

Afghanistan: Cause for Anxiety and Optimism

The war in Afghanistan was the world's deadliest in 2018, and it has stayed that way. Battle deaths thus far in 2019 nearly outnumber the combined toll in Syria and Yemen. The number of civilian casualties is poised to reach, or even surpass, the country's previous records since 2001. The U.S., Afghan government and Taliban all stepped up operations on the ground in 2019, even as U.S.-Taliban talks in the Qatari capital Doha gained momentum. Those nearly year-long talks, aiming for a deal that paves the way for intra-Afghan talks and an eventual ceasefire, collapsed in early September. The presidential election in late September 2019 could further complicate peace efforts, and the run-up to the polls triggered more Taliban attacks. The risk is high that top candidates will contest the election results, leading to a period of extended political wrangling. In early October, there were glimmers of an opening for the resumption of U.S.-Taliban talks with both sides visiting Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, simultaneously. If talks restart and produce a deal, that could mark the beginning of a serious peace process. If, on the other hand, they remain frozen, Afghanistan may descend into worsening violence.

The EU and its member states should:

- Encourage a resumption of U.S.-Taliban negotiations, as a prelude to broader peace negotiations that include all major Afghan stakeholders. The political and military realities that prompted the U.S. to accept the Taliban's preferred sequencing of talks – first between the U.S. and Taliban, then among the various Afghan parties – have not changed, and this approach remains the only realistic option for starting a peace process among Afghans.
- Support and expand the EU Special Envoy's efforts to establish a regular channel to the Taliban via the movement's political representatives in Doha. EU humanitarian officials should also pursue high-level contacts with the Taliban, modelled upon their communications with authorities in Sanaa, Yemen, which have enabled the provision of humanitarian aid to areas held by the Huthi movement.
- Support the EU Special Envoy's use of his good offices to mitigate tensions among non-Taliban factions as they arise after the September 2019 election, in close cooperation with the UN, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and other diplomatic actors. The Special Envoy could also encourage non-Taliban factions to participate in a unified negotiating team, in preparation for intra-Afghan negotiations.

- Expand cooperation with the World Bank to prepare financial scenarios for Afghanistan during peace negotiations and after the conclusion of a political settlement, including the perspectives of all major factions: the Afghan government, political opposition groups and the Taliban. Such planning would signal to all conflict actors that only through a consensual process would Afghanistan benefit from large-scale future assistance.

Since the beginning of 2019, the Afghan conflict has continued to intensify. The Taliban, pushing ahead with their war of attrition, mounted major attacks against Afghan government targets and captured more territory. The Afghan government continued to hold major cities, but also to lose ground to the Taliban in rural areas, in keeping with a trend over the last decade. U.S. and Afghan government forces stepped up their airstrikes and night raids in Taliban strongholds. In this spiral of violence, civilians are increasingly caught in the crossfire. Since the year began, more than 1,000 Afghan civilians, on average, are displaced by the conflict every day. The vast majority of the violence relates to the struggle between the U.S.-backed Afghan government and the Taliban. A very small fraction of incidents – 2 per cent, by one estimate – concerns the so-called Islamic State Khorasan Province, which maintained a foothold in eastern Afghanistan despite battling the Taliban, Afghan forces and the U.S. military.

Political developments have offered some hope of curtailing the violence. U.S.-Taliban negotiations witnessed significant progress over the last year. The talks were poised to reach a conclusion, and to make the delicate transition to broader intra-Afghan peace negotiations, when President Donald Trump interrupted them in early September 2019. Trump's reasons for scuttling the talks are not clear, but options for U.S. policy remain unambiguous. The U.S. could start pulling out of Afghanistan unilaterally without a Taliban deal; it could maintain a troop presence and support pro-government forces indefinitely; or it could return to the bargaining table and finalise its agreement with the Taliban. Two of the three options would have predictable results. A unilateral pullout would almost certainly precipitate an intensified civil war and possibly bring about the central state's collapse, particularly if U.S. and other funding dried up as troops departed (the Afghan government remains dependent on foreign donors). The status quo option has no prospect of reducing violence. Current trends would likely continue: the government would lose territory, its armed forces would weaken as recruitment fails to keep pace with attrition, and the Taliban would exploit the narrative of continued foreign occupation. Negotiations with the Taliban offer a less clear outcome. But a U.S.-Taliban deal that explicitly sets the stage for talks among Afghans is the only option that presents some possibility of diminished violence and economic growth.

The presidential election of late September 2019 adds further uncertainty to peace efforts. Previous elections have all led to months of political tensions, often over allegations of rigging and contested results. Whatever happened at the ballot box is likely to consume politicians' energy and the public's attention into 2020. The likelihood is low that the future government will be in a better position to garner greater national consensus behind peace talks and the Talib-

an's inclusion in the country's political order, meaning that the election should not be expected to open up new vistas for the peace process.

The coming months thus present reasons for both optimism and anxiety in Afghanistan. If a U.S.-Taliban deal is reached soon and opens the door to crucial intra-Afghan talks, those talks would be a milestone, possibly the best opportunity at achieving peace in a generation. Yet no one should underestimate the complexity and fragility of such a process. Given the diversity of interests involved, many obstacles will have to be overcome for such a process – which undoubtedly will be chaotic – to succeed.

The priorities for the EU and its member states should thus be to encourage the resumption of U.S.-Taliban talks, press Washington to ensure that any deal with the Taliban sets the stage for intra-Afghan negotiations and do everything within their power to improve prospects for successful intra-Afghan talks.

In this light, the EU and European governments should support the EU Special Envoy's efforts to open his own regular channel to the Taliban and look to expand on them. Regular contacts could allow European donors to show the Taliban that they remain committed to the Afghan people's humanitarian and development needs, as well as to human rights, including those of women and girls. The idea of engaging in diplomatic contacts with the Taliban still generates resistance among politicians and civil society groups in Brussels and other European capitals. This opposition is understandable, given the Taliban's track record, but the group's military strength means that whatever course the U.S. follows, establishing regular contacts with the Taliban will be essential to protecting as best possible the well-being of Afghans in areas controlled by the group.

At the same time, the EU and its member states should support efforts by the EU Special Envoy, together with the UN, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and other diplomats, to avert or resolve tensions among non-Taliban factions after the September 2019 election. The Special Envoy has built significant goodwill with President Ashraf Ghani and his rivals for executive office and could play a useful role if disputes emerge. The EU should increase its monitoring of factionalism in the Afghan security forces and the activities of pro-government militias, as a system of early warning to minimise risks of multi-factional civil war. More broadly, the EU Special Envoy could use his good offices to encourage non-Taliban factions to form a unified negotiating team ahead of potential intra-Afghan talks.

The EU and European governments could also consider additional steps to ensure that the hundreds of millions of dollars they spend each year on aid contribute toward a political settlement – or, at minimum, do not harm prospects for one. They could, for example, introduce or expand conflict sensitivity assessments before approving projects that do not involve humanitarian aid. These would examine the potential impact of the project, its value in terms of strengthening or weakening public support for a settlement, and any risks of the assistance being repurposed in a manner that sustains the conflict. These assessments would take place before, during and after a peace process.

Lastly, the EU and European governments could deepen their planning work with the World Bank and attempt to involve the Taliban alongside other

Afghan actors. Analysis of potential financial scenarios for Afghanistan during negotiations and after a political settlement would be more realistic if it canvassed all major factions. Afghans' early cooperation on the country's future relationships with donors could even become a confidence-building measure in the initial stages of peace talks or a prelude to intra-Afghan negotiations. Most importantly, such planning would send a message to all conflict parties that only by cooperating among themselves would they benefit from large-scale future assistance. The EU's involvement could also help reinforce the normative standards expected by donors.