

Afghanistan in 2017

Another Year of Running in Place

ABSTRACT

The year 2017 witnessed continued challenges to the credibility and competence of the so-called National Unity Government in Kabul. President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah competed over the perquisites of power rather than collaborating to secure a viable future for their country. US and NATO forces remained at a stalemate with the Taliban, while Afghanistan's predatory neighbors were as self-interested as ever. Hard-won gains remain reversible.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, Taliban, National Unity Government, Kabul, Ghani

INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan is America's longest and most expensive war, long ago exceeding the cost of the entire Marshall Plan with which the United States rebuilt post-war Europe. While al-Qaeda remains largely vanquished and the Islamic State's presence is greatly diminished, the war with the Taliban is at a stalemate. Civilian casualties remain high. Antigovernment elements are responsible for most of these, but this is little consolation for the victims and their families. Afghan and international efforts to secure the state continue to be undermined by corruption, government inefficacy and illegitimacy, economic development issues, and insecurity. Afghanistan's neighbors view the country as a palimpsest for their conflicts. Pakistan remains ever more committed to ensuring Afghanistan's continued instability while limiting India's presence there. India for its part believes that continued engagement in Afghanistan is critical to protecting India's security at home and

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abroad. Iran and Russia have engaged in a complex game of hedging against both the specter of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and American actions under the new president, Donald Trump, who released his Afghan policy after months of internecine squabbling within his administration. The year 2017 was yet another in which hard-earned gains in human development and women's rights seemed ever more fragile, while an end to the conflict seems ever more unattainable.

THE DISUNITY GOVERNMENT

Three years ago, the ironically named National Unity Government (NUG) was forged in the aftermath of the fraud-riven 2014 presidential elections to quell the demands of Abdullah Abdullah and his supporters, who believed the election was stolen from him. Under the NUG, Ashraf Ghani became the president, after an internationally supervised audit announced that he had garnered most of the votes, while Abdullah Abdullah assumed the newly created position of chief executive officer. Despite the theatrics of the process, many Afghans still doubt that Ghani is the legitimate president. Moreover, given the ethnically divided nature of their support bases, the NUG seems to have polarized the country along ethnic lines as never before in recent history.

The NUG, an extra-constitutional arrangement, structurally has done little to unify the government, as Ghani and Abdullah have divided up both portfolios and patronage networks between them, apparently spurring competition over collaboration. Although President Ghani recently appointed a high-level committee to work on a national anticorruption plan, corruption continues to hobble the state. As the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan concluded, the country does not require additional reforms or committees, but the political will to efficaciously implement extant reform plans.¹ Corruption matters. In the Asia Foundation's 2017 Survey of the Afghan People, 84% of respondents identified corruption as a major problem in Afghanistan, while another 13% identified it as a minor problem. Concerns about corruption in daily life have steadily risen over the years, and the 2017 survey documented a new apex, with 70% of Afghans indicating that corruption

1. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Afghanistan's Fight against Corruption: The Other Battlefield," April 2017, <https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistans_fight_against_corruption_-_the_other_battlefield_-_april_2017-english.pdf>.

is a major problem in their daily life, while another 23% said it is a minor one.²

Only 54% said that they felt safe publicly criticizing the government. This finding is largely invariant with gender, ethnicity, age, and location of residence. This statistic calls into question many of the survey's other findings asserting Afghans' positive views of their government, while revealing a starker reality about their relationship to that government. The poll also found that popular satisfaction with democracy has been steadily falling since the contentious elections of 2014, with only 57% still holding a favorable opinion of democracy. (It was as high 73% in 2014 and 77% in 2006.)³ The survey also shows worrisome ethnic schisms. Pashtuns, the ethnic group represented by President Ghani, are the most optimistic about the direction of the country: 41% of Pashtuns are optimistic, compared to 29% of Tajiks, 26% of Hazaras, and 26% of Uzbeks. This divergence may reflect the ethnic schisms between political leaders and the disunity of the NUG. Corruption, dissatisfaction with government performance, and even the nature of the government itself have profound impacts on security. Antigovernment elements such as the Taliban, narcotics traffickers, smugglers, and other criminal elements exploit corruption and government inefficacy at all levels to advance their agendas.

ECONOMY: THE PERILS OF A RENTIER STATE

While most of the international focus on Afghanistan is on security and the international military presence there, perhaps the biggest threat to the long-term viability of the state is the lack of economic sustainability. In fairness, the news is not all bad. In recent years, the Afghan government has managed double-digit growth in revenue collection.⁴ However, more than a year has passed since Afghanistan joined the WTO (July 29, 2016). The business environment remains bleak due to a combination of per-during insecurity, a regulatory environment that is not business-friendly,

2. Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People," 2017, San Francisco, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf>.

3. Ibid.

4. Bill Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda, "Afghan Government Revenue Continues to Grow: A Bright Spot in a Weak Economy," Afghan Analysts Network, September 27, 2017, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-government-revenue-continues-to-grow-a-bright-spot-in-a-weak-economy/>>.

and industrial-strength corruption, which debilitates extant businesses, stymies smaller businesses, and deters new business ventures. Unfortunately, there are many powerful beneficiaries of the status quo who effectively block reforms.⁵

Consequently, Afghanistan remains uniquely dependent on foreign aid, which subsidizes service delivery, the financing of growth, the provision of security, and debt service. Afghanistan must find a way to pay its own bills, if for no other reason than the simple fact that this international assistance is drying up. As nations withdrew their military forces between 2011 and 2014, they also began downsizing their aid missions. This had adverse, cascading economic effects. As aid budgets retracted, so did the foreign presence and the need for services such as, inter alia, upscale (safe) housing, drivers, translators, personal security teams, and implementing partners. This in turn depressed property values, as renters disappeared and wages paid to nationals dwindled as the “war economy” wound down. This demand shock slowed economic growth from double-digit levels in 2009 (when growth spiked to 20%) to less than 3% by the close of 2017, which is roughly the rate of population growth. In the words of Byrd and Clark, “Over the past five years, the Afghan economy has essentially been ‘running in place’ with no gain in average per-capita incomes.”⁶

Long-term, sustained economic growth will require structural economic transformations and new sources of growth. While Afghanistan is endowed with many natural resources, such as minerals, it lacks the means to extract them and get them to market. Under the circumstances, few investors are willing to bear the risk in this sector. Even the notoriously risk-tolerant Chinese have been wary: some nine years after Chinese companies took control of the Aynak copper mine, extraction has yet to start.⁷

5. Bill Byrd and Kate Clark, “The 2018 Afghan National Budget: Confronting Hard Realities by Accelerating Reforms,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, December 5, 2017, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-2018-afghan-national-budget-confronting-hard-realities-by-accelerating-reforms/>>; World Bank, “The World Bank In Afghanistan,” October 17, 2017, <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>>.

6. Byrd and Clark, “The 2018 Afghan National Budget.”

7. Mohsin Amin, “The Story Behind China’s Long-Stalled Mine in Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2017, <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-story-behind-chinas-long-stalled-mine-in-afghanistan/>>.

LOSING GROUND IN HARD-WON GAINS IN HUMAN SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Along with 2015 and 2016, 2017 was one of the deadliest years in Afghanistan since the war began in October 2001. Between January 1 and September 30 of 2017, the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 8,019 civilian casualties (2,640 deaths and 5,379 injured).⁸ Antigovernment elements were responsible for 5,167 civilian casualties (1,760 killed and 3,407 injured) during this period; 66% were due to the Taliban, 10% to the Islamic State, and the remainder to unidentified antigovernment elements. The latter continued to target civilians, a war crime under international humanitarian law. Civilian casualties by pro-government forces (including the US and NATO) declined by 19% from the previous year but still included 560 killed and 1,018 injured, over half in ground fighting.⁹

Despite the military standstill, Afghanistan has witnessed significant gains in human security and development—all of which are reversible, as evidenced by the fact that the government has lost ground in female education and in freedom of expression, in addition to security. Human Rights Watch reports that only about one-third of Afghan girls attend school, less than did in 2016. Conflict and insecurity are the main impediments to female education.¹⁰ Freedom of expression, a pillar of democracy, is under constant pressure as journalists are subjected to intimidation, kidnapping, violence, and murder. Nai, an Afghan media-freedom watchdog, reports some 80 attacks on journalists so far in 2017, including killings, torture, detention, threats, and other forms of violence by both state and non-state actors. The Islamic State's attack on one of the leading Afghan TV stations, Shamshad TV, on November 7 prompted analysts

8. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2017," <<https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>>.

9. United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2017," <<https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>>. Note that another 916 casualties are due to both parties (i.e. during fighting) and another 358 are attributed to "other," non-specified actors.

10. Human Rights Watch, "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick: Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan," October 17, 2017, New York, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/17/i-wont-be-doctor-and-one-day-youll-be-sick/girls-access-education-afghanistan>>.

to conclude that terrorist organizations are attempting to abridge freedom of speech in Afghanistan.¹¹

AFGHANISTAN'S CONTINUED INSECURITY

In late November—some three months after Trump announced his new policy—General John W. Nicholson, the highly regarded commander of NATO and US troops in Afghanistan whom Trump threatened to fire in early 2017 for no obvious reason despite his many years of experience fighting in Afghanistan, conceded that the fight against the Taliban was still in a stalemate but claimed that Trump's new strategy had reversed a decline in the US position.¹² Roggio and Gutowski, in September, assessed that the Taliban controlled 41 districts and contested another 118 (which together is more than one-third of Afghanistan's 398 districts) through military force and socio-political influence. US and Afghan military sources tend to emphasize urban control to assess the Taliban's strength and downplay their control of rural areas as having less strategic importance. Sixteen years into this war, US and Afghan forces fail to appreciate that the Taliban are waging a *rural* insurgency, with an aim to “leverage control of rural areas to launch attacks against urban centers,” which “delegitimizes the Afghan government and force[s] the redeployment [of] Afghan National Security Forces.” Besides their rural footholds across the country, Taliban forces have safe havens in Pakistan and active Pakistani state support. All of these are critical elements in the Taliban's resilience, and its ability to undermine the Afghan government and its security forces.¹³

While the US commitment to troops in Afghanistan increased to 14,000 troops under Trump,¹⁴ Afghan National Security Forces still struggle with

11. Nai, “Violence against Journalists in Afghanistan 2001-2017,” Kabul, <<http://data.nai.org.af/>>; Fahim Abed and Jawad Sukhanyarnov, “A Leading Afghan TV Station Is Attacked in Kabul,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/asia/kabul-shamshad-tv-attack.html>>.

12. Hans Nichols and Jonathan Allen, “‘Still in a Stalemate,’ Top U.S. Commander In Afghanistan Says,” NBCNews.com, November 24, 2017, <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/still-stalemate-says-top-u-s-commander-afghanistan-n823671>>.

13. Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, “LWJ Map Assessment: Taliban Controls or Contests 45% of Afghan Districts,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 26, 2017, <<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/09/lwj-map-assessment-taliban-controls-or-contests-45-of-afghan-districts.php>>.

14. Jack Moore, “Trump's Afghanistan Troop Surge Is Complete, Raising Total Number of U.S. Servicemen to 14,000,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 2017, <<http://www.newsweek.com/trumps-afghanistan-troop-surge-complete-raising-total-number-us-servicemen-714588>>.

ghost personnel who are paid but not on duty. Given the sustained high casualties and Taliban threats to their families, government forces have seen record attrition and recruitment shortfalls. These are serious impediments to the Afghan forces' being able to replenish their shrinking ranks. The ongoing conflict continues to displace Afghans: between January 1 and August 31, a total of 223,874 people fled their homes due to conflict—11,000 more than in the same period in 2016.¹⁵

TRUMP'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

In November 2016, Donald Trump won the US presidential election. He had campaigned on wanting to withdraw from Afghanistan. Anxieties at home and abroad deepened over 2017 as the revolving theatrics of antagonism among members of his cabinet, and power struggles between proponents of a crude American nativism (notably, senior adviser Steve Bannon) and more traditional foreign policy goals (National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster), played out on the international stage. McMaster and his team of national security professionals advised remaining in Afghanistan. Ultimately, Bannon, who wanted out of Afghanistan, was fired amid squabbles among the White House inner circle, and McMaster's team seems to have prevailed.

On August 21, 2017, Trump addressed Americans, whom he rightly noted are tired of fighting—but not winning—in Afghanistan. He made several arguments. First, he identified an “honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made. . . . The men and women who serve our nation in combat deserve a plan for victory. They deserve the tools they need, and the trust they have earned, to fight and to win.” Second, he said that he had come to understand the lessons of withdrawing from Iraq prematurely and, for this reason, had changed his mind about leaving Afghanistan. Third, he told his citizens that “the security threats we face in Afghanistan and the broader region are immense.” He went on to explain that “20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan—the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world.” Like presidents before him, he promised that this effort would bring

15. “Number of IDPs Fleeing Conflict on the Rise,” *ToloNews*, September 5, 2017, <<http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/number-idps-fleeing-conflict-rise>>.

to bear all the instruments of national power. Like President Obama before him, he identified the perennial problem of Pakistan and promised to deal differently with the regime should it continue aiding and abetting the Taliban and allied militant groups in destabilizing Afghanistan and the region.¹⁶

Americans had heard most of this before. Like his predecessors, Trump provided no explanation of how his administration would succeed where others had failed. He did depart from past presidents in at least four important ways:

- Trump argued for a conditions-based strategy rather than a time-based one.
- He specifically called on India to play a larger role. In the past, India has requested a prominent place in rehabilitating Afghanistan but has been largely rebuffed by the Pentagon, which worried that Pakistan would act even worse if India's presence expanded.
- Third, he committed another 3,000 troops to the fight, delegating more latitude to his commanders in Afghanistan, to which President Ghani agreed.
- Fourth, his plan involved bringing at least 1,000 US military advisers to the Afghan theater who would operate at the brigade (*kandak*) level.

The Americans will fight two missions. Operation Freedom Sentinel is focused on counter-terrorism goals; the NATO mission Resolute Support primarily aims to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces. The US goal is not to defeat the Taliban but “to prevent the country from being used as a safe haven for terrorists to attack to [*sic*] the U.S. or our allies.” The US hopes to demoralize the Taliban and drive them to the negotiating table.¹⁷

However, as the end of 2017 neared, it became clear that the Trump administration would be constrained by the same issues as its predecessor: without an alternative route to resupply US and NATO troops as well as the Afghan National Security Forces, it would be business as usual with Pakistan. Had Trump maintained the momentum of the US–Iran deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Washington could have consolidated its

16. “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” August 21, 2017, the White House, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia>>.

17. “News Transcript: Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” US Department of Defense, December 2, 2017, <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1019029/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/>>.

rapprochement with Iran and further solidified its special relationship with India by working with the latter to move some supplies (using Indian private contractors) through the port India helped build in Chabahar, Iran. Once in office, the Trump administration learned the hard lessons of geography and logistics. The Northern Distribution Route was never useful, and with Trump focused on destroying Obama's historical rapprochement with Iran, Pakistan's prominence again loomed large. Trump's Pentagon pressured the US Congress to dilute conditions on security assistance and dispatched Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on a mission to rehabilitate US–Pakistan relations. Washington did little but utter banal bromides when Pakistan released from house arrest Hafez Saeed, the head of the Lashkar-e-Taiba organization.

The US Department of State has designated the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, “Army of the Pure” in Urdu), as well as its numerous front organizations, a foreign terrorist organization. While LeT is officially banned by Pakistan, it operates under several front organizations, such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa and the Falah Insaniyat Foundation. Its operatives committed the November 2008 atrocity in Mumbai; it has been active in killing Afghans, Americans, and Indians in Afghanistan. Washington didn't even murmur when Saeed announced that Lashkar-e-Taiba had launched a political party which would contest Pakistani elections in 2018, although its recognition by the Pakistan Election Commission is being negotiated in Pakistan's courts. By the end of the year, the organization had contested two by-elections (technically their candidates ran as independents, but the party's branding was apparent in their campaign materials). Hafez Saeed, the head of LeT, even opened an office in Lahore in the final days of 2017.¹⁸

Without a viable Pakistan strategy, the 10,000 or so troops that Trump wishes to keep in Afghanistan will be no more successful than previous troop contingents. Worse, the international community has not yet grappled with the very serious question of how to sustain Afghanistan. From the 2000s on, the US has insisted on building the largest rentier state that has ever existed in Afghanistan's history. The Afghan government cannot pay even the recurring costs of this monolith. Yet downsizing while fighting an insurgency is perilous. After all, people who lose their government jobs may simply join the insurgency.

18. M. Zulqernain, “Hafiz Saeed Opens Milli Muslim League office in Lahore, Eyes 2018 Elections,” *Live Mint*, December 25 2017, <<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/bQCih2MiDNswqcC0QOJJEI/Hafiz-Saeed-opens-Milli-Muslim-League-office-in-Lahore-eyes.html>>.

AFGHANISTAN'S DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOOD

Afghanistan's neighbors continue to compete to prosecute their interests. Pakistan continues to undermine any political settlement, even while some factions of the Taliban seem anxious to escape the thumb of their erstwhile patrons. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan seem unable to come to any compromise on their shared border, on Afghan refugees in Pakistan, or on the various Islamist militants seeking safe harbor in both countries. Moreover, part of Pakistan's battle against the so-called Pakistan Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan) involves driving them into Afghanistan, where some have defected and joined the Islamic State. Thus Pakistan's security gains are at the expense of Afghanistan.

Both Iran and Russia continue to stake out claims based on their assessments of the strength of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, the threat it poses to their own countries, and the merits of supporting the Taliban to balance against the Islamic State. At the same time, both countries are wary about their relations with the US and view Afghanistan as a theater in which to prosecute their agendas against Washington. China and India, who are also security competitors, have their own rivalries to promote. While India and Iran have long cooperated on important ground lines of communication, China has been busy cultivating its own options in Pakistan, with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is an integral part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. While India hopes that goods and hydrocarbons will move safely through the port it helped build in Chabahar and beyond, China hopes that the port it has helped develop in Gwadar (in Pakistan's restive Balochistan) will be a competitor route.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan in 2017 looks fairly similar to Afghanistan in 2016. Security remains elusive, as the battle with the Taliban remains stalemated. The National Unity Government, like the previous Karzai government, has failed to deliver unity or credibility and has been unable to follow through on much-needed reforms. Afghanistan's neighbors seem more interested in prosecuting their own agendas than in securing the country, while the US continues to struggle to learn the lessons of past mistakes. The international community continues to fixate on its military role, while failing to appreciate the urgent need to begin focusing on a plan for economic sustainability.