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Afghanistan: A Civil War State of Mind

By hunkering down, the U.S. and Afghan governments hope to eventually bring the Taliban to the table.

By Kevin Laiveling
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While the finishing touches were being put on the Trump administration's plan for the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban overran the district center of Khamab, in the northern Jawzjan province. This highlights a growing concern surrounding the strength of the resilient Taliban insurgency, which is believed to control or contest 35 percent of the population, or similarly, 40 percent of Afghan districts.

Offering a logic for this dismal outlook, the United States and the Afghan government point to a process of "security prioritization," detailed in the latest Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report as "identifying the most important areas that the [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] (ANDSF) must hold to prevent defeat, and placing less emphasis on less vital areas." In this way, the United States and Afghanistan are shifting from a counterinsurgency approach to a "civil war" footing that seeks to consolidate power in crucial areas to ensure long-term survival of the government in Kabul.

A Counterinsurgency vs. a Civil War Footing

There are fundamental assumptions that allow for a differentiation between counterinsurgency and civil war. Primarily, counterinsurgency assumes that there is a preponderance of power in favor of government forces in relation to the insurgency. As such, the goal of counterinsurgency

is to reassert government control over the entirety of the country, thereby subduing the insurgency and establishing the national government as the sole governing institution.

On the other hand, civil war implies a rough degree of parity in the balance of power between the government and the armed opposition. As the opposition in this scenario is able to consistently halt government advances and exert control over a substantial part of the country, the goal for the government forces shifts from regaining control over the entirety of the country to consolidating in and defending key areas that would ensure its long-term survival. In short, the civil war approach would focus on survival rather than an outright military victory.

Such a transformation was seen in Syria where, beginning in 2012, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad shifted from counterinsurgency to a civil war footing. As the armed Syrian opposition gained strength, Assad relinquished control of much of northern and eastern Syria to consolidate around his traditional power base in the west and southwest. In doing so, he secured his long-term survival while sacrificing his ability to forcefully re-unify Syria under his rule. That is, until Russian and Iranian interventions changed his fortunes.

Kabul Takes Stock

As the Syrian regime calculated in 2012 that it could no longer secure the entire country, so too does the Afghan government seem to be moving towards a similar conclusion. In the face of a resilient Taliban insurgency, mounting casualties among Afghan forces, and international partners moving to place responsibility for the fighting squarely on Kabul's shoulders, President Ashraf Ghani and the Afghan government have had to reconsider what their forces are capable of.

By concentrating on "vital areas… that the ANDSF must hold to prevent defeat" and "placing less emphasis on less vital areas," Kabul acknowledges that it is not capable of reasserting its authority over the whole of Afghanistan at this time. Instead, the government is digging in to defend the areas they deem vital to survive in the long term, such as the major provincial and district capitals and populations centers, while ceding the hinterland to the Taliban. To fill the gaps in the areas where the government has only a minimal presence, the state is increasingly relying on militias to defend the areas from Taliban advances. Taken together this constitutes a trend of shifting towards defense, as the government strategically weakens its presence to entrench itself in a more durable position.

In order to retain these key areas, the United States has focused in recent years on building the capacity of Afghan security forces and has committed special forces and air power to help the Afghans defend or recapture vital territory when threatened or overrun by Taliban offensives. Such a scenario played out after the Taliban overran the northern city of Kunduz. Following the Taliban's capture of the city, Afghan forces, backed by U.S. special operations forces and close air support, mounted a determined counteroffensive and regained control from the insurgents.

What is the Endgame?

With his promise that "we are not nation-building again," and choosing to shift America's focus to counterterrorism in Afghanistan, President Trump's strategy seems set to show more continuity with the last few years than change. What has been lacking over this span has been a clear concept of "victory" or what a successful outcome in Afghanistan would constitute.

Two options for concluding the war stand out when conceptualizing a shift to a civil war stance. First, by credibly signaling an ability to survive in the long run and deny the opposition total victory, the government could convince the opposition that gains on their part can only be the result of a political settlement. On the other hand, as with Syria's Assad, the government can hunker down and wait for its fortunes to change via a third party intervention or some other *deus ex machina.* Despite the impending troop surge, it seems that among Western policymakers there is an aversion to going back on the offensive in Afghanistan. Rather, the goal of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has become an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process."

As the reality of the stalemate on the ground has become more evident, talks of "reconciliation" have featured in policy discussions among analysts and officials alike. Indeed, in holding the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation the Afghan government has also acknowledged that "a sustainable means of ending the conflict is through a negotiated political settlement." This echoes the words of the U.S. Department of Defense's most recent report which claims that "the best way to ensure lasting peace and security in Afghanistan is through reconciliation and a political settlement with the Taliban."

It is thus apparent that both U.S. and Afghan officials no longer believe a military defeat of the Taliban is possible. Rather, by adjusting to ensure its longevity, the Afghan government and its American backers seek to tire out the Taliban, hopefully leading them to calculate that they can only achieve any political goals through negotiation. As General John Nicholson, the commander of U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, put it, "this new strategy means the Taliban cannot win militarily. Now is the time to renounce violence and reconcile." This hardly indicates that U.S. and Afghan forces are ready to go on the offensive. Rather, by reconsolidating in "vital areas" and denying the Taliban the ability to overrun the entire country as they did in the 1990s, Kabul hopes to convince them that any progress will be made at the negotiating table alone.