

# The Strategic Stalemate in War Waging and the Conceptual Conundrum of Peacemaking in Afghanistan

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## *Introduction*

Despite studying the situation in Afghanistan for many years, analysts and experts still cannot overcome a number of strategic and conceptual dilemmas and conundrums. In many instances, the attitudes of pundits as well as official circles to the conflict and to prospects of peace in Afghanistan are based on old-fashioned perceptions and notions. This cannot but lead analysts and decision makers to wrong interpretations of the problems and erroneous recommendations for their resolution.

The overall issue considered in this chapter is that of establishing peace, eliminating factors causing war and conflicts, defeating various terrorist groups, and devising ways and means of reducing geopolitical rivalry in this country. That being the case, strategic thinking on this issue should be based on theories of security and geopolitics.

In his famous book *On War*, the great strategic thinker Karl von Clausewitz drew special attention on the following “trinitities” when analyzing any war: (1) critical analysis, personal experience, and historical factors; (2) interactions between government, people, and the military; (3) the nature of enmity, purpose of actors, and degree of opportunity. The first has to do with approaches to a correct assessment of the situation. The second addresses the mutual relations between the three actors that manage the situation. The third involves the ratio between the three factors that affect the dynamics and turns of war.<sup>2</sup>

Some modern scholars may doubt whether Clausewitz’s work is still relevant for analyzing twenty-first-century wars, especially small and terrorist wars. Some scholars have even redefined war—as applied to small or civil wars—by proposing that it is no longer politics (or policy), but

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2 . Karl Klauzevits. 2007. *O voyne*. (perevod s nemetskogo). Moskva: EKSMO.

economics continued by other means. Interestingly, this redefinition does not contradict Clausewitz because, ultimately, the economics of war is also a means of war that has its own ends and laws.

Christopher Daase provides a good description of the difference between big wars between states and guerilla warfare. He points to the asymmetry in the essence of war for the two sides by recalling Clausewitz's tactics–strategy distinction and his scheme of the means, aims, and ends of war.<sup>3</sup> He also refers to Henry Kissinger's observation: "the guerilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win."<sup>4</sup>

With regard to the situation in Afghanistan and "the war on the Taliban," the view could be put forward that politics is war by other means, that is, that terrorists, whose modus vivendi is waging small wars, may resort to politics only to win time and get more chances to continue their military/guerilla actions. The realist school of the theory of international relations (IR) provides a relevant framework for analysis but it is noticeable in the process that this school itself should be supplemented by universal moral principles to resolve the problems we have to consider.

From this perspective, the central argument of this chapter is that war in Afghanistan gets into a strategic deadlock to a great extent because this specific war is poorly conceptualized and the vision of peace is distorted. Building on such thinking, the chapter is organized around the following two sets of overall problems for analysis: (1) the strategic stalemate in war waging and (2) the conceptual conundrum of peace-making in Afghanistan. An orderly exposition of these sets of problems will, first, reflect the whole analytical perplexity faced on the academic level and, second, hopefully contribute to efforts to correct both the strategic position and the conceptual framework on the political level.

### *War and Peace Controversies*

*Problem 1:* the assertion that war in Afghanistan has been in progress for about 25 years. This is partly true, but it considers only the situation that has existed from 1996 (the Taliban's seizure of power) until now. It considers this period as the historical turning point in the life of Afghans.

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3 Christopher Daase 2007. "Clausewitz and small wars," in Hew Strachan & Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.) *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 189.

4 *Ibid*, p. 190.

However, in order to understand even this period more correctly, one has to remember that the entire history of this country has almost never been free of tribal conflicts, civil wars, and geopolitical rivalries between great powers. This, in turn, has produced a specific mentality and way of life among the people, which are reflected in such features as being constantly ready for and anticipating the outbreak of war, and seeing participation as a fighter in a war as a tool for survival.

*Problem 2:* the conviction that there is no military solution to the Afghan problem. This is, probably, an incorrect assertion. When there is a war, there always has to be a military solution of one kind or the other. Non-military efforts are important but they have to come after or in parallel to military actions. The “no military solution” slogan sounds like an expression of good will, pacifism, and the value of negotiations – which is correct as far as it goes, but, in reality, it is idealistic and utopian in character and, as events have revealed, less than effective. Infinite war between implacable enemies cannot be stopped without military measures.

Since the Taliban’s seizure of power in Afghanistan in 1996 until today, there have been numerous calls and exhortations addressed to them by the international community, the Afghan government, the US and its allies. The Taliban have not taken these efforts seriously and have continued with their terrorist actions.

Clausewitz warned that the first strategic task for achieving success in any war should be correct comprehension of the nature of that war. So, what is the nature (or type) of the war that we are analyzing? Some people interpret it as a struggle for freedom on the part of Taliban. Others describe it as an internal Afghan affair, asserting that it is a civil war, a local conflict, or an internecine wrangling or the like. But all these perceptions are, it seems, incorrect, insofar as the war in Afghanistan is one of the biggest theatres of the global struggle against terrorism.

Clausewitz also asserted that one of the first strategic tasks is to deprive the enemy of his ability to resist. From this viewpoint, the military dimension not only should not be ignored, it should also be recognized as the most decisive dimension. More precisely, the Taliban should have been defeated, not engaged with.

*Problem 3:* regarding Afghanistan as a part of the Central Asian region. Recently, this concept has become popular among analysts and in official circles. Initially, it appeared in American analytical circles and later became

more widely spread.<sup>5</sup> One of the reasons for such a trend is to engage Central Asian states more in the Afghan question. There is no doubt that the historical, cultural, and religious affinities between the Central Asian and Afghan peoples are an important factor linking them. However, from the strategic (and even from historical) point of view, this single factor is not sufficient to warrant fitting them into the same region.

First, the name “Central Asia” was chosen for themselves in 1991 by five states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—and the international community recognized this region as being composed solely of these five. Second, the affinities mentioned above exist among other peoples neighboring Central Asian countries, but they are not portrayed as parts of Central Asia. Third, in contrast to the Central Asian nations, Afghanistan developed along a different historical path; a path that has been especially distinct since the beginning of twentieth century when Afghanistan was separated from the then Turkistan and an official border and diplomatic relations were established between the USSR and Afghanistan. Fourth, the ongoing, long-lasting war in Afghanistan has thrown this country into the category of a “failed state” where tribal affiliations are much stronger than civic ones, a factor that further differentiates this country from its Central Asian neighbors.

Recent research into this matter also confirms this thesis: “Although the Soviet transformation of society did not work out as initially planned, enormous changes did result—changes that created obvious differences that have remained to this day and mark northern Afghanistan and the regions to the north as distinctly different cultural, political and economic spaces.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, at least over a period of more than 100 years, Central Asia and Afghanistan have been developing in different directions. Afghanistan should be considered as a part of South Asia or Rimland to use geopolitical terminology. This reality, in turn, makes it obvious that the historical and geopolitical laws determining the development of Central Asia and

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5 S. Frederick Starr. 2005. “A ‘Greater Central Asia partnership’ for Afghanistan and its neighbors.” *Silk Road Studies*. <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13109-a-%E2%80%98greater-central-asia-partnership%E2%80%99-for-afghanistan-and-its-neighbors.html>.

6 For more information on this, see: Christian Bleuer & Said Reza Kazemi. 2014. “Between cooperation and insulation. Afghanistan’s relations with the Central Asian Republics.” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. [https://www.academia.edu/7506570/Between\\_Co\\_operation\\_and\\_Insulation\\_Afghanistan\\_s\\_Relations\\_with\\_the\\_Central\\_Asian\\_Republics](https://www.academia.edu/7506570/Between_Co_operation_and_Insulation_Afghanistan_s_Relations_with_the_Central_Asian_Republics).

Afghanistan are essentially different, and two different strategic approaches should be considered for the two regions.

*Problem 4:* initiatives to create a system of connectivity between the two regions as a means of supporting cooperation and peace-making in Afghanistan. This is a good idea in itself, but it needs to be realized relatively slowly, step by step. On the one hand, for example, Uzbekistan has helped Afghanistan with the construction of roads, bridges, highways, electrical transmission lines and other infrastructure. China within its mega initiative “One Belt, One Road” intends to create large-scale infrastructure in Afghanistan. However, such connectivity has rather a mechanical character and its effectiveness has yet to be seen.

On the other hand, connectivity in the strategic sense, that is, in the form of deep and comprehensive links, is a much more complicated issue, since, before considering connectivity between two regions, two other types of connectivity ought to be looked at. First, the integration of Central Asia into a single and cohesive region was proclaimed long ago (in 1991), yet there is much work still to be done; in other words, the five Central Asian countries should embody their own model of regional connectivity as a primary task. Second, Afghanistan’s own internal connectivity has yet to be achieved, since as a country it is very fragmented and divided. It has, above all, to turn itself into a single space, a state in which peace is firmly established, where conflicts are eliminated and whose entire territory is well governed from the political center. Henry Kissinger’s remark is worth quoting in his regard:

Traditionally, Afghanistan has been less a state in the conventional sense than a geographic expression for an area never brought under the consistent administration of any single authority. For most of recorded history, Afghan tribes and sects have been at war with each other, briefly uniting to resist invasion or to launch marauding raids against their neighbors.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the idea of connectivity between two regions, correct as such, may be a controversial approach to the task of peace-making in Afghanistan.

*Problem 5:* the various and contradictory views and rumors regarding the geopolitics of great powers and regional powers. At first glance, Afghanistan has, throughout its entire history and especially in the twentieth

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7 Henry Kissinger. 2014. *World Order*. London: Penguin Books, p. 319.

century, been the victim of geopolitical struggles between the great powers. It was at the epicenter of the Great Game, which is nowadays taking on a new shape. At the same time, besides the great powers, countries neighboring Afghanistan in and around South Asia (for instance, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others) have been constantly pursuing their own geopolitical goals and have supported certain political forces within Afghanistan, their proxies that are loyal to them (including the Taliban). According to another point of view, however, great power geopolitics did not yield any of the expected results for them and only turned Afghanistan into a buffer zone.

Each vision has its own strength and at the same time there is vagueness in each of them. For example, some analysts and observers believed that the United States would maintain its forces in Afghanistan over the long term because, besides the assistance mission in Afghanistan, Washington was pursuing other geopolitical goals, such as watching and deterring the rising great power, China. However, the sudden withdrawal of US from Afghanistan in August 2021 not only refuted this “classical” geopolitical vision but also created paradoxical impression of America’s “shameful” defeat by the Taliban.

Classical geopolitical visions like this, although they may look logical, are more often than not based not so much on substantial research as on suspicions and stereotypes. In general, living in a geopolitically tense environment is perhaps Afghanistan’s eternal historical fate. So, the future stabilization and accommodation of Afghanistan, as well as any strategic approaches to it, will be shaped by the presence of a permanent geopolitical environment.

*Problem 6:* the development and security dilemma. The previous problem is also the source of a new and complicated one, namely the development vs security dilemma. Recently, international analysts have advanced the concept of an “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led” process. This idea is a worthy one, but it too is not free from the idealistic approach.

Unfortunately, Afghans are unlikely to be able to establish peace and maintain stability in the country on their own because they are extremely vulnerable to external threats and heavily exposed to the geopolitical struggle of great and regional powers. Therefore, Afghans need to approximate to an “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led” process while continuing receive due assistance from the UN and other international organizations as well as the US, the EU, and other interested states.

It is often argued that economic development, attracting investment, reconstructing the country — all these will help ensure security and stability. However, the opposite is also true — namely that when and if security and stability are achieved, investment will come, the economy will grow, and the country will be reconstructed.

*Problem 7: too much diplomacy, too little solution.* The international agenda for Afghanistan has been overwhelmed with numerous international forums, calls, events, decisions, initiatives, negotiations, and the like. But the situation in this country remains unchanged and there is too little progress in terms of peace-making. Is the international community so incapable of resolving the Afghanistan conundrum?

The issue that we are analyzing is not an ordinary war between two states but a struggle against international terrorism. In contrast to an ordinary interstate war, in this struggle the classic tools of diplomacy are unlikely to be effective. Non-conventional asymmetric war requires non-conventional measures. There should be strategic solutions, not simply calls, forums, negotiations, and promises. What can be exchanged for what? What can be compromised, what cannot? When should pressure be exerted on the enemy and when is it possible to reconcile with him? In the Afghan context questions of this kind required a very specific approach; unfortunately, they were not addressed.

In March 2018 the international conference “Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity” was held in Tashkent. It was an important opportunity for Uzbekistan to put forward and demonstrate new initiatives. Representatives of 21 states, as well as the UN and EU, who participated in this conference adopted the Tashkent Declaration. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoev stated that Afghanistan should not be regarded as territory from which threats were escalating but as an area where new opportunities for cooperation were emerging. That was an important message and a call addressed to Afghans.<sup>8</sup>

This conference was undoubtedly a significant contribution to overall international efforts directed to peace-making in Afghanistan. But to what extent might the voices and signals from Tashkent be heard by warring

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8 Farkhod Tolipov. 2018. “The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Too Much Diplomacy, Too Little Solution.” *CACI Analyst*, May 29. <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13521-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-too-much-diplomacy-too-little-solution.html>.

sides? (See the next chapter in this volume on Uzbekistan's policy on Afghanistan)

*Problem 8:* confusing threat perception and threat assessment. More often than not, when one talks about threats, the changeability of those threats is overlooked. It should be said that the information available for threat assessment is incomplete and controversial. What is the real size and strength of fighting forces in Afghanistan? Why and how do they manage to recruit new fighters? How is their material, social, and military supply chain organized and equipped? These and other similar questions are left without in-depth investigation. A large volume of the information is secret or classified.

For example, the international media have spread rumors that, after their defeat in Syria, thousands of ISIL fighters fled to Afghanistan. How is it possible to check this information out and confirm it? One should keep in mind that such rumors can be spread for geopolitical purposes and be part of the information war. "In war," wrote Clausewitz, "under the influence of numerous and strong impressions, with the unreliability of all data and all assessments, there exist significantly more possibilities for a man to go astray, mislead himself and others than in other types of human activity... Nowhere can one encounter such a divergence of opinions as in war."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, accurate information management and strategic communication are crucial for correct threat assessments, threat perception, and strategic decisions (see below for strategic communication).

*Problem 9:* the allegation that people support the Taliban and alienate international forces. This issue should also be clarified. First, the statistical data (for instance, sociological surveys and polls) are quite ambivalent. Some experts claim 2–3% public support for the Taliban; others believe that this figure is not less than 50%.<sup>10</sup>

Second, it would be wrong to operate only with figures to assess the scope of and reasons for people's taking the Taliban's side. The following question is relevant: Why do people support groups of fighters who inhibit development on behalf of Islam, reject democracy, are against women's emancipation, and are a source of terrorism?

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9 Карл Клаузевиц, 2007. О войне. С.69.

10 The author had numerous conversations with the experts and analysts from Afghanistan itself and other countries dealing with this issue and their assessments of public opinion significantly diverged.



According to reports, “people’s support” is determined not so much by the Taliban’s ideology or the goals they are pursuing as by the fighters’ practice of instilling fear in the population. According to reports, fighters have invaded villages, homes, and uncontrolled land, threatened civilians, taken away their property, and strictly warned them against supporting the Americans or even the Afghan government.

Meanwhile, the symbol of Afghanistan of the days of US troops withdrawal in August 2021 were Afghans in horror trying to escape Taliban by clinging to the undercarriage of a flying plane. Obviously, this symbol eloquently displays the real rejection of the Taliban’s new order.

*Problem 10:* the Taliban’s demand for the withdrawal of US troops as a condition for peace. This demand, which sounds like an ultimatum, actually misled public opinion inside and outside the country. US troops were not in Afghanistan when Taliban seized power in the 1990s and “ruled” the country—the main reason why the country is mired in the civil war. US troops were not in Afghanistan when the Taliban provided sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden. Only after the events of 9/11 were US/NATO troops deployed in Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban (five years after the latter came to power). That is why this ultimatum was strategically irrelevant and unacceptable unless clear-cut assurances were given on the part of the Taliban regarding their respect for the then Afghan Constitution and giving up their extremist ideology and terrorist actions. Even if the US troops had to withdraw, in the event of worst-case scenarios in the aftermath of the withdrawal the possibility of their return to Afghanistan could have been officially envisaged and communicated to the Taliban. In fact, the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2012 between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America and the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) of 2014 between the two states might have provided strategic ground for post-war arrangements.<sup>11</sup> Instead, US withdrawal in August 2021 appeared to be unconditional and stipulated by the other secret agreement between the US and the Taliban signed in Doha.

All these problems reflect the situation of strategic stalemate in war waging in Afghanistan that cannot but affect the quality of the strategic decisions and policies of states exposed in one way or another to the devel-

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11 Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America. See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/BSA-ENGLISH-AFG.pdf>.

opment of the strategic situation in this war-torn country. Uzbekistan—a neighboring state to Afghanistan—is quite illustrative in this regard.

*Tashkent's idealistic pacifism and realistic preparedness*

Uzbekistan's position and policy with respect to issues of war and peace in Afghanistan have always reflected the principle "Hope for the best but prepare for the worst." Since the Soviet–Afghan war of 1979–1989, Uzbeks have associated Afghanistan with a dangerous area where thousands of their compatriots died during that war.

The memory of the past war continued to affect Uzbekistanis to some degree after their country gained independence and shaped their vision of the overall situation in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan found itself, so to speak, face-to-face with its neighbor after the disappearance of the powerful Soviet "security umbrella." That is why, Tashkent combined idealistic pacifism with realistic preparedness. A pacific approach was adopted to demonstrate good will toward the war-torn country and has perhaps hidden the desire to prevent any possible spillover of challenges from the territory of Afghanistan to Uzbekistan. Preparedness, in turn, is based on more realistic assumptions regarding the possibility of that spillover. For the latter case, all necessary measures were undertaken to strengthen the border guards and army units, which were well trained and stood ready to repel any threat.

So, long before the March 2018 conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent, Uzbekistan had shown itself in the international arena to be quite enthusiastic about Afghanistan-related activities. In the late 1990s it proposed the so-called "6+2" formula for resolving the Afghan question. This involved setting up a group composed of diplomatic representatives of six neighbor states of Afghanistan plus two great powers—the United States and Russia. This platform existed from 1998 till 2001 when the 9/11 terrorist actions occurred in the US. Afterwards, in April 2003, Tashkent proposed a new "6+3" formula with the inclusion of NATO in addition to the previous make-up. However, this initiative was rejected by Washington and the Alliance as irrelevant in the context of the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan that time. So, idealism and realism merely got in each other's way.

The then UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, explaining his disappointment with this post, said in his interview: "What really led me decide to go away was that we got all these people, all the neighbors,

plus Russia and the United States, to a meeting in Tashkent in July '99. They signed a very solemn declaration in which they said, 'We will not help any faction anymore and we will intervene with others not to help any faction.' One month later, there was a Taliban offensive that was supported, financed, armed by some of the people who had signed that declaration."<sup>12</sup>

The above-mentioned Tashkent international conference on Afghanistan held in March 2018 and the Tashkent Declaration adopted at it, like all previous endeavors, displayed what can only be described as "too much diplomacy and too little solution." In the text of the Declaration, phrases like "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" are repeated three times; the idea of direct talks with the Taliban is repeated three times, and the Declaration contains two clauses addressed to the Taliban urging them to move towards a peaceful settlement. The document also uses the dubious term "moderate Taliban" and, surprisingly, treats the movement as a legitimate political force in Afghanistan.

Such diplomatic wishful thinking has manifested itself throughout entire period since the Taliban's first coming to power in Afghanistan 27 years ago. However, to date the Taliban have shown no willingness to compromise. Over 27 years, the UN, the US, the EU, the RF, the Afghan government and neighbors from Central Asia have regularly addressed calls for peace and reconciliation to the Taliban leadership but all their efforts have been fruitless.<sup>13</sup> One major reason for frustration is that the Taliban enjoy comprehensive support on the territory of neighboring Pakistan, and curbing this support is a major precondition for peace enforcement in Afghanistan. So, having assumed that the Taliban are not an independent force but only a front for other more powerful forces standing behind it and pushing it, we can make a more correct strategic assessment of the nature of the war being waged, which then will, perhaps, look less like a small war or insurgency but like something much bigger.

Another major reason is hidden in ideological nature of Taliban, which makes the prospects for a political settlement very precarious. This fact has been well noted by many observers and in analytical works as well as in the official circles of the country.

Having considered and deeply analyzed a number of possible scenarios for a political settlement in Afghanistan, Omar Sadr has come to the con-

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12 Lakhdar Brahimi. 2005. *Conversations with History*. Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley. <https://iis.berkeley.edu/file/1695>.

13 Tolipov. "The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan."

clusion that real progress in peace-making in this country depends on the degree to which insurgency is weakened militarily and ideologically. Yet in 2019, he rightly pointed out the challenging nature of the task of rebuilding the social contract among different parties to the conflict. Any peace agreement with the Taliban—Sadr argues—should not negate the social transformation that Afghanistan has undergone in the past 17 years in terms of the proliferation of modern democratic norms, generational shift, and devolution of power. However, he is skeptical about prospects of a settlement because the “Taliban assumes that it is unbeatable and hence it doesn’t accept this mechanism.”<sup>14</sup> This again confirms the necessity of revising the overall strategic and conceptual frameworks of peace-making in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, besides the relatively ineffective Tashkent conference, in terms of the real peace-making Tashkent undertook another pacific step: in August 2019 the leaders of the Taliban were invited to Tashkent and negotiations were organized by the Uzbekistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Surprisingly, in the aftermath of that meeting the Afghan government issued a note in which it accused the Uzbek side of conducting the meeting without notifying the Afghan authorities. The Afghan Foreign Ministry released a statement on August 10 saying that, while Kabul appreciated international and regional cooperation, the “formal reception of Taliban representatives by the Republic of Uzbekistan and the dynamics of the talks do not help in facilitating peace talks between the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban.” Afghanistan’s Foreign Ministry called on “all countries, particularly our neighbors, to respect the leadership and ownership of the people and government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the Peace Process.”<sup>15</sup>

Some analysts and officials explain such steps on the part of Tashkent as efforts made in order to reduce possible threats to Uzbekistan from the Taliban through contacts with the latter. However, everything suggests that this threat is exaggerated because the Taliban does not possess an expansionist capacity. At the same time, only a few days had passed after the August meeting when new terrorist actions committed by the Taliban took place in Afghanistan. This simple fact is just one of many illustrating

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14 Omar Sadr. 2019. *Political Settlement of the Afghanistan Conflict: Divergent Models*. Kabul: Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 47, 96.

15 Bruce Pannier. 2019. “Uzbekistan experiences the pitfalls of peacemaking in Afghanistan.” <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-afghanistan-taliban-peacemaking-pitfalls/30126897.html>.

the conceptual deficiency of peace-making in the context of a strategic stalemate in waging war.

One analyst has noted that a high-level international conference on Afghanistan opened in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, on March 26 2018, even as Kabul was still recovering from an Islamic-State-led terror attack that killed 32 people in the capital on March 21. Just two days later, a car bomb in Helmand province killed a further 14 innocents. Week after week the death toll among the civilian population is increasing in Afghanistan and incidents are, alas, occurring so often that they are ignored in the global news cycles.<sup>16</sup>

As one observer put it, “until geopolitics and mediation of third parties prevail, Tashkent Conference’s lofty and idealistic goals such as ‘peace, security, and regional connectivity’ would be like castles in the air. The people and politics of Afghans have to be wise enough to understand the great game led by external players. Otherwise, Tashkent Declaration could be a phony peace-making process.”<sup>17</sup>

Well, this experience along with the above-mentioned strategic problems require us to look deeper into the conceptual issues that probably cause such unsuccessful experiences and the strategic stalemate. In other words, the strategic problems have to do with the reasons and factors behind the low efficiency of war waging and even its unsuccessful results; the second set of problems are about the misperception and misinterpretations of the existing situation and the actors in this war and about future anticipations.

### *Conceptual Dilemmas*

A number of conceptual flaws in analysis have created a big conceptual conundrum that further perplexes the assessment of the real situation in Afghanistan. For instance:

*First:* the assertion that the Taliban are Pashtuns and part of the Afghan society? Such rhetoric is just like an assertion that any other terrorists belong to a particular national community. Such an assertion cannot but

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16 C. Uday Bhaskar. 2018. “Tashkent conference: Fading hopes for a consensus on Afghanistan.” <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/03/27/tashkent-conference-fading-hopes-for-a-consensus-on-afghanistan/>.

17 Bawa Singh. 2018. “Tashkent declaration 2: Phony peace harbinger for Afghanistan?” *South Asia Journal* April 26. <http://southasiajournal.net/tashkent-declaration-2-phony-peace-harbinger-for-afghanistan/>.

create a wrong impression that this group constitutes something of a national liberation (or resistance) movement.

*Second:* portraying the Taliban as insurgents, not terrorists. The reason for such a depiction perhaps is twofold: (a) to soften their posture and make them look more attractive; (b) to make official negotiations with them more justifiable internationally. However, such a rebranding of the Taliban may, on the one hand, create an undesirable precedent in the overall global war on terror and, on the other, distort the real nature of Taliban. One recent story, among many, speaks for itself:

July (2019) was the deadliest month for Afghan civilians in over two years. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), over 1,500 civilians were killed or injured that month, the highest monthly toll so far in that year and the worst since May 2017. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the bulk of the casualties. There was no respite from the violence in August. Just days before the US and the Taliban reached a draft accord, the latter launched major offensives on the strategic town of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan and Pul-i Khumri, the capital of the neighboring Baghlan province. On September 2, just hours after Khalilzad had briefed the Afghan government on the draft deal and was outlining the draft agreement to the Afghan people in an interview broadcast on ToloNews television channel, the Taliban carried out a massive truck bomb explosion in Kabul's Green Village compound, a residential area for foreign nationals and offices, killing 16 people and injuring 119.<sup>18</sup>

*Third:* After the 2014 withdrawal of American forces some contingents were left in Afghanistan with the aim of training and assisting the Afghan Army and security forces. By the time of the full withdrawal in 2021, this specific mission turned out to have been a complete fiasco, because Taliban fighters not only continued terrorist attacks but in the end seized power without encountering any resistance from the Afghan Army. Does this reveal the fact that the Afghan forces were really unable to fight the insurgents effectively or was there something else going on behind the scenes that made those

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18 Sudra Ramachandran. 2019. "Afghanistan headed for a new spiral of violence as U.S. cancels talks with the Taliban", *CACI Analyst*, October 14. <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13590-afghanistan-headed-for-a-new-spiral-of-violence-as-us-cancels-talks-with-the-taliban.html>.

forces so impotent? How should the US forces' mission in Afghanistan be reconceptualized?

*Fourth:* the speculation that, after the US Forces withdrew, the Taliban would return to power. This was too simplistic a view and a misleading apprehension, at least for the following reason: “[T]he US would withdraw its forces in a hasty measure. With this, the state would become more fragile, weakened, and prone to collapse. The Taliban might escalate their offensive, and finally, the anti-Taliban constituency would have no other option than to regroup itself to fight and defend from Kabul,”<sup>19</sup> The likelihood of such a scenario should restrain all parties involved from new vicious cycle of war in absence of US forces.

The Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement between Afghanistan and the US which was adopted on 30 September 2014 contains the provision that says: “The United States shall regard with grave concern any external aggression or threat of external aggression against the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, recognizing that such aggression may threaten the Parties’ shared interests in Afghanistan’s stability and regional and international peace and stability.”<sup>20</sup>

We can hypothetically suppose (although this would be an illusion) that even after complete withdrawal the US forces might return to this country if it were again to be mired in deadly conflict with the Taliban because the latter were the main target when the former came to Afghanistan in 2001.

Meanwhile, this logic contradicts the fact the Taliban did return to power in August 2021 and without any resistance. However, it should be admitted that this return was not predetermined and happened in vague and strange circumstances.

*Fifth:* the irrelevance of democratic rhetoric. Many pundits argue that a democratic settlement is the solution for Afghanistan. In conditions of perpetual war, geopolitical rivalry, and tribal divisions Afghanistan has turned into a highly decentralized failed state. It is true that the pre-Taliban Constitution and political system of Afghanistan had a democratic design per se. However, this is just a de jure statement which is far from describing the de facto situation. Democratic settlement is hardly a relevant model for peace-building for such a very fragile and conflict-prone country and disunited people.

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19 Sadr. *Political Settlement of the Afghanistan Conflict*, p. 107.

20 Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America.

Sociological surveys made in Afghanistan on the perception of democracy among ordinary Afghans reveal that there are tensions between support for democratic values in the abstract and a willingness to apply these values in specific instances.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, democracy in Afghanistan (regardless of whether real or false) must be assessed in relation to Islam, war, and tribalism – three specific contexts this country is living in.

Therefore, peace-building ought primarily to take the form of state-building. It is the case in all non-democratic countries which are vulnerable to security threats: they always reduce freedoms and democratic institutions when they need to consolidate the state and ensure stability. A country as disrupted as Afghanistan needs state-building even more urgently than other non-democratic but stronger states. This thesis was also expressed some time ago by Lakhdar Brahimi: "There is now a very well-meaning and welcome Western interest in supporting democracy everywhere, but they want to do it like instant coffee. It doesn't happen that way".<sup>22</sup>

Mr. Brahimi said of his short-term objectives: "Give the country *a state* (emphasis in the original) that is fairly well organized, and give the people a sense that they can have justice, and you have done a lot for all the other things you talk about, in particular democracy." Elections, he said, should come at the end of the process, not the beginning.<sup>23</sup>

### *Strategic communication*

For a stronger analysis of the above topic leading to a more correct answer to the questions arising from the previously mentioned problems, it is necessary to pay attention to "strategic communication," which is a key notion in strategic analysis and strategic planning. It means delivering messages about strategic goals and plans to one's opposite number, persuading them, and thereby influencing their will, views, and character. In strategic communication discourse, at least five different ways of understanding strategic

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21 Arpita Basu Roy. 2009. "Challenges to peace building in contemporary Afghanistan," in *Emerging Afghanistan in the Third Millennium*, Mondira Dutta (ed.). New Delhi: Pentagon Press, p. 93.

22 Carlotta Gall. 2004. "Kabul Journal: With future charted UN envoy departs." *New York Times*, January 6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/06/world/kabul-journal-with-future-charted-un-envoy-departs.html>.

23 Ibid.



communication can be identified:<sup>24</sup> (a) as the orchestration of words and deeds; (b) as a way to explain action; (c) as a way to convey an image; (d) as a strategic tool; and (e) as a branch of planning and operations.

Strategic communication in the Afghan context has been controversial, so far. Frankly speaking, international forces', especially US forces', strategic communication in Afghanistan deserves much criticism. The messages and signals that they delivered to the local population aimed at gaining trust and increasing hopes among people. However, the success and effectiveness of these undertakings were often diminished and outweighed by terrorist groups' own "strategic communication." The language of fear often prevailed over the language of hope. This strategic failure of the "forces of good" against the "forces of evil" has, among other things, a cultural explanation: the Americans will always look like an alien people vis-à-vis local fighters even if the latter are terrorists.<sup>25</sup>

Strategic communication is directed not only to the people but also to the adversary. From this point of view, a key element in ending the campaign is the realization that terrorism is a "highly problematic means of bringing about change," a realization that requires, among other things, inflicting demoralizing losses on the terrorists through military action and law enforcement activities; it also requires convincing the terrorists themselves that they have been defeated politically, or at least that they cannot succeed, as well as actively deterring sponsors who support terrorist groups and eliminating the conditions that gave terrorists legitimacy in the first place.<sup>26</sup>

That is why spreading the truth about the Taliban is one of the basic strategic communication tasks as long as the Taliban themselves and their supporters create a false image of this grouping. For example, Kalim Bahadur in his article illustrated them as illiterate in Islam and argued that they are not strategically, militarily, or morally strong. He writes: "Slowly

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24 Magnus Johnsson. 2011. *NATO and the Challenge of Strategic Communication*. Rome: NATO Defense College.

25 Shanthie Mariet D'Souza. 2018. "Taliban narratives: the use of stories in the Afghanistan conflict." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29(4), 830–834, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2018.1488425.

26 Antulio J. Echevarria., II. 2007. "Clausewitz and the nature of the war on terror" in Hew Strachan & Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.) *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 211.

the myth of Taliban invincibility was spread partly by the Pakistani media and the ISI [Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence].”<sup>27</sup>

Another task for strategic communication should be to address the issue of achieving broader international support for peace-making in Afghanistan. This means stronger and principled messages need to be sent out from the UN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as the great powers and regional powers: a) to all terrorist and insurgent groupings about the inevitable failure of their actions; b) to the Afghan people about the principles and values on which peace, statehood and government in Afghanistan can be built and recognized. This is very important in terms of demonstrating the resolute willingness of the broader international community, not only the American forces, to put an end to war in this country.

Some years ago, the former UN Envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi in an interview pointed to important nuances of the Afghan war that many strategic analysts overlook in their elaborations on strategic communication:

Afghanistan is a land-locked country. A fly cannot go in unless it stops somewhere; therefore weapons, fuel, food, money will not go to Afghanistan unless the neighbors of Afghanistan are working, are cooperating, either being themselves the origin or the transit. During the Soviet occupation, Pakistan was the necessary indispensable transit place that the Americans and Saudis were using to channel money and weapons to the Mujahadeen who were fighting against the Soviet Union. When we moved from that to a civil war it was the same thing: Iran, and Pakistan in particular, were very, very much part of the problem.”<sup>28</sup>

He even almost predicted the global consequences of a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the causes and nuances of the Afghan war: “Afghanistan is a small country, it's a very poor country, it's an isolated country, it's a faraway country, but if you think you're going to keep that conflict within the borders of Afghanistan, you are wrong. It will spill over on all of us one day.”<sup>29</sup> By and large, Brahimi was right when he noticed the strategic connotations of the supply of fuel, ammunition, military guidance, money,

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27 Kalim Bahadur. 2009. “The future of Taliban” in Mondira Dutta (ed.) *Emerging Afghanistan in the Third Millennium*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, p. 268.

28 Conversation with Lakhdar Brahimi, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people5/Brahimi/brahimi-con3.html> April 5, 2005.

29 Ibid.

weapons and so on to those fighters who would have quickly been defeated without such supply. Strategic communication should address this issue and create a more adequate explanation of war dynamics.

Today, the role of the United Nations in Afghanistan might be strengthened. In particular, the principle might be introduced according to which if war/conflict in one country dangerously drags on for several years and constantly causes casualties among the population, then this war is no longer considered to be an internal affair of the state, and the international community, primarily the UN, must take the initiative in order to restore peace and stabilize the strategic situation in the country. UN forces would represent the world community, not just the US. In this context, parties to the conflict, primarily the Taliban, would have to face not its eternal enemy—the United States—but a broader and stronger peace-enforcing mission. That would be a novel and promising strategic communication addressed both to the Afghan population and all insurgents/terrorists.

In any event, strategic communication could be based on a more adequate assessment of the situation which should acknowledge that conceptual deficiencies and strategic mistakes were the reasons for the protracted war in Afghanistan.

### *Conclusion*

Many pundits and politicians have so far attempted to apply standard theories to the non-standard environment. This has led them to a strategic stalemate in war waging and a conceptual conundrum around peace-making in Afghanistan. At the end of the day, we are left with the situation of “too much diplomacy, too little solution.” Afghanistan is a failed state in every respect. The difficulties faced by any analysis stem from neglecting this fact.

Very often we see a strange confusion in distinguishing who is the stronger and who should be begging for negotiations in this long-lasting war. Misperceptions and misinterpretations of the problems of peace-making disguise the real driving forces behind war-making. International forces’ and local government’s strategy of peace-making in this war-torn country have not been significantly modified since the start of the war to reflect lessons learnt from failed strategy.

The biggest confusion relates to undermining the importance and necessity of military success in this war. The formula “no military solution”

can be relevant and acceptable only in three circumstances: (a) the supply of fighters (including the recruitment of new fighters) is cut off and the Taliban are deprived of material capability and a feeding ground; (b) the strategic, military, and moral supremacy of one warring side and its victorious advance convince the other to raise the white flag; (c) parity in military power is established on both sides and the consequent strategic stalemate prompts both sides to start peace negotiations. None of these circumstances is currently available in Afghanistan. Instead, the above-mentioned simplistic and illusive formula is more often than not taken for granted.

The following observation by Omar Sadr can be supplementary to the previous one: “An insurgency does not accept a settlement in three conditions: (1) If it is fighting an ideological war and does not want to compromise on it; (2) If it has multiple financial sources other than the people, such as natural resources, drug trafficking and sponsorship from patrons; (3) If it perceives the status quo in its favor. All three conditions confirm with the Taliban.”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, as Arpita Basu Roy wrote back in 2009, “reconciliation and social rehabilitation remains a distant goal until ongoing hostilities and armed resistances come to an end. Therefore, peace-building in Afghanistan can largely be explained in the context of a new war on terrorism rather than the transformation of local conflict dynamics through negotiation.”<sup>31</sup>

For a regular army “in war there is no substitute for victory” (General MacArthur’s maxim). For an irregular army or a rebel group waging a small war, the substitute for victory is success in politics.<sup>32</sup> This formula has to be considered when one tries to comprehend the means of war-making and ways of peace-making in Afghanistan. This formula for the real substitute for victory by the regular army was reflected in an “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” signed by the US and Taliban on 29 February 2020. However, this bilateral deal seems like “stepping on the same rake twice.”

As Indian analyst Dr. Sudha Ramachandran writes, “The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, signed by the U.S. and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, is a major milestone in the almost two-decade long war

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30 Sadr. *Political Settlement of the Afghanistan Conflict*, p. 104.

31 Roy. “Challenges to peace building,” p. 105.

32 Daase. “Clausewitz and small wars,” p.191.

between the two adversaries. While it could change the trajectory of the conflict, it is unlikely to bring peace to Afghanistan. Narrow self-interest of the two signatories drove the deal, rather than the objective of peace in Afghanistan. This and the flawed content of the agreement will, in all likelihood, lead to escalating violence in the coming months.”<sup>33</sup>

### *Postscript*

Recently Grégoire Chamayou wrote a book in which he argues that, unlike Clausewitz’s conception, modern war is no longer a duel. Its paradigm does not imply two enemies meeting face to face. It is rather about a crouching hunter and a lurking prey; therefore, the rules of the game have changed. The hunting scenario is different from the classic war scenario, since the fugitive wants to escape capture whereas hunter pursues him until capture. So, for victory, the pursuer needs direct confrontation, whereas for his victory a fugitive needs to hide.<sup>34</sup> Yes, the era of drones as a means of modern war has come, and the hunter–prey picture/scenario of war-waging is perhaps relevant. But this vision does not deny the nature and causes of war waged by the states or terrorists or insurgents rooted in geopolitics, ideology, religion, criminality, poverty, human ambitions, and so on.

In the context of the new era of drones but old-era causes of war, the international community will most likely repeatedly face the Afghan syndrome, until the lessons of the tragedy of this country are learned.

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33 Sudha Ramachandran. 2020. “What will the U.S.–Taliban peace agreement bring for Afghanistan?” *The CACI Analyst*, March 7. <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13608-what-will-the-us-taliban-peace-agreement-bring-for-afghanistan?.html>.

34 Grégoire Chamayou. 2020. *A Theory of the Drone*. New York: The New Press.

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