
2020 Conflict Risk Diagnostic: Afghanistan

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Authored by: Paloma
Boucher, Sarah DelVillano,
Liu Shi, Maseh Hadaf



Executive Summary

2019 witnessed a drastic increase in NATO airstrikes, growing regional instability due to the Iran-US conflict, insufficient recovery from the 2018 drought, another contested election, and drastic cuts in foreign military aid in Afghanistan. The Washington Post's release of confidential memos and interview notes from the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) refocused international attention on the results from the nearly 1 trillion USD spent in Afghanistan.

This conflict diagnostic uses five-year data trends based off adaptations of the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy Project (CIFP) to arrive at a risk-assessment for Afghanistan in 2020. This report identifies the shift of Iranian support in favour of the Taliban, increasing regional instability due to the Iran-US conflict, climate-based displacement, and the US-Taliban peace agreement as the primary risk factors for conflict in Afghanistan.

Background

Afghanistan has been in constant conflict since the 1978 Saur Revolution. The decade-long Soviet-Afghan War was followed by infighting and the Taliban's totalitarian government between 1996 and 2001. Their regime was toppled when the United States invaded Afghanistan following 9/11.ⁱ The Bonn Agreements allowed for the United States and NATO to democratize and centralize Afghanistan.ⁱⁱ

The legitimacy of Afghanistan's government is threatened by the Taliban and the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIK)ⁱⁱⁱ. The war in Afghanistan has been ongoing for nearly two decades, but there is movement towards a peace deal between President Trump and the leader of the Taliban, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, provided the Taliban adhere to a cease-fireⁱⁱⁱ. Previous meetings were called off in September of 2019.ⁱⁱⁱ

President Ashraf Ghani has been President of Afghanistan since 2014.^{iv} Ghani narrowly beat his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah with 50.64% of votes in the national election.^{iv} An appeal to these results is pending.^{iv}

Primary Stakeholder Analysis

Role in Conflict: + (positive), - (negative), +/- (mixed)

Taliban -

The Taliban continue to finance themselves with opium revenue and illegal timber trading, extortion, and mining operations.^v They also collect revenues on electricity bills, harvests, personal income and transportation.^v They receive financial contributions from Islamic charities and other institutions from countries in the Gulf region and neighboring Pakistan, even from Russia.^v Taliban are in full control of 14 districts in Afghanistan (4% of the country) in 2018 and maintain an active physical presence in an additional 263 districts (66%).^v The Taliban and other insurgents launched 8,204 attacks in the last quarter of 2019, the highest number since the military began keeping records in 2010.^{vi} They use insurgent violence to leverage their negotiation with the US.^{vii}

Iran +/-

Iran has recently publicized relations with 'moderate' Taliban forces, despite a history of counter-Taliban efforts.^{viii} Iran is interested in offsetting Saudi's influence in the region through ISIK forces in the Nangarhar region of Afghanistan.^{viii} This might affect the ongoing peace process, and Iran's ongoing conflict with the US worsens the prospects of stability in the region.^{viii} Iran has also become Afghanistan's largest trading partner as of 2018, indicating greater interdependency and interest in mutual security.^{ix}

ISIK -

Islamic State's Khorasan branch holds its base in Nangarhar Province. They claimed responsibility for attacks on Shi'a mosques/shrines, against Hazaras protestors against the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) power line route in July 2016.^x ISIK ideology is transnational, with a recent bombing in Tajikistan^{xi} and the rise of several central Asian Salafi groups, including a Salafist militant group in Uzbekistan.^{xii}

Afghan Government +/-

The recent SIGAR leak has reaffirmed the kleptocracy within the Afghan government.^{xiii} The recent presidential re-election of Ashraf Ghani remains disputed, and Afghanistan's Independent Elections Commission (IEC) has stated the outcome of the election can change, as the results are being reviewed by the Electoral Complaints Commission^{xiv}. Progress has been made on development indicators and commitments have been made towards strategic south-south partnerships for self-sufficiency^{xv} and repeated calls have been made for a ceasefire with the Taliban.^{xvi}

Pakistan -

Afghanistan is in a long-standing conflict with Pakistan. Afghan officials accuse the Pakistani government of ongoing collaboration with the Taliban.^{xvii} Violence continues along the 'Durand Line', Pakistan and Afghanistan's 2,400 km shared border^{xvii}. Pakistan continues to be a training ground for insurgents.^{xvii} Escalating tensions with India might raise the cost for Afghanistan to continue its close relations with the Indian government.

United States +/-

The United States has decreased funding and Secretary Esper said the United States could reduce troop levels to as low as 8,600 and still be able to maintain its role in their counterterrorism mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).^{xviii} President Trump will once again begin to discuss peace talks with the Taliban if they agree to a cease-fire.^{xix} The recent murder of Qasam Soleimani by the United States has increased insecurity in the region and the United States may use Afghanistan as a means through which to attack Iran in the future.

Afghan Military +/-

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) consists of Afghan national army and national police.^{xx} On Sept. 28, 2019, for the first time in almost 20 years, the Afghan security forces succeeded in securing the country's presidential election without foreign support.^{xx} However, the Afghan government is still far away from self-reliance and financing the forces from home revenue.^{xx} Afghan military casualties have been rising, which made the recruitment harder.^{xx} They are reports that some units of Afghan local police are involved in the illegal activities and captured by local powerbrokers and/or local ethnic, tribal or factional interests and were abusive against the local population.^{xxi}

Afghan People +

In the Asia Foundation's annual Survey of the Afghan People, 36% of randomly selected respondents believe Afghanistan is going in the right direction, which is up 33% from the last two years, although below the 2013 high of 58%; 64% believe that reconciliation is possible with the Taliban, which has increased from 53.5% in 2017.^{xxii} This might suggest a greater notion of state legitimacy and inclination towards peace by the population, and popular buy-in might enable a stronger agreement between the Taliban and the government, should one come to light.

Secondary Stakeholder Analysis

EU +

Overall, the EU focuses its financial contributions to development assistance in Afghanistan. They also attempt to foster cooperation in the region and implement peace agreements, including a five-point peace plan that consist of an increase in inclusivity, support, incentives, development and connectivity.^{xxv} Over 300,000 internally displaced persons in Afghanistan are assisted by the EU annually.^{xxv} 124,624 Afghani police officers are paid by the EU every year.^{xxv} The EU constructed 2,000 new Afghani water points and funded 3133 Afghani primary healthcare facilities in 2018.^{xxv}

International Aid

Organizations +

Afghanistan continues to demonstrate slow economic growth due to ongoing conflict, displacement, insecurity and the impact of severe drought on agricultural production^{xxiii}. UNOCHA has employed a four-year Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which extends through 2021, where emphasis has been placed on three priority areas; response to conflict and natural disasters, reduction of international humanitarian law violations and aiding vulnerable people to recover and become more resilient.^{xxiv}

India +/-

Afghanistan signed Trilateral Transport and Transit Agreements with India (and Iran) in 2018. Afghanistan's security is affected by ongoing animosities between India and Pakistan.^{.xxvi} The Afghan government has teamed up with India to increase counter-terrorism initiatives, especially related to cross-border terrorism. Afghanistan is a recipient of development assistance from India.^{.xxvii} The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India project, a pipeline worth \$10 billion that will carry gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan, is estimated to be finished in 2019.^{.xxviii} The US supports this pipeline.^{.xxix} India contributes \$3 billion dollars into Afghan infrastructure projects.^{.xxx}

Russia +/-

Afghanistan suspects that Russia supports the Taliban^{.xxxii} And the US has accused Russia of supplying arms to the Taliban, smuggled across the Tajik border.^{.xxxii} There is also evidence of increased diplomatic ties between Russia and the Taliban.^{.xxxiii} Russia stated commitment to be a guarantor for Taliban-US peace deal.^{.xxxiv} Russia, China, and Pakistan continue to meet and discuss terrorist activity in Afghanistan, suggesting an ongoing relationship with Pakistan.^{.xxxv}

China +/-

The Afghan government focuses on increasing ties with China, even though China is believed to support the Taliban.^{.xxxvi} The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plans to link China to Central and South Asian countries, including Afghanistan.^{.xxxvii} Afghan trade is sub-optimal and the BRI may contribute to an increase in economic potential and ability to integrate into the global economy.^{.xxxviii} The Chinese government has a strong bilateral relationship with Afghanistan, which is significant because of its close proximity to Pakistan.^{.xxxix}

Conflict Indicators

Militarization (Very High Risk) Worsening

Stabilizing

Number of armed forces has increased to 174,000, after a sharp decrease to 161,000 in 2016. (2019) International comparisons of defense expenditure and military personnel.^{.xi}

Destabilizing

Foreign military aid from the US is dropping significantly, from 4.8 billion in 2014 to 0.33 billion in 2019.^{.xli} Military expenditure in South Asia is increasing from 70.5 billion in 2014 to 87.2 billion in 2018.^{.xlii} Afghanistan's percentage of military expenditure as per its GDP is dropping, as well as its fraction of regional (south and central Asia) expenditure.^{.xliii}

Assessment



The primary area of concern is rapidly decreasing funding from the US, as Afghanistan has been reliant on their military aid for the last 16 years. Increased militarization in the region and Afghanistan's decreasing share is of concern.

History of Armed Conflict (Very High Risk) Worsening

Stabilizing

New displacement cases produced by conflict have more than doubled since 2014 but saw its highest spike in the last five years in 2016, with 653 cases.

Destabilizing

The annual conflict-related deaths have increased from 2014 to 2018.^{.xliiv} The total number of persons displaced by conflict and violence has increased substantially, from 805,000 in 2014 to 2.598 million in 2018.^{.xliv} New displacement cases associated with disasters in 2018 were sixteen times higher than 2017 figures as a result of drought.^{.xlv} The number of refugees hosted has decreased significantly between 2014 and 2018.^{.xlvii}

Assessment



Environmental disasters, such as severe drought, have been aggravated by climate change and will only serve to exacerbate ongoing conflicts. Decades of conflict have caused large segments of the population, particularly in rural areas, where displacement and instability have left individuals more insecure and vulnerable to future attacks.

Governance (High Risk) Stable

Stabilizing

The regime durability score has increased in the last five years, from 0 to 4.^{.xlviii} The restrictions on civil and political rights have remained extremely high, but stable over the last five years.^{.xlix} The level of democracy has remained extremely low, but stable at -1.ⁱ The level of freedom of the press has improved minorly, from 66 to 60 between 2014 and 2017.^{.ii} The level of corruption has increased from 12 to 16 between 2014 and 2018.^{.ii}

Destabilizing

There are currently no destabilizing factors as all factors are remaining stable or slightly increasing, but scores remain low, demonstrating no significant improvement.

Assessment

Ghani narrowly beat his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, with 50.64% of the votes and an appeal has been made and the results of the election may change in the upcoming months



if the votes are recounted due to allegations of fraud. The increase in corruption score, release of the SIGAR report, and decreased foreign military aid justify governance as a high risk issue area, despite only stagnation in the data.

Environment (High Risk) Worsening

Stabilizing

2019 saw a recovery in harvests compared to the 2018 drought.

Destabilizing

Areas with more than 10% tree cover decreased from 0.7% to 0.1% from 2000 to 2018, arable land decreased from .233 hectares per person in 2014, to .218 in 2016. Freshwater in cubic metres reduced by more than 30% per capita from 2014 to 2017.^{liii}

Assessment



Water scarcity is driving farmers to switch from traditional agricultural practices to poppy cultivation, which requires much less water than other crops and is also more lucrative.^{liv} Iran and Pakistani relations will likely be strained by water disputes in the future, which would have a destabilizing effect in Afghanistan.^{lv}

International Linkages (Medium Risk) Stable

Stabilizing

Formal membership in 50 international organizations, including 12 economic organizations and 22 UN-based organizations.^{lvi} Relatively high level of international collaboration.^{lvii} South-south cooperation: 10 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline for gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.^{lviii} Government seeking further collaboration through Heart of Asia Process, New Silk Road Initiative and Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan.^{lix} Afghanistan joined WTO in 2016.

Destabilizing

Spike in NATO activity in 2018.^{lx}, 33% increase in number of airstrikes in 2019 compared to 2018.^{lxi} International disputes over border with Pakistan and water resources with Iran and Pakistan remain of concern.^{lxii} Remittances went from 1.237% of GDP (or 253 million USD) in 2014 to 3.369% (652 million) in 2016 to 1.986% (385 million) 2018.^{lxiii}

Assessment



Afghanistan has developed many international linkages and agreements for regional cooperation on economic projects. Minimal sign of self-sufficiency five years after NATO's withdrawal, and remittances have decreased since 2016. International disputes over water resources with Iran and Pakistan can be further exacerbated by climate change.

Demographic Stress (Medium Risk) Improving

Stabilizing

Population density is improving.^{lxiv} Total population is increasing but at a lower rate.^{lxv}

Destabilizing

Youth bulge^{lxvi}, urban population^{lxvii}, and urban population growth rate^{lxviii} are steadily improving, but remain extremely low compared to global averages.^{lxix}

Assessment



Elevated levels of rural population is a risk factor as a result of higher poverty rates and comparatively lessened access to basic needs, such as clean water and sanitation in rural areas.^{lxx} Continued high levels of youth bulge in Afghanistan contributes to risk for conflict because youth are recruited to participate in conflict.^{lxxi} Risk is conflated by high levels of rural population and low levels of school enrolment. Increasing urban population growth is a positive indicator of stability at this stage.

Economic Performance (Medium Risk) Worsening

Stabilizing

The inflation has decreased from 5% to 0.63%^{lxxii}, Trade openness is decreasing but still high at 51% of GDP in 2017 and debt service remains extremely low at .31% of GNI.^{lxxiii}

Destabilizing

GDP growth rate has declined from 2.73% in 2014, to 1.03% in 2018.^{lxxiv} GDP per capita^{lxxv} has also decreased by 93 USD/capita since 2014, to 521 USD/capita in 2018. The GINI coefficient has fluctuated slightly from .29 in 2007 to .33 in 2011 and down to .31 in 2016. The exchange rate has reached a five year high in 2019 at 77.58 Afghanis/USD, up almost 17 Afghanis/USD since 2014.^{lxxvi}

Assessment



GDP growth rate is stable but slow due to severe drought and intensifying insecurity.^{lxxvii} GDP growth rate is much slower than the population growth rate, which explains GDP per capita is declining. Most concerns lay on donor fatigue, decreasing foreign aid and shrinking possibility for increased private investment which can be reflected by the dropping official exchange rate^{lxxviii} and very low foreign direct investment.^{lxxix}

Population Heterogeneity (Medium Risk) Stable

Stabilizing

Nearly homogenous religious composition: 99.7% Muslim. 84.7-89.7% Sunni, 10-15% Shi'a.^{lxxx}

Destabilizing

There 14 ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and three subsets represent over 20% of the population each. One estimate based of representation of ethnic interests from MPs in the Afghan parliament yields the following proportions: Pashtun (38.5%), Tajik (21.3%), Hazara

& Sayyids (24.5%), Uzbek (6%), Aymaq (3.2%), Turkmen (1.2%), Nuri (1%), Sayyid, all other ethnicities under 1% each.^{lxxxix} Afghanistan has increased its rank from 5th in 2014 to 4th in 2019 as per the State of the World's Minorities Report. Hazara, Pashtun, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluchis are highlighted as peoples under threat.^{lxxxii}

Assessment



Data remains unclear on current ethnic distribution. High homogeneity of religion remains a stabilizing factor, but the 10-15% Shi'a minority might be an important factor in Iran's interests, especially because Iran is normalizing relationships with the Taliban who have historically antagonized the Afghan Shi'a population.^{lxxxiii} E-tazkira contains ethnic identity that can be weaponized by a future government and should be closely monitored.^{lxxxiv}

Human Development (Low Risk) Improving

Stabilizing

Infant mortality rate^{lxxxv}, maternal mortality ratio^{lxxxvi}, and life expectancy are all improving annually. Secondary school enrollment is increasing.^{lxxxvii} HIV/AIDS is consistently lower than global averages.^{lxxxviii} At 90.31%, global primary school enrolment^{lxxxix} was significantly higher than Afghanistan's 64% in 2015.^{xc} Afghanistan's rising secondary school enrolment remains low: from 19.5% lower than global averages in 2014 to 17.6% lower in 2017.^{xcii}

Destabilizing

Rates are still very poor compared to global averages, apart from HIV/AIDS; IMR and MMR remain some of the lowest in the world. The 90.31% global primary school enrollment was significantly higher than Afghanistan's 64% in 2015.^{xcii} Children in Afghanistan are engaged in the worst forms of child labour, including forced participation in armed conflict and manufacturing bricks and carpets, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic work as a result of human trafficking.^{xciii}

Assessment



Low access to improved water supply facilities and/or access to potable water increases instability. Risk is conflated by a high percentage of youth in Afghanistan's population and a low level of school enrolment. Youth that live in poverty and do not attend school are at a greater risk for recruitment by groups that participate in conflict.^{xciv} Data indicates that Afghanistan's Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) is working.

Conflict Risk Scenarios

Worst Case

- US and Iran conflict intensifies, spills over into Afghanistan through proxy actors. As a result of increased conflict with its major trading partner, Afghanistan's economic growth declines and economic partnerships with regional actors are further jeopardized. Foreign aid continues to decrease and the region becomes increasingly militarized and unstable. The Electoral Complaints Commission finds the election results to be illegitimate due to corruption and the runner-ups rally populist support for a re-election. The above factors strengthen the leverage of the Taliban in negotiations and weaken the prospect for peace.
- Drought returns to 2018 levels and the number of IDPs continues to increase due to the confluence of conflict and environmental disaster.

Most Likely

- No concrete progress is made in peace negotiations with the Taliban, and no cease-fire is achieved. The results of the election are challenged and adjusted by the ECC, but the conclusions are insufficient to justify a re-election. Regional partnerships on infrastructure slow down due to growing instability in the region. The conflict with Iran and the US remains tense but sporadic, and no official declaration of armed conflict of an international character is initiated. Foreign aid continues to decrease, and the region continues to become increasingly militarized. Food insecurity and internal displacement continue to be exacerbated by sudden-onset climate disasters.

Best Case

- The peace process with the Taliban gains traction and a temporary cease-fire is included in the agreement. The elections are legitimized through a positive report by the Electoral Complaints Commission, and Ghani continues his administration's revised Self-Reliance Agenda through strategic regional partnerships that bolster economic growth and interdependence with Iran, Pakistan, China, and northern neighbours. The conflict between Iran and the US does not heighten nor spillover to affect Afghanistan. Harvest levels improve sufficiently, and efforts are made for reforestation. The sudden decrease in foreign aid is reversed and weaned off over a longer-term, and a sufficient number of US forces remain stationed in Afghanistan as negotiations continue with the Taliban.

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