

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PAPERS

Instability in Afghanistan: Why Afghanistan matters and what Australia can do to address the causes of instability

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Abstract

This paper examines why Afghanistan is important to Australia, and what Australia can do to address the causes of instability in that country. It argues that Afghanistan is a key element of the regional security dynamic of South Asia, and that it has the potential to adversely affect the security of other regional states, notably India, with which Australia seeks closer political and economic relations.

The paper proposes two policy initiatives to contribute to Australia's efforts in supporting the Afghan Government in its efforts to address the sources of instability. The first addresses the immediate causes of instability. The second proposes a strategy to address the influence of external actors on the long-term stability of Afghanistan. The paper concludes that these initiatives should enhance Australia's national security, economic and political interests in Afghanistan, as well as strengthening Australia's ability to exploit the economic opportunities that are emerging in South Asia.

Instability in Afghanistan: Why Afghanistan matters and what Australia can do to address the causes of instability

Australia has a vital national interest in supporting Afghanistan's stability and security after transition [of the International Security Assistance Force].

Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon David Johnston, December 2013 ¹

Introduction

After almost a decade and a half of international intervention, Afghanistan continues to face significant threats from an insurgency, political corruption and a lack of economic development.² In the second half of 2014, insurgents made some gains in districts in Helmand and Ghazni provinces and conducted an offensive in Kabul with a number of high-profile attacks.

This aggressive campaign continued through the winter of 2014 to May 2015 and has highlighted a number of deficiencies within the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), particularly acquisition and use of intelligence, casualty evacuation and close air support. As a result of this intensive fighting, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani gained support from President Obama to maintain US force levels throughout 2015 and allow for additional combat support to the ANSF, including close air support.³

During its 15-year commitment, Australia has invested significant 'blood and treasure' in Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains of long-term importance to Australia's national interests in South Asia. Accordingly, Canberra must have an ongoing policy for Afghanistan.⁴ The focus of Australia's strategic interests in Afghanistan has tended to centre on its efforts to counter the insurgency in Uruzgan Province. But since the departure of Australia's combat forces from that province and the subsequent end of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, Afghanistan is no longer of much interest to the Australian public.

However, the question of Afghanistan's stability and situation cannot be viewed in isolation of Australia's national interests in South Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, Afghanistan's geostrategic location in the 'heart of Asia' means it has an effect on the dynamics of South Asia, Central Asia and China, with some asserting that the West cannot afford 'regional instability in a nuclear fault zone'.⁵

Australia's engagement with South Asia has been longstanding, although its diplomatic and military relationship with Afghanistan is only a recent phenomenon, which followed from the al Qaeda-sponsored attacks on the US in September 2001.⁶ In the past decade, Australia has displayed a growing national interest in South Asia, particularly due to the benefits of the rise of an economically prosperous India as a trading nation. Two-way trade between the two nations was worth approximately A\$16 billion in 2014; India is ranked as Australia's fifth largest trading partner and trade is forecast to grow significantly in the future.⁷ Therefore the stability of South Asia is a key element in maintaining Australia's growing economic relationship with the region.

In December 2014, the NATO-led ISAF mission concluded and handed over to the more limited US-led NATO Resolute Support Mission.⁸ This new mission is largely constrained to a non-combat role to train, advise and assist the ANSF and other security institutions, focusing on national-level functions that are critical to generating, sustaining and resourcing the ANSF. It is only permitted to provide *in extremis* military support to the ANSF, thus limiting ground combat operations against the Taliban to mostly Afghan forces.

The US has maintained additional forces within Afghanistan for its own counter-terrorism mission to continue to target the remnants of al Qaeda and its affiliates.⁹ President Obama said in May 2014 that US objectives in Afghanistan from 2015 would be 'disrupting threats posed by al

Qaeda; supporting Afghan security forces; and giving the Afghan people the opportunity to succeed as they stand on their own'.¹⁰

It is widely acknowledged, however, that the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan requires outside aid to fund its security, governance and delivery of services.¹¹ According to Ian Dudgeon, one of the key determinants of success in the short- and long-term future of Afghanistan will be 'the willingness of the international community, particularly the US, NATO countries, Japan and Australia, to commit politically, financially and militarily to Afghanistan in the longer term after 2014'.¹²

Australia has indicated that it remains interested in the immediate stability and future of Afghanistan post the ISAF mission. Since 2001, Australia's commitment to Afghanistan has seen bipartisan political support, with the former Minister for Defence, Kevin Andrews, asserting as recently as September 2015 that:

Australia remains committed to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission ... to ensure that Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for al Qaeda and other international extremist groups.¹³

This commitment is evident in the Government's provision of 400 ADF personnel to the Resolute Support Mission in 2015, its ongoing contribution of US\$100 million per year for three years from 2015 to sustain the ANSF, and its provision of A\$134.2 million in aid to the Afghan Government during the financial year 2014-15.¹⁴

Australia's long-term interests in maintaining a relationship with Kabul are also reflected in the commitments made in two key agreements between Canberra and Kabul, namely the Comprehensive Long-term Partnership and the Memorandum of Understanding on Development Cooperation.¹⁵ The Long-term Partnership was signed between Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Afghan President Hamid Karzai in May 2012 and included an Australian commitment to assist the ANSF in 'countering the threat of international terrorist groups, and to promote the national security of Afghanistan during the transition of lead security... as well as after 2014 as mutually determined'.¹⁶

This paper will argue that Afghanistan is crucial to the stability of South Asia, and that it has global significance and remains important to Australia's economic, security and political interests. It will propose that Australia should continue to support the Afghan Government to counter the threat from the Taliban-led insurgency, and that it should develop a policy approach to support the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

This proposition will be presented in three sections. Section 1 will illustrate why Afghanistan matters in the South Asia region and why, therefore, it remains important to Australia. Section 2 will review the current and future threats to the stability of Afghanistan, focusing on the security threats to the Afghan Government. Section 3 will draw from the analysis conducted in the first two sections to identify opportunities for Australia to implement policies that serve to support the Afghan Government in addressing the sources of instability.

Section 1: Why Afghanistan matters

As seen by its role as the playground of the 19th century's so-called 'Great Game', Afghanistan has global significance by being at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan has geopolitical importance, not in isolation, but rather due to its location and 'the activities of its external stakeholders—Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia and some Central Asian republics'.¹⁷ As NATO continues to downsize its forces and influence, nations with vested interests, such as Iran, Pakistan and India, will most likely increase their presence and engagement in Afghanistan to fill the vacuum of Western nations.¹⁸

This section will explain why Afghanistan is important to the Indo-Pacific region and to Australia's security, economic and political interests. It will examine Afghanistan's unique strategic location and its importance to South and Central Asia. It will then analyse Pakistani and

Indian interests in Afghanistan before looking at the reasons why competition between these two states in Afghanistan may result in a more unstable South Asia, as well as why this could lead to instability in South Asia. Finally, it will examine the factors that make Afghanistan important to Australia.

Afghanistan's geostrategic importance

Afghanistan's neighbourhood has become a region influenced by multipolar competition between regional and great powers, including India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed regional states that are strategic competitors. At the same time, there are indications of growing competition between China and India over their respective interests in Afghanistan.

There is evidence of an emerging 'New Great Game' between China and India in the region, which is aimed at increasing their respective influence as aspirational regional powers, and increasing their access to trade and energy resources.¹⁹ China has significant economic interests in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, already investing over US\$5 billion in Afghanistan for access to the Aynak copper mine and several oil fields.²⁰ China's security and economic interests in Pakistan are significant.²¹

China's key economic interest in Pakistan is the so-called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which travels through the western part of Pakistan, adjacent to areas in which the terrorist group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is active. An unstable Afghanistan would therefore adversely impact this corridor, giving Beijing reason to support a stable security situation in Afghanistan. China's shared border with Afghanistan and concerns regarding the spill-over of Islamic extremism from the restive Afghan-Pakistan frontier into China's Muslim-majority state of Xinjiang also add to Beijing's interest in the future of Afghanistan.

Iran also shares a border with Afghanistan and is a key stakeholder in its future.²² The two nations share a long history extending back to the influence of the Persian Empire, which resulted in shared linguistic ties and a significant Shia Muslim minority via the Persian-speaking Hazaras. Until the 1857 Treaty of Paris, Afghanistan's western city of Herat was part of Iran. During the rule of the Taliban, Iran provided arms and training to the Hazaras and Tajiks in an attempt to halt the spread of the Taliban to North and North Western Afghanistan.

Tehran is concerned that increased instability in Afghanistan has the potential to adversely impact its security and economy.²³ The success of the Taliban is seen to have direct implications on Iran's Baloch rebellion and its potential to cause an influx of refugees into Iran. Economically, Iran views Afghanistan as a possible link between India and Iran. Iran has partnered with India in developing a significant transport corridor from Afghanistan to its port of Chabahar, thus weakening Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan for external access and, as a result, providing economic benefits to Tehran.

Iran, like the US, does not want to see the Taliban controlling Afghanistan.²⁴ However, Tehran's Afghanistan policy is sometimes at odds with that of Washington, particularly in its traditional area of influence in the west and south of Afghanistan. Iran is also in competition with Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan. While Islamabad wants a pro-Pakistan, Pashtun-dominated government, Tehran wants a government which will not challenge its interests and which will 'preserve its influence in western Afghanistan'.²⁵

The interests and competition of these regional powers in Afghanistan place it in an important geostrategic position to influence the stability and security of the greater South and Central Asia regions. As Australia has an increasing interest in the Indian Ocean, via its Indo-Pacific strategic setting, the effects of Afghanistan on South Asia should be the focus of Australia's national interest. Therefore, the remainder of this section of the paper will focus on the importance of Afghanistan on the current and future situation in South Asia and its importance to Australia.

Why Afghanistan matters to South Asia stability

The direct influence of Afghanistan's stability on the security of Pakistan is a critical strategic concern to the international community.²⁶ Pakistani stability is important for four main reasons. It is located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia and can influence the global energy supply artery in the Indian Ocean through its ports at Gwadar and Karachi. It has a large and youthful population of over 170 million people who could pose a humanitarian crisis in the event of state failure. It is also nuclear armed and has a history of actively pursuing its national security interests through the use of proxy groups.²⁷

Therefore, any failure of or destabilisation within the Pakistan state has the potential to have a knock-on effect on South Asian stability, with ramifications further afield. Success by the Taliban and its affiliates in Afghanistan may embolden anti-state forces in Pakistan, particularly Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which may in turn threaten the stability of or, in the most extreme case, lead to the failure of Pakistan's government.²⁸

The longstanding rivalry between Pakistan and India, and their respective influence in Afghanistan, also has the potential to impact on regional stability in South Asia.²⁹ The corrosive impact of this rivalry has been acknowledged by President Ghani, who recently claimed that ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan is a result of a 'proxy war between India and Pakistan'.³⁰ Afghanistan is simply another theatre in which Indo-Pakistan regional rivalry is played out. Maximising its own influence in Afghanistan is seen by New Delhi as a component of its desire to 'maintain dominance over Pakistan in South Asia'.³¹ Pakistan in turn views Afghanistan as a critical element in its defence against an expansive India.³²

To increase its influence in Afghanistan, New Delhi signed a Strategic Partnership agreement with Kabul in October 2011.³³ This partnership is focused on Indian assistance to the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the areas of education, politics, economic issues and trade. The agreement also addresses security issues, although it is not a security alliance. India has not committed to deploying any security forces into Afghanistan; however, it has agreed to provide security force training for the ANSF in India.

The partnership has also offered significant economic opportunities to both nations.³⁴ For example, an Indian mining company has received concessions to develop a large block in the Afghan iron ore deposit at Hajigak. India has also granted Afghanistan preferred trading status for its food exports, so that India is one of the few trading partners with which Afghanistan has a positive trade balance. India is the fourth largest donor to Afghanistan, having given over US\$2 billion to Afghanistan through aid and development projects to develop its economic capacity with roads, power, education and agriculture.³⁵

India sees a secure and stable Afghanistan as a key component of the region, which will be vital to India's access to the energy resources and markets in Central Asia.³⁶ The Strategic Partnership has provided India with an opportunity to develop a greater role in regional affairs, thereby enhancing its status as a rising regional power.

Pakistan views the Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership as a threat to its security and its own influence on Afghanistan. Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan include ensuring that the Durand Line is maintained to prevent the establishment of what might become 'Pashtunistan', spanning both nations, as well as blocking India's influence and maintaining Pakistan's access to Afghanistan and Central Asia for trade.³⁷ As a consequence of these interests, Islamabad sees competition with India as a zero-sum game.

Afghanistan plays an important part in Pakistan's longstanding plans to defend its territory against the existential threat from India. Islamabad needs to be able to influence a weak or compliant Kabul in order to provide it with strategic depth to the west in case of an attack from India.³⁸ Therefore, Islamabad views the motives of the Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership as New Delhi's attempt at strategic encirclement, which therefore is a direct threat to Pakistan's territorial security.

This rationale encourages Pakistan to utilise ‘destabilising security measures—[which are] destabilising for itself, its neighbours and the international community’.³⁹ There is evidence that this perceived strategic encirclement has resulted in Pakistan maintaining its support to the insurgency in Afghanistan, including the Taliban and Haqqani Network.⁴⁰ The supposed rationale is that these groups will keep the Afghan Government under pressure and target India’s interests, including its consulates, in Afghanistan.⁴¹ The risk is that this rivalry leads to regional competition, increased instability between these two nuclear-armed nations and ‘the risk of strategic miscalculation’, which at worst case has the potential to spill-over into state-on-state conflict.⁴²

Pakistan suspects that India is using this partnership to deprive Islamabad of a dominant share of Afghan markets and deny it access to Central Asian energy markets.⁴³ In particular, Pakistan is concerned about India’s development of the Zaranj-Delaram Road, connecting Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar. This route has now given India and other nations a direct trade route into Afghanistan, thereby undermining Pakistan’s monopoly over Afghan access to a port (via Karachi). As a result, Islamabad sees India’s ties with Afghanistan as a threat and part of India’s plan of strategic encirclement of Pakistan.

Why Afghanistan matters to Australia

The stability of Afghanistan is in Australia’s national interest due to its alliance with the US and potential negative influence on the stability of South Asia. Australia’s interests in Afghanistan cannot be looked at in isolation. Afghanistan’s critical role in the security and stability of the broader South Asian region, in particular its part in the Indo-Pakistan relationship, is also important to Australia. Hence, Australia has three main interests in Afghanistan: preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven; its role in the US-Australia relationship; and preventing the country from destabilising the broader South Asian region, with its attendant impact on Australian economic and security interests.

Successive Australian governments have maintained the consistent message that ‘ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorists’ is in its national interest.⁴⁴ In April 2012, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted that since the September 11 attacks in the US, ‘most of the terrorist attacks ... [that] have targeted Australian interests directly or in which Australians have been killed, had links to Afghanistan’.⁴⁵ As there is evidence that proscribed terrorist organisations, including ISIS, exist in Afghanistan and that the Afghan Government is threatened by the Taliban-led insurgency, the conditions still exist in which active terrorist planning can occur. The risk of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan therefore remains an ongoing concern for Australia’s national interest.

Australia’s interest in remaining committed to Afghanistan is also a reflection of its alliance relationship with the US. Australia committed troops to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks against the US in 2001.⁴⁶ While the reasons for continued Australian involvement in the country have evolved over the ensuing 15 years, the importance of the US-Australia alliance has been critical to Canberra’s calculus in maintaining its commitment in Afghanistan. This is evidenced by then Prime Minister Gillard’s statement to Parliament in 2010, when she stated:

Australia has two vital national interests in Afghanistan: (1) to make sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists, a place where attacks on us and our allies began, and (2) to stand firmly by our alliance commitment to the United States, formally invoked following the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001.⁴⁷

This view was reinforced by then Minister of Defence Kevin Andrews’ update to Parliament in September 2015, when he stated that ‘[o]ver the last decade and a half, our purpose in Afghanistan has not changed’.⁴⁸

The added benefit to Australia’s national interest is that its support to the US in Afghanistan has enhanced and strengthened the US-Australia alliance.⁴⁹ At a practical level, this support and cooperation in Afghanistan has seen improved interoperability between the ADF and US armed forces, strengthened people-to-people links, and improvements in intelligence sharing. In

December 2013, Australia's Defence Minister and the US Secretary of Defense jointly opined that 'Australia and the United States will emerge from our shared commitment in Afghanistan with closer practical ties than ever before'.⁵⁰

A third and increasingly compelling reason why Afghanistan is important to Australia is the link between Indo-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan and its potential to have a negative effect on the stability of South Asia and continued economic growth of India.⁵¹ India is the tenth largest economy in the world and has transformed its economy from US\$433 billion in 1991 to US\$2.052 trillion in 2014.⁵² India is Australia's fifth largest export market, with the potential to rank higher as the two countries develop a 'Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement', which is expected to increase two-way trade beyond the figure of A\$16 billion in 2014.⁵³

Australia has a national interest in the peaceful rise of India and the economic opportunities it presents to Australia now and into the future. Australia, along with its ally the US, has an interest in India's rise as 'an Asian balancer, global security provider, and engine room of the world'.⁵⁴ If it is mired in a proxy conflict with Pakistan, in both Afghanistan and along its shared border, this potential is likely to be impeded. Therefore, Australia should care about 'avoiding scenarios that inflame the adversarial India-Pakistan relationship'.⁵⁵ The security situation in Afghanistan, and Indo-Pakistan competition for influence in Afghanistan, are issues which Australia needs to take a close interest in—and attempt to positively influence.

Section 2: An uncertain road – instability and future threats to Afghanistan

American forces no longer patrol Afghan villages or valley. Our troops are not engaged in major ground combat against the Taliban. Those missions now belong to Afghans, who are fully responsible for securing their country.

President Barack Obama, October 2015 ⁵⁶

Since the end of the ISAF mission, Afghanistan continues to face significant complex 'challenges of governance, economy, security and regional dynamics'.⁵⁷ The Taliban has not been defeated militarily or politically and these challenges exist in the midst of an ongoing, resilient and entrenched Taliban-led insurgency. 2015 was expected to be the bloodiest year since 2001, with insecurity rising across the country, resulting in increased civilian casualties and the Afghan security forces taking large and likely unsustainable losses.⁵⁸ The increased insecurity of Afghanistan and pressure on the ANSF from the Taliban-led insurgency is best illustrated by the temporary seizure of the strategically-located northern city of Kunduz by the Taliban in late September 2015.

The US Department of Defense has assessed that the insurgent challenge to the stability of Afghanistan persists due to a number of key factors that remain unresolved by ISAF and are yet to be effectively addressed by the Afghan Government. They include:

1. Public resentment of corruption in the Afghan Government;
2. Lack of governance and security forces in much of the rural areas;
3. Safe havens for militants in Pakistan;
4. A popular backlash against civilian casualties and property damage as a result of military operations; and
5. The population's unrealised and unrealistic expectations for economic development.⁵⁹

The US Commander of the NATO Resolute Support Mission asserted in October 2015 that:

The ANSF still cannot handle the fight alone without American close air support and a special operations counter terrorism force to hit the Taliban leadership. [Moreover], it will take time for them to build their human capital in logistics and managing their forces in the field, meaning Afghan forces will need international assistance well beyond this year.⁶⁰

To comprehend the importance of Afghanistan to Australian policy settings, it is fundamental to first understand the current and future multifaceted threats to Afghanistan's stability. This section will analyse the causes of instability in Afghanistan, with a focus on those which threaten the future security of the nation. It will initially examine the ongoing threats emanating from the Taliban-led insurgency, including emerging threats, and the US response to those threats. Second, it will examine the threats of poor governance and corruption on stability and legitimacy of the Afghan Government. Finally, it will outline the risks posed by the uncertainty of ongoing medium- to long-term commitment of the US and NATO to Afghanistan.

Ongoing insurgent threats

The main threat to the Afghan Government continues to be the Taliban, which continues to seek a return to power and the ousting of foreign forces.⁶¹ However, it is also threatened by other loosely-allied groups such as the Haqqani Network, al Qaeda and affiliated groups.⁶² There is growing evidence that ISIS has also established forces in Afghanistan, particularly in the frontier regions of the eastern provinces.⁶³ The map at Figure 1 depicts the extent of large-scale Taliban and ISIS-supported attacks in Afghanistan during 2015.

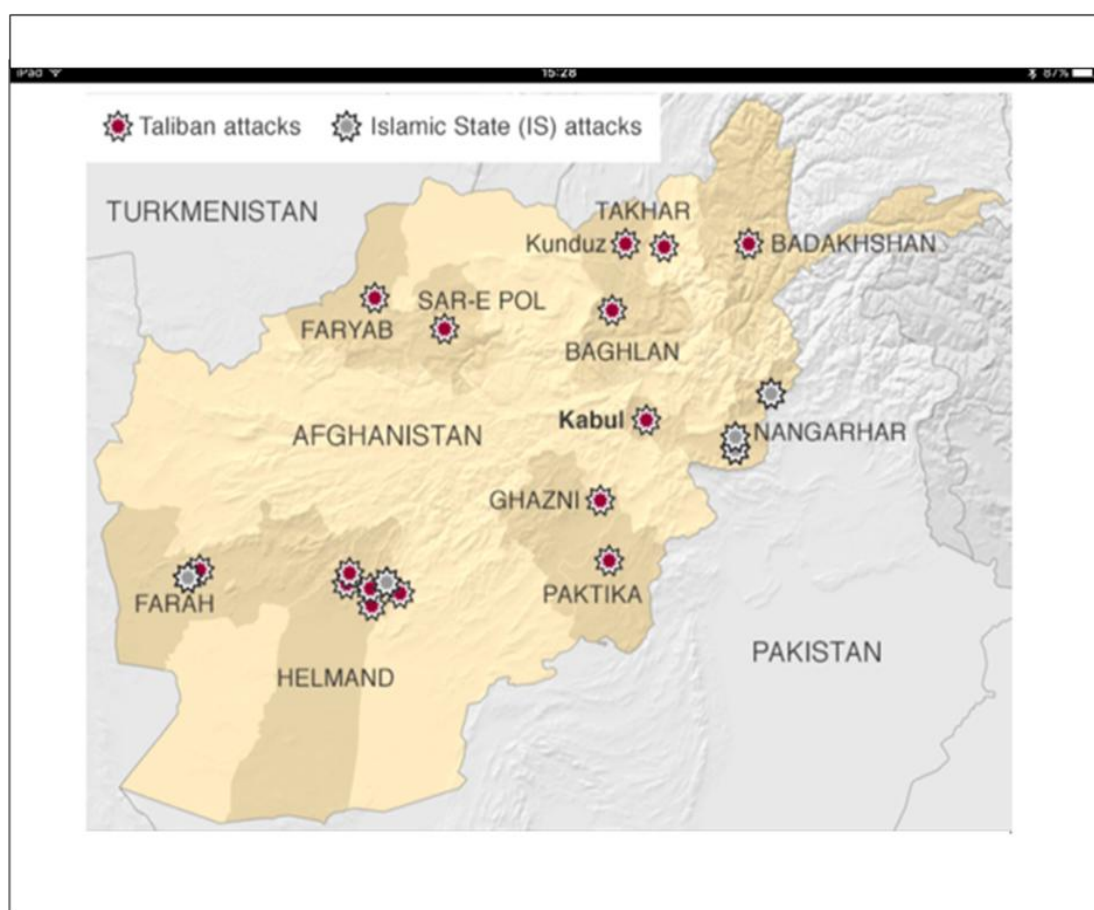


Figure 1: Major insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, June-September 2015⁶⁴

*The Taliban*⁶⁵

The Taliban remains an effective insurgent force capable of challenging the ANSF and exploiting the weaknesses of the Afghan Government, particularly in rural areas. There is no agreement on the current size of the Taliban forces, however, in April 2015, the US Department of Defense

assessed that the hardcore element of the Taliban comprised some 22,000 members.⁶⁶ The real strength of the Taliban, however, is not its numbers but its ability to 'influence and intimidate the population and to co-opt local support'.⁶⁷

The Taliban operates throughout Afghanistan, with the majority of its forces located in the Pashtun homeland in the country's south and east. However, as a result of the Taliban's successful capture of Kunduz in September 2015, it is evident that the Taliban has established itself outside its traditional Pashtun heartland and has been recruiting non-Pashtuns from Afghanistan's northern provinces.⁶⁸

Afghanistan's frontier provinces along the Pakistan border are of particular importance to the Taliban. It has established sanctuaries in these areas, adjacent to its safe havens in Pakistan, where it continues to plan, train, re-equip and seek refuge from ANSF and US offensive operations. In testimony to a US House of Representatives' committee in 2013, it was asserted that 'a US withdrawal and continuing Pakistan support of ... Afghan insurgent groups could lead to Taliban control of part or most of Afghanistan over the next decade'.⁶⁹

Haqqani Network⁷⁰

The Haqqani Network is a US-designated terrorist organisation, which US officials consider to be a 'veritable arm of [Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence]'.⁷¹ The network has been cited as being the 'most virulent element of the insurgency ... [and] the greatest risk to remaining coalition forces', as well as a significant threat to Afghan security and a key enabler of al Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁷² It is also considered the key facilitator of foreign fighters into Afghanistan and the most effective militant group at conducting successful high-profile attacks in Kabul.

The network shares similar goals to the Taliban: namely, to expel coalition forces, destabilise the Afghan Government and re-establish an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.⁷³ The size of the network is unknown. At its height in 2010, it was believed to have had 3000 fighters, although its strength is thought to be much diminished since.⁷⁴

The Haqqani Network's core support area is the three eastern provinces of Paktika, Paktiya and Khost. It is also reliant on safe havens in Pakistan to protect it from the ANSF and US counter-terrorism operations. The network is known to receive support from Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, and is suspected as often acting as a tool for Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ US officials have cited the Haqqani Network as being responsible for at least four high-profile attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan, including India's embassy in Kabul.

Haqqani commanders had earlier indicated that the network may be prepared to participate in peace talks with the US and the Afghan Government, contingent on the Taliban leader Mullah Omar deciding to do so also. However, Omar reportedly died in 2013, so its current willingness to negotiate is uncertain. Regardless, US officials assess that the Haqqani Network will remain a major threat to Afghan security and coalition forces via its demonstrated capability for high-profile, complex attacks, particularly if it cannot be denied its safe haven in Pakistan.

al Qaeda⁷⁶

al Qaeda's presence within Afghanistan is minimal and is now focused on facilitating other insurgent forces, rather than acting as a fighting force itself. As a result of successful US counter-terrorism operations, al Qaeda has largely been denied the use of Afghanistan for the planning and preparation of transnational terrorist acts. It has been confined to the isolated north-eastern Afghan provinces, such as Kunar and Nangarhar, and reportedly maintains between 50-100 fighters in these areas. The key concern for US and its coalition partners is that al Qaeda could regroup in Afghanistan's remote eastern provinces if the security situation worsens.

Islamic State⁷⁷

US officials and the UN have acknowledged that ISIS exists in Afghanistan and presents a threat to the stability of the country. In late September 2015, the UN reported that ISIS was recruiting in 25 of the nation's 34 provinces.⁷⁸ However, it is believed that the majority of ISIS members are foreign fighters and a small number of disaffected Taliban commanders and their supporters, operating in eastern Afghanistan in Nangarhar province, where it has been launching coordinated attacks on ANSF outposts.⁷⁹

The existence of ISIS in Afghanistan further complicates the Taliban's approach to negotiations with the Afghan Government. The Taliban may find the need to better ISIS on the battlefield, and negotiations with the Afghan Government may affect the Taliban's unity and ability to recruit. Therefore, the Taliban may drag out any plans for peace talks with the government.

It was initially believed that the existence of ISIS and conflict between it and the Taliban would diminish the strength of both groups. However, both have continued to attack the government and its security forces. The additional risk of ISIS involvement in Afghanistan is that it may again make the terrorist threats to the Afghan Government and the US and NATO transnational.

An uncertain peace process

The prospect of achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan through a negotiated peace settlement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban is looking unlikely in the near term.⁸⁰ Such efforts were largely unsuccessful during Hamid Karzai's presidency, as a result of Pakistani interference and friction between Karzai and Washington over the process. However, President Ashraf Ghani has made peace talks 'the centre of his agenda'.⁸¹ In early 2015, President Ghani visited both China and Pakistan and raised the issue of peace talks, with both nations expressing their willingness to assist in getting the process started.

In May 2015, the Afghan Government and the Taliban met in Qatar, where both expressed enthusiasm about starting official negotiations. However, since the confirmation of the death of Mullah Omar in July 2015 and the appointment of Mullah Aktar Mansour as the new Taliban leader, the peace talks have stalled. It has been reported widely that Mullah Mansour does not want to commit to peace talks, contending that peace can only be achieved once all foreign forces have departed the country and the movement has the potential for victory.⁸²

Contrary to optimistic assessments by the current US Administration, the Afghan insurgency has gathered strength after the end of the ISAF mission.⁸³ In late 2014, the US asserted that the insurgency 'continued to test the ANSF, but failed to achieve its objectives', particularly during the Afghan presidential election process.⁸⁴ The belief was that the insurgency would challenge the ANSF in remote rural areas but that it would not be able to capture or destroy well-defended zones and did not have the capability to control major urban centres. It was judged that the insurgency would focus on the rural areas and on high-profile attacks on key individuals and population centres. This assessment has been challenged by the Taliban's seizure of Kunduz, which led to questions regarding the capability and capacity of the ANSF and the Afghan Government to counter the Taliban-led insurgency.

An uncertain governance and development prospects

The ongoing challenges in Afghan governance are adding to the strength and threats from the Taliban-led insurgency. According to Halimullah Kousary from the Afghanistan Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, these challenges include rampant corruption at all levels of government and ineffective governance throughout the country's institutions.⁸⁵ The United States Institute of Peace similarly opines that a major causal factor for instability in Afghanistan is the 'failure of state institutions to respect and promote the rule of law and to act accountably and effectively'.⁸⁶

It is widely assessed that corruption in Afghanistan is endemic throughout all layers of the Afghan Government and institutions, including the legal and justice system, the government's

administration, and the implementation of foreign aid and development.⁸⁷ Such corruption exacerbates the divides along ethnic and tribal lines, especially seen when corrupt provincial governors appoint local officials, including police chiefs, thus marginalising segments of the population.⁸⁸

This leads to individual Afghans struggling to gain justice or support and allows the insurgents to fill the gap, including appeals to the locals to take up arms against the government in what is termed a 'religious jihad for justice'.⁸⁹ Added to the challenges of corruption is the lack of development, particularly at the village and district level. According to Kousary, this has left the 'Afghan population disenchanted with their government'.⁹⁰

These challenges for the Afghan Government are compounded by Afghanistan's fragile economy. As a result of long-term internal conflict and poor governance, Afghanistan has become almost totally aid dependent.⁹¹ Its economic growth has shrunk significantly over the past four years, with a drop in its GDP growth from 9 per cent in 2012 to 2 per cent in 2014.⁹² Since the departure of ISAF, the Afghan domestic revenue has shrunk, with a sharp decline in the collection of taxes and customs revenue. As a result of this fiscal crisis, the Afghan Government was unable to pay the salaries of its civil servants in 2015 and was reliant on a US\$190 million stop-gap payment from the international community to meet its obligations.

Critically, as a consequence of corruption, lack of development and fiscal crisis, the Afghan Government has not met the expectations of its people, and is therefore failing to win over the population and failing to establish a position of strength for negotiations with the Taliban.⁹³ Kousary identifies that for a long-term solution to counter the Taliban, there needs to be 'economic development in Afghanistan and economic integration in the broader region'.⁹⁴

An uncertain of US perseverance

A further cause of increased instability in Afghanistan is disengagement of the US and NATO from the region. International support is still critical to Afghanistan, and ongoing assistance from the international community, including security sector support and funding and development aid, is essential for setting the conditions for stability in Afghanistan.⁹⁵

It is here that history sounds a warning. The US and the West can benefit from acknowledging and not repeating the consequences of an untimely withdrawal of international support from Afghanistan. The 1992 collapse of the Soviet-backed Najibullah nationalist government and the rise of the Taliban and Islamic extremism in Afghanistan are often linked to the withdrawal of covert Soviet financial and advisor support in 1991. After the withdrawal of Soviet combat forces in 1989, the Najibullah regime was able to hold off the Afghan Mujahedeen until 1992. However, Najibullah's regime was only able to achieve this with significant Soviet covert aid, which he utilised to 'consolidate his power through networks of patronage and by maintaining a powerful military'.⁹⁶

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the support suddenly disappeared. As a result, Najibullah was unable to fund his patronage system and his regime was dealt a fatal blow. Najibullah agreed to an UN-brokered transition process and disappeared from view. The resultant scramble for power by regional and ethnic groups led to warlordism and a civil war from 1992 to 1998. By 1998, the Taliban had taken control of the majority of Afghanistan and had formed a national government in Kabul. What followed eventually led to Australia's own involvement in Afghanistan.

It now serves Australia's interests that history is not repeated in Afghanistan. The US and the West can also heed the lessons from the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. While the circumstances of that withdrawal was the lack of a status-of-forces agreement between Iraq and the US, the US departure left an Iraqi security force not capable of providing security in a divided nation, which facilitated the rise of ISIS.⁹⁷

Following the ISAF mission, NATO established its US-led Resolute Support Mission, with a mandate until December 2016.⁹⁸ The purpose of this mission is to ensure that the Afghan

Government and the ANSF are capable of taking responsibility for their own security on the departure of ISAF's combat forces. It is to be achieved through the provision of 'train, advise and assist' tasks to support the ANSF and Afghan security institutions. NATO and partner nations are also providing funding support to the ANSF through three key funding mechanisms:

1. ANSF's operating budget;
2. The NATO ANA [Afghan National Army] Trust Fund; and
3. The UN Development Program's Law and Order Trust Fund for the Afghan National Police.⁹⁹

The US commitment to this new mission was outlined by President Obama in his State of the Union Address in January 2014, where he asserted that:

After 2014, we will support a unified Afghanistan as it takes responsibility for its own future.... A small force of Americans could remain in Afghanistan with NATO allies to carry out two narrow missions: training and assisting Afghan forces, and counter terrorism operations to pursue any remnants of al Qaeda.¹⁰⁰

The US and NATO had planned to decrease the size of the ANSF from the high of 352,000 (comprising 195,000 army and 157,000 police) in 2012 down to 228,000 in 2015.¹⁰¹ However, due to assessments of the challenges in securing Afghanistan, NATO agreed in February 2013 to reverse this plan. Hence, ANSF is to be funded by the US, NATO, partner nations and the Afghan Government at a cost of US\$5.85 billion per year until at least 2017. At present, Afghanistan has pledged US\$500 million towards the ANSF for 2015 and is expected to take full responsibility to fund its own security requirements by 2024.

An uncertain ANSF

As a result of the increasing levels of insurgent-led violence, an atmosphere of uncertainty has pervaded in Afghanistan, including concerns regarding the ANSF's ability to secure the nation.¹⁰² In late 2014, it was judged that the ANSF had the ability to preserve the safety and security of Afghanistan, based largely on the success of the ANSF to plan and execute the security for the Afghan presidential election and its follow-on runoff in early 2014. However, as the insurgency maintained its high tempo through the winter of 2014 and into 2015, it has become apparent that the ANSF has not been able to maintain security.

The key areas of concern include an unsustainable level of personnel losses through casualties, desertions and discharges, and losses in equipment. The high level of combat has also highlighted the well known ANSF weaknesses in logistics planning and capability, operational planning and fusion of intelligence. It also reinforced its lack of a working casualty evacuation system and deficiencies in its intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance, and close air support.

As a result of US and NATO concerns regarding the performance of Afghan forces against the Taliban-led insurgency and the Taliban actions in Kunduz in September/October 2015, President Obama made the decision on 15 October 2015 to extend the US mission in Afghanistan, committing to extend its 'train, advise and assist' mission and its counter-terrorism force to beyond 2017.¹⁰³ This decision will see the current US force of 9800 remain in Afghanistan until late 2016, reducing to a force of 5500 in 2017.

These troops will remain as part of the US contribution to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the US counter-terrorism task force. This decision is a major amendment to the US plan, which previously envisioned the US reducing its forces to approximately 5000 in 2016 and then down to an embassy protection force of 1000 in 2017. The decision explicitly acknowledges that the ANSF and the Afghan Government are not yet ready to accept responsibility for the country's security. The plan will also see the Resolute Support Mission maintain its bases in Bagram and Jalalabad in the east and Kandahar in the south after 2016.

The internal security and governance threats in Afghanistan are multifaceted and challenge the capacity of the Afghan Government to defeat the Taliban-led insurgency. The identified deficiencies in the ANSF highlight the fragility of Afghanistan's ability to counter the entrenched insurgency and, as identified in a European Parliament report, the ANSF's inability to function without adequate international funding and support for the foreseeable future.¹⁰⁴

The performance of the ANSF will be important to the future outlook of Afghanistan and the perseverance of its international donors. It will also shape the perceptions of 'Pakistan, India, and other regional countries on the viability of the Afghan state and the existing political arrangements in the country'.¹⁰⁵ As a result, the decision by the US and NATO to extend the Resolute Support Mission is intended to buy time for the Afghan Government to address its challenges and provide space for future negotiations with the Taliban.

Having demonstrated why Afghanistan matters to Australia's security, economic and political interests, it is important to consider how Australia might develop and implement policies that serve to promote Afghanistan's long-term sustainability, and thereby strengthen South Asian stability.

Section 3: Australia's future policy option

Beyond 2016, Australia will remain a constructive and committed partner to our Afghan friends.

[Then Australian] Minister for Defence, Kevin Andrews, September 2015 ¹⁰⁶

Because of the weakness of the Afghan state and its institutions, and the poor sustainability and force generation of the ANSF, there is a very real potential for the Afghan Government to fail. That could allow an emboldened Taliban to take control or result in a return to a 1990s-style civil war and warlordism. Following President Obama's decision in October 2015 to extend US forces in Afghanistan beyond 2017, there is now an opportunity for NATO and Australia to review their current plans and policy settings for Afghanistan.

On the same day as President Obama's announcement, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg asserted that the US decision was important as it 'paves the way for a sustained presence by NATO Allies and partners in Afghanistan'.¹⁰⁷ He indicated that NATO would shortly announce its plans after reviewing the details of the US decision. Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull responded to the US decision by stating that Australia would review current plans and discuss with the US what is required and then make a decision.¹⁰⁸

The current Australian Resolute Support Mission commitment and Afghan policy are based on decisions taken in 2013-14 that reflected the optimistic assessment of the situation in Afghanistan at the time. New policies must, therefore, be developed to recognise the more pessimistic assessments and take into account Australia's interests in the broader South Asia region, rather than just looking at Afghanistan in isolation.

This final section of the paper will draw on the analysis of the first two sections and identify opportunities for Australia to support Afghanistan's security, thereby helping safeguard Australia's strategic interests in the region. To achieve these national interests, Canberra should develop both short- and long-term policies.¹⁰⁹

This section will first address the short term by recommending what Australia should commit in the extended Resolute Support Mission. This recommended commitment would support the Afghan Government in addressing the deteriorating security situation and support the US-Australia relationship. A longer-term initiative will then be proposed to address the effect of external factors on Afghanistan's stability, focusing on the regional competition and tension between India and Pakistan.

Policy Recommendation 1: Extend and expand Australia's ongoing commitment to Resolute Support Mission

In response to the recent US decision, an extension of the ADF's current commitment to the Resolute Support Mission, as well as an expansion of the current Special Forces capability and tasks in Afghanistan, are both warranted. The first proposed initiative requires an understanding of the likely amendments to the planned drawdown process for the NATO forces, which reflect a 2017 or later withdrawal, rather than the current 2016 plan. The second proposal would require detailed planning and coordination with the US and NATO, separate to those being conducted regarding the extension of the NATO mission.

Current status of Australian commitment to Resolute Support Mission¹¹⁰

The ADF's commitment to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission is Operation HIGHROAD. It is significantly smaller than its commitment to the previous NATO-led ISAF mission under Operation SLIPPER. Australia has promised NATO to provide up to 400 personnel to the Resolute Support Mission. However, as at October 2015, there are only about 270 personnel deployed in Afghanistan under Operation HIGHROAD.¹¹¹

Australia's military commitment has been approved and funded out to the end of 2016, to align with the original NATO plan to end the Resolute Support Mission in December 2016. The Australian Government has provided additional budget funding to the Department of Defence for Operation HIGHROAD, with A\$115.1 million allocated in the 2015-16 budget and an additional A\$134.4 million allocated over the forward estimates.

The ADF's contribution to the Resolute Support Mission is confined to the NATO-led 'train, advise and assist' mission in Afghanistan, with no Australian commitment to the US counter-terrorism mission in support of the Afghan Government. The ADF elements in Afghanistan are providing approximately 70 personnel as embedded staff within the NATO Resolute Support Headquarters in Kabul and the Headquarters of the Train, Advise and Assist Command-South in Kandahar. It also has about 90 personnel deployed as trainers, advisors, support staff and force protection in the UK-led training and advisory team at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Qargha near Kabul.

The ADF also provides support to the ANSF's Special Forces through the provision of a small contingent of Australian Special Forces in Kabul. This contingent provides staff and support to the NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan and the Special Operations Advisory Group. The Australian contingent's focus is on advising at the Headquarters of the Afghan General Command of Police Special Units Special Forces. The ADF also has its own national headquarters in Kabul, with support elements in Kandahar, totalling about 110 personnel, providing communications, logistic and administrative support and staff officers.

Initiative 1.1: Australia should maintain personnel and funding commitments in support of the Resolute Support Mission out to and beyond 2017.

It is recommended that Australia extend its current contribution deployed on the Resolute Support Mission to align with and reflect the US extension and pending commitments by the NATO nations. This would require the ADF to maintain its current deployed capabilities—and might also see Australia asked to provide additional capabilities.

The US mission extension will require the Resolute Support Mission Commander to review the current timeline for the drawdown of the current train, advise and assist capabilities. This would likely see the need for deployed ADF capabilities to remain in Afghanistan beyond current timelines. It may also see Australia asked to provide additional capabilities to address areas of weakness within the ANSF and the Afghan Government which have led to the current security situation.

The Australian commitment would need to be meaningful, support the legitimacy of the Afghan Government and reinforce the Australia-US alliance. However, a key concern for defence planners would be government and public sensitivities about any increase in the number of ADF personnel in Afghanistan beyond the mandated cap of 400 personnel. Therefore, any increase in defence personnel to support any requests for additional capability should be constrained by the Government's current manning cap of 400.

Initiative 1.2: Australia should expand its Special Forces commitment in Afghanistan.

It is recommended that Australia should expand its current Special Forces commitment to include the deployment of a Special Forces training team to support US Special Forces' training of units from the Afghan National Army's Special Operations Command or its Special Forces.¹¹² This training team would provide trainers, alongside US Special Forces trainers, to deliver advanced skills.

This initiative reflects previous Australian Government public statements that it would consider contributing Special Forces to Afghanistan post-2014. In April 2013, then Minister of Defence Stephen Smith asserted that:

Under an appropriate mandate, Australia remains prepared to make a Special Forces contribution, either for training or for Counter Terrorism purposes, or both ... to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven or breeding ground for international terrorists.¹¹³

With the deteriorating security situation across Afghanistan, including the emergent ISIS threat, it is likely that there will be increased reliance on the Afghan Special Operations Forces to conduct a higher tempo of counter-terrorism missions. An expanded and meaningful commitment of Australian Special Forces, to reinforce NATO's efforts to train, advise and assist Afghan Special Operations Forces, would provide assurances to the Afghan Government that its stability is important to Australia. Furthermore, an expanded Special Forces mission would reinforce the Australia-US alliance.

The deployment of this Special Forces commitment would potentially support the US and Afghan Counter Terrorism mission. By assuming that the Australian training team would relieve some US Special Forces from this training responsibility, it could be presumed that those US Special Forces personnel would be available to conduct the more robust combat-advising task alongside Afghan Special Operations Forces.

The increased risk profile associated with additional ADF personnel deployed in Afghanistan would be a key concern for defence planners. Noting the likely Government and public sensitivity to the risks associated with Australian Special Forces being recommitted to a combat or combat advisory role, it is unlikely that the Government would approve any such role. However, deploying these forces in an enhanced training role with the Afghan Special Operations Forces may be more palatable. The reduction in ADF personnel deployed on Operation HIGHROAD, as a

result of the end of ISAF mission, should allow the ADF to deploy a Special Forces training team without increasing its commitment above 400.

Funding for initiatives

The funding of these two initiatives should be able to be accommodated within the Government's current budget allocations to support operations.¹¹⁴ These initiatives should not require additional immediate funding if there is no increase in personnel above the current cap of 400, and the Special Forces Training Team is constrained to training tasks. The funding should be able to be sustained within the current A\$115.1 million allocated in the 2015-16 budget. However, it would require additional funding into the forward estimates, above the already-allocated A\$134.4 million, to cover costs out to at least mid 2018.

Rationale for initiatives

These initiatives, to extend and expand Australia's ongoing commitment to Resolute Support Mission, would reflect the intent of the Australian Government over the past four years. Since 2012, Australian Government ministers have regularly reiterated their intent not to allow Afghanistan to again become a terrorist safe haven and to continue building the capacity of the ANSF to counter the Taliban-led insurgency. The present Minister for Defence, Marise Payne, stated in early October 2015 that '[c]ontinued international support will be vital for Afghanistan.... [t]he country still faces many challenges, including in relation to security as a result of the ongoing Taliban insurgency'.¹¹⁵

The proposed initiatives would also support the Australian Government's commitment to the Afghan Government as outlined in its May 2012 'Comprehensive Long-Term Partnership between Australia and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan'.¹¹⁶ As part of that agreement, Australia committed to 'addressing long-term transnational threat, including terrorism', to assist the ANSF in 'countering the threat of international terrorist groups', with Australia promising to continue this support after 2014. The proposed deployment of an expanded Special Forces capability would also meet Australia's pledge to provide 'defence cooperation ... [which] could encompass such areas as counter-terrorism support and providing trainers and advisors to assist building capacity of ANSF institutions'.¹¹⁷

The final rationale for these initiatives is that they would support the US- Australia relationship. The US alliance remains vital to Australia's national interest; therefore, a small commitment to US efforts in Afghanistan would be of great value to both US and Australian interests.

Policy Recommendation 2: Influence Afghanistan's regional external actors

In response to the ongoing negative influence of some of Afghanistan's regional neighbours, Australia should undertake initiatives to promote regional cooperation. This would support the intent of UN Security Council recommendations on Afghanistan which, since 2001, have had a consistent theme of regional development and cooperation to assist the Afghan state with its transition to a stable and functional nation.¹¹⁸

The actions of these stakeholders have both a short- and long-term effect on the prospects of the Afghan Government and will require both multilateral and bilateral initiatives to address the behaviour. This policy approach would focus primarily on the actions of Pakistan and India but would require the input of all regional stakeholders.¹¹⁹ The first policy initiative focuses on Pakistan and the Taliban/terrorist safe havens on its frontier with Afghanistan. The second initiative focuses on reducing friction between India and Pakistan, in order to facilitate trade and cooperation in the transit of goods and energy resources.

Initiative 2.1: Australia should work with like-minded nations in influencing Pakistan to cooperate with Afghanistan to deny Taliban/terrorist safe havens which exist on their common frontier.

At the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012, it was recognised by NATO and its partners that Pakistan has an important role in 'ensuring peace, stability and security in Afghanistan and in facilitating the completion of the transition process [from ISAF-supported security to Afghan lead and responsibility]'.¹²⁰ According to Thomas Barfield, 'if Pakistan ever reversed its policy of support, as it did to Mullah Omar in 2001, the insurgency in Afghanistan would be dealt a fatal blow'.¹²¹

The Australia-Pakistan relationship has been longstanding, with diplomatic relations established in 1947.¹²² The Australia-Pakistan security relationship commenced during the Cold War period and has deepened as a result of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan. Australia has said that the security and stability of Pakistan, like Afghanistan, is important to Australia's national interest.

Australia lacks the bilateral influence to address Pakistan's macro issues, such as the safe havens, and therefore would need to work multilaterally to address this issue.¹²³ However, the Australian Government is well positioned with Pakistan, in comparison with some other Western nations, as it has very little 'political baggage or perceived agenda'.¹²⁴

To influence Pakistan's actions to counter the safe havens, Australia should prioritise the discussion of this issue at the every opportunity. Australia has both bilateral and multilateral forums where it discusses security issues with Pakistan. The bilateral forums include the Pakistan-Australia Defence Cooperation Committee, which is a regular 'Chief-to-Chief' meeting; the 1.5 Track Security Dialogue, which involves the respective Chiefs of Defence Force, along with senior leaders from government agencies, discussing issues of mutual strategic interest; and the Pakistan-Australia Joint Working Group on Border Management and Transnational Crime, which focuses on cooperation to counter transnational crime, including terrorism financing.¹²⁵

In a multilateral approach, the key forum to influence Pakistan is the Istanbul Process, which is a 'regional cooperation mechanism designed to support a peaceful and stable Afghanistan'.¹²⁶ The forum's key stakeholders are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates. Australia and the US are supporting members, along with another 26 members which are the traditional donors to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

In this forum, Australia should work with the US to directly influence Pakistan. The two countries should also utilise China's longstanding strategic alliance with Pakistan to indirectly influence Pakistan to do more to clear the safe havens. Achieving this would result in a benefit to Afghanistan's future. It would also improve security within Pakistan and decrease the terrorist risks to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project.

Initiative 2.2: Australia should develop a strategy to de-escalate India-Pakistan tensions in relation to Afghanistan.

Australia should initiate bilateral initiatives and multilateral efforts, particularly regional, to promote the de-escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan in relation to Afghanistan. Decreasing tensions would provide an opportunity to facilitate South Asian regional trade,

including a more effective transit of goods, which would contribute significantly to the stability of Afghanistan.¹²⁷

Since 2009, Australia has recognised the growing importance of India as a rising power in Asia.¹²⁸ This recognition resulted in the elevation of the Australia-India relationship to a 'strategic partnership', which was affirmed in 2014 with the two nations conducting reciprocal Prime Ministerial visits. This relationship is further supported by annual ministerial-level meetings, such as the Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue and the 2009 Joint Declaration of Security Cooperation and its associated regular senior officials-level meetings. The importance of India in Asia has also been acknowledged by the US, which has developed a more formal relationship in recognition of the economic and strategic importance of India to the US.¹²⁹

The focus for Australia's strategy should address how India and Pakistan approach their competing relationships with Afghanistan. For India, the strategy should focus on its intent regarding the Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership, alongside the Afghan Government's expectations from this partnership. In particular, there is a need to ensure that the economic and security elements of the partnership do not enflame Pakistan's concerns that India is attempting a strategic encirclement.

Australia, therefore, should work with the US and NATO to shape the security environment such that Afghanistan does not need to rely on India for security sector support. This issue has been addressed in the short term by the US decision to extend the Resolute Support Mission. However, in the medium and long term, the US, NATO and Australia should develop security sector support, looking beyond the Resolute Support Mission, to provide Afghanistan with confidence that it does not need to ask India for security support in the future.

For Pakistan, the strategy should focus on reassuring Islamabad that the Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership is not a threat to its security but rather that it has potential benefits. In particular, Australia, US and NATO should emphasise the potential economic benefits of a normalised Afghan-India-Pakistan relationship. Regional cooperation and development in the exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral and energy resources, and the transit of those resources and energy resources from Central Asia through Pakistan, would potentially contribute significantly to Pakistan's economy and thus address some of its economic challenges.

The forums which Canberra could utilise for this strategy are Australia's bilateral relationships with each nation and multilateral forums. At the bilateral level, Australia should use its Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue and the meetings associated with the Joint Declaration of Security Cooperation to influence India. With Pakistan, it should use high-level visits by the Foreign Minister, the Pakistan-Australia Defence Cooperation Committee and the 1.5 Track Security Dialogue to address the issues. At the multilateral level, Australia should work alongside the US and NATO nations, particularly at the Istanbul Process, to influence Pakistan and India to normalise their relations with Afghanistan.

Rationale for initiatives

This proposed initiative reflects the intent of the Australian Government 'to secure the external environment for Afghanistan' using regional forums and processes.¹³⁰ The proposed initiative also supports Australia's commitments in the 'Comprehensive Long-Term Partnership between Australia and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', where Australia noted that 'Afghanistan's position [is] in the heart of Asia' and committed its 'support for regional stability and peaceful regional relations'.¹³¹

The proposal would also support the intent of the various UN Security Council Resolutions on the transition of Afghanistan to a stable and functioning state. In particular, this initiative would help facilitate 'regional cooperation, economic development, trade and transit ... by working with regional organisations whose activities intersect with Afghanistan', and assist Afghanistan in becoming the 'land bridge between East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East'.¹³²

Conclusion

Despite its ongoing instability, Afghanistan remains globally and regionally significant. Afghanistan is a key element of the regional security dynamic and has the potential to adversely affect the security of other regional states, including India, with which Australia seeks closer political and economic relations. Through an examination of the ongoing and future threats to Afghanistan and the way in which the US and NATO are responding to the deteriorating security situation, it has been argued in this paper that action needs to be taken to continue assisting Afghanistan to address the sources of its instability.

To that end, the paper has proposed two policy initiatives to contribute to Australia's efforts in supporting the Afghan Government. The first addresses the immediate concerns of instability and is broken into two sub-components; namely, that Australia should maintain its current 'train, advise and assist' commitment to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in response to the US decision to extend its commitment into 2017, and that Australia should expand its current Special Forces commitment by the provision of a Special Forces training team to support the US counter-terrorism mission in Afghanistan.

These initiatives would support the Afghan Government in countering the Taliban-led insurgency, in accordance with Australia's commitment to its Comprehensive Long-Term Partnership with Afghanistan. They also reflect Australia's national interest in ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a transnational terrorism safe-haven, as well as support to the US-Australia alliance.

The second policy initiative proposes a strategy to address the influence of regional external actors, particularly Pakistan and India, on the long-term stability of Afghanistan. The policy recommends that Australia employ its bilateral relationships with each nation and its involvement in multilateral forums, such as the Istanbul Process, to influence the behaviour of Pakistan and India.

Specifically, it proposes that Australia should develop a strategy to convince Pakistan to do more to close the terrorist safe havens along the Pakistan-Afghan frontier. It should also work with Pakistan and India to temper their competition for influence on Afghanistan, which leads to a 'proxy war' in Afghanistan. The policy should also promote economic benefits through a cooperative approach to trade and development within Afghanistan. However, this policy cannot be achieved by Australia alone and would require the support of the US, NATO nations and regional stakeholders such as China.

Australia cannot view Afghanistan in isolation but rather must see it as part of a wider South Asia geopolitical construct. In promoting new initiatives to support Afghanistan, Australia will need to work as part of a US-led coalition while engaging key regional stakeholders. The policy initiatives suggested in this paper would protect Australia's national security, economic and political interests in Afghanistan and South Asia, and would strengthen Australia's ability to exploit the economic opportunities that are emerging in South Asia.

Notes

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- 7 Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 'India Country Brief', *DFAT* [website], available at <<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/india/pages/india-country-brief.aspx>> accessed 19 August 2015.
- 8 This paragraph based on NATO, 'Resolute Support Mission: key facts and figures', *NATO* [website], available at <http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_02/20150227_1502-RSM-Placemat.pdf> accessed 4 August 2015; and Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope in Afghanistan'. When referring to NATO with respect to ISAF or Resolute Support Mission, it includes all NATO partner nations, such as Australia, New Zealand, Georgia etc.
- 9 US Department of Defense, *Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, p.3.
- 10 The White House, 'Statement by the President on Afghanistan', *White House* [website], 27 May 2014, available at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan>> accessed 10 September 2015.
- 11 Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope in Afghanistan'.
- 12 Dudgeon, 'Afghanistan - Transition to transformation', p. 2.
- 13 Kevin Andrews, 'Statement on Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Operations in the Middle East', [Australian] *Minister for Defence* [website], 16 September 2015, available at <<http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2015/09/16/minister-for-defence-statement-on-iraq-syria-afghanistan-and-operations-in-the-middle-east/>> accessed 5 October 2015.
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- 18 See Motwani and Bose, 'Afghanistan', p. 266; and Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart and Leila Mahnad, 'Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: implications for the US drawdown', Occasional Paper, RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, 2014, pp. 1-4.
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