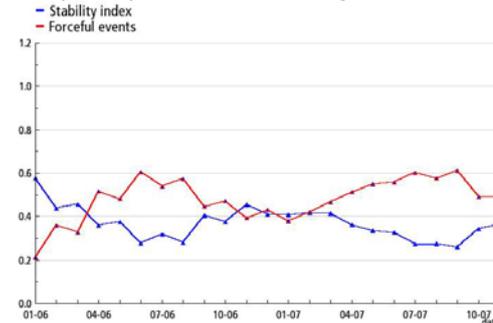


AFGHANISTAN | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

Afghanistan remains instable in the face of mounting insecurity, weak governance, political polarization, and a booming drug economy (see graph).

Country Stability and Forceful Events in Afghanistan



Source: FAST event data

Although national and international troops primarily focus on containing the Taliban insurgency by military means, the Karzai administration backed by Britain is simultaneously exploring the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban. In mid-October, the Taliban forwarded a "wish-list" to the government, which included demands for the control of ten southern provinces, a time-table for the withdrawal of foreign troops and the release of all Taliban prisoners. Although these demands are unlikely to be taken seriously by the government, there appears to be some willingness on both sides to consider talks as a means for conflict resolution and the recognition that neither side might win this war militarily. Similarly, at the end of October it was reported that the government was trying to strike a deal with Mullah Abdul Salaam, a former Taliban commander and member of the Alizai tribe in northern Helmand. The deal, which has so far not materialized, is being built on the exploitation of tribal differences in the area and within the Taliban movement. All endeavors for talks

between the government and the predominantly Pashtun Taliban are seen with great suspicion by the leaders of non-Pashtun ethnic groups from northern and central Afghanistan and also from regional powers like India and Iran.

On 6 November, a suicide bomber blew himself up in front of a sugar factory near Pul-i-Khumri in the northern province of Baghlan. Among the 72 people killed were several dozen school children, five teachers and six out of 18 visiting parliamentarians. The most prominent among the dead was the Hazara Shi'ite Sayed Mustafa Kazimi, spokesman of the powerful opposition party United National Front (UNF). It has not yet been fully determined who was killed by the bombing and who was killed in the ensuing gunfire from the security guards of the lawmakers and other security personnel. The Taliban have denied their involvement in the incident and no other group has claimed responsibility for it, albeit many analysts believe that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami might have been somehow involved. The incident can, on the one hand, be seen as an attack against the country's Western-style democratic institutions and the ongoing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and on the other hand, as a struggle among different local leaders for control of lucrative plants in the north. The sugar factory had received German support and provided work for 2,500 farmers to wean them away from poppy cultivation.

In terms of foreign relations, no major changes have been observed. In the past two months, the Pakistani government has primarily been absorbed in dealing with an internal crisis, thus putting Afghan-Pakistani politics on the back-burner. As President Musharraf and the pro-Musharraf parties are most likely to remain in power after the elections, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan is not expected to change significantly. Nevertheless, the level of militancy in Pakistan is likely to rise as Afghan insurgents move into Pakistan's tribal areas from the south-east to support their Pakistani counterparts. Talks of the "small jirga" established in the aftermath of the Afghan-Pakistani peace jirga held in August had to be rescheduled, reportedly due to intense fighting between Pakistani security forces and militants in the Swat Valley. Despite continued allegations by the US and NATO of Iranian involvement in the insurgency in Afghanistan, Afghan officials continue to emphasize their good relations with Iran.

SECURITY

Fighting between the Taliban and ISAF/NATO, US-coalition forces and Afghan security forces in the southern parts of the country continued unabated. The Taliban maintain warfare in the south and east while also moving activity into new areas close to Kabul. At the same time, they temporarily control parts of the highway and mark their presence through occasional attacks in the north. In Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Farah, where mainly British, Canadian, Dutch and US coalition troops have a presence, the Taliban managed to capture several districts in the past months, albeit some of them only temporarily. According to a recent survey by the Sensil Council, the Taliban currently control more than 50% of the country's territory but such claims are adamantly rejected by NATO and Afghan officials. In any case, the concept of control remains blurred in the Afghan context. The expanding Taliban insurgency has brought the militancy-related death toll to unprecedented levels since 2001. According to figures by the Associated Press, over 6000 people have died in insurgency related violence this year, while thousands of others were injured or displaced. Moreover, the death toll of international troops in Afghanistan has also increased: the relative death rate for US troops in Afghanistan is now nearly twice as high as in Iraq.

Besides the Taliban insurgency in the southern parts of the country, the north is facing increasing lawlessness caused by drug gangs, criminal organizations and local warlords. In light of the spread of the Taliban insurgency and

the possibility of government-Taliban talks, non-Pashtun factional leaders in the north are also reported to have re-armed their militias, making disarmament and demobilization efforts illusionary and adding to a deepening north-south ethnic divide. However, the risk of a joint armed insurrection by the UNF factional leaders is still minimal since the alliance is too split to form a common front.

Calls by NATO to increase the number of international troops have only had a very limited effect. Despite growing domestic skepticism about its engagement in Afghanistan, Germany's lower house approved the extension of Germany's deployment of 3000 troops and six tornado jets for another year. At the same time, the Dutch cabinet on 30 November extended its mandate of 1,650 troops in Uruzgan until December 2010, a decision that might affect the up-coming renewal of Canada's mission (the mission ends in February 2009). On 1 November, Japan stopped re-fuelling US warships involved in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan due to a political deadlock over the extension of the supply mission. Due to coalition and NATO forces' unwillingness to significantly expand their presence, the Defense Ministry in December advocated the creation of a 200,000-strong Afghan army to deal with possible external threats and the mounting Taliban insurgency. According to official figures, the Afghan army currently stands at around 57,000 troops and should reach the targeted strength of 70,000 in a few months. However, it is noteworthy that only a small proportion of the Afghan troops is operational without outside assistance.

Ongoing insecurity negatively affects the operational space of development and humanitarian agencies. The UN regards one third of the country as dangerous and inaccessible to humanitarian workers. By the end of October, criminal gangs and insurgents have reportedly killed over 40 aid workers (mostly Afghans), abducted 76 aid workers and attacked or looted around 55 convoys. On 10 October, a German engineer kidnapped three months earlier and four Afghan staffers of UNAMA were released by militants linked to the Taliban in exchange for five Taliban prisoners. Despite the fact that no new cases of kidnappings of internationals have been reported in the past two months and the lifting of the governments' travel ban for areas outside of Kabul, the mobility of humanitarian actors remains seriously restricted. Slow-paced reconstruction efforts and deteriorating security, in turn, are raising Afghan frustrations with the Karzai administration.

Amidst wide international protest, Afghanistan on 7 October ended a three-year moratorium and executed 15 convicts by gunfire. The crimes committed by those executed include murder, kidnapping, armed robbery and involvement with the Taliban/al-Qaeda.

The Karzai administration has also started cracking down on some of the numerous private security firms operating without license. Private security firms are still working in a legal vacuum and have, at times, been involved in criminal activity, corruption, etc.

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC

According to the Human Development Report 2007 released in November, Afghanistan still ranks amongst the poorest and least developed countries in the world (174 out of 178) despite steady economic growth, progress in school enrolment (from 900,000 to 5.4 million enrolments over the past five years), and dropping infant mortality. Afghanistan fairs particularly poorly in equality between women and men and life expectancy is estimated to be only around 43 years.

Apart from the booming drug trade, drug addiction amongst Afghans has seen a sharp increase. According to UN figures, around 4% of the Afghan population is addicted to drugs (opium, heroine, cannabis); most of the addicts are deportees from Iran and Pakistan.

Towards the end of October, Iran restarted the deportation of illegal Afghan migrants with around 500 people returning each day. These returnees, who mostly come through Herat and Nimroz, face difficult conditions in Afghanistan with winter approaching.

OUTLOOK

Given the reluctance of involved countries to significantly increase their troops, the international troops' supremacy over the Taliban will continue to depend on aerial strikes, which raises the risk of civilian casualties. Taliban violence might, however, decline in the winter months because many of the infiltration routes from Pakistan will be blocked. This pattern was observed throughout past years, although it will be less marked this year due to shifting combat techniques. Political polarization is expected to intensify while local power holders consolidate their power bases. Given the current high prices for basic commodities, a harsh winter would add an additional strain on the Afghan population.

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