

The Afghan elites in 2016 are characterised by magical thinking, of a kind all too drearily familiar to anyone who has travelled in the more hapless parts of the developing world, writes Anatol Lieven. For by far the greater part of them, nothing that has happened to Afghanistan is the fault of Afghans. The Taliban are entirely created and supported by Pakistan, the USA, or some bewildering combination of the two, and have no support among Afghans. The last elections were manipulated by the USA, and the near-paralysis of the resulting "national unity government" is due to a malign American plot to ruin Afghan democracy. Western complaints about corruption, misgovernment and drug dealing in the Afghan state are because since British colonial times, "the West has hated Afghanistan".

By the same token, the solution to Afghanistan's problems is also not the responsibility of the Afghans themselves. Read more below

China will miraculously switch its support from Pakistan to Afghanistan for the sake of Afghanistan's mineral reserves and communications routes. Some miraculous new combination of US, Chinese and Indian pressure on Pakistan will lead to the Pakistani military ending its support for the Taliban, after which the insurgency will end "in half an hour". There is no need therefore for the Afghans themselves either to fight better or to seek peace.

Most of these beliefs have as much rational content as a half-boiled egg; but the dependency that feeds them is very real. As of 2016, the entire budget of the Afghan security forces is paid for by the United States. International aid accounts for up to 90 percent of the Afghan budget in general. The economy has declined steeply as a result of the end of the NATO military presence, and development of Afghanistan's mineral and energy reserves is nowhere in sight. The general assumption among experts is that without the continued presence of US airpower and US special forces, the Afghan National Army would collapse ♦ which is why (under intense pressure from the Pentagon) president Obama reversed his earlier decision to withdraw those forces.

As a result of this continued US commitment, from a purely military standpoint the situation of the Afghan state today is not as bad as some observers have suggested. It is true that the Taliban captured the city of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan last October ♦ but with US assistance, the Afghan forces recaptured it again a few days later, inflicting serious losses on the Taliban in the process. No other provincial capital has fallen to the Taliban. This marks a decided setback for them, since in the first half of last year I was told by people close to the Taliban was that their hope then was to capture and hold several towns, and perhaps set up an alternative government inside Afghanistan. This year, they appear to have abandoned that strategy in favour of their longstanding one of slow attrition (which is not to say of course that they may not launch another major offensive if they spot a particular local weakness).

The military situation therefore resembles in key respects that from 1989 and 1992, the period between the withdrawal of Soviet forces and the collapse of the Afghan state. As then, the present Afghan state and army are entirely dependent on the support of their superpower backer, and will collapse if that support is withdrawn. But as long as that support continues, from a purely military point of view, despite the Taliban's impressive resilience and courage, the Afghan state should be able to hold them at bay.

The reason for this lies in the central distinction between on the one hand guerrilla warfare, and on the other large-scale attacks on major defended positions. The essence of guerrilla warfare is brief and relatively small-scale attacks followed by dispersal in the face of the vastly superior firepower of the conventional enemy. Attacks on cities requires the concentration of the attacking forces ♦ which can then be decimated by the same concentrated firepower of the other side. This is what happened to the Mujahedin when they tried to capture the city of Jalalabad in March 1989 (something I witnessed myself as a British journalist

accompanying them) and as long as the US air force is present, it is what will most probably happen to the Taliban if they try to take cities today.

But of course the military factor is not the only one. Equally important in the long run is the political condition of the Afghan state; and here, the state left behind by the USSR had one colossal advantage. It was a single party state, led by a figure rather in the old Afghan mould of the Emir Abdur Rahman the ruthless but formidable, detested but feared Najibullah Khan. The West by contrast has set up a dreadfully ramshackle, bitterly divided "democracy", with a presidency which is far too powerful in theory and far too weak in practice, and which is doomed to a potentially fatal crisis of legitimacy every five years in other words, every time it holds presidential elections, which are invariably accompanied by highly credible accusations of massive rigging.

At the last presidential elections in 2014, the refusal of the defeated candidate, Abdullah, to accept the legitimacy of the result was only overcome by a US-brokered power-sharing agreement between Mr Abdullah as "Chief Executive" and Ashraf Ghani as president. This was supposed to be confirmed after two years by a national assembly or "Loya Jirga". But given the government's weakness and unpopularity, it now seems impossible to hold such an assembly. Nor is it even possible to hold parliamentary elections on schedule, since the administrative structures for this have collapsed and the Election Commission is paralysed by battles over rules, powers and composition.

The new US strategy is therefore to try to continue the present arrangement until the next presidential elections due in 2019; but the government is divided, largely paralysed and lacking in legitimacy; the USA is having to exert great pressure on former president Hamid Karzai and other opposition figures to prevent them from launching a mass movement to bring it down; and anyway this strategy only postpones the next political crisis to 2019.

The Afghan state suffers from a familiar problem of elites who are relentlessly focused on their personal and sectional advantage, even with the Taliban breathing down their necks. There is also however a deeper problem, that of an ethnic divide that cannot quite speak its name. The question is whether (as most Pashtuns think) the Pashtuns are the Afghan people of state who should have a guaranteed preponderance of national power, and other ethnicities are minorities; or whether (as the other ethnicities think) Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state in which the Pashtuns are at best first among equals. At the last elections the USA appeared to acquiesce in an unspoken principle that only a Pashtun could be president; but whether this can become an accepted and stable convention seems unlikely.

Afghanistan therefore seems doomed to repeated political crises, with the USA doomed to try to resolve these crises. Meanwhile, Afghanistan and the Taliban have become largely irrelevant to the main terrorist threat facing the West, which now comes from the Islamic State and the Middle East. Indeed, during a visit to the Afghan province of Nangrahar in June, I learned that IS there had been defeated by an unplanned combination of attacks by the USA, Afghan forces and the Taliban. Under its previous leader, Akhtar Mansur (killed by a US drone strike on the Pakistan border in May) the Taliban declared that it had no international jihadi agenda and that its ambitions were purely restricted to Afghanistan.

The real US interests in Afghanistan, it seems to me, are no longer directly connected at all with the "war on terror". There may in certain strategic circles be a desire to keep bases in Afghanistan in order to maintain some presence in the region as a check on the rising power of China and Russia. There is certainly fear of the blow to US prestige if another US client state collapses. Finally, there is an interest which has not been fully recognised in Washington but should be: namely, that a collapse of the existing Afghan state and an intensification of civil war would greatly increase the flow of Afghan migrants heading for Europe, further undermining European

democracy and the US alliance system in Europe. But as things look at the moment, the USA will have to support the Afghan state and resolve its internal divisions for all foreseeable time; and whether Americans will have the patience for this is anyone's guess.

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