WHY WAR IS GOING ON IN AFGHANISTAN: THE AFGHAN CRISIS IN PERSPECTIVE

OLIVIER ROY

Olivier Roy is the author of The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations, I.B. Tauris, 2000.

The continuation of war in Afghanistan is linked to both domestic and regional factors, and has led to a strategic realignment in the area, with Pakistan and Turkmenistan siding along with the Taliban, while Tajikistan, Iran, Russia and India try to prevent the fall of the United Front, more in order to check a Pakistani breakthrough in the area than to prevent the spread of 'Islamic fundamentalism', which in fact is limited to Uzbekistan. But, Uzbekistan, caught between its fight against the Islamic opposition and its fear of a greater Tajikistan, tries to keep neutral in the present conflict.

Any political solution to the present conflict in Afghanistan has thus to take into account not only the fighting factions inside Afghanistan (presently limited to the dominant Taliban and to commander Ahmad Shah Masood, who is their only real military challenge), but also the interests of the neighbouring countries. These interests are expressed sometimes in terms of assets (for Pakistan and Turkmenistan, who see in Afghanistan an opportunity to extend their regional influence) and sometimes in terms of liabilities (for Iran and Uzbekistan, who consider the country a source of problems and not as part of their sphere of influence), while Russia and India consider Afghanistan in a broader picture. For the Russians the war is a good opportunity to keep their influence in Tajikistan, while for India it is one of the few potential leverages it can use to put pressure on Pakistan in retaliation for Islamabad's growing use of the Kashmir issue. Small Tajikistan, on the other hand, is increasingly embroiled in the Afghan issue, for good or bad reasons (including ethnic solidarity and drug trafficking).

THE ROOTS OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

Afghanistan is a multiethnic society, where the main groups are the Pashtuns, the Sunni Persian-speakers (nowadays called Tajiks), the Uzbeks and the Shiah Hazaras (Persian-speakers), to which can be added a large range of other groups (Turkmens, Nuristanis, Balochs, Pasha'is, etc.). The Afghan state was built and, traditionally, has been dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group, although many Pashtuns who settled in Kabul became 'Persianised' (like the former King Zahir Shah). The only exception to Pashtun rule was the brief seizure of Kabul in 1929 by Bache-ye Saqqao, a Tajik from the north. Since the rule of Amir Abdurrahman (1880-1901), the monarchy has been able to build a loose but pervasive state apparatus (administration, permanent army, networks of primary and secondary schools, universities, etc.). The foreign policy of Afghanistan was based first on its opposition to British and Russian encroachments. After three wars against the British, from 1840 to 1919, Afghanistan became a buffer state between the two empires. But, the partition of India in 1947 suddenly altered the regional balance of power. A dispute broke out between Afghanistan and Pakistan on their common border (the so-called Durand Line); Afghanistan was the only country to vote against the admission of Pakistan in the UN. After 1955, the Americans decided to support Pakistan and Afghanistan slowly shifted towards Moscow and established working relations with India. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was, in

a sense, only the brutal confirmation of Afghanistan switching from a buffer state to a part of the Soviet sphere of influence. But, on the other hand, the Afghan war of resistance against the Soviets provided a good opportunity for Pakistan to shift the balance of regional power in its favour by enlisting Western support for its efforts to establish a friendly government in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani policy has been coherent since General Zia decided in 1979 to provide support for the Afghan Mujahidin. This policy was based on a simple premise, which still applies: to give full support to Pashtun fundamentalist groups, without appearing on the front line. Two factors determine such a choice: on the one hand, the Pakistani Pashtuns are closely associated with the dominant Punjabis in ruling Pakistan, and they are particularly numerous in the armed forces (and in its intelligence branch, the ISI), providing ideal connections with their Afghans ethnic cousins. On the other hand, since General Zia came to power, a close association between Pakistani governments and the militant religious networks (from the Jama'at Islami to the present deobandi) has been a permanent pattern in domestic and regional politics (Islamabad is waging a war by proxy in Indian-held Kashmir through Islamic militants, as illustrated by the Kargill incidents in spring 1999). The permanent strategic goals of Pakistan are:

1) To have a friendly government in Kabul to prevent the reconstitution of a Kabul-New Delhi axis;

2) To establish strategic depth against India, by using Afghan territory and a corridor towards central Asia, which could be used to import gas and oil;
3) To enact a 'Sunni Islamic policy', which is the very basis of Pakistan's legitimacy, both internally and regionally. Such a policy allows the secular Pakistani government to enlist the support of the increasingly effective and numerous militant religious networks inside Pakistan and to divert them from domestic politics to regional militancy.

This policy of indirect confrontation with the mighty USSR was rather risky, but succeeded. In February 1989, the last Soviet soldier left Afghan soil. It was time for Islamabad to reap the fruits of its perseverance. The tool of the Pakistani great design was the Hizbi Islami of Hikmatyar and a loose coalition of Pashtun commanders (like J. Haqqani), supported by a small but effective corps of Islamic volunteers (mainly Arabs) who joined the jihad against the Soviets from 1984 onwards under the auspices of two activists: the Palestinian Muslim Brother Abdallah Azzam and the Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden. This plan had the full support of both the Saudis and the Americans, who nevertheless reverted to a lower profile in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal, giving, until 1997, a free hand to the Pakistanis for handling post-Soviet Afghanistan.

But things did not go as expected. The communist regime of Najibullah survived for three years (by using the traditional game of dividing and bribing local leaders) and Kabul was taken in April 1992 by a coalition of non-Pashtuns from the north (led by Masood and Dostum). For the first time, non-Pashtuns were solidly entrenched in Kabul. Pakistan's favourite, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, was unable to dislodge Masood from Kabul, despite three years of intensive bombings. Moreover, by openly supporting Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, he antagonised his Saudi supporters. In 1994, the emergence of the Taliban movement around Kandahar provided Pakistan and Saudi Arabia with a new tool in Afghanistan that was still Pashtun and fundamentalist. Washington viewed with favour the rise of the Taliban from August 1994 until the fall of Kabul, on September 1996: the Taliban

were restoring law and order, and, although strictly fundamentalist, its conservative political attitude looked far less anti-Western than the fierce revolutionary ideology of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. An American oil-company, Unocal, was planning, with Pakistan's support, to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, through Afghanistan.

But the Taliban, although militarily victorious, have never been able to win the hearts and minds of the non-Pashtun population. Recently, a return of traditional tribal and clan rivalries has weakened their power in the south. Moreover, their harsh attitude towards women and the hospitality they gave to Osama bin Laden, widely considered to be the instigator of many anti-American terrorist actions, alienated them from Western public opinion and, subsequently, Western governments. In August 1998, US forces bombed training camps used by some Pakistani hard line movements inside Afghanistan. But, on the domestic Afghan political scene, the main failure of the Taliban was to appear as an almost exclusively ethnic Pashtun movement, whatever their willingness to use Shari'ah to bypass both tribal and ethnic affiliations. As so often happens, political practice did not fit with avowed ideology.

THE ETHNIC POLARISATION OF AFGHANISTAN

Resistance to the Soviet invasion was largely based on local fronts and commanders, more or less loosely affiliated with a wide range of political parties in exile, the Sunnis being based in Pakistan and the Shiahs in Iran. This fragmentation had two consequences: on the local level, a new élite (the 'commanders') tended to supersede the traditional one (khans, tribal leaders and ulemas). The commanders have a personal stake in maintaining a permanent state of warfare. Almost none of them, once war ended, have been able to turn into civil administrators. Many are also involved in different kinds of smuggling (not only drugs). Interestingly enough, none of the political factions cares to manage civil society, including the Taliban: there is no reconstruction, state educational networks, hospitals, sewage systems, etc. This task is left to the UN agencies or to foreign NGOs. In a word, the élite who came out of the war has been unable or unwilling to turn into a real political civilian organisation.

A second consequence of the war is that it has created an ethnic polarisation in Afghanistan. For the first time, non-Pashtun groups have been able to assert themselves militarily and politically. In fact, only three groups managed to build their own political and military organisation: the so-called Tajiks (in fact Sunni Persian-speakers), the Shiah Hazaras of central Afghanistan and the Uzbeks. The United Front is composed of these three groups. But this ethnic polarisation did not lead to a contest over borders: none of these groups claims independence or unification with another bordering state. Only the Hazaras are claiming territorial autonomy, but not independence or attachment to Iran. The same is true for the Pashtuns: they do not want the establishment of 'Pashtunistan' on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border (but the Taliban, nevertheless, are still reluctant to define the Durand Line as an international border). Ethnic and religious solidarity does work: there is Tajik solidarity between the political factions of the former soviet Tajikistan and Masood. The Hazara Shiah opposition was based in Tehran, from which it gets both political and material support. The Taliban are supported directly by non-private and official Pakistani Pashtuns (who come to fight against Masood or are employed as technicians or civil servants in Kabul). Although the Taliban are a genuine product of Afghanistan, the overlap between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban is growing - both are products of the same educational system (the deobandi madrasas) and both are mainly Pashtun. Another negative consequence of the war is the decrease of bilingualism in the country. Persian and Pashtu were and still are for both factions the official languages of the state, but Persian tends to disappear from the south and Pashtu

from the north because the institutions that were the basis for bilingualism (schools and conscription) have almost disappeared. The Pakistan-trained Afghan Taliban are more at ease with Pashtu and Urdu than with Persian.

Despite this clear and growing ethnic polarisation, none of the Afghan factions thinks in purely ethnic terms. They all compete for power in Kabul, either for hegemony (the Taliban) or for a fair share of power at the centre. The concept of Afghanistan survives the fragmentation of the country and this could be a good basis for a political settlement. But, the duration of the conflict inside is also fuelled by foreign rivalries.

A NEW REGIONAL ALIGNMENT

Ethnic polarisation is also linked to regional evolution. The fall of the USSR and the creation of independent nations based on ethnic identities have stimulated ethnic polarisation in Afghanistan. The independent Turkmens, Uzbeks and Tajiks have, by definition, some kind of solidarity with their Afghan counterparts, who, in turn, tend to find support from their former Soviet brethren against old or new enemies: Masood has a base in Tajikistan, General Dostum regularly takes refuge in Uzbekistan, while Iran is flooded with millions of refugees, in large part Hazaras.

To what extent do Afghanistan's neighbours use this ethnic polarisation? Iran's policy has never been motivated by ethnic solidarity but rather by religious connection. Since 1979, Iran has supported the Iranian Shiahs (mainly Hazaras) and not Masood, who is a Persian-speaker but Sunni. Since the Taliban take over of Kabul, Iran has constantly tried to make a deal with Pakistan by acknowledging the leading role of Pakistan and the Pashtuns in exchange of a fair share of power for the Shiahs. This policy failed in August 1998 when the Taliban stormed the city of Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan and killed Iranian diplomats as well as thousands of Shiahs. Since then, Tehran has given some support to Masood, but without direct involvement, probably to maintain leverage on Afghan politics in any prospective political deal.

Ethnic solidarity has played a greater role among the Tajiks themselves. Since the end of the civil war in early 1993, Masood has been instrumental in bringing together the government of Dushanbe and its Tajik Islamic opposition. The agreement signed in Moscow in June 1997 between both sides, under the auspices of the UN and through Russian and Iranian mediation, led to the establishment of a coalition government in Dushanbe, which gave full support to Masood. Masood, interestingly enough, is a hero for both the former communists and the Islamic opposition. When confronted with a choice between either a national coalition government with the former Tajik communists, headed by President Rahmanov, or joining the Taliban to endeavour to reconquer Tajikistan, Mollah Nuri, chief negotiator of the Tajik opposition, clearly sided with all the Tajik factions (Masood, the Taliban, the government in Dushanbe). The Tajik Islamist movement reacted more in 'national' terms (not to speak of nationalism). 'Islamo-nationalism' is taking precedence over purely ideological connections.

Uzbekistan has been even more cautious than Iran on the Afghan issue: it has used General Dostum as a sort of armed doorkeeper, but has not authorised him to keep weapons and barracks inside Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has never granted citizenship to Afghan Uzbeks. After the defeat of Dostum in August 1998, Tashkent apparently stopped giving logistical support to the remaining opposition groups fighting the Taliban. Tensions between Uzbekistan and the Taliban certainly increased after the terrorist attempt against president Karimov in February

1999 and the armed clashes between Uzbek Islamic militants and the Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border (August 1999 and August 2000). Tashkent castigated the Taliban for supporting the Uzbek Islamic opposition. But, on the other hand, Tashkent was worried to see growing Tajik unity going beyond the Afghan-Tajik border. More worrisome was the Russian and Iranian support for this coalition. Tashkent fears the shadow of a 'greater Tajikistan'. Masood's army is the best Tajik military force in the area. Although Masood has never supported the idea of a greater Tajikistan, Tashkent fears that a victory for Masood in Afghanistan would lead to a new boost for Tajikistan that could reclaim Samarkand and Bukhara. Conversely, Tashkent also fears that the defeat of Masood would drive from Afghanistan to Tajikistan a small and effective Tajik army led by Masood. After the last Islamist foray inside Kyrgyzstan (in the summer of 2000), Moscow proposed more security and military co-operation between the Central Asian states to thwart the Taliban threat. Tashkent decided not to enter such an alliance and to endeavour to establish a rapprochement with the Taliban, hoping that they would end their support for the Islamist opposition. The Afghanistan conflict has contributed to an increased and sharpened divide between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which is probably at the core of the political definition of the new Central Asia.

Turkmenistan welcomed the Taliban victory. Afghan Turkmens were unable to build a military or political organisation of their own during the war. Ashkhabad was from the beginning of its independence deprived of any tool inside Afghanistan. On the other hand, it is very eager to open a new road to export its gas through Afghanistan towards Pakistan. Hence, the interests of Turkmenistan, Pakistan and the Taliban coincide. But, after oil prices fell and on making a new assessment of possible exportation routes for crude oil, Unocal withdrew from the project. Any plan to export Turkmen gas through Afghanistan in the near future is wishful thinking.
Pakistan now fully acknowledges the ethnic dimension of its support for the Taliban. General Pervez Musharaf made a clear statement stressing Pashtun solidarity with the Taliban in May 2000. The fall of Masood's capital, Taloqan, in September 2000 was possible only because of the direct involvement of Pakistani advisers, technicians and maybe military personnel on the ground. There is a definitive joint venture in Pakistan between the Islamic religious networks (of which the most vocal is the Jamiat-ul-Ulema Islami headed by Mawlawi Fazlurrahman) and the military government, as illustrated not only by support for the Taliban but also by the ongoing crisis in Kashmir. Islamabad is pushing for the attribution of the Afghan seat at the UN to the Taliban, despite the sanctions voted by the Security Council against them in the autumn of 1998. Such a forward policy has antagonised India, of course, but also Iran and Russia.

For Russia, Tajikistan is its only remaining foothold in Central Asia: Moscow maintains the 201st division and border guards, where the rank and file are usually locals under Russian command, while it has neither troops nor even military advisers in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Despite the so-called 'Islamic threat', Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan refuse to allow Russian troops in their countries and stay away from any practical military co-operation with Moscow. Russia does not have any strategic interests inside Afghanistan, but needs to keep Tajikistan outside Uzbek influence and pressure. Hence, the use of the 'Islamic threat' makes sense. Russia has a pragmatic approach to the Afghan conflict: its only goal is to maintain its military presence in the area at the lowest possible cost. A protracted low-level local conflict is the best context in which to do it.

THE FUTURE OF THE TALIBAN

Afghanistan's ongoing civil war is becoming the cornerstone of a regional realignment. On the one hand, Iran, India and Russia are fighting what they perceive as undue Pakistani expansion through proxies in the area and they are supporting Tajikistan and the United Front in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are more open to recognising Taliban power in exchange of a guarantee of non-intervention. All the other countries have a pragmatic and tactical approach as far as Afghanistan is concerned, except Tajikistan, which has everything to loose in case of a complete Taliban victory in Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which has a strategic objective. Pakistan's objective is to establish a friendly Pashtun Islamic government in Afghanistan. This means if the regional powers were convinced that they could make a deal with the Taliban - one guaranteeing non-interference in their domestic affairs, no support for Islamist opposition and a minimal co-operation on border control - those powers would not hesitate to abandon their Afghan allies and make a deal with the Taliban. In a word, there is no symmetry between the strategy of the different regional powers: only Pakistan is committed to being a long-term definite player in Afghan domestic politics. Such dis-symmetry weakens Masood.

But the key question remains the attitude to be adopted towards the Taliban. Two conflicting stories appear here. For some, the Taliban are more Afghan-Pashtun-nationalist than Shari'ah-obsessed clerics, although the two are not in contradiction. One should first engage the Taliban, help them to dissociate themselves from Pakistan and, soon or later, they will get rid of Osama bin Laden. The other school believes that the supra-nationalism of the Taliban is a direct consequence of their religious conception and that thus they will spread it even in a more hidden way. The Taliban movement is profoundly ambivalent, mixing utopian Islamic fundamentalism and Afghan-Pashtun nationalism. They have to make a choice and they probably will do it under pressure. But, Islamist internationalism is not the sole issue. If a durable peace could be achieved in Afghanistan, any future government would have more or less to respect the balance between ethnic groups.
The Afghan leaders are increasingly aware of the political predicament of their country: ethnicity is more at stake than Shari'ah. But, in the short-term, the Taliban hope to defeat Masood before really engaging the UN and entering negotiations. If the military stalemate persists, political negotiation through UN auspices might be possible ... after the next season of fighting.