axzz2b4Qy+NVi}
\item[107] Wendle, J., ‘Rabbani’s Killing Pushes Peace with the Taliban Further Out of Reach’, \textit{Time}, 21 Sep. 2011, \url{http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2094186,00.html}
\item[112] Author’s notes, \url{http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/afghanistan-towards-2014-diis-conference-key-points/}
\end{itemize}
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The Taliban had their morale boosted by the impending withdrawal of international military forces in 2014 with the conflict still underway. But the US government continue to insist that the Taliban publically renounce Al Qaeda, support the Afghan constitution, disarm and declare support for human rights. The Taliban’s perspective is simple – why does a retreating army think it is in a position to dictate terms?

“In reality, they want surrender of Mujahideen under the title of peace; give up arms, abide by the constitution created under the shadow of invaders and bow your heads to our orders and we won’t say anything to you! Is this peace? Do they think that the Afghan nation gave colossal sacrifices for the past eleven years to surrender to the invaders?”

Blurring things further is the state of the combat between the Afghan government and international forces on the one hand and the insurgents on the other. With the ISAF forces withdrawing, this burden of combat is being picked up by the fledgling Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Neither the ANSF nor the Taliban yet seem ready to concede the field of battle. There is little evidence of a “hurting stalemate” pushing anyone into talks. Some Western analysts and advisors continue to believe that the Taliban can be militarily defeated and that substantial numbers of US forces should remain in Afghanistan.

Finally, there is the poor use of language and terminology in the dialogue process: “talks”, “cease-fire”, “dialogue”, “settlement”, “negotiations”, “reintegration”, “reconciliation” and even “peace” are all being applied in different (and misleading) contexts. This has the effect of raising expectations and complicating processes. An Afghan government initiative, the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) was introduced in 2010, intending to reintegrate individual insurgents and reconcile larger insurgent groups. The APRP process has been criticised for being little more than a counter-insurgency tool, intended to fragment

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and erode Taliban capabilities by bringing over small groups of fighters weary of combat. ISAF publically described its role in the process thus:

“Reintegration is an essential part of the [counter insurgency] campaign, not an alternative to it. Reintegration removes fighters from the battlefield.”118

Whereas reconciliation and reintegration might usually be undertaken after a settlement and fighting has ceased, the APRP seemed designed as a means of stopping the fighting in a fashion wholly designed to achieve a victory for government forces. Perhaps it is hardly surprising that the APRP is rejected by the Taliban and has achieved little.119

*The case for stalemate*

Periods of protracted military stalemate look less common in Afghanistan’s history. Internal wars of succession, Barfield suggests, are usually resolved in months.120 While genuine dialogue progress is certainly possible – even probable - after 2014, given the problems getting the parties together and the lack of decisive military capability on either side, there looks to be a likelihood, from what we have seen of the 1990s (and more recently) that talking and fighting will co-exist, with the latter generally hampering the former. This might point towards messy stalemate. Although the lessons of history are perhaps less valuable as we move further back in time, in the last four decades of conflict in Afghanistan, it is possible to identify several instances of stalemate:

1. The Soviet military efforts in the mid-late 1980s failing to make headway.
2. The Najibullah regime and army resisting the Mujahideen from 1989 to 1992
3. The struggle between the “warlords” from 1992 to approximately 1994
4. The struggle between warlords and the Taliban from 1998 to 2001
5. The insurgency led by the Taliban against the government and international forces from approximately 2005 to the present

This suggests that we can entertain the idea of a protracted conflict beyond 2014 in which neither side develops significant advantage over the other and credible dialogue simply does

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not take root. The international community’s financial, military and political support to the Afghan regime will be important but perhaps only *decisive* if it ceases. While the West might not allow Afghanistan to fail over this period, and is highly likely to retain some military presence, it doesn’t appear to possess the appetite for sustained political or military effort beyond a “propping up” exercise after 2014.\(^\text{121}\)

So how might the conflict play out after 2014? Certainly the historical parallel that catches the eye is the situation facing the Afghan regime under Najibullah after the Soviets departed in 1989.\(^\text{122}\) This saw the military forces of a superpower being extricated (“a well-planned and superbly executed nine-month withdrawal”) while an insurgency was on-going.\(^\text{123}\) Responsibility for continuing the fight was handed over to a large but weak Afghan national army. Many international observers expected a rapid collapse. Early indicators seemed to confirm this, with insurgent attacks increasing in intensity and a military coup (involving government and rebel elements in collusion) only narrowly averted.\(^\text{124}\) However, over-confidence on the part of the Mujahideen led to major casualties as they attempted to assault Jalalabad.\(^\text{125}\) After these “wobbles”, the conflict settled into a stalemate, with the government holding the major urban centres and communication routes and the insurgency many rural areas. Weitz, writing in 1992, called this the “unexpected military stalemate”, noting that:

> “After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghan government troops proved unexpectedly successful at attaining their minimum objective of retaining control of the cities. The insurgents, so skilled at guerrilla warfare, were unable to defeat government forces in large-scale conventional warfare.”\(^\text{126}\)

This stalemate was only broken when the Soviet regime in Moscow itself dramatically collapsed, causing the rapid end to the military and economic support going to the Afghan regime.


Conclusions

I find that this hypothesis works plausibly. There is a good chance that the ANSF, after early teething problems, will prove capable of holding the cities and the main communications routes if US financial and military support remains, particularly air power, logistics and intelligence. The insurgent groups will continue to attack at the edges, penetrating into areas where government reach is less advanced and continuing the campaign of targeted terrorist actions. The Afghan army, despite its many flaws, looks better equipped, trained, resourced and motivated than Najibullah’s Soviet-backed army of conscripts. The insurgency, although undoubtedly capable and experienced, will probably be unable to generate high levels of popular support. Although a stalemated conflict is an unpleasant enough scenario, it might be preferable to more apocalyptic predictions that Afghanistan will simply return to the multifactional and brutal civil war of the 1990s.127

Prospects for credible and sustainable dialogue look poor, certainly before 2014. In 2014 and 2015, the situation may well see some fluid political and military developments – absorbing the aftermath of what will probably be another difficult election, together with the impact of international military disengagement. After 2015, I suggest that both main combatants will still be willing and able to continue the fight. Dialogue would need to lead to ceasefire, negotiated settlement, implementation, monitoring (perhaps enforcement) and only then, some form of wider popular reconciliation. Historic patterns of allegiance shifting have been documented, most recently in the 1990s civil war. Many key figures from that time are still active within government or insurgency. This suggests that, even if a basic political power-sharing deal could be struck, it could unravel or reverse before getting a chance to solidify.

My examination of the development, capabilities and potential problems within insurgents and counter-insurgents suggests that neither side is capable of a military resolution of the conflict in their own favour. Counter-insurgency has not worked, but neither has the Taliban version of “Jihad”.128 Neither party yet exhibit signs that they are sufficiently hard-pressed to support genuine and coherent political dialogue. Absent a major military or diplomatic breakthrough, both sides still in the field and dialogue at an unimpressive “talks about talks” stage, this points to a continuation of the conflict for some years to come.

8. Discussion of Hypothesis 3 – The main risk of conflict post-2014 will be the emergence, once again, of multiple contenders for power

“Insurgencies with more than two clear parties involved have longer, more-violent and more-complex endings.”

Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’

Each year of stalemated conflict will hold out the possibility that aspects of economic, social and political development will take root. Conversely, a persistent and virulent insurgency, though it may not be capable of overturning a government, might indirectly create conditions for a damaging escalation in fighting by undermining and eroding it.

Although the likelihood of the Taliban regaining political power (or a majority share of it) looks small, the sort of persistent civil war I am suggesting clearly contains risk of greater destabilisation and even state fragmentation through other factors, given the county's overall and extensive political and economic fragility. The following outcomes could be created by a continued insurgency:

1. A violent event, such as a key assassination of a particular person or mass-casualty event at a particular time (such as an election, peace talks or other significant political event).
2. War-weariness causing disengagement of the international community.
3. Worsening interference by neighbours – particularly Pakistan.
4. The failure of central government: inability or unwillingness to function, leading to inertia and popular frustration.
5. Re-emergence of “warlords”, regional military and political leaders seizing – or attempting to seize – power for themselves.

My particular interest here are ethnic or political factions currently aligned with the government that might start pulling away from the centre, causing a more damaging fragmentation. These groups would not necessarily support the Taliban (although short-term, tactical, alliances should certainly not be ruled out) but neither will they be content to support

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the current central government system any longer. It is perhaps more in keeping with recent Afghan history to think again of multiple groups with regional powerbases contending for power as the major risk for the country than it is a single group (thus far, the Taliban) versus the Afghan government.¹³¹

Charles Tilly’s writings are particularly helpful here as a means of visualising this. Tilly outlines the notion of revolutionary situations – i.e. proximate potential causes that might bring about transfers of power – and revolutionary outcomes concluding with a transfer of power.¹³² He identifies three drivers: the emergence of a contender (or coalitions of contenders) to the government; groups of the population committing themselves in support of these groups and the inability or unwillingness of the government to suppress or otherwise resolve these competing claims.

Tilly notes that many revolutionary situations have existed in the world that failed to lead to the full transfer of power he describes as a revolutionary outcome.¹³³ This seems to have been the case for Afghanistan in the 1990s, with the emergence of numerous groups vying for power. There was much conflict among factions powerful in their own local areas, but with insufficient power and support to finally tip the balance in their favour. In Afghanistan, examples of betrayal and side-changing are numerous – Dostum, Hekmatyar, Pahlawan.¹³⁴ Even the most famous Mujahideen commander, the ethnic Tajik, Ahmad Shah Massoud was alleged to have reached a temporary deal with the Soviets in the 1980s to gain respite from attack. Ahmed Rashid suggests it is a positive step that members of the Afghan political opposition are also engaged in dialogue with the Taliban, but perhaps there is more to be concerned about here – raising, as it does, the notion of some factions of government aligning with some insurgent factions (Hezb-e Islami, for example, have a foot in both camps). This would point to a return to the swirling, complex and destabilising military alliances of the 1990s.¹³⁵

Barfield offered two civil war “styles” in Afghan history: the short war of succession and the messier and protracted foreign-backed “regime change”. Tilly gives us two additional ideas why we might see a stalemated civil war as more likely than one that resolves itself quickly.

Firstly, in Afghanistan today, after four decades of conflict with the population suffering in the middle, there is little strong political or ideological commitment to any side:

“Competing armies, furthermore, sometimes battle for control of a government with little or no civilian support. Lack of widespread commitment to the revolutionary coalitions disqualifies these civil wars as revolutionary situations…recent civil wars in Angola, Uganda, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Colombia have all pitted against each other armies that inspired more fear than love among reluctant civilians.” ¹³⁶

The Afghan population have developed a finely-tuned defence mechanism during these periods of conflicts. They understand the need to “wait and see” until it becomes clear who is winning before committing one way or the other. And commitment, when it comes, will be cautious, pragmatic and, as necessary, temporary.¹³⁷

Secondly, Tilly suggests that revolutionary outcomes, where a conclusive power transfer actually takes place, are more likely in medium- to high-capacity non-democratic regimes (China and Russia, for example) as control, communications and power infrastructure facilitates political and military consolidation post-transfer, more effectively than in low capacity states:

“Control of the state apparatus by members of revolutionary coalitions, however, faces severe obstacles in low capacity, non-democratic regimes, since the apparatus itself tends to fragment during such seizures of power.” ¹³⁸

Despite international efforts, we might still judge Afghanistan to be in the low capacity category, pointing to a contestation for fragmenting (or fragmented) government power being a messy, protracted and bloody process mirroring the 1990s – a stalemate of sorts.

So, what evidence do we have of potential alternative sovereignties? Many of the main warlords are still evident. The Tajiks have expressed extreme disquiet at what they see is a Pushtun President bending over backwards to accommodate the Pushtun Taliban. Amrullah Saleh (a former intelligence head and a politician) recently declared that: “the Taliban are not

our brothers they are our killers”.\footnote{Farmer, B., ‘Afghanistan's former spy chief: 'Never trust the Taliban”, The Daily Telegraph, 13 Aug. 2011, \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8700028/Afghani...}} The Tajik ethnic grouping have many leaders in key government positions – including a vice-presidency - and are well-placed within the armed forces.

The Hazara are ethnically very distinct and are Shia Moslem (they form 20% of the population with the Sunnis – including the Taliban – accounting for 80%). They were brutally handled by the Taliban regime and do not look favourably upon a Taliban return to government.\footnote{Rashid, A., \textit{Taliban}, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp.76-77 and also Duparcq, E., ‘Afghanistan's oppressed Hazaras dread Taliban return’, \textit{AFP}, 19 Mar. 2011, \url{http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jDZQaM7FErxV6XAubD2gVrBAEvyBA?docId=CNG.1411cd01df64d8f14a45e3962493b9a.5f1}.} Other individual warlords still wield power, even though donning the trappings of government. Ismail Khan, from Herat province in the west is the Minister for Energy and Water.\footnote{Dietl, G., ‘War, Peace and the Warlords: The Case of Ismail Khan of Herat in Afghanistan’, \textit{Turkish Journal of International Relations}, Vol.3, No.2 and 3, Summer and Fall, 2004.} He has recently talked of the need to rearm the Mujahideen as neither the central government nor ISAF was capable of protecting the country.\footnote{Bezhan, F., ‘What's Behind Former Afghan Warlord Ismail Khan's Public Call to Arms?’, \textit{The Atlantic}, 15 Nov. 2012, \url{http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/whats-behind-former-afghan-warlord-ismail-khans-public-call-to-arms/265226/}.} Abdul Rashid Dostum is an ethnic Uzbek warlord in the north of the country. He controlled a significant part of the north in the 1990s and ran it as a state, with its own currency and airline.\footnote{Dostum’s biography, \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/dostum.htm}} He has also often talked about forming his own army to defeat the Taliban.\footnote{Hamilton-Little, M., ‘Top Afghan General: Taliban Defeat Would Take Less Than a Year’, \textit{The Daily Beast}, 31 July 2012, \url{http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/31/top-afghan-general-taliban-defeat-would-take-less-than-a-year.html}}

\textit{Conclusions}

I think this hypothesis stands up. Afghan recent history very starkly demonstrates the implications of the existence of powerful multiple armed factions only loosely controlled by central government, particularly the difficulties of \textit{any} group achieving a decisive result. Theory suggests the mess and complexity implicit in a contest between multiple groups. To be sure, the international community’s engagement (particularly the military side) looks to be keeping the worst aspects of these forces in check, but the lessening of the grip and other growing uncertainties engendered by “2014” suggest that the days of the warlords may yet return – if they ever went away.
9. And what of the army? Control of the coercive means.

“Control over the major organised means of coercion within the population is pivotal to the success or failure of any effort to seize power. Within all contemporary states, that means control of the military forces.”

Charles Tilly, 1977. 145

A recalcitrant warlord, bent on rejecting central control - and even replacing it - needs fighters. Tilly’s thinking is clear: the control of the army and police – the “violence specialists” - is crucial for the survivability of a regime or for a new regime seeking to replace it. In the context of Afghanistan, the International Crisis Group (ICG) wrote, in 2012, that:

History has shown that failure to build a cohesive national army has often led to the diffusion of state force among disparate actors, hastening the collapse of governments in Kabul.147

How politically robust and loyal are the Afghan security forces, given that it is a fledgling forces? The 2010 paper from the ICG made a further stark assessment:

Ethnic frictions and political factionalism among high-level players in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the general staff have also stunted the army’s growth. As a result, the army is a fragmented force, serving disparate interests, and far from attaining the unified national character needed to confront numerous security threats.148

The ICG judge that the Tajiks dominate control of the army. It is hard to get an accurate sense of the ethnic imbalance, but the US Government Accountability Office recorded this is 2011:

“Tajiks were especially overrepresented in the officer corps, constituting 40 percent of all ANA officers, as compared with a target of 25 percent. NTM-A/CSTC-A officials noted that they were concerned about ethnic imbalance in the ANA and had taken steps to limit

overrepresentation of Tajik officers, such as keeping a number of eligible officers in reserve and not assigning them to units in order to avoid increasing the imbalance. However, some ethnic imbalance within the force still remains.”

Army loyalty is critical if the viability of the state is to rest on the ANSF’s ability to withstand military pressures on the battlefield and political pressures at government level. At a conference on Afghanistan in Copenhagen in April 2013, the issue of army loyalty came up several times:

“…although the majority of the officer corps was now Tajik, the “identity” of the officers was “fluid” – many having fought in several armies of wildly different affiliations. This political identity was important to understand. Ruttig said loyalty to the government is the key. Rashid was downbeat – he had seen 6 or 7 armies break up in Afghanistan since 1979 – ethnic loyalty drives it all in the end...the ANSF…was loyal neither to the state, the institutions or the President. Who was it loyal to? Answer – their own ethnicity. Ruttig countered by suggesting that it went deeper and broader than ethnic loyalty and down to individual commanders.”

Ruttig’s last comment raises the spectre of a potentially devastating fragmentation of the army, were it to be pushed around politically. In this scenario, multiple groups contending for power would have access to very powerful, modern weapons systems, trained personnel able to use them and, perhaps most critical of all, would be contesting power at a time when the international community is reluctant to re-engage.

10. Conclusions

“...Afghanistan almost always tended to fragment: its few moments of coherence were built on the successes of its armies, never of its administration.”

William Dalrymple, historian, 2013

Perhaps characteristic of many theses, I found my initial intention and research for the paper migrated during writing, sometimes because of analytical difficulties, other times because...


new approaches suggested themselves. I will consider briefly my intentions, methods and experiences in writing the paper and then reflect upon my findings.

**Intentions and methods**

I treated Afghanistan as a qualitative case study, using a hybrid of descriptive, particularist and heuristic approaches, looking at the nature of Afghanistan’s conflict and some of the factors that might influence its direction after 2014. Positioning myself in the middle of historical context, civil war theory and the complex post-2001 political and military situation, I looked at the prospects for continued conflict, likely outcomes and the possible triggers and risks of additional armed contestation for control of the state.

**Experiences**

Analytically, Afghanistan is a very complex subject. Many theorists will point to the need to resolve popular grievances as a means of ending an insurgency. This is hard to disagree with but, with four decades of ever-shifting grievance and violently contested politics in Afghanistan, it becomes hard to sift through and identify exactly what the relevant “causes” might be, let alone resolving them. It was a struggle to avoid diverting down a multitude of avenues of analysis. Initially I thought I would produce a paper looking at all aspects of Afghanistan post-2014 - security, political, economic and social - to, in effect, “solve” the problem. Early on it became clear that this was neither viable nor desirable and would dissipate my analytical resources.

Instead, I looked at some analytically “less-travelled” but relevant issues. These themes were interwoven and combined well to create, not only an important analytical and narrative thread (a civil war stalemate could fracture the government, making army loyalty crucial), but a constructive exploration from a new perspective. Here, I found the Taliban still to be important, but less decisive and for different reasons.

**Findings**

If political dialogue is unsuccessful, a military contest remains indecisive and international support remains cautious, a form of stalemate is highly plausible for Afghanistan after 2014. This could last for many years. With reference to Tilly, I concluded that a threat to Afghanistan’s future beyond the Taliban’s insurgency could be the emergence of *multiple*
sovereignties, where other political groupings develop the capability, intent and support to contest state control. This could come from ethnic, religious or political factions already in existence or from coalitions yet to form. It could certainly involve “pro-government” factions aligning with “pro-insurgent” groups. In this scenario, the Taliban could become relegated – important, but not necessarily directly decisive. Control of a powerful but fledgling army, whose loyalty is untested but justifiably questionable, would be crucial in a violent contestation for power. Combining an extant insurgency with other contesting factions and a struggle for the army would produce a much more devastating civil conflict than would the current civil war stalemate.

How might theory inform the case?

Making use of various aspects of conflict theory allowed me to examine the nature and likely course, of the conflict. I made use of two “clusters” of theory. One was a wider exploration, using aspects of qualitative, quantitative and counter-insurgency theory, to help me consider the concept of civil war in the context of Afghanistan and the issue of stalemate. The other made more specific use of the ideas of Charles Tilly and let me explore notions of multiple sovereignties contesting power.

Although theory is less than consensual on nature, cause and course, it helped me to conclude that Afghanistan was in a state of civil war. This was in spite of the fact that the term is barely used to describe the current conflict and only deployed when discussing past history and a possible future. This is probably because – as theory also noted - the subjective nature of the term itself makes it an important political and propaganda tool, with significant implications for particular behaviours within the Afghan and international communities.

Although civil war theory does not offer a “solution” to the conflict as such, the work of Charles Tilly was particularly instructive as a prism through which to view the conflict. Afghanistan’s unique history lends itself well to an examination of the role of fluid multiple sovereignties vying for power. Tilly’s work on the control over the coercive means also points to the importance of understanding the strength and loyalty of the new Afghan army and to consider the implications of its “failure”.

How might the case inform the theory?
After comparing “theory” to “Afghanistan”, I tend to sympathise with Nathan’s criticism (cited by Tilly) that quantitative analysis is undertaken without sufficient grounding in the peculiarities of the specific conflict. The lack of consensus (Sambanis, Nathan, etc.) on the specific nature and causes of civil war was compounded, I felt, by the “hyper-complex” nature of the Afghan conflict. On top of multiple layers of historic, ethnic, geographic and societal challenges, we must overlay four decades of swirling, destructive, conflict and a bewildering array of grievances, opponents, causes and external interventions. For this reason it is possible to find many shades of civil war theory, however contradictory, present in Afghanistan.

Charles Tilly’s broad and flexible ideas enabled me to step out of the complexity and take a less cluttered perspective of the conflict and to stimulate thinking that took me beyond standard assumptions. Exploring the potential for a stalemate in Afghanistan – which I conclude is a very plausible option after 2014 – was difficult to develop as I could find little detailed writing on this phenomenon, with significant disagreement on how and when a conflict finally concludes. Theory perhaps could reflect further upon how “hyper-complex” conflicts can best be studied and how concepts of “stalemate” could be refined.

Final remarks

The international community and the Afghan population could give thought to three areas: the wider implications of an Afghan “civil war”, how to consider and address the idea of a long-term stalemate after 2014 and, finally, whether the Taliban are the only alternative contenders to government and, if not, how and why others might emerge. The international community has frequently taken a short-term approach to Afghanistan: consideration of the themes I have explored here, and how they might be engaged with, could encourage a more practical, constructive and longer-term perspective on the country.

Tim Foxley, August 2013
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Annex: Map of Afghanistan showing ethnolinguistic groups, major cities and neighbouring countries.