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The pan-Afghan imperative

By Khalil Nouri and Michael Hughes

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Ethno-sectarian violence engulfing Afghanistan after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 2014 exit has become something of a fait accompli, especially given the depth and intensity of the divide between the Pashtuns and northern minority groups.

To be sure, Pakistan and the United States have stoked the flames of intra-Afghan animus in pursuit of broader geostrategic aims. However, unless the Afghans can come to some internal political accommodation, all roads will lead to civil war - with or without external interference.

For all practical purposes the Afghans are stuck in the middle of a US-Pakistani proxy war with the Americans backing the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of the former Northern Alliance against Pakistan's extended expeditionary force, the Taliban, which consists primarily of Pashtuns from the south and east.

Exploiting Afghan rivalries is a legacy of the British colonial "divide and conquer" stratagem which Pakistan inherited at the dawn of the Cold War. But the Pakistanis haven't been content with simply dividing, they've tried to destroy the very fabric of Pashtun tribal culture and replace it with a violently radical strain of Islam.

By providing militants with sanctuary and pitting Pashtuns against minorities in the north, Islamabad has been able to "keep the pot boiling" in an effort to keep Kabul under its thumb, part and parcel of its "strategic depth" doctrine driven by Pakistan's illusory competition with an ambivalent India.

The US, for its part, exacerbated tensions when it supported the Northern Alliance during the post-9/11 Taliban takedown. NATO has also built up a primarily non-Pashtun central army to prevent the Taliban from taking Kabul after 2014. Meanwhile, amidst this military stalemate, the CIA will continue its counter-terror operations against suspected anti-Western elements within the Pashtun tribal belt.

Afghanistan has been an acephalous society beset by a certain degree of ethnic and tribal rivalry for most of the past millennium. However, one could describe it as a form of "regulated anarchy" that was kept in check by a unifying monarch, especially during a 40-year era of "peaceful coexistence" which ended when superpowers began meddling in Afghan affairs in the 1970s. But even then one would never describe it as racial antagonism. In fact, since Afghanistan was founded in the mid-18th century it had enjoyed a long history of ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism until the US and Soviet Union began using it as a geopolitical chessboard. The country has never seen the type of racial animus that has plagued Afghanistan for the past 30 plus years.

For centuries the disparate Afghan tribes and ethnicities rallied whenever threatened by foreign domination. But because of societal fragmentation, the death of the dynastic principle and the absence of a well-respected national leader, the Afghans now lack a common lineal thread that could unify the nation. As a result, inter-ethnic ties have become so corroded Afghanistan will be too weak to defend itself against external actors like Pakistan after the international coalition leaves.

Afghanistan's vulnerability derives from a lack of political legitimacy, which will never be attained until there is ethnic and sectarian unity. Multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian political parties do not even exist for the Afghans have failed to share a common platform due to lack of direction.

The Afghans do have a common foe to rally against in Pakistan. Hence, the time is ripe for ethnic unity, balanced security forces and a "Pashtun awakening" that can restore Afghanistan's sacred tribal structure and reverse Pakistan's de-Pashtunization operations.

Prominent members from civil society from both sides of the ethnic divide have stepped forward recently and called for unification. Unfortunately, they have largely been ignored by the coalition, which has its eyes on the exit doors as the US continues to prop up the corrupt Karzai regime and local warlords who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Not to mention, it seems the US wants to strike a power-sharing arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban - an unholy alliance that could only make things worse.

Most Afghans long for pluralism, equality and political participation and the first step in realizing such a vision is the establishment of the country's first ever pan-Afghan political party. The US has a horrible record of trying to "pick winners" and must give Afghans of all ethnicities enough space to allow such an inclusive movement to come to fruition.

Incessant warfare over the course of the past three decades has engendered a culture of hesitancy amongst the Afghans, who are now voiceless and paralyzed with fear. A vibrant pan-Afghan movement can foster national solidarity, empower the silent majority, strengthen internal resolve and pave the way for the founding of a legitimate nation-state.