



Political developments in Afghanistan

Standard Note SN/IA/5960
Last updated: 13 May 2011
Author: Ben Smith
Section International Affairs and Defence Section

This note looks at the political system in Afghanistan in the wake of the 2010 parliamentary elections and the moves towards reintegration and a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

- Politics in Afghanistan are unpredictable and some institutions work much better than others, with the parliament showing signs of independence
- The Presidency still has much more power than other national institutions, but in global terms it is weak
- Patronage and corruption may be on the rise
- Both Karzai and Obama have made personnel changes which may be preparations for a faster move towards negotiations with the insurgency
- Inter-ethnic tensions, particularly associated with the Afghan army and other security-related institutions, is reported to be on the increase and non-Pashtuns generally oppose negotiations with the Taliban
- A real commitment from Afghanistan's neighbours to foster stability would make a big difference. It is not clear that this is forthcoming, particularly in the case of Pakistan and India, who may play out their rivalries in Afghanistan
- The possibility of a resurgence of instability or even of civil war when Coalition forces withdraw cannot be ruled out

Related Library briefings include:

Research Paper 10/45: [The 'AfPak policy' and the Pashtuns](#)

Standard Note 5851: [Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition](#)

Standard Note 5678: [Afghanistan: Towards a Handover of Security Responsibility?](#)

Standard Note 3139: [The cost of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan](#)

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

Contents

1	Afghan politics	2
1.1	Parliament	3
	Wolesi Jirga	3
	2010 election	3
	Meshrano Jirga	4
1.2	Cabinet	4
1.3	Security posts	5
1.4	Provincial and district governors	5
2	The results of the patronage-based system	6
3	Deepening ethnic divisions?	7
3.1	Afghan National Security Forces	7
3.2	Militias	7
4	Afghan reintegration programme	8
4.1	High peace council	8
5	Negotiations with the insurgency	9
5.1	Afghanistan	9
5.2	UK	10
5.3	US	11
5.4	Commentary	12
6	Regional involvement	13
7	Conclusion	14

1 The Afghan political system

The president has broad powers under the Constitution, being commander-in-chief of the Afghan armed forces and empowered to inaugurate the parliament. The president's powers of appointment are listed as follows in the constitution:

- Appointing of Ministers, the Attorney General, the Director of the Central Bank, Head of the National Security Directorate and the President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society with the approval of the *Wolesi Jirga*, and acceptance of their dismissal and resignation.
- Appointing the head and members of the Supreme Court with the approval of the *Wolesi Jirga*.

- Appointment, retirement and acceptance of resignation and dismissal of judges, officers of the armed forces, police, national security, and high ranking officials in accordance with the law.
- Appointment of heads of diplomatic missions of Afghanistan in foreign countries and international organizations.¹
- Appointment of the members of the Independent Commission for the Supervision of the Implementation of the Constitution.²

The president's powers of patronage 'cascade' down through the public service. For example, judges are appointed by the Supreme Court, with the approval of the president. The president has also appointed the High Council for Peace, to negotiate with the Taliban, and various presidential advisers, such as one for tribal affairs.

1.1 Parliament

With power concentrated in the presidency, Afghanistan's National Assembly or parliament is not particularly influential. Since the 2010 election, however, the lower house, or *Wolesi Jirga*, has impressed some observers as relatively independent, particularly in its refusal to approve some proposed presidential appointments.

Wolesi Jirga

The 249-seat lower house of parliament (*Wolesi Jirga*, House of the People) is completely elected and does have some significant powers, including approval of the president's candidates for the cabinet. Most members of the *Wolesi Jirga* sit as independents, with only a few having party allegiances.

2010 election

The result of the 2010 election, held on 18 September, was a *Wolesi Jirga* with some 20 fewer Karzai supporters than the outgoing parliament. The election also saw a very high turnover of members, with only 88 of the 249 sitting members being returned. Without party affiliations, the ethnicity of members was perhaps the most important factor at the election, and Pashtuns did badly, winning around 90 seats, compared with 112 at the 2005 elections. Hazaras, a minority Shiite community which represents about 9% of the population, did well, winning 59 of the 249 seats (23.7%). Partly because of a Taliban-inspired boycott by Pashtuns, Hazaras took all 11 seats in the Province of Ghazni, a flashpoint in the nine-year Taliban insurgency.

Dr Abdullah Abdullah, defeated at the 2009 presidential election by Hamid Karzai, said that more than 90 of his supporters had won seats. Abdullah is associated with the Tajiks in the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul. Jamiat-e-Islami, an Islamist party led by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, is reported to have increased its representation.³

President Karzai's brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, chairman of the Kandahar (elected) provincial council, worked openly but without much success to get more pro-Karzai candidates elected to the *Wolesi Jirga* from Kandahar Province.

President Karzai had hoped to gain enough supportive seats in the *Wolesi Jirga* to remove the incumbent Speaker, Yunus Qanooni, who is a Tajik, and replace him with Abdul Rab

¹ Article 64, [Constitution of Afghanistan](#)

² Article 157, [Constitution of Afghanistan](#)

³ Interparliamentary Union, Afghanistan [Wolesi Jirga](#)

Rasul Sayyaf, a Pashtun regarded by some western officials as a “warlord” and accused of many human rights abuses committed during the 1980s.⁴ He was unsuccessful.

After the election an unexpected struggle ensued between the presidency and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), which decided to take allegations of electoral fraud seriously.

Before authorising the release of the final results, the IEC discarded over 1.3 million ballots, or about 25% of the total, for fraud or other irregularities and refused to validate 19 candidates' victories. Recounts were conducted in seven provinces. Final results were finally released on 31 October, and on 20 December, the Presidency announced that the new House of Representatives would be convened on 20 January 2011.

In December, President Karzai set up a five-member Special Election Court (SEC) to consider allegations of fraud, which was subsequently approved by the Supreme Court. On 3 January 2011, the SEC said that it would issue decisions within two weeks, so as to allow the opening session of the *Wolesi Jirga* to take place on 20 January. Further legal struggles ensued, with another official committee declaring the SEC unconstitutional. Further recounts were conducted by the SEC in February 2011.

Wrangles over the post of Speaker continued, with the house failing to elect a new one until 27 February 2011. According to one report, high-ranking officials and members of parliament working for the presidency started to distribute “huge amounts of money” with the aim of causing deadlock over the issue and generally creating chaos “so that it could ultimately use parliament as a tool”.⁵ The winning candidate was Abdul Raouf Ibrahimy, a low-profile compromise candidate from an Uzbek background.

Meshrano Jirga

The 102-seat upper house (*Meshrano Jirga*, House of Elders) is all-appointed. It is selected as follows: a third, or 34 seats, is appointed by the president for a five-year term; another third is appointed by the elected provincial councils for a four-year term, and the final third is appointed by elected district councils for a three-year term. Of the president's appointments, half (17) must be women. In the absence of elected district councils, two thirds of the body are selected by the provincial councils for four year terms.⁶

Unsurprisingly, the presidency has a more influence over the *Meshrano Jirga* than over the *Wolesi Jirga*. Karzai has managed to retain an ally in the post of Speaker of the *Meshrano Jirga* since its creation. The post is currently held by Fazl Hadi Muslimyar.

1.2 Cabinet

When re-elected president in 2009, Hamid Karzai promised to appoint individuals of integrity to the cabinet but, on 3 January 2010, the *Wolesi Jirga* rejected 17 out of the 24 presidential nominees. The nominees were not well-known national figures. At the second attempt, parliament rejected 10 out of the 17 new names.⁷

⁴ “Afghan Legislators Pick Leader”, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 February 2011

⁵ “Behind the scene dealings once again push parliament towards captivity”, *Arman e-Melli*, 2 February 2011 (Translation by BBC Monitoring)

⁶ Article 84, *Constitution of Afghanistan*

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan's Elections Stalemate* Asia Briefing N°117, 23 February 2011

The 2010 cabinet appointment process was interpreted widely as a “return to patronage”,⁸ with many of the candidates described as either linked to regional strongmen or to small parties within the *Wolesi Jirga* that support the Karzai presidency. While the appointments were reported to reflect a reasonable balance of candidates from the country’s different ethnic groups, they generally had little administrative experience or, worse, a record of incompetence in other ministries.

One example that attracted attention was the nomination and approval of Zarar Ahmad Moqbel as counter-narcotics minister. Moqbel’s record at the interior ministry did not impress one local UN official, who said that: “Muqbel had totally failed the ministry,” and that his time of control had seen a rise in crime to record levels.⁹

A growth of patronage may be a sign of Karzai’s perception of his own weakness and reliance on others for support, or it may be a symptom of the increasing distance between Karzai and the US State Department and an attempt to rely on Afghan support rather than rely the presidency’s international supporters.

1.3 Security posts

The presidency appoints the head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS, the intelligence service) and the Army Chief of Staff. The presidency also controls all police and security appointments down to district level. Such posts have become opportunities for preying on local communities and as such have undermined support for central government among communities that have been abused in this way.

The ethnic mix of security posts is particularly sensitive. Tajiks have traditionally held a number of the most important posts in the army and the other security agencies, but there has been an increasing bias towards Pashtuns in government security appointments. Tajiks are reported to be resentful of this change.¹⁰

Minister of Interior Hanif Atmar and Amrullah Saleh, head of the National Directorate for Security, resigned from their posts in 2010, after a rocket attack on the peace *jirga* in June of that year. Some say that the Karzai administration took this opportunity to remove them because they did not support a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, were unpopular with the Pakistanis, or because they were both supported by the Coalition. While Atmar is a Pashtun, Saleh is a Tajik. Amrullah Saleh is now an active opponent of negotiations with the Taliban.

1.4 Provincial and district governors

Karzai has the right to appoint provincial and district governors. In practice he takes care to appoint governors of the same ethnicity as the majority in particular provinces and districts, and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (which makes appointment recommendations to the presidency) often consults local notables.¹¹ The presidential power to nominate provincial governors has been used in different ways. In Kandahar, where his brother is chairman of the elected provincial council, he has rotated the nominated provincial governors frequently, allegedly so that none challenges the authority of his brother. In other

⁸ “Karzai’s new cabinet seen as return to patronage politics”, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 January 2010

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Politics of racism will cause a new crisis”, *Kabul Weekly*, 6 July 2010

¹¹ Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance*, Congressional Research Service, March 2, 2011

cases, Karzai's interests would normally be served by having a strong representative of the presidency.

District governors are an important part of government since they are often the only officials that the average Afghan sees. They are also technically appointed by the president although, in practice, district governors have appointed many of them.¹²

2 The results of the patronage-based system

The corruption endemic in the Afghan state has been commented on widely. In the anti-corruption group Transparency International's 2010 survey, Afghanistan came second from bottom for perceptions of corruption. Only Somalia was perceived as a more corrupt country than Afghanistan.¹³

According to a recent report published by Chatham House,¹⁴

Research published by the World Bank and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2006 argued that Afghanistan's criminal underworld could not operate without the support of the political 'upper world'. This was especially visible in appointments.

A certain amount of politics will always be involved in the appointments process,¹⁵ but the subversion they identified was altogether more poisonous: according to the report, the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) was appointing Chiefs of Police 'to both protect and promote criminal interests'.¹⁶ The result was described as a 'complex pyramid of protection and patronage, effectively providing state protection to criminal trafficking activities' and involved powerful political players who had stepped back from direct involvement in the trade but continued to benefit financially.¹⁷

*This 'grand corruption' is extremely damaging to state-building efforts because it involves the capture of parts of the state apparatus. There are numerous accounts of senior MoI officials accepting large bribes in exchange for appointing certain individuals into strategic and lucrative positions, often as police chiefs in districts and provinces involved in drug production or trafficking.*¹⁸

Experts interviewed for this report thought the problem to be still deeply ingrained, affecting not only police appointments but also provincial and district governorships. The need to recoup the money 'invested' in obtaining a post means corruption and abuses of power are virtually inevitable:

There is a vertically-integrated corruption syndicate [which] affects so much of the government ... This is not like a standard patronage system, where money flows down in exchange for

¹² Richard Kemp, "Local Governance and COIN in Eastern-Afghanistan 2004-2008", *Military Review*, 1 January 2011

¹³ Transparency International, [Corruption Perceptions Index 2010 Results](#)

¹⁴ Stephen Carter and Kate Clark, *No Shortcut to Stability Justice, Politics and Insurgency in Afghanistan*, Chatham House, December 2010

¹⁵ M. van Bijlert, *Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments*, Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2009

¹⁶ M. Shaw, 'Drug Trafficking and the Development of Organized Crime in Post-Taliban Afghanistan', Chapter 7 in D. Buddenberg and William A. Byrd, *Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Functioning, Dynamics, and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy*, UNODC and World Bank, 2006, pp. 189–200

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ A. Wilder, *Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police*, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007, p. 5

*loyalty; rather, officials on the periphery move money upwards, in exchange for licence [to commit crimes].*¹⁹

There have been reports that a decision was made in October 2010 to distance the presidency from the nomination of deputy ministers and provincial governors.²⁰ An open competition involving competitive examination would instead be held. Commentators have wondered whether the decision will be fully put into practice, as this is not the first time that an open system has been proposed.

3 Deepening ethnic divisions?

3.1 Afghan National Security Forces

The Taliban-inspired boycott of the 2010 parliamentary election contributed to a very low turnout among the Pashtuns of southern and eastern Afghanistan, who make up some 40 percent of the population. The result was that Pashtun representation in the *Wolesi Jirga* declined by between 10 and 20 percent as smaller minorities, especially the Hazaras, made equivalent gains.

Non-Pashtun leaders generally oppose any peace deal with the Taliban, resent Pashtun dominance and want to amend the constitution to introduce a parliamentary system in place of the current presidential system. Non-Pashtuns also resent the fact that some 70 percent of international development aid goes to the southern Pashtun provinces where violence is worst.²¹

The Afghan National Army is reported to be increasingly dominated by Tajiks. The aim of the Coalition's training programme is to produce Afghan national security forces that reflect the ethnic balance of the country and, according to NATO, is "largely balanced" but the Afghan Ministry of Defence has developed a special recruitment drive to increase the level of southern Pashtun participation.²² However, Tajiks are heavily over-represented in the officer corps,²³ which leaves the Afghan National Army resembling the Northern Alliance, with few Pashtun commanders and with Dari, the language of the Tajiks, rather than Pashto the dominant language. Former British Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, said in evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee:

We need to remember that the Afghan army, which is only 3% southern Pashtun, is almost as alien to the farmers of the Helmand valley as the 3rd Battalion The Rifles or the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States army.²⁴

According to Craig Murray, former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, the coalition is "stoking still further the ferocity of a future civil war" by imposing the increasingly Tajik-dominated ANA on Pashtun areas in the south.

3.2 Militias

Along with the ethnic imbalance in official security forces, observers are worried that leaders in the north of the country are moving to re-arm their private militias, in preparation for the

¹⁹ Interview with senior ISAF officer, Kabul, February 2010

²⁰ "Top govt posts up for competition", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 19 October 2010

²¹ The Way Out of Afghanistan", *New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2011

²² NATO, "Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)", media backgrounder, March 2011

²³ Obaid Younossi et al., *The Long March: building an Afghan national Army*, RAND Corporation, 2009

²⁴ Foreign Affairs Committee, The UK's Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, *Corrected evidence*, HC 514-iii, 2010-12, 17 January 2011

civil war with the Taliban that they expect to result from the draw down of Coalition forces and from a deal to bring the Taliban into the government.²⁵

According to some reports, Amrullah Saleh, who was sacked as intelligence chief partly because of his opposition to negotiations with the Taliban, has already lobbied India to rearm the Northern Alliance.²⁶

4 Afghan reintegration programme

President Karzai has reiterated his call to the Taliban to return to peaceful Afghan society. In his New Year address to the nation, the president said:

Ensuring a full and sustainable sovereignty of the Afghan nation hinges on peace in the country. Since the establishment of the Peace Strengthening Commission led by Professor Mujadedi and the subsequent High Council for Peace led by Professor Rabbani, promising steps for peace and reintegration have been taken. Peace and reconciliation stands as a major and pivotal issue in the Afghan government's policy to seek an end to this devastating war. The nation of Afghanistan keeps wide open its arms to those who are willing to return to a peaceful life. However, dismantling plots by those who stand in the way of peace would require us to display abundant patience and resilience.

We all know that there are some who still want to use terrorism as a tool for interference and dominance (influence), but it remains our duty to provide for our countrymen to return to their homeland. It is through peace that we could save our country from the clutches of al-Qaeda and other terror organizations and bless people with an honorable life under the Constitution. We know that not all those who picked up guns against their country are terrorists driven by ideology or associated to intelligence organizations. There are cases where people were forced to fight us out of injustices they were committed against. We understand that these injustices and violations by the employees of the government and powerful individuals as well as the bombardments, house searches or arrests by the coalition and NATO forces have led to public grievance and resentment. Whatever the cause maybe, this bloody war has to stop and the country has to be guided towards better tomorrow.²⁷

4.1 High Peace Council

The High Peace Council, established in October 2010 by the Afghan government, comprises seventy members drawn from all of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups, including representatives of the government and opposition, women, civil society and former insurgents. It is chaired by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

The council has organised 'Governors' Roadshows' in six provinces to promote the reintegration of former fighters into mainstream communities and has made visits to Pakistan and Turkey.

28 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, including Helmand, have **Provincial Peace Councils**. Reintegration teams from five districts have received training in Lashkar Gah, others will follow. The Provincial Peace Councils are intended to work locally to promote the **Afghan**

²⁵ "Afghan warlords prepare to rearm as Taliban arrive for peace talks in Kabul", *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 October 2010

²⁶ "Why talks with the Taliban are likely to fail; A power-sharing deal in Afghanistan will not be supported by the radicals fighting the war", *Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 2011

²⁷ "Remarks to the Nation by His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan On the Occasion of The New Afghan Year, 1390", Afghan Mission to the United Nations, 22 March 2011

Peace and Reintegration Programme, the Afghan government's programme for persuading insurgents to give up the fight and return to their communities.²⁸

The latest progress report on Afghanistan from the US Department of Defence argues that the reconciliation programme is a success and that this may be a sign of increased stress within the insurgency:

Moreover, the progress made by Afghan Government-led initiatives, such as the High Peace Council and the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), in drawing insurgents away from the battlefield suggests that discord within the insurgency may be increasing. Since the APRP became operational in July 2010, more than 700 former Taliban have officially reintegrated into Afghan society, another 2,000 insurgents are in various stages of formal reintegration, and still others have put down their weapons and informally rejoined Afghan society.²⁹

The White House's latest review, published in April 2011, paints a slightly more pessimistic picture of a "resilient" insurgency:

...in Afghanistan, we are confronting the inherent challenges of a war-torn nation working to restore basic security and stability in the face of a resilient insurgency that finds shelter in a neighbouring sanctuary.³⁰

5 Negotiations with the insurgency

5.1 Afghanistan

President Karzai is increasingly enthusiastic about the idea of a negotiated settlement, as he is said to be losing confidence in the ability of the Coalition to win the war, and consequently worries about the survival of the Afghan government after the withdrawal of Coalition forces. There have been talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban since 2008 but, without the participation of the US – specifically requested by the Taliban – these talks have not made much substantive progress.

In his New Year address to the nation in March, President Karzai said:

From here, I would like to call on the Taliban that there is a place for those who are willing to live in peace and brotherhood and within Islamic justice and law. Foreigners are here, because other foreigners attacked them and attack them now. Return to a peaceful life and share in politics through legitimate means is the only way that can enable Afghanistan end its dependence on others.³¹

A **Peace Support Group** has been set up and held its first meeting on 24 March with representatives from the US, UK, Japan, Turkey, Germany, Pakistan, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, UNAMA and the EU. The aim of the Peace Support Group is to enable Afghan and international partners to co-ordinate efforts on reconciliation.

The Afghan government may support negotiations with the Taliban, but many other Afghans do not, particularly those who are not Pashtuns. As mentioned earlier, some commentators have expressed concerns that, after a withdrawal of Coalition forces, Afghanistan might

²⁸ Further information about the programme is available on the ISAF website: [Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program](#)

²⁹ *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, US Department of Defence, April 2011

³⁰ *Report on Afghanistan and Pakistan March 2011*, White House [provided by ABC News]

³¹ *Remarks to the Nation by His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan On the Occasion of The New Afghan Year, 1390*, Afghan Mission to the United Nations, 22 March 2011

return to civil war between the Tajik-dominated forces which made up the Northern Alliance which overthrew the Taliban government in 2001 and 2002, and Pashtuns associated with the Taliban and the Karzai government. Opinion polls have shown that most Afghans do not want the Taliban to control the country, but are in favour of peace negotiations.³²

On 5 May 2011, perhaps as many as 15,000 Afghans demonstrated in Kabul against accommodation with the Taliban, chanting “Death to the Taliban. Death to the suicide bombers. Death to the Punjabis,” a reference to the Pakistanis they blamed for backing the Taliban.³³

Abdullah Abdullah, who stood against Karzai in 2009, also opposes Karzai’s approach to negotiation:

None of the players believe in the current strategy. Karzai is going down the drain and taking the international community with him. If he thinks he can give [the Taliban] a few ministries and a few provinces, they will simply take those provinces and then force him out.³⁴

5.2 UK

British officials have for some time been ready to contemplate negotiations with the insurgency. In 2007, two events hinted at clandestine moves by UK officials to open contacts with the Taliban.

Firstly, the US was reportedly dismayed by the revelation that MI6 officers had held secret discussions with the insurgency over the summer of 2007.³⁵ Then a British diplomat working for the United Nations, Mervyn Patterson, was expelled from Afghanistan in 2007, along with an Irish colleague working for the EU, Michael Semple. The Afghan government discovered that the two had travelled to Helmand province to discuss security there. The UN denied that any UN official was negotiating with the Taliban.³⁶

A document was published by the British government’s Stabilisation Unit in July 2010 with some policy considerations.³⁷ These included expanding the negotiation framework to include more elements of Afghan society and the country’s neighbours, a longer military commitment but with fewer troops, and an end to the policy of killing mid-level Taliban commanders to ensure that the organisation is capable of delivering any commitments in a negotiated settlement. The “non-paper” also called for decentralisation of power to the provinces.

When he was Foreign Secretary, David Miliband called for early and substantive political negotiations between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban and other insurgent groups, because military successes would never be enough to end the war:

The idea of political engagement with those who would directly or indirectly attack our troops is difficult, but dialogue is not appeasement and political space is not the same

³² “Afghans overwhelmingly support talks with Taliban”, *CBC News*, 9 November 2010

³³ “Death of Bin Laden: Afghanistan: Thousands attend anti-Taliban rally held by Karzai rival”, *Guardian*, 6 May 2011

³⁴ “Turmoil in Afghanistan after rumours of peace talks between Karzai and insurgent leader”, *Guardian*, 28 June 2010

³⁵ “Britain in secret talks with the Taliban”, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 December 2007

³⁶ “Diplomats expelled over talks with Taliban”, *Times*, 27 December 2007

³⁷ *Political Settlement in Afghanistan: Preparing for the long game, not the endgame*, Stabilisation Unit, July 2010

as veto power or domination. Now is the time for the Afghans to pursue a political settlement with as much vigour and energy as we are pursuing the military and civilian effort.³⁸

As long as the US was not pushing for a negotiated settlement, British policy in favour of talks was not likely to be acted upon. The death of Osama bin Laden may have changed the situation. Like others, David Cameron saw that development as an opportunity to split the Taliban from al-Qaeda and to encourage the Taliban to enter negotiations:

We should take this opportunity to send a clear message to the Taliban: now is the time to separate themselves from al-Qaeda and participate in a peaceful political process.³⁹

For the Opposition, Jim Murphy, Shadow Defence Secretary, said recently:

Turning to the political process, it is increasingly acknowledged that there will not be a military-only solution in Afghanistan. Although there have been, and will continue to be, military successes, we also need a diplomatic surge to match the military surge. As we moved to the agreed withdrawal date of 2015, a political settlement is not a prerequisite for our withdrawal, but it is undoubtedly a condition for lasting peace.⁴⁰

David Miliband has continued to argue for negotiations, particularly in his recent speech delivered at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.⁴¹

5.3 US

US policy has until recently given higher importance to the 'surge' and turning the military campaign around. This was explained last year by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who said that the timing of negotiations with the Taliban:

...depends on the conditions on the ground in terms of when people, particularly the more senior commanders, realize that the odds against their success are no longer in their favour.⁴²

Nevertheless, the idea of reconciliation and a negotiated settlement is reported to be gaining ground in Washington, despite inconclusive news about the progress of the military campaign, described as "fragile and reversible" in the Department of Defence's progress report.⁴³ It is reported that the US authorities have held secret talks with the Taliban, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the group's number two, since autumn 2010 and are seeking to step them up.⁴⁴ Hillary Clinton has now made renunciation of violence and the acceptance of the Afghan Constitution "outcomes" of negotiations rather than preconditions, significantly reducing the barrier to the initiation of talks.

The Administration has also replaced Richard Holbrooke, who died in December 2010, with Marc Grossman as Special Envoy to Afghanistan. Grossman strongly favours negotiations with the Taliban.⁴⁵ Also leaving Afghanistan will be General David Petraeus, who is

³⁸ "British official urges Afghanistan to negotiate with Taliban, other insurgents", *Washington Post*, 11 March 2010

³⁹ HC Deb 3 May 2011, c454

⁴⁰ HC Deb 14 February 2011, c735-6

⁴¹ David Miliband, "[The War in Afghanistan: Mending it not just Ending it](#)", Speech, MIT, 13 April 2011

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ [Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan](#), US Department of Defence, April 2011, p1

⁴⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "How US intends to end war with Taliban", *Financial Times*, 18 April 2011

⁴⁵ "Upping the ante in Egypt", *Washington Post*, 20 April 2011

associated with the 'surge' and the military campaign. His replacement, Lt General John Allen, may be more amenable to pursuing negotiations. Ryan Crocker has replaced Karl Eikenberry as US Ambassador to Afghanistan. Mr Eikenberry has been blamed for the poor state of relations between the US administration and President Karzai. Taken together, these personnel changes may make a significant difference to the timetable for entering negotiations.

The US has also now accepted the need for the Taliban to have a political office in a country outside Afghanistan so that serious negotiations can take place in safety and with accredited Taliban representatives. The Taliban office will probably be in one of the Gulf States, although it could be in Turkey.

5.4 Commentary

Efforts at reconciliation have so far been patchy. There has been much discussion of the difference that the death of Osama bin Laden might make to policy in Afghanistan, with many suggesting that it would make a negotiated settlement with the Taliban easier.

Patrick Coburn, for the *Independent on Sunday*, wrote recently:

Obviously, there is going to be no military solution to the Afghan conflict, and negotiations with the Taliban will have to begin sooner or later, so why not now?⁴⁶

Ahmed Rashid also supported determined moves towards a negotiated settlement:

Renouncing their links with al-Qaeda and negotiating as Afghans rather than as members of an international jihad has just become much easier for the Taliban. Nato and Afghanistan's neighbours have swiftly to take military and political measures that will help President Hamid Karzai negotiate with the Taliban to end 33 years of wars.⁴⁷

The *Washington Post* has cautioned against a rush to negotiate an exit from Afghanistan, drawing attention to the need to prevent Pakistan from being taken over by extremist Islamist forces, which means preventing the Taliban from maintaining its bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴⁸

Max Boot for the Council on Foreign Relations has also warned against a hasty withdrawal, writing that a comprehensive counterinsurgency policy in Afghanistan is still needed to prevent the country from falling into the hands of al-Qaeda's fellow-travellers, such as the Haqqani network, adding that the US military presence in Afghanistan is the best way for the US to project power into Pakistan and prevent that country from falling to extremists.⁴⁹

Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said recently that the US military presence should be minimised:

We should be working toward the smallest footprint necessary, a presence that puts Afghans in charge and presses them to step up to that task. Make no mistake, it is fundamentally unsustainable to continue spending \$10 billion a month on a massive military operation with no end in sight.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ "Wasn't Bin Laden the reason we went to war?", *Independent on Sunday*, 8 May 2011

⁴⁷ "Now to break the al-Qaeda franchise", *Financial Times*, 3 May 2011

⁴⁸ "The post-bin Laden calculus", *Washington Post*, 8 May 2011

⁴⁹ Max Boot, "Afghanistan war is about more than al Qaeda", Council on Foreign Relations, 4 May 2011

⁵⁰ "Washington weighs choices in Afghanistan", *New York Times*, 11 May 2011

Senator Kerry opposed a rush to withdraw, however.

6 Regional involvement

Presenting the FCO's quarterly report on progress in Afghanistan, Foreign Secretary William Hague drew attention to attempts to get Afghanistan's neighbours to contribute to the political process:

Through the High Peace Council the Afghan Government are increasing their dialogue with their neighbours to promote regional engagement in the wider political process.⁵¹

Recently, President Karzai implied that cooperation with the Pakistani authorities was not all it could be, singling out Afghanistan's eastern neighbour when calling for regional cooperation:

The war and insecurity inflamed in our country today also threatens the countries in our region. In Pakistan, innocent people are killed every day in the hands of terrorists and families are left mourning just like those in Afghanistan. We can understand the grief and pain of our neighbors more than any other country as we have suffered and given sacrifices more than others. I therefore invite all Afghan neighbors and in particular officials in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to give their full and cordial support to our efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan shall not be a threat to the independence and security of its neighbors.⁵²

These comments can be taken as implicit criticism of Pakistan, but also as an olive branch. Reports suggest that President Karzai's attitude towards the Pakistanis has mellowed as his comments about the Coalition and the US have hardened. Although the recent death of Osama bin Laden on Pakistani soil may change the dynamics of the relationship between the Pakistani security forces and the civilian government, it is far from certain that it will stop clandestine support for the Taliban and other insurgent groups from elements in the Pakistani security services. Analysts suggest, on the contrary, that the uncertainty created by the reduction in Coalition forces in Afghanistan may confirm those elements in their retention of these 'assets'.

The relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial to bringing stability to Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid, a respected commentator on Afghanistan, suggests some moves that might reduce the two countries' rivalry and help bring about a peaceful settlement:

India and Pakistan [should] enter into secret talks between their intelligence agencies in order to make their presence in Afghanistan more transparent to the other and end their rivalries. Later the two governments [should] come to agreements that would allow each one to tolerate the other's embassies, consulates, rebuilding activities, and trade interests in Afghanistan. Both [should] pledge not to seek a military presence in Afghanistan or to use Afghan soil to undermine the other.⁵³

Reports suggest that Iran is giving some assistance in the form of supplies and safe havens to the Taliban. While the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran is not ideologically aligned with the Sunni Taliban, Iran sees it as a useful hedge.

⁵¹ HC Deb 4 April 2011, c48-9WS

⁵² "Remarks to the Nation by His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan On the Occasion of The New Afghan Year, 1390", Afghan Mission to the United Nations, 22 March 2011

⁵³ Ahmed Rashid, "The Way Out of Afghanistan", *New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2011

Iran, Russia, India, and the Central Asian states are generally hostile towards Pakistan's aims in Afghanistan and the Taliban but do not know how to counter them. They would like the US military presence to continue for now, but they do not want a permanent foreign military presence in their region.

While the level of trust between the US administration and the Pakistani security forces is at a low point after the assassination of Osama bin Laden in a house near a Pakistani military academy, US officials recognise that Afghan stability is not feasible without the cooperation of the Pakistani army.

The relationship between India and Pakistan is vital, as the two countries battle for influence in Afghanistan, with Pakistan allegedly favouring the mainly Pashtun Taliban and India said to be close to the former Northern Alliance forces, led largely by Tajiks.

The US is also seeking talks with neighbouring countries such as Iran, India, and the Central Asian states.

7 Conclusion

Domestic politics in Afghanistan is unpredictable. Its democratic institutions – the parliament, the Independent Electoral Commission among others – have shown signs of life independent of the Presidency. However, in a centralised presidential system such as Afghanistan's, the influence of parliament is limited, despite the relatively poor showing of the president's allies at the 2010 election.

Commentators have suggested that an increasingly insecure Hamid Karzai has resorted to traditional patronage methods to ensure his survival, which may undermine progress towards a more transparent and less corrupt political system. At the same time the Afghan government, like the Obama administration, has made some personnel changes that can be interpreted as paving the way for accelerated moves to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban.

The main question for western observers appears to be how soon the White House and the Pentagon decide that it is time for talks. This is to be expected, given that it is linked to the withdrawal of troops, which is a compelling domestic political consideration for the Coalition's contributing nations. However, the exact timing of the beginning of negotiations may not make much difference to their outcome.

President Karzai has been attempting to assemble sources of support to replace a Coalition presence that cannot last forever. It is difficult to see how this strategy will be successful, however. With some Pakistani elements likely to continue to back the Taliban and India, Iran and the Central Asian states allegedly moving to back former Northern Alliance forces, the destabilising influences on Afghanistan do not look likely to go away.

The Coalition's central strategy – to build up the strength of the Afghan National Security Forces – is undermined by Tajik predominance in the high command of the army. In the event of violence between the north and the south of the country, it is not clear that the army's full loyalty would be to the Karzai government or to the state.

With the government's weak armed forces, any power-sharing agreement between the Karzai presidency and the Taliban would be a difficult balancing act. It would also be opposed by most non-Pashtuns.

On the other hand, neighbouring states such as Iran have an interest in avoiding chaos and war in Afghanistan. These countries already suffer from refugee crises, drug trafficking and other problems associated with the Afghan conflict. If these countries can be persuaded to make serious efforts in favour of stabilising the country, that would make a big difference.

Nevertheless, reports say that millions of dollars are being moved from the country to safer havens such as the United Arab Emirates because of the fear of impending civil war.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Dan Green, "Karzai's exit strategy: The Afghan president's goal is survival, not victory over the Taliban", *Armed Forces Journal*, September 2010