AFGHANISTAN: THE NEXT PHASE

ZALMAY KHALILZAD

Zalmay Khalilzad is Corporate Chair of International Security at RAND.

The Taliban's recent conquest of Taloqan and other military successes against its United Front opponents in northern Afghanistan has brought the war to another turning point. Unless the United Front reverses these gains, the Taliban will have reduced the opposition to a minor military nuisance, making itself the unquestioned master of Afghanistan. Such a development could have a profound effect for Afghanistan and for Central Asia and beyond.

In this article, I first describe the situation in Afghanistan and the factors responsible for its current condition. I next address the role that the regional powers are playing in Afghanistan. Subsequently, I analyse the role of the broader international community. I conclude by analysing how the situation in Afghanistan might evolve and how the international community should respond.

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The Afghan tragedy has its roots in the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, which occurred 18 months after the pro-Soviet communists had taken over the country in a bloody coup. The Afghans, with support from the United States and Pakistan among others, resisted the Soviet occupation and after some eight years of brutal fighting the Soviets agreed to withdraw.

The war against the Soviets had a profound effect on Afghanistan. It changed the balance of power, which had previously favoured Afghanistan's dominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns. Traditionally, the Pashtuns dominated Afghanistan's armed forces and, as a community, they were well armed. During the war against the Soviets, other ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras became armed and developed well-organised groups. The Pashtuns also became politically fragmented, with several Pashtun resistance groups emerging to fight the Soviets.

The Soviet war also profoundly affected Afghanistan's neighbours and the broader Islamic world. Pakistan in particular, but also Iran, acquired considerable influence in Afghanistan. Several million Afghans became refugees in both countries, and both governments assisted anti-Soviet fighters.

Islamabad was also the conduit for American and Saudi military aid to the Afghan resistance fighters. It controlled who got what and, at times, it placed its own operatives with the Afghan fighters. Pakistan favoured Islamic groups because it opposed Afghan nationalist groups, which in the past pursued territorial claims against Pakistan.

The war also increased the influence of Arab Islamist groups who sent volunteers and money to like-minded parties. These groups formed networks during the Afghan struggle that lived on after the Soviets withdrew.

With the Soviet departure, the United States lost interest and disengaged. The agreement on the Soviet withdrawal left unresolved the issue of what government would take power in Afghanistan. To no one's surprise, the Afghan resistance groups and the Najib government that Moscow left behind went to war against each other. Pakistan and Iran filled the vacuum left by the departure of the big powers.

The war intensified after Najib's government was overthrown. Some of Najib's former allies, such as General Dostum, formed a coalition with former resistance groups to fight other anti-Soviet resistance groups. Anarchy reigned in much of the country. Professor Rabbani, a Tajik, who had led one of the key resistance movements against the Soviets, led the government in Kabul, but this government had little influence outside the capital.

The anarchic conditions and old ties facilitated the return to Afghanistan of Islamic extremists such as Osama bin Laden. Similarly, drug traffickers from Pakistan and elsewhere in the region also moved in.

Against this backdrop of strife and regular outside intervention, the Taliban emerged in 1994-95. The Taliban is a backward Islamic movement dominated by Ghelzai Pashtuns. With strong Pakistani support, the Taliban have managed to gain control of over 90 percent of Afghanistan, defeating most of the former resistance leaders. On the positive side, the Taliban collected many of the heavy weapons and ended anarchy - a relief to many war-weary Afghans. This progress, however, has come at a terrible price. The Taliban have imposed a totalitarian social order. Men must wear beards, women have few rights and few girls are allowed any basic schooling. The Taliban have also developed close ties with bin Laden, who provides them with money and militants to fight alongside them. Militants from many other Islamic areas such as Kashmir, Central Asia and several Arab countries are based in the Taliban areas. The only military force remaining on the scene resisting the Taliban are those forces loyal to the anti-Soviet fighter Ahmad Shah Masood, who is supported by Iran, Russia and Tajikistan.

THE REGIONAL GAME

Pakistan has become the most influential outside power in Afghanistan. This influence is at both a government level and that of several important Pakistani institutions and political parties. The struggle against the Soviets has intertwined the two countries. Many Afghan refugees have gone to Pakistani religious schools, the madrassas, and have come under the influence of Pakistani religious leaders - especially those associated with Jamiat-ul-Ulama.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Islamabad sought to establish a client government in Kabul. Although beset with many domestic problems, Islamabad is pursuing an ambitious regional policy. With regard to Afghanistan, it would like to count on the use of Afghan territory and other assets in any confrontation with India. Already, Islamabad is using Afghanistan in its confrontation with India over Kashmir. Many Kashmiri militants are being trained in the Taliban regions of Afghanistan and some members of the Taliban have fought in Kashmir. Pakistan would like to do in Kashmir what was done in Afghanistan: support an insurgency until the costs to India becomes high enough that it seeks a settlement acceptable to Pakistan. It appears committed to using its emerging nuclear and missile capabilities as strategic cover as it supports the insurgents in Kashmir.

Islamabad also would like to gain increased influence in Central Asia and perhaps promote radical Islamic movements similar to Taliban. Some Islamic forces in Pakistan believe that, given the sacrifices made by the Muslim groups in the struggle against the Soviets, they are entitled to incorporate the Islamic parts of the former Soviet Union into a truly Islamic order, led perhaps by an Islamic Pakistan. Many in Pakistan also would like Afghanistan to become a bridge for its economic and political links with Central Asia.

Islamabad has decided that the Taliban is the best vehicle for achieving its objectives in Afghanistan and is willing to pay a high price to continue this support. Islamabad has recognised the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan and has sought to encourage others to do so. Many Pakistani political groups also have developed ties with the Taliban and have sent people inside Afghanistan to work with the Taliban.

The most important contribution Pakistan has made has been its military support. The Pakistani military has deployed units inside Afghanistan in several locations. The Pakistanis assist the Taliban in both planning and implementing their military operations. At times, Pakistani units have participated directly in operations against the opposition. The fact that Pakistan is willing to put its own people at risk is an indication of Pakistan's commitment to its Afghan policy.

Iran has been opposed to the emergence of a pro-Pakistani and Taliban dominated government in Kabul. It believes that such a government would not protect the interests of Afghan Shiahs and would be hostile to Iran's geopolitical interests in the region. Tehran has provided weapons and money to Ahmad Shah Masood, among other anti-Taliban groups. Iran's influence has declined as its allies have lost ground. Disagreement between Iran and Pakistan has been one of the main causes for the continuation of the Afghan conflict.

Current Iranian objectives in Afghanistan, other than opposing a Taliban victory, are unclear. It is possible, indeed likely, Iranian leaders are divided on what to do about the threat from Afghanistan. A few Iranian radicals might be open to ties with the Taliban because they share a common bond with extremists such as bin Laden and the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Others might favour a continuation of the conflict to preclude the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia across Afghanistan to Pakistan and beyond. Still others might favour a settlement in which non-Pashtuns - including Shiahs and Tajiks - participate, the Afghan refugees from Iran return home and the threats of drug trafficking across the Iranian border from Afghanistan diminishes.
Like Iran, the Indians, Russians and Uzbeks similarly oppose the Pakistani-backed Taliban. The Indian posture reflects the Indo-Pakistani rivalry. Delhi has provided limited support to Masood. The Uzbeks are concerned about the Taliban and bin Laden's support for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has declared a jihad against the Karimov government. Uzbekistan's concerns also include the spread of narcotics and weapons trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia.

Russia has been supportive of Masood and has been concerned about possible Taliban or bin Laden support for Chechens fighting the Russian forces. Moscow also worries about the spread of radical Islam, weapons and drugs to Central Asia and perhaps to Russia itself. At the same time, the situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia has been an opportunity for Russia. Moscow has used the possible threat from the Taliban to strengthen its influence in Central Asia. Already, the Uzbeks have endorsed the Russian military presence in Tajikistan. They also signed a military agreement with Russia in May 2000 - something they had been

reluctant to do before the Taliban consolidated their power. Moscow has also continued its military presence in Tajikistan, citing the threat from Afghanistan as part of its justification.

The Taliban are not completely alone. The Turkmen government has a good working relationship with the Taliban, selling it fuel, including jet fuel. Turkmenistan's policy is driven by a desire to see the construction of a pipeline across Afghanistan to export its natural gas to Pakistan and India. Turkmenistan needs the income from the sale of gas and it wants to reduce its dependence on Russia. The Saudis supported the Taliban at first, providing it with economic assistance and recognition, but relations between them have deteriorated over Taliban support for bin Laden. Riyadh believes that the Taliban have gone back on a commitment to turn bin Laden over to the Saudi authorities.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNTIY

The United Nations has been promoting a peace process for Afghanistan aimed at establishing a broad-based government acceptable to the warring factions. '6+2 Group' - involving Afghanistan's six neighbours, Russia and the United States - has guided UN activities on this front.

These efforts have been a failure. The members of the '6+2 Group' have been in fundamental disagreement. They have issued statements in support of self-determination for Afghans and non-interference in Afghan affairs, but have regularly broken their promises.

The major powers are largely focused on terrorists based in Afghanistan - especially bin Laden. Because of this factor, they supported the imposition of an embargo on the Taliban. But they have not yet seen enough at stake for themselves strategically to push seriously for a settlement of the conflict and self-determination for the Afghans. Since there is little press coverage of the conflict, the humanitarian tragedy there also has not been sufficient to move the international community. This has worked to the advantage of Pakistan and the Taliban.

In its September 2000 meeting, the '6+2 Group' threatened the Taliban with more sanctions unless it agreed to a cease-fire and the formation of a broad-based government. Given the fluid military situation in Afghanistan, the UN's next steps will be informed by developments on the ground in Afghanistan. UN reactions will also be affected by the impact of current developments in Central Asia and whether other terrorist attacks take place that can be linked to groups based in Afghanistan.

FUTURE EVOLUTION OF THE AFGHAN CONFLICT

There are two paths that the conflict can take in the coming months: either a complete Taliban victory - or something close to it - or a return to a mutually hurting stalemate. If current trends hold, the Taliban could reduce the opposition to a minor factor and largely win the war. At present, the momentum is with the Taliban. The opposition appears to be in disarray. Even if the current opposition collapses, however, some form of opposition to the regime is likely to continue. But the opposition's impact will fall sharply if it only assumes the form of sporadic, disorganised resistance.

Several issues will become important if the Taliban win. First, will the Taliban pursue the opposition into Tajikistan should it move to that country? A second issue is which faction will become dominant within the Taliban - an organisation with many potential fissures. Some

disagreements are based on policy differences, others on different interpretations of Islam and still others on tribe (e.g. Ghelzai or Durani). A third question concerns the future government. Some might push the Taliban to hold the grand assembly of Afghan elders and notables - Loya Jirgah - that the former king of Afghanistan has been advocating. Others might want changes that will make the regime more acceptable to the world, including a solution to the bin Laden problem. Relative moderates could argue that only such changes might produce the badly needed economic assistance and attract Afghan technocrats living abroad to come home and assist in the reconstruction of the country.

The radicals, who have dominated the Taliban in recent years, might argue for continuing hard-line policies. The radicals have close ties to bin Laden and his network and receive financial assistance from him and his friends. They are likely to push the Taliban to increase its existing support for Islamic radicals in Central Asia and beyond. With regard to domestic reform, the radicals might become even less willing to support a Loya Jirgah or elections. They are likely to push for pursuing what is left of the opposition abroad and continuing harsh policies at home.

Should the opposition manage to regain lost territory and the situation return to a mutually hurting stalemate, prospects for a negotiated settlement would improve. The issues that would become more important then would be the future of the military balance, the possible role of third forces such as the one put forward by the former king of Afghanistan and the UN role in bringing about a negotiated settlement, among others.

IMPLICATIONS

The recent military developments in Afghanistan represent a significant success for the Taliban and Pakistan and a setback for the United Front and its supporters - Iran, India, Russia and Tajikistan. These changes are also a setback for the UN effort that favoured a negotiated settlement. The hope for a settlement and a broad-based government was based on the assumption that no side can win the war militarily and that a mutually hurting stalemate would encourage the Afghan factions and their external sponsors to prefer a negotiated settlement rather than continuing the war. A Taliban victory would shatter this assumption.

Those opposed to the Taliban have three options: first, assist what remains of the opposition in Afghanistan in the hope of changing the military balance in favour of the opposition. Whether any power would be willing to provide the kind and quantity of help the anti-Taliban forces would need is unclear. Without outside assistance the Taliban might well conquer the rest of the country.

Second, outsiders can work to contain the Taliban. This means keeping the Taliban isolated and imposing new restrictions on them. It also means refusing to recognise them as the legitimate government until they carry out major changes such as holding a UN sponsored Loya Jirgah, ending support for terrorism, expelling foreign militants, respecting human rights and co-operating with international efforts against drug trafficking. It might also involve strengthening neighbouring states against Taliban attacks.

Third, outsiders might engage the Taliban. Engagement means increasing political dialogue, providing reconstruction assistance, moving towards recognising the Taliban and avoiding measures that increase the Taliban's isolation.

CONCLUSION

Which of these options will be chosen, of course, depends on what the Taliban do. If the Taliban continue with their current agenda at home and maintain their co-operation with international extremists such as bin Laden, the dominant response is likely to be containment, which might include support for anti-Taliban resistance groups. Such a development would mean that Afghanistan's reintegration in the region and into international institutions would be slow. The same would be true of its economic reconstruction. Of course, it would be better for the Afghans and the region if the Taliban makes a moderate choice for their future, focusing on democratisation (e.g., co-operate in holding a Loya Jirgah), economic reconstruction and distancing themselves from drug-traffickers and international militants. Their track record so far, however, inspires little confidence.