



## **THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

*Anatol Lieven*

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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For the second time in a generation, Afghanistan and its neighbours are facing the potential collapse of the Afghan state, and the consequences of this collapse for the region. When this occurred in 1992, the result was violent chaos, ethnic massacre, and the restoration of a form of state order by the Taliban – thereby ushering in the new chapter in Afghanistan's tragedy that began in September 2001.

This time round, it is highly unlikely that the Taliban will be able to storm into power in Kabul – but at present, it seems equally unlikely that the Taliban and the Kabul-based forces will be able to reach a settlement; or that any Kabul-based government and army without Taliban participation will be able to extend state control to the Pashtun south and east of the country. The result may be an indefinite civil war, with disastrous consequences for Afghans and severe ones for the entire region. Pakistan is the most endangered country of all by this prospect, and is likely for the foreseeable future to face a situation of anarchy on its western border.

At the heart of both Afghanistan's and Pakistan's travails lies the issue of Pashtun fears, hopes and resentments. The Taliban have always assiduously exploited the perception that after the fall of the Communist regime in 1992, and once again after the US overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Pashtuns became victims of domination and oppression by the other ethnic groups. The growth of anti-minority nationalism among the Pashtuns has been one of the most striking and dangerous developments of the past two decades. The choice of Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, as President, was intended to diminish this tendency and did so for a while.

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However, the failure of his government to improve the lives of the population, combined with a Pashtun belief that it remains dominated by non-Pashtuns, has meant that in recent years Pashtun grievances have once again become a potent source of Taliban recruitment. Sympathy for the Taliban has also taken deep root among the Pashtuns of Pakistan

A key question now facing both Afghanistan and Pakistan is whether once the widely-hated US and Western military presence is removed (or reduced to small and less visible elements), Pashtun support for both the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban will recede; or whether hatred of the states in both Kabul and Islamabad is now so great among Taliban supporters that they will continue their struggle regardless of the US withdrawal.

A hopeful vision is given by the leading French expert on Afghanistan Gilles Dorronsoro,

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“The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban... We have one major political weapon: a progressive and focused scaling down of combat troops *on our own terms* [my italics]. This would neutralise the Taliban’s appeals for Jihad against unbelieving foreign invaders, open up space for Afghan institutions and political solutions, and allow us to focus our efforts on areas where we can still make a difference.”<sup>i</sup>

As I saw myself in Afghanistan in 1989, foreign military withdrawal can have an effect. With the hated Soviet occupiers gone, hostility to the regime diminished, at least in the cities. The conflict was seen to have reverted to what it had been before the Soviets invaded, namely a civil war between Afghans. As a result, the failings of the Mujahedin were highlighted, especially as far as people in the cities were concerned. On the other hand, the Afghan Army’s morale improved, since they were no longer subjected to constant humiliating command by the Soviets, and once they had won on their own a solid victory over the Mujahedin at Jalalabad in March 1989.

Secondly, the Kabul state had long since ceased to be a “Communist” regime and had become in effect a military one. As such, despite numerous defections and desertions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were the heirs of an Afghan Royal military tradition stretching back to Abdur Rahman, and in some respects to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Not only was the Afghan army the only moderately successful modernising achievement of the Afghan monarchy, but the great bulk of its military history and tradition lay in fighting not against outside invaders, but against tribal and religious rebels within Afghanistan – of which the Mujahedin were the lineal descendants.

By the end of the 1980s the Communists had become the heirs of the urban tradition in Afghanistan, now mortally threatened by its own old tribal and religious enemies, with their dreams of looting the cities and abducting middle class women in the name of God and of tribal freedom. This is of course precisely what happened to the cities when the Mujahedin took them over in 1992, and the city-dwellers were well aware of what was in store for them. This consolidated support for the regime in many of the cities.

Finally, the Soviets and Communists had developed a sophisticated strategy of buying off sections of the Mujahedin. Only rarely (as in the case of General Dostum) did this involve actually bringing them over to the Communist side. Far more frequent was a deal whereby in return for Soviet money, individual Mujahedin commanders and their men remained publicly at war with the regime, but in fact only pretended to fight, staging only very limited attacks or even mock battles. In a number of areas, a key part of this strategy was deals to share the opium poppy harvest, and guarantee uninterrupted harvesting and transport to Mujahedin groups who agreed not seriously to attack the regime.

This pattern of local deals is beginning to replicate itself – for example in northern Helmand, where in December, to the horror of the West, the army not only reached a truce with the local Taliban, but began joint patrolling with them. Across large parts of the South, the army and police are pulling back from exposed positions and checkpoints. This process is bound to intensify in the years to come, since even if President Karzai or his successor signs an agreement allowing the USA to continue basing some forces in Afghanistan, according to President Obama's plan combat air support will cease at the end of this year. Medical evacuation by air for wounded Afghan soldiers has already ceased – with predictable consequences for morale.

Nonetheless, today as in the 1980s, the only moderately successful state institution is the Afghan National Army. Its foundation is partly the old Communist army with its Royal roots, and partly the Tajik (and to a lesser extent Uzbek and Hazara) forces of the former Northern Alliance. It would seem to follow logically therefore that not only will the ANA obviously be critical to preserving whatever Afghan regime we leave behind from the attacks of the Taliban, but that it may well *be* the future regime, just as it was under Najibullah.

But like the PDPA state and its army in 1989, the present Afghan state and army are utterly incapable of raising the revenue that it needs to maintain its basic functions, let alone fight off the Taliban. Today, around 90 percent of the Afghan budget is paid for by foreign aid, and almost 100 percent of the military budget – four billion dollars a year – is provided by the USA. There is no prospect whatsoever of the Afghan state being able to raise these revenues itself. On the contrary, since even the ten percent of its money that the state does raise for itself mostly comes from import tariffs, and imports are above all being sucked in by the boom created by Western aid, Afghan state revenues can actually be expected to decline sharply in the years to come.

The only way that the Afghan state could try to raise large quantities of its own revenue would be by legalizing and taxing the heroin trade. This of course is something that the international

community is very unlikely to allow – though I have no doubt that (as before 1992) government troops and police on the ground will in practice do this in order to support themselves. Indeed, they already are.

The PDPA state lasted so well that it outlasted the Soviet Union itself – and then promptly collapsed for want of Soviet aid. Unlike the USSR in 1989, the USA is in no danger of ceasing to exist over the next few years – but US willingness to help the Afghan state may well cease to exist; and in that case the Afghan state will fall.

However, even if this does happen, it does not mean that the Taliban will be able to capture central power, let alone conquer the non-Pashtun areas of the country. Russia itself is far more powerful – and far more concerned by Islamist militancy – than it was in the mid-1990s; as Iranian officials have told me, Iran has the same attachments to its traditional allies in Afghanistan that it did then, and is absolutely determined to prevent the Taliban from conquering Herat or Hazarajat; and most importantly of all, India is very much wealthier and has already made some very important investments in Afghanistan in an effort to limit the influence of Pakistan.

Since neither the Taliban nor their enemies can win an outright victory in Afghanistan, the basis should exist for a negotiated settlement and power sharing. Unfortunately, however, to judge by recent news most of the leaders of the Taliban and the former Northern Alliance are very far indeed from a willingness to seek such a settlement.

While sensible Indian officials recognize that the Kabul government cannot rule the whole country, and fear Indian being drawn into an Afghan quagmire, they too seem indomitably opposed to the idea of a negotiated settlement. Part of the reason for this is that (as I observed myself and as a leading Indian analyst in the West told me with concern), Indian officials and parliamentarians seem absolutely convinced that Pakistani policy remains what it was in the late 1990s: namely to back the Taliban to win a complete victory in Afghanistan. No amount of arguments and evidence concerning the effects of a decade of domestic Islamist insurgency on the Pakistani military and civilian mindset seems to have any effect in Delhi; and unfortunately, Pakistan and India lack the means of “back-channel” communication that would allow Pakistani representatives to try to convince Indians that things have changed. Such channels need to be developed as part of a wider push for improved Pakistani-Indian relations, without which there is no possibility of a peace settlement in Afghanistan

For unless some part of this equation changes, the Afghan civil war will therefore continue, and Pakistan will continue to border on war and anarchy in Afghanistan. The best that Pakistan can hope for is that the withdrawal of US and Western forces from Afghanistan, and a further reduction in drone strikes, will reduce radicalization in Pakistan, and especially in the Pashtun areas. Perhaps a reduction in the US presence will also reduce the desire of Pakistani voters for a peace agreement with the Pakistani Taliban, and might stiffen the resolve of the governments in Islamabad and Peshawar to fight them.

None of this is certain however. It is entirely clear that the Pakistani Taliban have long since developed an identity and an agenda of their own, only partly linked to the Afghan jihad, and dedicated to the overthrow of the existing Pakistani state. Many are now also motivated by a desire to take

revenge on the Pakistani military for the deaths of relatives. For a long time to come therefore, irrespective of what happens in Afghanistan, Pakistan will face its own Islamist insurgency, not only in FATA and KP, but increasingly in Karachi too. And irrespective of what happens in Afghanistan, Pakistanis will need to fight against this insurgency if they wish their country to survive, let alone prosper.

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<sup>i</sup> Gilles Dorransoro, *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, series on Foreign Policy for the Next President, January 2009).

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