

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI "CESARE BONACOSSA" - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA



The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia
founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
Vol. XXVIII / 2017

Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Elisabetta Basile
Nicola Mocci

viella

A large, faint, gold-colored mandala pattern is visible in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

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ISSN 2385-2526

ISBN 978-88-3313-044-6 (paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-045-3 (e-book)

Annual journal - Vol. XXVIII, 2017

Published jointly by Associazione Asia Maior & CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei "Cesare Bonacossa" - Università di Pavia

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Paper version Italy € 50.00 Abroad € 65.00

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AFGHANISTAN 2017:
TRUMP'S «NEW STRATEGY», THE AF-PAK CONUNDRUM, AND THE
CRISIS OF THE NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Diego Abenante

University of Trieste
diego.abenante@dispes.units.it

The political evolution in Afghanistan in 2017 was dominated by the release of the US president's new policy towards the region. Although the strategy was characterised by a substantial continuity with the Obama policy, there were some important changes. The most relevant was the revision of US-Pakistan relations, and the re-definition of the role of Islamabad as a key US ally in the region. This essay discusses in detail the possible implications of this change and analyses its historical-political context. The factors behind the complex relationship between Islamabad and Kabul are also discussed, in connection with the political balance in South Asia. The latter part of the essay analyses the domestic political situation, which was characterised by a further deterioration of security, vis-à-vis an increasing offensive by the Taliban and Daesh, and by the political crisis of the National Unity Government (NUG). Despite the reforms carried out in 2016, the Ghani-Abdullah government seemed unable to stabilise the Afghan political system, or to guarantee the normal functioning of the electoral calendar.

1. Trump's «new strategy»

The announcement, on 21 August, of President Trump's strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia was without doubt the most important event of the year in the region. There had been considerable expectation for the US president's strategy among the observers and regional political actors, given that during the electoral campaign Donald Trump had declared his intention to withdraw from the Afghan conflict.¹ However, the delay of the announcement, together with rumours of intense discussions between the White House and the Pentagon, had led some observers to foresee a U-turn on the part of the US president.² Moreover, during the early months of 2017 there had been unconfirmed reports that Trump had personally reassured the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani of his intention to endorse the US

1. 'A history of Trump's thoughts on Afghanistan', *CNN*, 21 August 2017.

2. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Trump Administration Faced with the Afghan Predicament', *Center for Research and Policy Analysis*, 19 May 2017.

commitment.³ The outline of the strategy issued in August confirmed such a radical shift. It reaffirmed, and even expanded, the US military involvement in Afghanistan, both in numbers and in its limits of engagement.

Trump's political coherence apart, the real question lay in the analysis of the options that the US had after 16 years of war in Afghanistan. As has been emphasised by various observers, a complete withdrawal of the troops would probably end with a military defeat of the Kabul government and a return of the Taliban to power. This, in turn, would likely force the US to return to the region with an even larger military force. Conversely, a continuing escalation of the international military engagement would not be a convincing option either. In fact, the communications disseminated by the Taliban through their official channels serve to confirm that the foreign military presence justifies and reinforces their determination to fight.⁴ This is the real conundrum of the Afghan conflict, and neither the Obama nor the Trump administrations have given the impression of fully realising its implications.⁵

The reality is that whatever choice is made – withdrawing, maintaining the commitment or expanding it – it is bound to have profound consequences not only on the Afghan scene but also on the regional situation. In particular, the «hard line» that Trump advocated towards Pakistan made it even more crucial to understand in historical terms the complex relationship between Islamabad and Kabul. In fact, President Trump not only dictated future American policy towards the Afghan conflict; he also advocated a sharp change in US foreign policy vis-à-vis Pakistan. In doing so, the US president emphasised his will to distance himself and his administration from Obama's policy.

Nevertheless, President Trump's political platform contains many key points that were already part of the Obama strategy: the confirmation of the military mission in the country; the «two-pronged» approach – fighting the insurgency and training the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF); finally, the combination of military threat with political support for the «Afghan-led» peace dialogue. Regarding the first point, Trump himself admitted changing his mind. «My original instinct», he said, «was to pull out, and historically I like following my instinct».⁶ However, he explained that his advisors and military experts convinced him that «withdrawal

3. See for example, a journalistic report of a phone conversation between Trump and Ghani, referred by the Afghan ambassador to the US, in: 'I Had Dinner with the Afghan Ambassador. What He Said About the Differences between Trump, Obama is Stunning', *Independent Journal Review*, 11 March 2017.

4. 'Afghan Taliban «Unaware» of Peace Talk Plans, Says Precondition Remains', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 24 February 2016.

5. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Trump Administration'.

6. 'President Trump Outlines New Afghanistan Strategy-Full Transcript', *CBS News*, 21 August 2017.

would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, would instantly fill». ⁷ As noted above, Trump did not rule out the continuation of the negotiating table. He even did not exclude the possibility of working «someday» with «elements of the Taliban». However, this would happen only «after an effective military effort». Therefore, there is here a resumption of the strategy, followed during the Obama administration, of «shooting and talking». This idea had already proved ineffective in the past, and there is no reason to say that it may work in the future. Albeit in a context of general continuity, Trump's strategy contained some elements of innovation. In particular, the exclusion of a fixed deadline for US involvement, stronger pressure on Pakistan, and, finally, stronger emphasis on military effort rather than on state-building.

On the former point, Trump said that the US «will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities. Conditions on the ground – not arbitrary timetables – will guide our strategy from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out». ⁸ It is undeniable that Trump highlighted here a critical point of the US policy under Obama. In fact, some analysts had noted in the past that, by establishing chronological limits, Washington had given unintended help to the Taliban. ⁹ Regarding the role played by Pakistan, Trump strongly criticised its authorities for giving «safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror». ¹⁰ While conceding that «in the past Pakistan has been a valuable partner», and that «the Pakistani people have suffered greatly under terrorism and extremism», ¹¹ the president's tones were possibly the toughest heard in Washington in recent years. In fact, Trump issued something like an ultimatum to Islamabad: «while (the US has) been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars, at the same time they are housing the very terrorists we are fighting [...]. But that will have to change, and that will have to change immediately». ¹² Here, undoubtedly, Trump changed the line. Not that American pressure towards Pakistan was a new event. For example, as early as 2010, the Obama administration's Policy Review had focused attention on the criticality of Pakistan's role in the regional crisis. It had said that there were aspects of American strategy towards Islamabad that «needed

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Kate Clark, 'Not Nation-building but «Killing Terrorists». Trump's «new» strategy for Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 23 August 2017, p. 3. See also John Hannah, 'Trump's Afghanistan Strategy could actually Work', *Foreign Policy*, 1 September 2017.

10. The White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, 21 August 2017 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia>).

11. *Ibid.*

12. 'The long history of incredibly fraught relations between the U.S. and Pakistan', *The Washington Post*, 5 January 2018.

correction».¹³ Therefore, Trump's bold statement that «we can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations»¹⁴ was not entirely true; at least in the previous few years, the US was not silent about the role of Pakistan.¹⁵ However, there is no doubt that Trump dictated a much tougher line on Pakistan, and that he put aside the nuanced diplomatic tones of the previous administration.

The reactions of the international community and the observers were various. The opinions of the independent analysts divided along two well-defined groups: on the one hand, those who believed that Trump had done well to clear away the ambiguity of the US relationship with Pakistan, and that henceforth Islamabad would be forced to revise its policy in order not to lose American funding. On the other, an equally large array of observers who believed that Trump's threats would be completely ineffective in changing Islamabad's policy. The latter opinion referred, in particular, to the fact that Pakistan had gradually become more autonomous from US funding, developing alternative sources of economic support, especially from China.¹⁶ In this regard, it is not irrelevant to note that the Chinese government immediately defended Islamabad from Trump's criticism, underlying the «great sacrifices» made by Pakistan in the fight against terrorism.¹⁷ Despite the successive effort by Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, during his visit to Pakistan in October 2017 to explain Trump's policy in more diplomatic tones, the basic lines announced in August 2017 were confirmed: the US was ready to carry on their strategy against the Taliban and *Daesh* without counting on Pakistan. Trump's words were soon followed by concrete examples of the new line: by July 2017, the United States had decided to suspend a US\$ 800 million military loan to Pakistan; in September, a further US\$ 255 million of military support was blocked.¹⁸ Washington also stressed the

13. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review*, 16 December 2010 (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review>). See also Diego Abenante, 'L'Afghanistan nel 2010: La nuova *impasse* elettorale e i tentativi di riconciliazione nazionale', *Asia Maior 2010*, p. 111.

14. The White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*.

15. *Ibid.*

16. John Hannah, 'Trump's Afghanistan Strategy'; Simon Tisdall, 'Why Trump's Afghanistan Strategy Risks the Worst of Both Worlds', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2017; Stephen Hadley & Moeed Yusuf, 'For Peace in Afghanistan, Talk to Pakistan', *The New York Times*, 16 June 2017; Christine C. Fair, 'Pakistan Has all The Leverage over Trump', *Foreign Policy*, 3 January 2018; Asad Hashim, 'Pakistan in the Crosshairs of Trump's Afghan Strategy', *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2017.

17. 'Trump's New Afghanistan Strategy Draws Mixed Reactions from Around the World', *Dawn*, 22 August 2017.

18. 'Pakistan: US suspends \$800m of military aid', *BBC News*, 10 July 2011; 'Trump administration freezes security aid to Pakistan', *The Independent*, 4 January 2018.

need to elaborate an alternative strategy based on other regional actors, first of all involving India.¹⁹ «We appreciate India's important contribution to stability in Afghanistan», the US president said, «but [...] we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development».²⁰

Another crucial point of Trump's speech was his reference for the need to focus on military rather than political objectives. «I also share», he stated, «their (the American people's) frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy and [...] lives trying to rebuild countries in its own image instead of pursuing our security interests»; «we are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists».²¹ Assuming that it is correct here to speak of discontinuity, it seemed related more to the US intervention in Iraq, rather than to Obama's policy in Afghanistan. It should also be noted that Trump seemed to confuse nation-building with state-building.²² If Trump really meant state-building, then the question arises whether this should be understood as a suspension of US economic support for the Afghan educational, health and administrative services, and, also, to the army and the police. While it is too early to say whether something concrete will follow, it is important to note that, in recent years, Washington has often fluctuated between involvement in institution-building and military activity. Therefore, it could well be possible that with Trump in power the US intended to choose this second path. Nevertheless, this raises the question of what would eventually be the cost of a failure to build these institutions.²³ While it is possible to say that Trump's strategy contains a more marked emphasis on the military side of the mission than on the political one, it cannot be said that the latter is absent. There is the recognition that «military power alone will not bring peace to Afghanistan»; there is also the idea that «elements» of the Taliban may one day be part of an Afghan political settlement. Finally, there is still the important distinction between the international Islamist networks and the Taliban.²⁴ These are, in fact, all points in common with the strategy followed by previous administrations.

19. Anwar Iqbal, 'US will Eradicate Terrorism with or without Pakistan: Tillerson', *Dawn*, 28 October 2017.

20. 'President Trump Outlines New Afghanistan Strategy', *CBS News*.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Kate Clark, 'Not Nation-building but «Killing Terrorists». Trump's «new» strategy for Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 23 August 2017, p. 3.

23. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Trump Administration Faced with the Afghan Predicament', pp. 5-6.

24. Trump has listed the objectives of the US action as «obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda», and «preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan». See 'President Trump Outlines New Afghanistan Strategy', *CBS News*.

2. *The reactions in Kabul and in Islamabad*

Despite the fact that Trump's strategy was far less innovative than expected, the reasons for the Afghan government's satisfaction were obvious. First, because of the emphasis on continued US engagement, and, second, for the harsh words on Pakistan. In fact, president Ghani termed it a «game-changer», and other diplomatic and government sources reacted enthusiastically to the release of the new strategy, and to the decision to place Pakistan on the list of countries that give «safe haven» to terrorists.²⁵ Conversely, the release of the US strategy caused outrage in Islamabad. Both the civil and military authorities in Pakistan rejected the accusations of not cooperating enough in the struggle against the Taliban.

The official response from Islamabad was that their armed forces and civil society had paid a high price in the fight against extremist organisations. The Pakistani representative to the United Nations, Maleeha Lodhi, replied that the «safe haven» used by both Taliban and the so-called Islamic State was not in Pakistan but in those areas of Afghanistan out of the government's control. Moreover, a Pakistan army spokesman claimed that with the launch of the operation *Zarb-e-Azb* in North Waziristan (in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan) in 2014, Islamabad's forces had attacked «terrorists of all colours», including the Haqqani network, that according to Washington would have connections with the Pakistani security.²⁶ The overall tone of Pakistan's reaction was one of bitterness and frustration towards the lack of recognition by the US of the price paid by its armed forces and civilians due to terrorism.

Trump's strategy for Afghanistan was probably the result of various pressures: first of all, the desire to break, at least symbolically, with Obama's policies, albeit in a political framework of substantial continuity. In this context, the aggressive tone towards Pakistan gave Trump the opportunity to highlight, at least ostensibly, some discontinuity with the policy of the previous administration, in the face of growing criticism of having betrayed his electoral promises. Moreover, the US president seemed to have been deeply influenced by his senior military advisors. The latter had become increasingly impatient with regards to Islamabad in the last few years, and had specifically asked the president to take a harsher position. Indeed, some observers noted the strong resemblance between Trump's plan and the re-

25. 'I had Dinner with the Afghan Ambassador', *Independent Journal Review*; Sharif Amiri, 'Defense Ministry Welcomes U.S. Move against Pakistan', *Tolo News*, 20 July 2017; 'The New US Strategy a game-changer', *The Kabul Times*, 28 October 2017.

26. Terrorist Safe Havens Exist in Ungoverned Areas of Afghanistan, not Pakistan: Maleeha Lodhi, *Dawn*, 24 December 2017; 'Time for US, Afghanistan «to do more», DG ISPR', *Pakistan Observer*, 29 December 2017.

port presented six months earlier by John Nicholson, military commander in Afghanistan, before the Senate.²⁷

We may also notice an emphasis on the will to break with all the diplomatic and geopolitical complexities that had made Pakistan over the years an obligatory US ally, albeit not an attractive one. Here, Trump showed his impatience with the complicated details of political relations in South Asia, and a scarce appreciation of its heavy historical burden. His statement signalled the abandonment of the diplomatic prudence followed by Washington in the past. The 21 August discourse sounded as if the US wished to distinguish the «good» from the «evil», in a language that was reminiscent of the Cold War. At the same time, its position seemed also to derive from a neglect of the historical and regional context. In particular, there appeared to be an unwillingness to acknowledge the intimate connection between Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan, and its troubled relations with India. In particular, there was scarce appreciation of the connection between the Kashmir issue and the tendency by Pakistani policy-makers to develop an Islamic agenda as a foreign policy tool, both towards its eastern and western neighbours. While some independent observers have acknowledged the role played by the broad regional context in moulding Pakistan's Afghan policy, the US administration has tended to neglect it, or treat it as a mere pretext.²⁸

Yet the complex relationship between the US and Pakistan must be placed in its historical context. As several authors have recognised – most recently Farzana Shaikh – this relationship has been characterised since the early 1950s by mutual distrust, recriminations and misplaced hopes.²⁹ Born in the context of British decolonisation and the Cold War, the alliance was marked by a lack of enthusiasm on the American side for Pakistan's dubious democratic credentials. These, however, were compensated by Pakistan's willingness to act as a barrier to communist influence, at a time when India had chosen the path of non-alignment. For Pakistan, American support was not without problems either, especially for a state that had been created «in the name of Islam», and aspired to be the leader of the Islamic *umma*. The alliance with the United States, therefore, underlined the identity problem that had tormented Pakistan since 1947: was it to be an Islamic state or a Muslim-majority nation-state?

Despite all the contradictions, Islamabad sought US support with the hope of achieving its basic aims: support for its conventional arms-race

27. United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, 'Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan', 9 February 2017 (<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/17-02-09-situation-in-afghanistan>).

28. Stephen Hadley & Moeed Yusuf, 'For Peace in Afghanistan, Talk to Pakistan', *The New York Times*; International Crisis Group, 'Resettling Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan', *Asia Report N. 262*, 28 October 2014, pp. 6-7.

29. Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, pp. 190-200.

with India; obtaining a territorial guarantee in case of military confrontation with its powerful neighbour; the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue. With these goals in mind, Pakistan agreed to enter the pro-US and anti-communist SEATO and CENTO pacts in 1954-55.³⁰ However, Pakistani hopes were disappointed on all issues. It never obtained the arms supplies it had hoped for; at least not to reverse the balance of forces in South Asia. Islamabad never came close to obtaining a territorial guarantee, and the weakness of the US support was dramatically highlighted by the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971. Yet, Islamabad paid a high price in political terms, especially in its relations with the Muslim bloc.

Pakistan had to face the great contradiction of being, at one and the same time, a state born with the ambition to lead the Islamic world and one of the closest US allies.³¹ From many points of view, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a watershed in the relationship between Washington and Islamabad. It constituted the climax of Pakistan's role as frontline ally in the fight against communism, and the most evident manifestation of the ambiguity of the alliance. The anti-Soviet *jihād*, organised and financed by the US and Saudi Arabia with the strategic and territorial support of Pakistan, epitomised Islamabad's ambition to play the international role of a great power; a role at least equal to its self-perception.

Although the war in Afghanistan led Washington to ignore Islamabad's nuclear programme, it did not remove all the ambiguities of their relationship, as the situation following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 has demonstrated. It is thus impossible to understand Pakistani foreign policy without taking into account its security concerns *vis-à-vis* India, with particular regard to Kashmir. This applies especially to its Afghan policy. The most recent difficulties with US relations are therefore not the result of contemporary dynamics. Rather, they are the culmination of an evolution at the root of which there are Pakistani frustrations for the lack of results of their strategic alliance with the United States.

When placed in the long-term perspective, and in the regional context, Trump's strategy appears all the more dangerous. It isolated, politically, Pakistan from its neighbours and probably pushed its policy-makers towards the old idea that they could count only on themselves for their own security and strategic interests. Furthermore, Trump's emphasis on India's

30. The South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was an organisation created in 1954 including Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the US; it was dissolved in 1977. The Baghdad Pact, later renamed Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), was an organisation formed in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and United Kingdom, and dissolved in 1979.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-95; Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule. The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 93-180.

vital role in Afghanistan could make Pakistan more worried for its strategic isolation, and induce it to renew its efforts for establishing some form of control over Afghanistan's political scenario. The US strategy also allowed the Kabul government to deploy its frustration towards its neighbour in concrete ways. This clearly emphasised the dangers arising from a transformation of the US policy in South Asia, from a mediating role to open support for an «Indo-Afghan» alliance.

3. *The context of Af-Pak relations*

The complex relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan was one of the obstacles to a peaceful solution to the war. Even without accepting the repeated protests by both the Karzai and Ghani governments that the Taliban were controlled by Pakistan, there was little doubt that Islamabad could hinder the achievement of a peaceful solution. We noted above the importance of understanding Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan in regional terms. Its policy towards its western neighbour was at the same time a reaction to its own perception of weakness to the Indian side, as well as a laboratory in which to test its ambitions as a regional power.

This said, the tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan predated largely the policy of the two independent states, and was connected to the 19th century colonial policy of border drawing in South Asia. In 1947, Afghanistan refused to acknowledge the Durand line as a valid international border, contending that it was only a demarcation of «zones of influence»³². Later, Kabul relied on Pashtun irredentism on both sides of the border in order to destabilise the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan (today Khyber Pakhtunkwa), and to a lesser extent Baluchistan. The attempt by Kabul to strengthen the tribes' aspiration for an independent «Pakhtunistan» had intensified since the early 1950s, due to the influence of Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud. In 1955, the Afghan government reacted strongly to the introduction by Pakistan of the «One Unit» scheme, denouncing it as an

32. Afghanistan was the only state to vote against the recognition of Pakistan at the United Nations in September 1947. The Durand Line derives its name from Sir Mortimer Durand, the diplomat who designed the frontier on behalf of the British government in 1893. The border had the aim of creating a buffer zone between the Russian and the British spheres of influence in South Asia. On the political dynamics behind the establishment of the Durand Line, see: Amin Tarzi, 'Political Struggles over the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands', in: Shahazad Bashir & Robert D. Crews, *Under the Drones. Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 17-29; Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 17-45; Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, pp. 200-205.

attempt to force the Pashtuns into Pakistani administrative structure³³. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, Afghanistan and Pakistan tried to destabilise each other, supporting their respective separatist or regional movements.³⁴

In spite of their reciprocal hostile activities, until the 1960s Pashtun nationalist sentiments were mainly a menace for Pakistan's unity. That began to change in the 1960s, when Islamabad began to promote a more proactive policy towards Afghanistan. In order to defuse the danger of Pashtun ethnicity, the Pakistani governments began to co-opt the Pashtuns within the bureaucracy and the army. By the 1980s, they had reached respectively 20% and 10% in the above sectors.³⁵ Moreover, governmental favour contributed to the Pashtuns' emergence as an economically influential community. Their strategically well-placed geographical position enabled them to control most of the trade and commercial routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and their dynamism led them often to control the business activities in the big cities, such as the private transportation market in Karachi³⁶. Paradoxically, while officially rejecting ethnicity in the name of national unity, Pakistani elites resorted to ethnic politics in order to defuse the danger of regional fragmentation.

A second important strategy was to incorporate the ethnic question into the politics of Islamisation. Underlying Islamic identity, especially since the 1970s, became Pakistan's main strategy to minimise the influence of Pashtun irredentism, as well as to project Islamabad's influence towards Afghanistan and Central Asia. A very important example of this strategy was Prime Minister Bhutto's support for the Islamist coup against Mohammed Daoud's government in Kabul in 1975.³⁷ From the 1970s onwards, Pakistan made Islamisation the key of its foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Its practical implications were the role played by Pakistan in coordinating the Afghan resistance during the Soviet invasion, and the formation of the Taliban militias in the 1990s.

33. According to the «One Unit» scheme, the four provinces of West Pakistan were merged into a single province. The measure was introduced in order to create an artificial parity between West and East Pakistan, and to prevent the latter from obtaining a dominant political weight.

34. Paul Titus & Nina Swidler, 'Knights, not Pawns: Ethno-nationalism and Regionalism in Post-colonial Balochistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Feb. 2000, pp. 52-58.

35. Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, p. 204-205.

36. Paul Titus, 'Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pushtun: Stereotypes, Social Organization and History in Western Pakistan', *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, 3, 1998, p. 677; Akmal Hussain, 'The Karachi Riots of December 1986. Crisis of State and Civil Society in Pakistan', in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 185-193.

37. Paul Titus & Nina Swidler, 'Knights, not Pawns', p. 62; Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 (2nd edition); it. tr. *Afghanistan. L'Islam e la sua modernità politica*, ECIG, Genova, 1986, p. 105.

4. *The end of Kabul's opening to Islamabad*

As we have mentioned earlier, during the Karzai presidency the Af-Pak tension probably reached its highest point, when Kabul openly accused Islamabad of controlling the front of the insurgency. Ashraf Ghani's election in Kabul in 2014 and the parallel rise to power of Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan led many observers to talk of a «peace window» for the region.³⁸

These optimistic forecasts were not only due to the simultaneous changes of leadership. Various analysts pointed to two other factors: first, the fact that president Ghani, unlike his predecessor, was a welcome figure in Islamabad, and was known as someone who had excellent relations with Pakistani civil and military leaders. Not surprisingly, during the presidential election campaign, Ghani had stressed the improvement of relations with Islamabad as one of his main goals. Moreover, just weeks after his election, Ghani exchanged visits with Pakistan's Army Chief and head of Intelligence³⁹. Second, various signals suggested that the Pakistani leaders had become more aware that the pacification of Afghanistan was also in their interests. This was especially due to the intensification of Islamist violence in Pakistan by groups of Taliban who had sought shelter in Afghanistan. This led, especially during 2015, to the beginning of an unprecedented military and intelligence collaboration between the two countries.

Moreover, there seemed to be a clearer awareness of the negative consequences for Pakistan's stability from a military victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ However, in 2017 these hopes almost completely disappeared. How was this radical change possible in such a short period? The main reasons were the worsening of the security situation *vis-à-vis* an increase in violence by the Taliban and the so-called Islamic State; the substantial failure of the peace initiatives; and the political crisis of the National Unity Government (NUG).

Despite the continued international financial and military support, during 2017 the military situation appeared to be gradually worsening. According to a report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), from January to September the United States conducted 2,400 air strikes, the highest number since 2014.⁴¹ The same source reported that the American air force dropped 751 bombs on the Taliban and the Islamic State-Wilayat Khorasan in September 2017, a record num-

38. Marvin G. Weinbaum, 'The Peace Window Is Closing For AfPak', *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2015.

39. Mohammed Umer Daudzai, 'Afghanistan and Pakistan: the False Promise of Rapprochement', *The New York Times*, 22 March 2015.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 'Quarterly Report to the United States Congress', 30 October 2017, p. 98 (<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf>).

ber since 2012 and a 50% increase since August of the same year. Moreover, from 15 June to 31 August 2017, the UN recorded 5,532 security incidents, which marked a 3% increase from the same period of 2016.⁴² At the same time, the area of the country under full government control decreased during the year. In August 2017, there were 54 districts under insurgent control (13) or influence (41), with an increase of nine districts over the previous six months. The total percentage of districts controlled or contested by insurgents was 43.3% in August 2017.⁴³

The terrorist attacks carried out in Kabul by the Taliban against civilian targets were particularly dramatic. An attack on 31 May in the diplomatic area of Kabul, with a truck full of explosives resulted in 150 deaths, causing great outrage among the Afghan public.⁴⁴ Strong feelings were aroused by the apparent ease with which the Taliban were able to strike in what was supposed to be the most protected area of the city. This resulted in a protest march against the government, accused of inefficiency, corruption and inability to guarantee the security of the capital. The protesters tried to reach the presidential palace but were blocked by the police. This in turn only intensified the demonstration, resulting in the police opening fire and causing five deaths.⁴⁵

As will be explained later, this unprecedented open protest against the government caused a serious internal political crisis. The consequence was the emergence of considerable frustration in Kabul both for the worsening of the military situation and the lack of progress of the peace process. This was understandable, given the considerable effort that had been placed on the peace negotiations during the previous year. In fact, 2016 saw no less than three different negotiating tables: 1) the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China), 2) the High Peace Council, and 3) the Murree process.⁴⁶ Yet this huge effort, presented at the time by president Ghani with great emphasis, was evidently fruitless. A further disappointment came from the fact that the new Taliban offensive followed a change at the apex of the insurgency in 2016, which showed their continued determination to fight.

The bulk of this frustration was directed by Kabul towards Islamabad, which was accused of giving refuge and support to the Afghan Taliban. President Ghani put aside his previous conciliatory tones, apparently responding to accusations by his political opponents of being too moderate

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. 'Kabul blast: Afghan leader says bomb toll passes 150', *BBC News*, 6 June 2017.

45. 'Kabul Bomb. Protesters Shot Dead at March in Afghan Capital', *BBC News*, 2 June 2017.

46. Diego Abenante, 'Military Crisis and Contested Reforms', *Asia Maior 2016*, pp. 407-411.

towards their neighbour.⁴⁷ The hardening of Ghani's tone towards Pakistan was also exacerbated by the serious border fights that occurred during the summer between members of the armed forces.⁴⁸ This climate quickly involved commercial bilateral cooperation, with Ghani accusing Islamabad of hindering trade relations between Kabul and Delhi. On 22 October, the Kabul government announced a ban on all Pakistani trucks wishing to enter the Afghanistan territory.⁴⁹ Later, during an official visit to India in October, Ashraf Ghani announced the withdrawal of Afghanistan from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), unless Pakistan agreed to concede to Kabul commercial access to India through the Pakistani border crossings of Wagah and Attari.⁵⁰

While the debate on Pakistan's connections with parts of the Afghan insurgency is complex, and lasted for years, some well-informed sources seemed to indicate that Kabul tended to overestimate, or oversimplify, Pakistan's ability to control the Taliban. In reality, relations between the Taliban and Pakistan, or better put, between the Taliban and Pakistan's powerful military intelligence, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), have been much more difficult than usually admitted.⁵¹ There have always been sectors of the Taliban who were closer to Pakistan and others who resented Islamabad's policy. While it seems safe to argue that Pakistan tried to influence Taliban politics, another matter is to establish a direct line between the two. This has been indicated by the difficulties with which Pakistan has tried to convince the Taliban to sit at the negotiating table with the Kabul government. Moreover, it has been reported that, over the past two years, various Taliban commanders have moved their families to Qatar or other Gulf countries, in order to be less vulnerable to Pakistani pressure.⁵² This also appeared in line with the decision by the Taliban in 2013 to open their political office in Qatar, rather than in Pakistani territory.⁵³ Furthermore, a core issue seemed to lie in the process of gradual reorganisation and vertical transformation undertaken by the Taliban over the past few years. This process probably made the Taliban increasingly autonomous from Pakistan. Furthermore,

47. Mujib Mashal, Azam Ahmed, 'Afghan Peace Efforts Reopens Wounds Over Pakistan', *The New York Times*, 8 March 2015.

48. Bashir Ahmad Naadim, 'Af-Pak Border Skirmish Stops. 9 Dead, 42 Wounded', *Pajhwok Services*, 5 May 2017.

49. 'Ghani Bans Pakistani Trucks from Entering Afghanistan', *Tolo News*, 23 October 2017.

50. 'No to CPEC Unless Pakistan Provides Trade Access to India: Afghan President', *Pakistan Today*, 25 October 2017.

51. Borhan Osman, 'Taleban in Transition 2: Who is in Charge Now?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 22 June 2016, pp. 2-5. The ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) is the military intelligence agency of Pakistan.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

53. *Idem*, 'The Murree Process: Divisive Peace Talks Further Complicated by Mullah Omar's Death', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 5 August 2015, p. 3.

there were also suggestions that the Taliban has tried to establish connections with other regional actors – such as Iran – in order to be less dependent on Islamabad.⁵⁴

Another aspect that is often underestimated is the ability of the border region to maintain its own autonomy from the control by the regional states. Since 2001, there has been a strategy by the states to extend their control over the Af-Pak border, especially by the Pakistani military. However, this process, that Gilles Dorronsoro called the «nationalisation of politics», did not prevent the border area from maintaining substantial autonomy.⁵⁵ The continuous flow of resources caused by the war, in the form of smuggled goods, weapons and drugs, helped to a considerable extent the border tribes to maintain their autonomy from the intrusion of the state.

5. The troubles of the National Unity Government

The internal political situation was characterised by the political crisis of the National Unity Government (NUG) formed in 2014. The government had to face a growing opposition that coalesced around well-known figures of the Afghan political scene. An active role was played by the former president Hamid Karzai, and by some former protagonists of the Afghan war, such as Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf. There was also an internal strife between the president and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah over government services' appointments. Those choices prompted accusations, brought mainly by members of minority communities, of preferential treatment towards Pashtuns and Tajiks.⁵⁶ These events emphasised once again the tendency in Afghan politics of re-shifting around ethnic and tribal-personal networks of authority, and the difficult institutionalisation of the political processes. Moreover, these issues have to be seen in the framework of the upcoming parliamentary elections, originally due in 2016 and then postponed to 2018. With the election process looming, all the main political actors are reassembling their networks of consensus, which in Afghanistan means seeking contact with the regional and ethnic power bases. This obviously tends to fragment even more the political scene.

The increasing difficulties of the NUG were initially rooted in the rivalry between president Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah

54. *Ibid.*

55. Gilles Dorronsoro, 'The Transformation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border', in Shahazad Bashir, Robert D. Crews, *Under the Drones. Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 30-33; Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith. Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 204.

56. International Crisis Group, 'Afghanistan: the future of the National Unity Government', *Asia Report* N° 285, 10 April 2017, p. 16.

on the distribution of government offices. More recently, the conflict had become a confrontation between the NUG and other political figures that, in the course of the year, had begun to organise themselves into official opposition parties. In order to understand the crisis, it is important to note that the NUG was in fact a forced marriage based on the contested result of the 2014 presidential election. The main reason behind the formation of the NUG was in fact that of avoiding a new civil war. The agreement was intended as temporary, pending the convening of a *Loya Jirga* («Grand Assembly») that was supposed to institute the position of prime minister (rather than chief executive), defining its powers and those of the president.

Since the agreement was based on an equal division between Ghani and Abdullah, it inevitably created discontent on both sides. It made it impossible for the two leaders to maintain all the promises made during the electoral campaign. Although the complaints were crosscutting, they came mainly from the Tajik supporters of the chief executive, who was accused by his supporters of being weak towards Ghani⁵⁷. During the year, this situation triggered a confrontation between technocrats and *mujahidin*, with many of the former military commanders accusing Ghani of excluding them from power in favour of new men. Indeed, after the 2014 election the technocrats acquired more influence than during the Karzai era⁵⁸. This gradually led to the formation of various groups of opposition: the Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council led by former *mujahidin* commander Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf; the High Council of Jihadi and National Parties, of former president Sibghatullah Mujaddidi; the High Coalition Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan, formed by Mohammed Atta, Rashid Dostum and Muhammad Mohaqqueq.⁵⁹ These various groups consolidated around Hamid Karzai, who assumed the role of supporter of the veteran commanders. Many of these former commanders held the opinion that it was necessary to regroup the old armed militia to support the ANDSF, an idea that Ghani refused to consider. Karzai did not limit himself to playing the role of shadow coordinator of the opposition. He also criticised openly his successor's policy in very harsh terms; in particular, he accused Ghani of passively accepting heavy US military operations in the country.⁶⁰ Although Karzai did not formalise his political position, according to some sources his activity was designed to prepare his own return to the presidency. To this end, the former president

57. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammed Ali, 'The National Unity Government and the Re-Shaping of Political Coalitions in Afghanistan', *Center for Research and Policy Analysis*, 9 January 2018, pp. 1-5.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 5, 17; Ali Yawar Adili & Lenny Linke, 'The Politics of Opposition: A Challenge to the National Unity Government?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 27 October 2016.

60. Mujib Mashal, 'Calling Successor «a Traitor», Afghan Ex-Leader Denounces US-Bombing', *The New York Times*, 15 April 2017.

and the opposition pressed for a swift convening of the Loya Jirga. According to some analysts, Karzai planned to use the Loya Jirga to pave the way for his return to power.⁶¹

Another complex issue that contributed to the crisis of the NUG was the return of the senior *mujahidin* commander Gulbudding Hekmatyar to Kabul. Although the agreement for his return had seemed a marginal event in 2016, it then became a source of bitter political confrontation between Ghani and his opponents. Some political forces, especially the Jamiat-i-Islami and the Hezb-e-Wahdat, opposed Hekmatyar's return due to his past military actions during the civil war. The latter, in particular, resented Hekmatyar's return because of his supposed anti-*shī'a* attitude. This debate was, in fact, exacerbated by a series of harsh statements released by Hekmatyar's faction of the Hezb-i-Islami towards Iran, the *shī'a* community, and the Jamiat-i-Islami.

Further problems arose from the ambiguities surrounding the details of the peace deal between Hekmatyar and the government. According to some sources, the deal was sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which supported the establishment of Hezb-i-Islami as a political contender for the next parliamentary elections, on the side of president Ghani.⁶² Despite the difficulties, the NUG demonstrated a remarkable resilience and managed to survive. Apart from Ghani's energetic personality, the resistance of his government was due to the high political cost of a change of government in such a precarious scenario as that of Afghanistan. Most political figures, although dissatisfied with the government, were unwilling to overthrow it for fear that this could lead to a civil war or to the suspension of international financial support.⁶³

6. *The socio-economic aspects of the crisis*

The security situation in 2017 still dominated the Afghan economy, hindering private investment and consumption. The low level of rainfall between March and May negatively affected growth of the agriculture sector during the first half of the year.⁶⁴ Other relevant factors were the temporary closure of the border with Pakistan, which caused an increase in the price of food, and the pressure caused by refugees. In 2017, the number of Af-

61. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammed Ali, 'The National Unity Government', pp. 13-14.

62. Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Hizb-i-Islami Deal: Dawn of Reconciliation or Sunset of NUG?', *Center for Research and Policy Analysis*, 5 September 2017, pp. 1-3.

63. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammed Ali, 'The National Unity Government', pp. 19-20.

64. 'Asian Development Outlook 2017 Update', *Asian Development Bank*, 2017, p. 170.

ghan refugees who returned from Iran and Pakistan totalled about 296,000. Moreover, more than 200,000 people were internally displaced due to the conflict, and 44,000 due to natural disasters.⁶⁵ This mass of people has obviously caused heavy pressure on the state's resources. Despite these negative developments, the economic indicators have continued to signal a moderate growth, which was estimated at 2.6 % at the end of the year, as compared to 2.2 % in 2016.⁶⁶ The inflation rate also rose to 5.1 % in the first half of the year from 4.5 % the preceding year, especially driven by the rising price of food.⁶⁷ The national budget continued to be dominated by foreign aid; the annual trade deficit was about 33 % of GDP, and was financed by international aid. Positive signs came from the fiscal area, where the domestic revenues were estimated to grow from 10.5 % in 2016 to 10.8 % at the end of 2017, which is near the government's targets.⁶⁸ These results were undoubtedly due, at least in part, to the reform agenda pursued by the Kabul government. This was epitomised by the presentation at the Brussels conference on Afghanistan, in October 2016, of the «Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework» to the donor countries and international organisations.⁶⁹ Another decisive development for the reassurance of domestic and international partners, and for the stabilisation of the economy, was the decision by Trump to confirm US commitment to Afghanistan.

65. 'The World Bank in Afghanistan. Overview', *The World Bank*, October 2017.

66. *Ibid.*

67. 'Asian Development Outlook 2017 Update'.

68. 'The World Bank in Afghanistan. Overview'.

69. *Ibid.*; Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), 2017 to 2021'.

