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## *The role of regional actors in the Afghan peace process*

### **Abstract**

On February 29th, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement that, if successful, will end with the signing of a peace agreement between the insurgent group and the Afghan government. For the negotiations that are now beginning to prosper, the support of the regional powers is essential. Predicting the attitude they can adopt as the process progresses requires analysing the initial position of each of them, their interests in Afghanistan, what they can expect from a possible peace agreement and, above all, what they would never accept. In fact, finding a balance between all these interests, which are often opposed, is one of the keys to the ongoing process.

### **Keywords**

Afghanistan Peace Agreement, India-Pakistan Conflict, US Withdraw from Afghanistan, South-East Asia.

### **Cite this article:**

RUIZ, JAVIER. "The role of regional actors. In the Afghan peace process", *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*. 2020, no. 16, pp. 461-488

«To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war»

Winston Churchill

**O**n 29 February, the US and the Taliban insurgency signed an agreement in principle that, if successful, will lead to the signing of a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government, thus putting an end to a conflict that has lasted almost two decades. For the negotiations now under way to lead to a desirable scenario, many conditions must be met. One is the support of regional powers; or at least their implicit consent. A possible agreement between the Kabul government and the Taliban is unlikely to lead to a lasting peace without the backing of regional actors who, to a greater or lesser extent, have interests in Afghanistan. Predicting the attitude they might adopt as the process progresses requires an analysis of their individual positions, their interests in Afghanistan, the benefits that a peace agreement might bring them and, above all, what they would not accept under any circumstances. Indeed, finding a balance between all these often conflicting interests is one of the keys to the ongoing process.

This article will analyse the position of the main regional actors, those who have the capacity to derail negotiations or at least hinder or facilitate their progress. These main actors are, in order of proximity: The Central Asian Republics, Pakistan, Iran, China, India and Russia.

### Regional actors in the Afghan conflict

*Afghanistan is a poor, mountainous, landlocked country with a weak central government and, while difficult to control, has always been too easily destabilised by the depredations and manipulations of larger powers. To secure peace, an agreement among regional actors to promote mutual non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs would be necessary.<sup>1</sup>*

These words perfectly sum up Afghanistan's reality vis-à-vis the regional powers that could affect its future. And they are perfectly valid at the present juncture. The outcome of the ongoing peace talks is, of course, conditional upon the ability of the Afghans themselves to reach an agreement. But also for the interests of their neighbours, who might choose to sacrifice a possible peace scenario if its outcome does not meet their particular expectations. It is therefore necessary to know what the visions of these neighbouring states are and their real capacity to influence the process.

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<sup>1</sup> THIER, J. Alexander *Afghanistan's Rocky Path to Peace*. *Current History*. April 2010. Page 133

### *The ethno-religious factor*

Before beginning to analyse the positions of these actors, it is necessary to analyse an aspect of Afghan reality that has an undeniable bearing on its relations with its neighbours: Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country<sup>2</sup>, whose ethno-religious groups have very close ties with its neighbours. Leaving aside small minorities that do not carry enough weight to condition the country's future, we can distinguish four major ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras<sup>3</sup>.

The Pashtuns, the largest group, are Sunni, Pashto-speaking and spread between Afghanistan and Pakistan, separated by the British-imposed *Durand Line*, which is not recognised as a legitimate border by all actors, especially from Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, they mainly inhabit along the southern and eastern provinces bordering Pakistan. The relationship between the Afghan Pashtuns and Pakistan is one of the most relevant factors in the Afghan conflict and explains the influence that Pakistan has always had over the Taliban and the tensions this creates with the government in Kabul<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, the Tajiks, also Sunni, live mainly in the provinces north of Kabul and speak Farsi, a language that links them culturally to Iran and Tajikistan, with whom they have close ties. Their Persian roots have traditionally allowed them to maintain good relations with Tehran. The central lands of the country, known as Hazarayat, are home to the Hazaras, Shiites of Central Asian origin who have traditionally been a minority protected by Iran because of their religious status and because they have traditionally been a highly disadvantaged minority. The northwestern provinces are inhabited by the Uzbeks, Sunnis who speak a variant of Turkish and have very close relations with Uzbekistan and Turkey.

The ethnic and religious alliances that derive from these ties are a factor that has always conditioned Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours and will continue to do so during the ongoing peace process. But this is not the only link between Afghanistan and its neighbours, as there are also economic, security and geopolitical interests that condition these relations.

### *Regional interests*

Each of Afghanistan's neighbours supports some political group within its borders and justifies its interference on the basis of its own geopolitical, economic or religious interests.

2 Reference is made to the existence of a Sunni majority and a Shia minority.

3 For a more detailed analysis of Afghanistan's ethnic and religious reality and its historical consequences see: RUIZ ARÉVALO, Javier. *Afganistán. Claves para Entender el Pasado. Pistas para Intuir el Futuro*. University of Granada. 2014. Page 133-149. Also: SPANISH INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES. *Geopolitical analysis of Afghanistan*. Analysis Paper 12/2011.

4 A comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's role: RASHID, Ahmed: *Pakistan on the Brink. The Future of America. Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Viking. 2012.

When analysing the role that these regional actors can play in the peace process, there may be disagreements over the role attributed to each of them, the groups they support or the content of their support. This is because many of these supports, although there is evidence, are publicly denied by those who provide them. Also because they often “play a double game”, simultaneously supporting pro-government and insurgent groups, or because there is a large gap between their official declarations and their actual actions. Even so, there is broad consensus that most of Afghanistan’s neighbours want to see an agreement that will ensure peace and prevent the spread of instability in the region. Moreover, all but India want the US to leave Afghanistan without establishing a permanent military presence. At the same time, neither wants to see a precipitous US withdrawal, which could provoke a new civil war<sup>5</sup>.

Disagreements are numerous and it is likely that some of these neighbours will continue to support rival *proxies* in the future. Even so, it can be expected that regional actors will tend to facilitate peace negotiations, as long as the agreements that are reached do not overstep the red lines that each has set. The need, felt by all regional actors, to curb an escalation of violence on their borders is conducive to this positive attitude, albeit with restrictions. So does the will to ensure its participation in an eventual political settlement, on the understanding that it is easier to defend its interests by acting within the framework of the ongoing negotiations than by acting outside them.

## A bilateral conflict of regional scope

### *A bilateral conflict?*

The current phase of the Afghan conflict, which began in 2001, involves many actors, both national and international, state and non-state. However, since its origins, it has tended to be simplified as a bilateral conflict between two actors, the Afghan government, with its US-led allies, and the Taliban insurgency. The June 2018 ceasefire<sup>6</sup>, the peace talks that began shortly thereafter<sup>7</sup> and the current peace process<sup>8</sup> all reinforce the idea of a simple two-sided conflict model. The fact is that the thousands of armed clashes that take place every year almost always pit pro-government forces against the Taliban insurgency. Conflicts between these two parties account for more

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<sup>5</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. *Afghanistan. The precarious struggle for stability. Highlights from an unclassified workshop of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)*. May 2019. Page 48.

<sup>6</sup> BBC NEWS. *Afghan Taliban agree three-day ceasefire - their first*. 9 June 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44423032>. Visited on 02/03/2020

<sup>7</sup> RUIZ AREVALO, Javier. *Conversaciones de paz sobre Afganistán ¿Una última oportunidad para la paz?* Revista Española de Estudios Internacionales. Vol. 5 Issue 2 (2019). Page 146 et seq.

<sup>8</sup> RUIZ ARÉVALO, Javier. *El reinicio de las conversaciones de Estados Unidos con los Talibán*. Global Strategy. March 2020. <https://global-strategy.org/el-reinicio-de-las-conversaciones-de-estados-unidos-con-los-taliban/>

than 95 percent of violent incidents in Afghanistan, making other armed groups an insignificant factor in the conflict<sup>9</sup>. The role of secondary actors cannot be ignored, but none of them has sufficient influence to control the war or dictate the terms of an eventual peace agreement, although their cumulative effect could be substantial<sup>10</sup>.

In the summer of 2018, the declaration of a cessation of hostilities issued by the Afghan and US governments was ratified by the Taliban, resulting in a three-day cessation of violence in most of the territory<sup>11</sup>. In the words of President Ashraf Ghani, it was “*a controlled experiment that demonstrates discipline. There is one spokesperson [the Taliban] who we must take seriously*”<sup>12</sup>. The fact that the three main actors in this process –the US, the Afghan government and the Taliban– agreed and respected this act of mutual trust can be seen as the first step in the ongoing peace process. The fact that its implementation led to a drastic reduction in violence confirms its absolute prominence in the armed conflict<sup>13</sup>.

Although they are often portrayed as global *Jihadi* actors, aligned with *Al Qaeda* or ISIS, the reality is that the Taliban are essentially domestic actors. Indeed, the Taliban insurgency is more about nationalism than global  *jihadism*. Most insurgents fight close to home and for objectives that do not extend beyond Afghanistan. The Taliban govern part of Afghanistan, running services such as education, health, justice and taxation<sup>14</sup>. And they do so without any vocation for integration into supposedly supranational caliphates. This reality means that the most relevant regional actors in the conflict do not frame the conflict as part of broader global conflicts, such as radical Islamism’s confrontation with the West and with “lukewarm” Muslim regimes. The international dynamics that most directly condition this conflict are regional. They are cross-border ethno-religious ties, ancestral alliances or clashes between neighbours, and fear of spreading instability that condition the context of conflict. Without denying that actors such as Iran or Russia, as we will see throughout this article, frame their decisions within the conflict that confronts them with the US.

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9 GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 48

10 Throughout the article, the main actors in the conflict will be listed, without analysing actors considered secondary, such as the Central Asian Republics or Turkey, which, due to their lack of relevance and alignment with Moscow in the first case, or their remoteness and lack of interest in the conflict in the second, will not condition the peace process.

11 INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. *Building on Afghanistan’s Fleeting Ceasefire*. Asia Report No 298, 19 July 2018

12 NATO Engages Day 2: *A Conversation with Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai*, German Marshall Fund, 16 July 2018.

13 The Afghan interior ministry put the degree of reduction in violence at 80 percent. GEORGE, S. *A glimpse of peace in Afghanistan*. The Washington Post. 27 Feb 2020. This is difficult to assess, but it shows that the ceasefire was respected by all, with very limited exceptions. RAHIMI, Z. *Soldiers, 9 Civilians Killed Since Start of RIV: Afghan Govt*. Tolo News. 28 Feb 2020.

14 JACKSON, Ashley. *Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government*. ODI, Research reports and studies. June 2018.

### *A bilateral conflict with a multitude of secondary actors*

The way the conflict has escalated in recent years has highlighted the increasing levels of direct assistance from neighbouring countries to the Taliban and other non-state actors. Pakistan, Iran, India and China support various Afghan groups politically, economically or militarily. This support is often intended to protect their own interests inside Afghanistan by supporting those they consider closest to them on ethnic, religious grounds (Taliban, military warlords, militia leaders)<sup>15</sup>. The consequence of this situation is that some regional actors provide support, in a calibrated manner, to rival factions on both sides. Or rival factions within the same side. It also explains the changes in the choice of allies that can be observed with some frequency. A clear example of this is Iran, which has at one time or another supported both sides and has adapted its support strategy to the circumstances of the moment.

Figure 1 shows, illustratively but not exhaustively, these lines of support that shape the conflict.

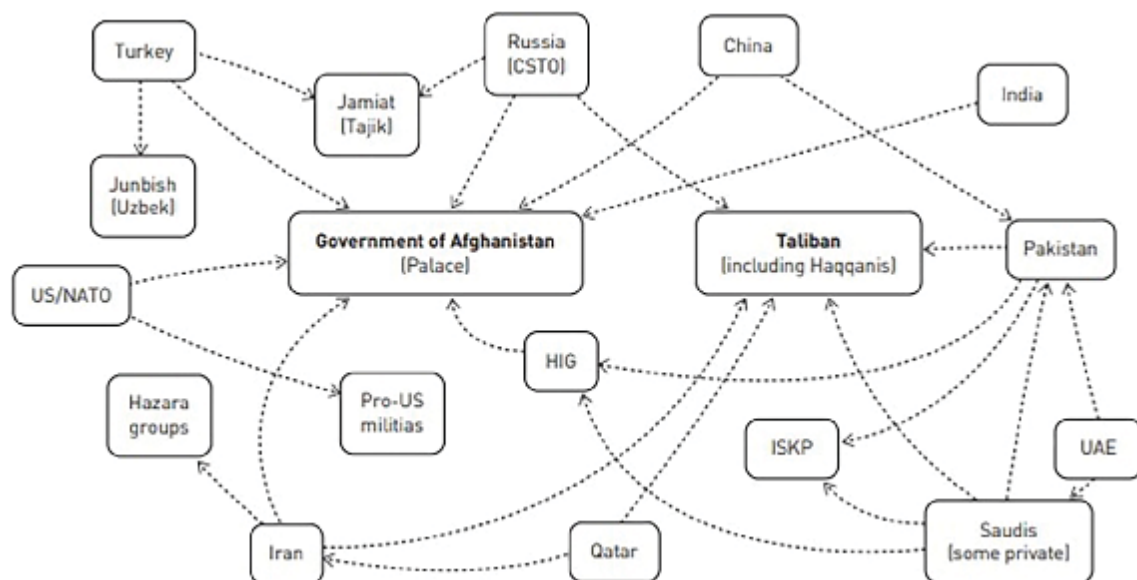


Figure 1. International support for the Afghan conflict.  
Adapted from: GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 49

In the centre of the image are two text boxes representing the two main actors: the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. The text boxes surrounding these two central boxes represent state (grey background) and non-state actors operating in the region (white background). With dashed border, terrorist groups). The connecting arrows show the support flows to each of the central entities, or to other groups:

- Turkey supports the Government of Afghanistan, the Jamiat party, (Tajik mujahideen party founded during the war against the communists by Burha-

<sup>15</sup> *Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Presentation, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, December 2012

nuddin Rabbani. He led the opposition to Karzai within the regime) and the Junbish party (majority Uzbek party based in the northwest of the country. It has a rather left-wing and secular character, with many former communists in its ranks. Its founder and historical leader is Abdul Rashid Dostum).

- Russia supports the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban (including the Haqqanis), as well as the Jamiat.
- China supports the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Iran supports the Taliban (including the Haqqanis), the Afghan government and Hazara groups.
- India supports the Afghan government.
- Pakistan supports the Taliban (including the Haqqanis), the HIG (mujahedin group created by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in 1979 and which has carried out a multitude of terrorist attacks against the Afghan government and its allies) and ISIS (Islamic State, represented by its franchise in the area, the Islamic State in Khorasan).
- UAE supports Pakistan.
- The Saudis (including private donors) support Pakistan, ISIS and the HIG. Donors from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries serve as an avenue for fundraising for the Taliban, but also support rival groups such as ISIS and HIG.
- Qatar supports the Taliban (including the Haqqanis) and Iran. It acts as a diplomatic outpost for the Taliban, while supporting Iran's policy in the region against its Sunni rivals: United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.
- The HIG supports the Government of Afghanistan and, finally,
- the US and NATO support the Afghan government and pro-US militias.

A simple glance at the figure shows that, although two central poles can be discerned, calling the Afghan conflict bilateral is inaccurate, to say the least. This must be taken into account when assessing progress in the talks between the two main actors. An agreement between the two is not an absolute guarantee of peace if what is agreed does not substantially satisfy either of the actors on the scene.

### *Conflicting interests*

The interests of each of these actors can be analysed on the basis of the same graph, starting at the top right of the figure and moving clockwise. It should be recalled that, in many cases, the actors themselves deny the links that will be discussed below<sup>16</sup>.

For Pakistan and India, Afghanistan is one of the theatres of their global confrontation. India is looking to Afghanistan for an ally to threaten Pakistan from its rear.

16 Such is the case of Iran, which denies the support it has been providing to the Taliban, despite evidence to the contrary. Pakistan also denies that it has continued to support the Afghan Taliban despite its commitments to the US.

Pakistan seeks to avoid, at all costs, an Afghan government aligned with its rival, which would make it feel surrounded. Its support policies should be understood in this perspective. To this end, both countries maintain close political, economic and military relations, overt and covert, with various Afghan entities, aimed at consolidating their position and undermining that of their adversary<sup>17</sup>. The articulation of the Afghan government as a juxtaposition of rival political groups facilitates this and allows different factions of the government itself to align themselves with one or the other of these two countries. Pakistan, in addition to standing up to India, seeks to preserve its regional influence by supporting the Taliban, while backing various militant groups such as the Islamic State of Khorasan and, previously, Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), to maintain pressure on India and the Afghan government. Pakistan may not seek a Taliban victory, but it does not feel safe with a negotiated end to the conflict either, as greater stability may facilitate India's presence in Afghanistan<sup>18</sup>. India, for its part, maintains close relations with the government in Kabul, with which it has been collaborating for years in training civil servants and providing humanitarian aid, despite the fact that it is the country with the largest number of poverty-stricken people in the world<sup>19</sup>.

For Iran, nothing that happens in Afghanistan can be alien to it. Firstly, because of the huge number of Afghan refugees on its territory that Iran would like to see return to a stable Afghanistan. The flow of drugs and other illicit trades across their long common border has made drug use a major problem for Iran. Because of the moral bond that links them to Afghan Shiite minorities, particularly the Hazaras, of whom they see themselves as protectors. Fear of a prolonged US military presence or a hostile government in Kabul.

Another relevant aspect is Afghanistan's strategic position. Communications from Central Asia via Afghanistan to Iranian ports are of strategic interest to Iran, especially the port of ChahBahar, which would give the Iranians the opportunity to access free waters without having to cross the Strait of Hormuz<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, Iran sees the western part of Afghan territory as a natural area of influence. For all these reasons, nothing that happens in its eastern neighbour can be alien to the interests of Iran, which is obliged to combine its needs for regional stability with those derived from its confrontation with the US.

Turkey is promoting itself as a regional power, so both its relations with the Taliban and its ascendancy over Turkic-language populations are aspects to be taken into

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17 GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 49

18 WALLDAN, Matt and WRIGHT, Matthew. *Who Wants What Mapping the Parties' Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict*. Research Paper. Asia Programme. July 2014. Page 7.

19 THIER, op. cit. Page 134.

20 CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. El eterno conflicto afgano: las mismas piezas en diferente posición sobre el tablero. In *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2018*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Page 164.

account. In Afghanistan it is true to its self-proclaimed role as protector of Turkic peoples, supporting the Uzbeks through strongmen such as Rashid Dostum of the Uzbek-dominated Junbish Party. It also supports, to a lesser extent, the predominantly Tajik Jamiat Party through figures such as Atta Muhammad Noor. For Turkey, the desired end-state would be a stable Afghanistan, without a US military presence and with Uzbeks and Tajiks retaining significant shares of power.

Turkey, together with Qatar, seeks to curb the influence of Saudi Arabia and its Pakistani ally in the Middle East, including Afghanistan. The dialogue with the Taliban, opened years ago by Qatar, may allow the Turks to identify less radical Taliban leaders and support them in reaching an agreement during negotiations. For their part, Turkey's ascendancy over Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may cause these ex-Soviet republics to change their stance against negotiating with the Taliban and move closer to Russia's current approach<sup>21</sup>.

Russia and other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO<sup>22</sup>) pursue a buffer strategy, supporting the government in Kabul while maintaining relations with other armed groups. Russia's actions in this conflict are also conditioned by its relations with the US and NATO. As relations have cooled, Russia has denied the US support initially provided, such as the use of the Manas Air Base<sup>23</sup> or the Northern Distribution network<sup>24</sup>, both essential elements in sustaining the allied military effort in Afghanistan. In the same vein, in 2018, Russia established relations with the Taliban and launched a dialogue table between the insurgent group and various Afghan groups, called the Afghan Society Council. The Council included broad representation from opposition groups and actors, such as Karzai, who are highly critical of the US role in Afghanistan. Moscow's contacts with the Taliban have been strongly criticised by Kabul as an obstacle to the US-led peace process supported by the Afghan government. There is also criticism from Kabul of the prominence given by Moscow to opposition leaders in the dialogue with the Taliban, which undermines the authority of the Afghan government<sup>25</sup>.

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21 RAMANI, Samuel (13 March 2018). *Can Turkey position itself as the most effective mediator in Afghanistan?* TRT World. 13 March 2018. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/can-turkey-position-itself-as-the-most-effective-mediator-in-afghanistan--15883>

22 An international politico-military organisation promoted mainly by Russia and comprising several European and Central Asian countries : Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

23 Located in Kyrgyzstan, its use was ceded to the US in the initial stages of the conflict until, under pressure from Moscow, the Kyrgyz government decided to stop providing this support in 2014.

24 RUIZ ARÉVALO, Javier. *Afganistán y la Red de Distribución Norte. Algo más que un Problema Logístico*. CESEDEN Information Bulletin. Issue 319. August 2011.

25 RAMANI, Samuel. *In the Demise of the Taliban Peace Talks, Russia Is the Winner*. Foreign Policy. 11 September 2019.

China, for its part, maintains good relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, while stepping up its counter-terrorism effort against the Uighurs with the cooperation of many actors, including the Taliban. Its interests in Afghanistan focus on preventing the spread of Islamist radicalism and exploiting the country's mineral resources. Both require a government that guarantees some stability.

Although the Central Asian Republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, do not constitute a major player in the Afghan conflict, they can contribute to strengthening any possible breakthrough in the Afghan peace process. Their main contribution may be to achieve greater regional political integration. Uzbekistan, in particular, could facilitate Afghanistan's further integration into Central Asian diplomatic frameworks. The Tashkent Conference in March 2018 marked the beginning of a substantial change in the republic's foreign policy, which has moved from isolation to regional engagement and has become a credible consensus builder in this field. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, individually and collectively, can contribute to the peace process by facilitating Afghanistan's further economic integration, through air and land corridors that would allow it to reach out to new economic partners<sup>26</sup>.

The role of these republics, modest and conditioned by Moscow's influence, will always be in favour of a solution to the conflict that provides stability on their southern border, guarantees the absence of terrorist groups on Afghan soil and is not harmful to their Tajik and Uzbek "brothers" to the south.

### *A network of micro-conflicts*

A full analysis of the role of the different actors in the contest cannot be limited to the flow of support between them; attention must also be paid to rivalries. Figure 2 reflects the main lines of tension between the actors involved in the conflict in some way. This graph is very illustrative in giving an idea of the complexity of the tensions in Afghanistan that, in some way, feed or accompany the main conflict. But it requires some clarifying remarks stemming from the opacity that, in many cases, surrounds the interactions between actors in this scenario. Thus, the arrows between Pakistan and Afghanistan are depicted in both directions, despite Islamabad's claim that there are no hostilities between the two countries. Indeed, the skirmishes along the Durand line and the harbouring of Taliban leaders in Pakistan are indicative of the existence of such tensions<sup>27</sup>. No lines are drawn between Iran and HIG because

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26 HAMIDZADA, Humayun and PONZIO, Richard. *Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan*. United States Institute for Peace. Special Report, 27 August 2019.

27 AKBARI, Hayat. *Durand Line Border Dispute Remains Point of Contention for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations*. *Globalsecurityreview*. 24 March 2019.

it is now unclear whether the historical tensions between Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Tehran have been resolved. Similar is the case with tensions between HIG and Russia<sup>28</sup>.

These tensions are relevant insofar as a peace agreement whose terms are very favourable to one of the actors will be viewed with suspicion by those who are in conflict with it.

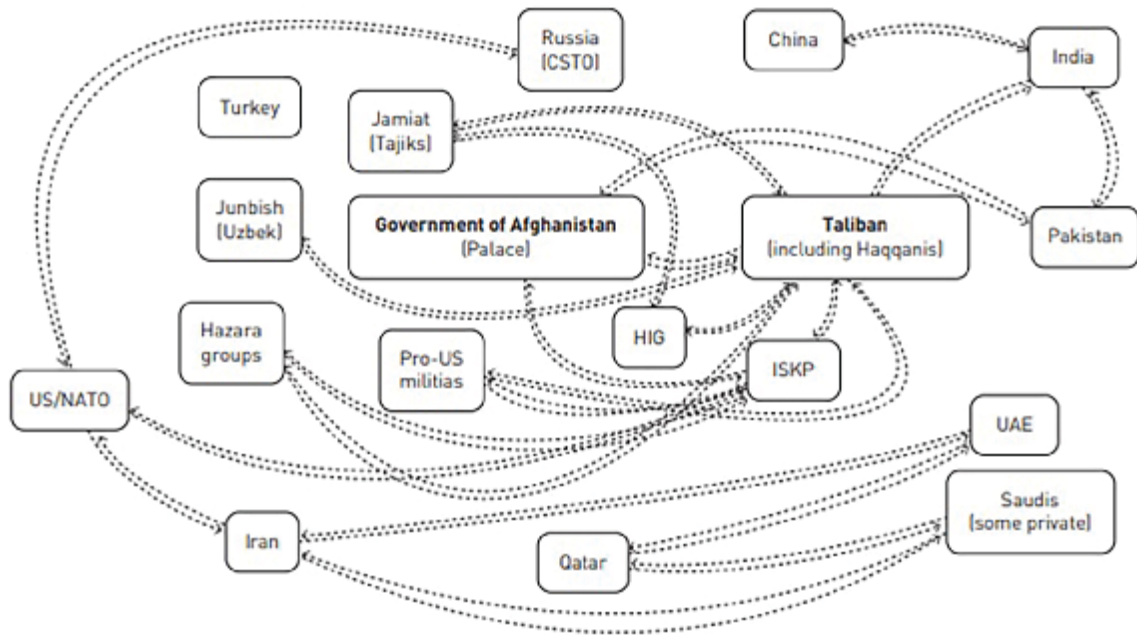


Figure 2. Tensions between the actors involved in the Afghan conflict.  
Adapted from: GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 51

### Pakistan: key player

Of all the regional actors, Pakistan has been most heavily involved in the Afghan conflict and is most likely to bring it down.

Pakistan’s ties with the Taliban date back to the 1990s, during the civil war, when Islamabad saw the Pashtun group as a valuable foothold against other Indian-backed groups. And as a good ally in opening trade routes with the newly independent states of Central Asia, securing a friendly government in Kabul. This strategy worked for a while, but became a problem after the 9/11 attacks, when it became clear that al-Qaida had planned the attacks from a safe haven that the Taliban had provided for the terrorist group.

Three days after the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan’s president yielded to US demands to cease support for the Taliban, but issued a warning to his ambassador in Islamabad: His country would assist the United States in its impending war against the Taliban,

<sup>28</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 49

who had long been its allies, but hoped that the war would be short and limited in scope and would not create a hostile neighbour for Pakistan<sup>29</sup>.

The George W. Bush Jr. administration forced Pakistan to make a drastic choice: sever ties with the Taliban and become a reliable partner against global terrorism, or end up becoming a target in that war. President Musharraf and his successors kept part of the deal: working with the CIA and pursuing Al Qaeda in Pakistan, as well as allowing US drone strikes in the country's tribal areas. But Islamabad never completely severed ties with the Taliban movement. The military intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), spent years covertly supporting them in Afghanistan and protecting their leaders inside Pakistan. So the Pakistani security apparatus cooperated with the US, but was unable to break completely with its former partners and allowed Pakistan to become a sanctuary for the Taliban<sup>30</sup>. For years Pakistan has served simultaneously as a main supply route for ISAF and as a sanctuary and headquarters for the Afghan insurgents' leadership.

Why has Pakistan maintained this unsustainable balance? The answer to this question is to be found in India. The Pakistani army and its intelligence apparatus feel surrounded by their eternal enemy. Pakistan has lost three or four wars with India (depending on how you count them). India's military and economic superiority, combined with unresolved border issues with India (Kashmir) and Afghanistan (the Durand Line), keeps Pakistan in a perpetual state of alert<sup>31</sup>. Pakistan feels threatened by India's close relationship with the Afghan government and continues to maintain its support for the Taliban to counter this influence, which it sees as hostile. This is the starting point from which he approaches his relations with Afghanistan and the Taliban and also his involvement in the peace process.

For the time being, Pakistan has facilitated direct talks between the US and the Afghan Taliban since they began in 2018.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there is a widespread feeling in Pakistan that the agreement between the two has come to recognise Pakistan's position since the 2001 Bonn conference that there is no military solution to the conflict and

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29 MAZZETTI, Mark and KHAN, Ismail. *From the Afghan Peace Deal, a Weak and Pliable Neighbor for Pakistan*. The New York Times. 5 March 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/world/asia/afghanistan-pakistan-peace.html>

30 For a detailed analysis of Pakistan's support to the Taliban: RASHID, A. *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Tauris, New York, 2009. RASHID, A. *Descente into Chaos*, Viking, London 2008. TANNER, S. *Afghanistan. A Military History from Alexander The Great to the War Against the Taliban*. Da Capo Press, 2009. LIEVEN, A. *Pakistan, a Hard Country*. Public Affairs, New York. 2011. POZO SERRANO, P. *La guerra Af-Pakistán y el uso de la fuerza en las relaciones internacionales*. University of Navarra Publisher, 2011. RUIZ ARÉVALO, J. *Afganistán. Claves para entender el pasado, pistas para intuir el futuro*. Ed. University of Granada, 2014.

31 THIER. Page 134.

32 HASIM, Asad. *Pakistan warns US of "spoilers" on US-Taliban deal in Afghanistan*. Al Jazeera. 2 March 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/pakistan-warns-spoilers-taliban-deal-afghanistan-200302093650382.html>

that the Taliban movement is a political reality in Afghanistan that must be reckoned with in order to make the country governable. In the words of Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States. "*The Taliban and the Pakistani military that supports them see this as their victory... Pakistan gambled on the Taliban for so long on the assumption that the Americans would eventually leave*"<sup>33</sup>. In official Pakistani circles it is argued that today's Taliban are very different from the "*band of fanatics once led by Mullah Mohammed Omar*"<sup>34</sup>. They are now seen as more pragmatic, because they have understood the importance of gaining political leverage in a deal that can lead to power-sharing. For many they are simply a political party<sup>35</sup>.

The bottom line is that Pakistan is much more comfortable working with the Taliban than with the current government in Kabul. But they recognise that if they were to seize all power in Afghanistan, the result could be civil war and would encourage the involvement of regional enemies, such as India. The prospect of being embroiled in a long and costly civil war on its western front is sufficiently worrying for Islamabad to view with extreme caution any attempt to rely on the Taliban to maintain its influence in Afghanistan<sup>36</sup>.

For Pakistan, therefore, the current *status quo*, accompanied by a degree of chaos that allows them to continue to exert their influence, is preferable to either of the two possible extremes: defeat or victory for the Taliban.

## Iran's role

The traditional hatred between Iran and the Taliban, stemming mainly from their religious differences, has evaporated over the years, giving way to an alliance that looks set to last, centred on both sides' adherence to the concept of political Islam. While in power in the 1990s, the Taliban received support from Iran's rival, Saudi Arabia. However, the Saudis were unable to maintain this support once their US ally went to war with them. The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where the Taliban have always had their political office, combined with existing ties between Qatar and Iran, facilitated reconciliation. Also contributing to this rapprochement has been Iran's move towards an Islamic theocratic state, which, despite sectarian differences, closely resembles the goal pursued by the Taliban movement, which has always striven to establish a government based on Islamic values in Afghanistan. These good relations are evidenced by the Taliban's continued consultations with the Iranian authorities. Since the start of peace negotiations with the US, its leaders have

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33 MAZZETTI and KHAN, *op. cit.*

34 MAZZETTI and KHAN, *op. cit.*

35 MAZZETTI and KHAN, *op. cit.*

36 MAZZETTI and KHAN, *op. cit.*

made numerous visits to Tehran, one of them, significantly, immediately after the temporary collapse of talks with the US in September 2019. These contacts not only reflect Tehran's importance to the Afghan insurgency, but also show the growing complicity between the two sides<sup>37</sup>.

Since the beginning of the peace process, the US has pressured the Taliban movement to sever its ties with Iran, which it accuses of using its influence over the insurgent group to torpedo it. Earlier, in October 2018, the US imposed sanctions on Iran for providing economic and military support to the Taliban. This alliance was, for the Trump administration, unequivocal proof of the terrorist nature of the regime in Tehran<sup>38</sup>.

Iran is also important to the insurgent group because of its good relations with almost all Afghan actors, including President Ghani, a Pashtun who is at odds with the Taliban, and Chief Executive Abdullah, an ethnic Tajik, a traditional ally of Iran. More importantly, both Iran and the Taliban face a common threat. Both are engaged in a direct fight against the Islamic State and US forces, with the ultimate goal of annihilating the former and driving the latter out of the region.

While Iran's *spoiler* role has become increasingly pronounced in recent months as Tehran has helped the Taliban consolidate its authority in the western regions of Farah province bordering Iran, there are indications that Iran may be distancing itself from the Taliban. Iran has consistently participated in Moscow-sponsored peace talks and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's anti-ISIS initiatives in order to appear as a responsible international actor advocating peace in Afghanistan. In the same vein, it seems that increasingly, his preferred interlocutors are the more moderate among the Taliban, which could indicate a rapprochement with the US position on a dialogue-based end to the conflict<sup>39</sup>.

For Iran, the best option is a stable Afghanistan free of the Taliban, the radical Sunnis with whom it almost went to war in 1998 and who, among other things, pose a

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37 Cfr. HUSSAIN, Kashif. *Why the Taliban Won't Cut Ties with Iran*. The Diplomat. 15 February 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/why-the-taliban-wont-cut-ties-with-iran/>. For a more in-depth analysis of Iranian-Taliban relations: APELLÁNIZ VÉLEZ, Alejandro (2017). "¿Es Afganistán una cuestión de estado para Irán?" *Historia Actual Online*, 44 (3), 2017: 7-21. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6365856>. BEHRAVESH, Maysam (2020). «What does Iran want in Afghanistan?». Al Jazeera. 04/02/2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/190204092658549.html> CLARK, K. "Taliban Claim Weapons Supplier by Iran" *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 2008. GOHEL, Sajjam (2010). "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan". *Combating Terrorism Centre, March 2010, Volume 3, Issue 3*. 2010. <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-ambiguous-role-in-afghanistan/>

38 RAMANI, Samuel. *Managed Instability: Iran, the Taliban, and Afghanistan*. The Diplomat. 14 November 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/managed-instability-iran-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>

39 RAMANI, op. cit.

threat to Afghanistan's Shia minority and their Tajik allies<sup>40</sup>. But a stable Afghanistan, within the US orbit, is not a good option for Iran either. Even less so if such an alliance involves the permanent presence of US military or intelligence elements on Afghan soil. At this juncture, it backs the Afghan government while providing limited support to the Taliban insurgency, especially in its fight against ISIS groups operating near its border<sup>41</sup>. With this support it achieves a double objective: to keep ISIS, Iran's strategic enemy, out of its territory and to maintain pressure on the US by fostering a state of controlled instability in Afghanistan, supporting the Taliban enough to complicate US military objectives, but without allowing the organisation to expand unchecked<sup>42</sup>.

### The United States and its allies

Although they are not regional actors, it is not possible to talk about the Afghan conflict without mentioning, albeit briefly, the US and its allies, primarily NATO. First of all, it should be remembered that they were instrumental in shaping the conflict by deciding at the Bonn Conference to include representatives of many armed factions, but not the Taliban,<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, international support for the new government led it to believe that it would be able to assert itself militarily, persuading the government of President Karzai (2001-2014) to seek its defeat rather than a settlement. Developments have shown how wrong this approach was.

The reality of the facts is compounded by the Trump administration's radical shift in its approach to the conflict, announced in August 2017, when it released its new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia: "*From now on, victory will have a clear definition: attacking our enemies, destroying ISIS, defeating Al Qaida, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping terrorist attacks on America before they emerge.*"<sup>44</sup>. The aim of this strategy was to break the stalemate in the armed conflict so that the Taliban leadership would come to the conclusion that they cannot achieve victory by military means. This would lead them to agree to a reconciliation process promoted and led by the Afghan authorities<sup>45</sup>. Whether or not as a consequence of the development of this strategy, the fact is that developments have since been aligned with its purpose.

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40 NADER Alireza et al. *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*. Rand Corporation. 2014. Page 5.

41 WALLDAN and WRIGHT, op. cit. p. 7.

42 RAMANI, op. cit.

43 SAJJAD, Ahmed. "The Exclusion of the Taliban from Afghanistan's State-Building and Its Human Security Vulnerabilities", *International Academic Forum Journal of Politics, Economics & Law*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, Spring 2017.

44 CASTRO TORRES, op. cit. Page 158.

45 CASTRO TORRES, op. cit. Page 158.

In addition to fighting the Taliban, the US has been conducting a parallel campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan since 2001. The fight against international terrorism remains the main reason for the US military presence and its main objective in the ongoing peace negotiations. The international community also pursues its own agenda in Afghanistan, related to the promotion of human rights –including women’s rights– and liberal democratic values. This promotion of Western values generates rejection, both inside and outside Afghanistan, among those who do not share Western values and provokes resistance among regional actors opposed to the US. On the other hand, the fact that the US, in addition to supporting the government, continues to support certain militias, provokes tensions that further complicate the situation in the region.

However, in this group of actors, the factor that weighs most heavily today is the need to end their involvement in a conflict that is very costly, both in terms of lives and in economic terms, and which does not produce results that justify such a sacrifice. The United States combines this with the fact that one of President Trump’s election promises was precisely to put an end to “endless wars”. With 2020 being an election year, there will be considerable pressure for immediate progress at any cost. The US and its allies urgently need an intra-Afghan agreement to end the conflict and allow them to end their military presence in Afghanistan without their legacy being the triumphant return of the Taliban or a new civil war. The fear among regional actors is that the need to withdraw militarily will lead them to ratify an agreement that does not meet the necessary guarantees of long-term stability<sup>46</sup>.

## Russia and China’s role in Afghanistan

When analysing the role that states in the region can play in the development of peace talks, the case of Russia and China deserves special attention. In principle, they share a fundamental objective for both: containing *jihadist* extremism within Afghanistan’s borders, preventing the emergence of Islamist forces with an ‘internationalist’ agenda. Moscow fears that a Taliban victory could have negative consequences for the stability of Central Asia and Russia’s Muslim-majority regions. Beijing, for its part, is concerned that a Taliban victory could strengthen the Muslim opposition in Xinjiang<sup>47</sup>.

Given this fear, a prolonged US presence supporting the Afghan government is preferable for both sides to the risks of a Taliban government, even though they have reiterated that they are only interested in Afghanistan and will never become a source of tension for neighbouring countries. If anything, as the US prepares to

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46 RUIZ ARÉVALO, 2019, *op. cit.* Page 149-50.

47 RUIZ ARÉVALO, J. *Nadar y guardar la ropa. La estrategia de Rusia y China en Afganistán.* Global Strategy. University of Granada. 2010. <https://global-strategy.org/nadar-y-guardar-la-ropa-la-estrategia-de-rusia-y-china-en-afganistan/>

leave, Moscow and Beijing have established contacts with the insurgent group<sup>48</sup>. Despite their many differences with the US, both Russia and China accepted (and Moscow even supported) the US-led military presence in Afghanistan as a means to further their own objectives<sup>49</sup>. However, since the 2014 start of the withdrawal of US and allied forces from Afghanistan, the Kremlin and Beijing have been preparing for the consequences of a full withdrawal. To this end, they work with the government in Kabul and also cooperate with the Taliban and Pakistan, their main external supporter. The insurgent group is no longer a threat but an ally against more radical movements such as the Islamic State and the East Turkestan Liberation Front, from which they have more to fear<sup>50</sup>.

### *Russia's vision*

Historically, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan has been more active than that of China. The Soviet Union maintained good relations and provided significant assistance to the Afghan monarchy until its fall in 1973 and continued to do so with the regimes that succeeded it. Support for the communist regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, faced with an insurgent movement that it was unable to control, eventually led the Soviet Union to engage in a fruitless counter-insurgency campaign that ended in a humiliating withdrawal. After the Soviet withdrawal, the USSR continued to support the communist regime in Kabul until the collapse of the USSR itself in 1991. The regime in Kabul fell a few months later and was replaced first by an Islamic republic dominated by the *mujahideen* who had fought against the Soviet occupation and then by the Taliban.

Until the US-led intervention in 2001, Russia and Iran were the two regional powers providing military support to the internal opposition to the Taliban regime. Russia had its own reasons for doing so: the Taliban allowed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to operate from northern Afghanistan and launch incursions into former Soviet Central Asia in 1999 and 2000. Iran, among other reasons, supported the Shiite minority, which was severely persecuted by the Taliban.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Russia's new president, Vladimir Putin, not only supported the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, he even approved the establishment of a US military presence in the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, consisting of support bases that facilitated the transit of personnel and resources to Afghanistan. However, from 2005 onwards, as relations between the two countries deteriorated for reasons unrelated to the Afghan conflict, President Putin began to call for the withdrawal of US forces from Central Asia, prompting Uzbekistan and

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48 RUIZ AREVALO, 2020, *op. cit.*

49 For an analysis, see RUIZ AREVALO, 2020, *op. cit.*

50 GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019, Page 55

Kyrgyzstan to make the same demand. Despite this, Russia continued to support US-led efforts in Afghanistan, especially through the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network, which it offered to the US. This was a support route to avoid the traditional route through Pakistan, which was proving problematic due to Islamabad's unreliable attitude, which was simultaneously hindering the use of this route and aiding the Taliban<sup>51</sup>. Over time, the rise of ISIS and its spread to Afghanistan, the drawdown of US and allied forces and the increasing vulnerability of the Kabul government led Moscow to see the Taliban as a preferable alternative to ISIS. ISIS has an internationalist agenda designed to spread *jihad* in Central Asia, while the Taliban's targets are limited to Afghanistan, which makes them less dangerous in Moscow's eyes.

Russia's approach to the Taliban is conditioned by its concern about the presence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in northern Afghanistan: in early July 2018, Taliban forces launched an offensive, possibly with Russian support, to drive ISIS out of the Darzab district near the border with Turkmenistan. On the other hand, Moscow may see relations with the Taliban as a form of deterrence against Washington: in private talks in Moscow in late 2016, Russian officials warned that if the US armed Ukraine, Russia could provide anti-aircraft weapons to Afghan insurgents<sup>52</sup>.

The Soviet experience has allowed Russia to establish contacts with the Taliban, which it does not see as a transnational threat and has therefore accepted them as a valid spokesperson. At the same time, the Russians have moved closer to Pakistan through military sales, while their alliance with Iran gives them special weight in the regional context. Meanwhile, they struggle with the US to exert their influence over the former Soviet republics to the north. Russia's approach could be a replica of the strategy it has developed in Syria, where it has benefited significantly from the erratic attitude of the US. Similarly, participation in talks in which the US is under pressure to deliver results in the short term may enable it to ensure that the outcome is favourable to it and, in the long term, to increase its influence in the region<sup>53</sup>.

### *China's vision*

Prior to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, China had preferential ties with Pakistan. Seeing the USSR as its main opponent, China sided with Pakistan in supporting the Afghan *mujahideen* fighting against the Soviet occupation. When the Taliban came to power, China continued to back Pakistan, its main supporter. In this way, it became an indirect ally of them. But just as Moscow came to see them as a threat because of their support for Islamists in Central Asia, Beijing felt threatened by

51 RUIZ ARÉVALO, 2011, op. cit.

52 RUBIN, Barnett. *Is Afghanistan Ready for Peace? How Great Powers Can End the War*. Foreign Affairs, 30 July 2018.

53 CASTRO TORRES, op. cit. Page 165.

their support for Islamists in Xinjiang, where there is a growing Muslim movement in opposition to Chinese rule<sup>54</sup>.

Although China was not part of the US-led international coalition since 2001, it seemed to see it as an obstacle to Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for Islamist movements in Xinjiang, and therefore welcomed its presence in Afghanistan. In recent years, China has provided security assistance to the Kabul government and, according to some reports, has even established a small military base on Afghan territory near the Chinese border and is expected to further strengthen its military presence in the region by establishing a naval logistics hub in the new Pakistani port of Gwadar<sup>55</sup>. Finally, like Russia, following the drawdown of US and allied forces, Beijing has established contacts with the Taliban and continued cooperation with Pakistan, which remains China's main partner in the region. In addition, it has increased its military presence in Afghanistan and Tajikistan to ensure that these territories do not serve as bases for ISI or Uighur attacks on its interests in Central Asia.

China's position seems rather pragmatic. Its Silk Belt and Road Strategy<sup>56</sup> needs Afghanistan's stability to provide continuity of overland communications from Central Asia and inland Chinese provinces to Pakistan. China has therefore offered to mediate talks with the Taliban, and has invested significant amounts of economic and military aid since 2016<sup>57</sup>.

### *Russia and China face the future of Afghanistan: Swimming and storing clothes*

It is possible that as US influence in Afghanistan wanes, Russian and Chinese interests may begin to compete with each other. But based on Russia's and China's behaviour in Central Asia, this seems unlikely at the moment. Both seem content with a division of responsibilities, according to which Russia provides security in the region, while China focuses on economic development, according to its own interests. In Afghanistan, China has greater economic interests than Russia, but both have very modest trade and investment ties: In 2017, Afghanistan imported USD 1.15 billion worth of goods from China, making China Afghanistan's largest supplier, although this amount is derisory to Beijing, as is the USD 3.44 million that Afghanistan exported to China. Russia's economic relationship with Afghanistan is even smaller: in

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<sup>54</sup> *Why is there tension between China and the US?* BBC News. 26 Sept 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26414014>

<sup>55</sup> FARMER, Ben. *China 'building military base in Afghanistan' as increasingly active army grows in influence abroad*. The Telegraph, 29 August 2018.

<sup>56</sup> CHATZKY, A. and McBRIDE, J. *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative*. Council on Foreign Relations. January 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

<sup>57</sup> CASTRO TORRES, op. cit. Page 163-164.

2017, Afghanistan's imports from Russia amounted to only USD 157 million, while its exports to Russia amounted to just USD 1.15 million<sup>58</sup>.

China's main interest is to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for Chinese Islamist groups that could pose a threat to Xinjiang, and it sees Russia's policy in Afghanistan as fulfilling this need, thus supporting Moscow's double game of supporting the Kabul government while working with the Taliban. Moscow, for its part, is convinced that a stalemate in the conflict is not the worst option, but if Taliban forces prevail, it is interested in maintaining good relations with them in order to keep ISIS under control. The US has accused Russia of providing aid to the Taliban, for example, by leaving poorly secured weapons caches after military exercises in Tajikistan, a tactic it has already used to arm rebels in eastern Ukraine. The Russians argue that the ineffectiveness of Afghan security forces leaves them no choice but to liaise with local commanders to protect the borders of Central Asia, which Moscow considers vital to its own security. Moscow claims that these commanders are "warlords", not real Taliban.<sup>59</sup>

For both Russia and China, the Taliban may be the lesser of two evils, and they prefer to maintain cordial relations with them in the face of uncertainty about their future role.

All open scenarios pose risks for Moscow and Beijing. A stalemate in negotiations is not a bad option in principle, but it could benefit ISIS, which would benefit from less attention from its adversaries. The Taliban's rise to power could be positive if they remain committed to confronting ISIS; but they could also return to supporting *jihadist* groups operating in other countries, as they have done in the past, threatening China, the Central Asian Republics and even Russia. Even if they have given assurances that this will not be the case, it is difficult to be sure that the Taliban leadership could prevent the more radical elements of the movement from deciding to support ISIS or similar groups. While for Moscow a "light-hearted" US withdrawal is still an attractive option, as symbolic compensation for its own withdrawal in 1989, prolonged US support for the Afghan government, even without a force presence, is not a bad option. This would hedge the risk of a Taliban victory and would mean continued US economic support for Kabul, which could continue to buy arms and other goods from Russia, something Moscow does not want to subsidise<sup>60</sup>.

While the security situation in Afghanistan has become more precarious, neither Russian nor Chinese interests have suffered much so far. Arguably, Moscow and Beijing benefit from the fact that all contending parties are too weak to prevail, but strong enough to keep their opponents in check. The failure of the US and its allies to defeat Kabul's enemies would mean that the US would be unable to use Afghanistan as a

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<sup>58</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 57-58

<sup>59</sup> RUBIN, 2018, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2019: 59

secure base from which to spread Western influence in Central Asia. However, it is this continued US presence that has prevented the insurgents from gaining the upper hand. Both the success and failure of the negotiations pose risks and opportunities, and the strategy of both powers is aimed at preserving their interests in both scenarios.

### *The weight of the war economy*

When assessing the attitude of regional actors towards the Afghan conflict, there is a cross-cutting factor that needs to be taken into account: the economic benefits that the conflict generates for almost all actors involved in it. An effective peace would put an end to the business of those who profit, directly or indirectly, from the business of war.

Leading figures on all sides have profited handsomely from the war: government officials, military, opposition groups, insurgents, governments and security forces in the region have all, to a greater or lesser extent, gained substantially from the conflict. The real concern is that this war economy provides incentives to maintain the *status quo*, potentially creating obstacles to effective progress towards lasting peace. A selfish calculation of the benefits to them of a stalled conflict may incline some actors to hinder negotiations – unless the benefits of a possible agreement clearly outweigh the economic benefits of continued conflict. Businesses associated with the armed conflict represent the largest non-agricultural employer in Afghanistan, either through direct contracts with the security forces or indirectly through the provision of transport, construction, fuel supply, private security and other activities associated with sustaining the military effort<sup>61</sup>. This poses a challenge for any future peace process: successful peace negotiations may reduce the size of the war economy, endangering the livelihoods of large parts of the population. On the other hand, the Afghan government and armed forces may feel, not without reason, that a stable Afghanistan will attract less international attention and therefore less economic aid<sup>62</sup>.

On the other hand, opium thrives in areas where conflict makes effective control by the authorities difficult. As with other illicit businesses, such as the arms trade, timber smuggling and illegal mining<sup>63</sup>. In May 2016, when a drone strike killed then-Taliban leader Akhtar Mansur in Pakistan, disputes arose among senior insurgents over

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61 HASIM, *op. cit.*

62 According to official figures, the cost to the US of the military intervention in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2019 was USD 780 billion. The annual cost has been declining significantly from a peak of 115 billion in FY2011 to 40 billion in FY2019. Projected budgets for 2021, calculated before the peace agreement was signed, are even lower. And the COVID 19 crisis will force a drastic downward adjustment. US Department of Defense. *Afghanistan. Cost of war through September 30, 2019*. <https://fas.org/man/eprint/cow/fy2019q4.pdf>

63 GLOBAL WITNESS. *War in the Treasury of the People*. Report. June 2016.

USD 900 million that reportedly disappeared from their bank accounts. The origin of this amount of money is difficult to trace, but can certainly be associated with illicit businesses related to drugs, illegal mining and extortion. On the opposite side, some well-known figures among the Afghan elite are, by all available reports, multi-millionaires<sup>64</sup>. These fortunes are in many cases the result of involvement in the opium industry, which has grown significantly since 2001 and now dominates the world market<sup>65</sup>. They also come from million-dollar contracts signed with the US and other powers, associated with reconstruction and development aid projects and support for their military contingents.

Armed conflict also creates many business opportunities, legal and illegal, in neighbouring countries. However, while this is a factor, it is also true that neighbouring states support the peace process in principle insofar as they see it as a means to end regional instability and allow for the definitive withdrawal of US forces. The positive effects of both factors appear to outweigh the disadvantages arising from the loss of economic benefits from the war economy. But while this is true, one cannot underestimate the weight of certain power groups, which may undermine the process in order to maintain their sources of income.

### The Afghan conflict: A complex adaptive system

The ongoing peace talks will be watched by all regional actors concerned about a possible peace agreement detrimental to their interests. But it is precisely this profusion of players, motivations, conditions and possible *spoilers* that makes it difficult to foresee how events will unfold.

This difficulty in forecasting is due to the fact that the Afghan conflict and the regional framework in which it is embedded constitute what in sociology is called a *Complex Adaptive System*, riddled with *wicked problems*<sup>66</sup>. The concept of a *wicked*

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64 See BERENQUER, F. *The Blunders in the Western Cross-cutting Policies in Afghanistan: The Opium Economy as a Case of Study*. Instituto Universitario General Gutierrez Mellado, UNED. May 2018. <http://www.unisci.es/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/UNISCIDP47-8BERENQUER..pdf>. WARD, Ch. and BYRD, W. *Afghanistan's Opium Drug Economy*. SASPR Working Paper Series. World Bank, Dec 2004. COYNE, Ch, HALL BLANCO, A. and BURNS, S. *The War on Drugs in Afghanistan: Another Failed Experiment with Interdiction*. *The Independent Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 2016), pp. 95-119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43999678?seq=1>

65 UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *Afghanistan opium survey 2017*, May 2018.

66 Concepts introduced in the 1970s by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber as a framework for analysing problems involving multiple stakeholders and conflicting interests. Unlike the definitive answers of the scientific domain (which they described as “tame” problems), wicked problems are societal and organisational planning problems that resist rigid definition and structure. RITTEL, Horst and WEBBER, Melvin. *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, *Policy Sciences* 4, 1973. pp. 155-169.

*problem* is used in social planning to describe a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because it presents incomplete, contradictory and changing constraints that are difficult to recognise. Moreover, in this type of problem, the existence of complex interdependencies between its components means that efforts to solve a partial aspect may generate new, unforeseen problems. This is why the environments in which such problems occur are often defined as Complex Adaptive Systems.

“A Complex Adaptive System consists of a plurality of parts (organisations, processes, technologies, relationships) that interact in different ways with each other and with the outside world, with the particularity that a change or intervention in any part of the system will produce changes, often difficult to predict, in other parts of the system. Its essential characteristic is that it can change its structure and behaviour over time in response to changes in its environment or interactions with other systems. Its analysis requires an examination of the dynamic behaviour of the system as a whole and its relations with the outside world”<sup>67</sup>.

In other words, the decisions taken by each of the actors throughout the negotiation process will alter the overall situation and, precisely for this reason, will provoke changes in the attitude of the other actors. This volatile scenario makes it virtually impossible to make reliable forecasts. We can deduce what the initial attitude of each of the actors will be; what their aspirations and red lines are. But we cannot anticipate what their attitude will be to the new scenarios that will open up and that will continually modify the initial budgets.

It is precisely this reality, intuited by all, that makes the general attitude of all actors be “swimming and storing their clothes”; that is, to maintain an open negotiating position, without ruling out any possibility, trying to find themselves in the best possible position, whoever the winner may be. This strategy helps to understand why a large proportion of regional actors support, directly or indirectly, both sides of the conflict. The aim is not to close off avenues and to be able to decide in favour of one or other option depending on developments.

## Conclusions

The main suspicion that has been circulating for years among Afghanistan’s neighbours is that the real purpose of the US presence in Afghanistan is its interest in maintaining permanent military bases in South Asia. A US troop presence similar to that in South Korea, for example, would be unacceptable to Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China. Only India, interested in a long-term US commitment, could accept a permanent

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67 RUIZ ARÉVALO, Javier. *Lecciones aprendidas en escenarios complejos ¿Es posible aprender de las operaciones de estabilización?* Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Opinion Paper 41/2017. April 2017. Page 8.

military presence<sup>68</sup>. This means that news of a possible US withdrawal is viewed with cautious optimism among most regional actors.

To the extent that they understand that the US negotiating effort is aimed at militarily abandoning the region, these actors may feel that it is not in their interest to hinder the process. A different aspect is the way in which they want the US to leave Afghanistan militarily. An abrupt exit, without guaranteeing a stable Afghanistan, would not be a good solution. Indeed, there is a widespread belief that a precipitous withdrawal could trigger a new civil war that would destabilise the entire region. No one wants any surprises here. For this reason, the signals from the White House during 2019, insofar as they questioned the US commitment to make its withdrawal conditional on certain guarantees of stability, were received with alarm in the region<sup>69</sup>.

Now, for regional powers, the problem is how to deal with Afghanistan's future in a new scenario, already looming, in which the US presence will be much more limited. This situation confronts them with difficult decisions on how to shape the future. They can support peace talks to create a more stable regional environment. They may support Afghan groups seeking to keep the civil war alive, or they will likely try to keep both avenues open and choose one or the other depending on how events unfold.

The main unknown in this scenario is Pakistan, a country that has very important interests at stake and has in its hands the possibility of derailing the process. It is unlikely to abandon its relationship with the Taliban, which it considers a strategic asset. It wants its allies, the Taliban, to succeed and wants to be a key player in the peace process. But it could use its influence to force a political settlement that preserves its vital interests. Its decision will be heavily influenced by its conflict with India. Tensions between India and Pakistan are such a major factor in the Afghan conflict that, in the opinion of many analysts, only an agreement between the two countries could guarantee stability in Afghanistan. And such an agreement does not seem very likely. In our view, the only plausible option at present is to find ways to mitigate Pakistan's concerns about the India-Afghanistan relationship.

In the words of former Pakistani ambassador Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's aim would be to continue to have the Taliban as *proxies* "while trying to contain their wilder instincts"<sup>70</sup>.

The other main players, Iran, Russia and China, face similar problems. Their red lines are threefold: they do not want a permanent US military presence; they do not want a Taliban victory; and they do not want an unstable Afghanistan. But all indications are that they would accept a certain level of instability rather than accept either of the first two conditions.

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68 RUBIN, *op. cit.*

69 RUIZ ARÉVALO, 2019, *op. cit.* Page 149-150.

70 MAZZETTI and KHAN, *op. cit.*

In assessing how they are adapting their positions to the evolving negotiations, public statements by regional diplomats will not be revealing of their plans. A more reliable indicator will be where the flow of arms and support of all kinds is heading in the future. Throughout the peace process that began in 2018, the attitude of regional powers has been consistently supportive of the negotiations, allowing for a degree of optimism. It remains to be seen whether these interventions will continue in this constructive spirit in the future. For the time being, regional policy in Afghanistan is at a crossroads and regional actors will continue to adapt their actions to the developments they observe.

The role of actors opposed to any agreement can also not be ignored. Either by defending maximalist positions or by benefiting from the current situation. *Spoilers* could be non-state actors such as ISIS, al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban, who do not want to see the conflict end, as well as actors inside Afghanistan who benefit from the war economy.

Each of the neighbouring states will analyse the evolution of the US presence in Afghanistan; the role to be reserved for the Taliban in the state that emerges from a possible agreement; the distribution of power between the different Afghan groups. Depending on this, each will decide whether to push the peace process forward or whether to encourage a stalemate that does not, at least, worsen the current situation. What seems to be ruled out by all is that the end of the conflict, if it comes to pass, will be a military victory for one of the two main actors. Peace can only come from an agreement; if there is no agreement, the conflict will continue.

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*Submitted: April 20, 2020.*

*Accepted: June 19, 2020.*

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