

Research Paper

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Who Wants What

Mapping the Parties' Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict



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Summary

- The principal parties directly or indirectly involved in the Afghanistan conflict, whether Afghan or foreign, have a range of political, geo-strategic, economic, social-cultural, reputational and other interests in Afghanistan. An understanding of these interests, especially their relative importance to the parties, and whether they converge or diverge, should inform any future efforts to resolve or mitigate the conflict.
- There is sufficient convergence of the parties' interests to suggest that some form of political accommodation is possible, yet ample divergence and distrust between them to make this difficult to accomplish. Considering this, and the complex web of the parties' interests and objectives, any peace process will require effective mediation or facilitation.
- There is apparent convergence of interests between most of the parties, including, to some extent, the Taliban, in terms of avoiding full-scale civil war or state collapse, preserving Afghanistan's territorial integrity, and, over the longer term, maintaining effective national security forces, containing extremists and securing continued international assistance for the country.
- There is at least some convergence between the parties in other areas, such as in preserving Afghanistan's sovereignty and political independence. To different degrees, a number of the parties share an interest in achieving medium- to long-term stability, promoting the rule of law and de-concentrating power. In due course, recognition and political inclusion of the Taliban may prove to be a convergent interest.
- However, there are interests that diverge, such as those relating to the exercise of power and the presence of foreign forces, a divisive issue but one that will decline in salience. There is divergence, too, in the Taliban's strong interest in the application of Sharia, and the interest of the Afghan government and northern groups in preserving democracy and civil liberties.
- There are certain interests that the parties' leaders do not regard as fundamental but that are important to the Afghan population. These include interests where there is divergence between the parties, such as ensuring respect for human rights and women's rights, or those where there is convergence, such as promoting development or strengthening trade and investment. Thus a peace process must involve representatives of Afghan society, and any future mediator should develop strategies not only to overcome differences between the parties but also to protect the interests of the Afghan population.

Introduction

Central to conflict resolution is the search for common ground – interests that adversaries share. Yet in Afghanistan it is difficult to discern such commonalities. The warring parties have tended to demonize each other, deny the existence of shared interests, or use rhetoric that obscures their true interests. In fact, as in most armed struggles, conflictual dynamics have led the parties to articulate positions that project an image of strength, rather than accurately reflecting their interests.

This paper has two aims and two corresponding sections: first, to identify the key interests of the parties directly or indirectly involved in the Afghanistan conflict, and second, to discern where those interests converge or diverge. The core purpose is to inform the debate about the feasibility of negotiations to resolve or mitigate the core conflict, and to provide information that is useful to policy-makers who are thinking about how to structure a peace process, formulate an agenda and develop strategies for mediation.¹ The aim is also to help policy-makers distinguish between the parties' interests and their stated positions.

As in most armed struggles, conflictual dynamics have led the parties to articulate positions that project an image of strength, rather than accurately reflecting their interests.

The paper is based on 30 in-depth interviews with experts in Afghanistan and the region, as well as government officials and diplomats. Their views are recorded, with direct quotations, in the appendix to this paper. Owing to limitations of space, only the most significant Afghan and foreign parties are considered; namely, the three principal Afghan actors: the government (the core of which is the presidency), northern groups and the Taliban; coalition states: the United States, United Kingdom and other US allies; regional powers: Pakistan, Iran, India, China and Russia; Central Asian states; and certain Western Asian states: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Exercises of this kind are usually limited to the parties to a conflict. However, any peace settlement is unlikely to be fair or enduring unless it accords with the interests of a majority of the population. In other words, the settlement must meet the expectations not only of elites but also of Afghan citizens. Therefore, the principal interests of the Afghan population are also considered.

Only interests that relate to the Afghanistan conflict are analysed in this paper. Nevertheless, interviewees stressed that the parties' interests vary widely in type, scope and magnitude. The paper therefore interprets the concept of 'interest' expansively, and reviews interests in the fields of politics and geopolitics, security and military affairs, economics and access to resources, or certain cultural and ideological concerns. It also reflects the view of interviewees that interests can be manifested in specific issues or objectives, broad policy agendas or even national goals.

Any attempt to map parties' interests is intrinsically imperfect because it requires generalizations. Inevitably, elements within each party differ on what matters to them; interests may be mutually

¹ The core conflict is between the Afghan government and the Taliban; however, even if this conflict were to be resolved, it is likely that other armed groups, including Taliban splinter groups, would continue to fight.

inconsistent and change over time. Moreover, leaders' perceptions of their interests and of others' interests may be distorted by political or historical factors, and in some cases *strategies* for securing or advancing interests come to be seen as interests in and of themselves. Nevertheless, given the complexity of the conflict and deep distrust between the parties, any future mediator or facilitator will need to identify areas of mutual interest that can form a basis for dialogue, and develop strategies to address issues of contention. Any mediator will also need to identify interests that the major parties do not regard as fundamental but which are of importance to the population, to ensure they are neither neglected, nor, in the worst case, sacrificed for the sake of achieving agreement. We hope this paper serves as a step towards these ends.

Overview of Interests

Afghan government

The Afghan government is a changing constellation of political forces, factions and power-holders, making distinct interests difficult to discern. However, the foremost interest of the presidency, which dominates the Afghan government, is in preserving political, economic and military power. The presidency has long depended on powers of patronage to balance the interests of competing power-holders. It has therefore resisted decentralization, especially relating to political appointments or fiscal powers, and looked to sustain high levels of foreign assistance, without forfeiting Afghan sovereignty.

Notably, both presidential candidates have said they favour de-concentrating presidential power (Ashraf Ghani by strengthening ministries, Abdullah Abdullah by establishing parliamentary government). Indeed, it has been reported that under an agreement brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry in July 2014, the candidates agreed to the eventual establishment of a parliamentary system of government headed by a prime minister.² Separately, both candidates have previously said they would grant greater powers to the provinces. However, it is unclear whether the July agreement and the candidates' other commitments will be upheld, what exactly they involve and to what extent they would be implemented, given that premiers are often disinclined to diffuse power.

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To meet donors' minimum expectations and maintain a level of domestic legitimacy, Afghanistan's political leadership has an interest in good governance and the rule of law – but not to such an extent that it disturbs the established *modus operandi* based on clientelism and resource-sharing between elites. Afghan government leaders have a vital interest in upholding government authority, containing the insurgency and defending Afghanistan's borders; over the longer term, they seek sufficient stability for mineral extraction. The government therefore seeks robust security forces. In addition, given the rapid scaling back of the West's presence in Afghanistan, and the country's location along geopolitical fault-lines, the government has an interest in expanding its sources of revenue (both licit and illicit) and strengthening its non-Western alliances. Nevertheless, with an impending change of president and formation of a new government, the nature of these interests could change.

Northern groups

Consolidating and expanding power is the central interest of leaders from northern, as well as central and western Afghanistan (referred to below as 'northern leaders'). In practice, this means they want greater influence over national- and local-level political decision-making, secure access to resources and economic rents, the decentralization of power and a more representative electoral system. Given their widespread abuse of power, northern leaders, like their Pashtun equivalents, have little interest

² Matthew Rosenberg, 'Afghans to alter the government', *New York Times*, 13 July 2014.

in a strict application of the rule of law. They have a clear interest in seeing the Taliban subdued or at least contained – and therefore seek continued funding for Afghan security forces – and if negotiations with the Taliban take place, they want a seat at the table. Paradoxically, although they want to avoid a major escalation of hostilities, some northern leaders appear to have an interest in a low level of violence that elevates their role, creates revenue-raising opportunities and secures outside support from anti-Taliban powers.

Afghan Taliban

As a composite movement, the Taliban's interests vary. However, most Talibs share an interest in the withdrawal of foreign troops, the establishment of a strict 'Islamic system', and action against corruption. The Taliban has a clear interest in acquiring a measure of power – especially in justice, religious affairs, anti-corruption, social affairs and education – but may conditionally be prepared to enter into a political settlement. The movement has an obvious short- to medium-term interest in expanding its territorial control, but many leaders reason that a bid for absolute power could generate a powerful anti-Taliban coalition with US and regional backing. Taliban leaders look to reinforce the movement's cohesion, commitment and legitimacy (which may be strained by the withdrawal of foreign forces), and to strengthen its autonomy from Pakistan. Most leaders realize that association with Al-Qaeda jeopardizes their prospects of recognition, influence and safety. In fact, Taliban leaders have a strong interest in international recognition, but believe acknowledging this will be taken as a sign of weakness. Insurgent fighters tend to have local interests, often relating to a community or tribe. Some foot soldiers, and certain factions, however, may be more hard-line than the Taliban leadership, creating significant internal tensions.

United States

Despite internal differences, the paramount interest of the United States is ensuring that Afghanistan does not revert to being a safe haven for extremists who seek to target American or Western interests. Therefore, the US has sought to build a functional Afghan government and substantial national security forces, seen as necessary to contain the Taliban and avoid full-scale civil war. This, officials believe, could benefit extremists and cause adverse spillover effects, especially in Pakistan. America's interest and influence in Afghanistan are receding as its troops withdraw, but for both security and reputational reasons it has an interest in a successful Afghan political and security transition. US officials see an interest in having a short-term, residual troop presence in Afghanistan – to support Afghan forces and act against extremists – hence their efforts to reach a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). Separately, the US seeks to limit opium cultivation, promote good governance, uphold democratic freedoms and protect women's rights – but none of these is a fundamental national interest.

United Kingdom and other US allies

The US has a range of important European and international allies in Afghanistan. The UK is a prominent example and its interests have mirrored those of the US, especially, as officials see it, in containing extremism and avoiding the spread of instability to Pakistan. Another powerful UK interest has been demonstrating support for its single most important ally – the United States – as

has been the case for many other NATO troop contributors. But as the US withdraws, the salience of this interest diminishes. Originally, the UK had sought to burnish its credentials as a global power in Afghanistan. Now its influence there is much reduced, and its priority is damage limitation: to leave without being seen as having failed to defeat the Taliban. The UK is active in a range of sectors in Afghanistan – and has committed to long-term development aid. This assistance is seen as contributing to stability but is not regarded as essential for British interests. Similar considerations apply to many other important US allies in Afghanistan, such as Canada, Australia, Germany or Japan. Other members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), such as Norway or Sweden, have invested in promoting human rights in Afghanistan, but cannot be said to have vital national interests at stake.

Pakistan

Despite significant internal differences, Pakistan's leaders generally see an interest in maintaining influence in Afghanistan and preventing the emergence of a strong, India-aligned government in Kabul. Pakistan's leaders have long perceived a threat from India, deriving from successive conflicts, and seek to deny India the ability to use Afghanistan as a base for threatening or destabilizing Pakistan. Thus Pakistan's military has provided sanctuary and support to the Afghan Taliban, seeing it as an asset that gives Pakistan 'strategic depth'. However, Pakistani leaders are increasingly concerned about 'reverse strategic depth': the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary by Pakistan's own enemies, including the Pakistani Taliban and Baloch insurgents. Thus they do not want to see a Taliban victory, but they do not necessarily favour a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan either, with some officials fearing that increased stability could lead to a greater Indian presence. A degree of cooperation on Afghan reconciliation, however, underscores Pakistan's strategic significance. Pakistan has a strong interest in avoiding an all-out civil war in Afghanistan, with inevitable spillover effects, and could benefit from cooperation with Afghanistan on trade, narcotics-trafficking and water supply – but these are seen as secondary to Pakistan's national security interests.

Iran

Iran has a strong interest in having a friendly, stable government in Kabul. However, given uncertainty about Afghanistan's future, and multiple sources of Iranian foreign policy, Iran is hedging its bets: it is not only cultivating allies in Kabul and maintaining good relations with northern factions, but is also, through the Revolutionary Guards, giving limited support to the Taliban. This has been seen as serving Iran's geostrategic interest in expediting a complete US military withdrawal. However, Iran has no interest in seeing the ascendancy of the Saudi Arabia-linked, Sunni Taliban, against which Iran nearly went to war in 1998, nor does it want to see escalating conflict. Either scenario could threaten Iran's cultural and economic interests in west and southwest Afghanistan, home to Hazaras, who are also Shia Muslims, or generate spillover effects. Indeed, Iran has a strong interest in combating Sunni extremism and in cross-border cooperation with Afghanistan, especially on narcotics and migration. Iran has the world's highest incidence of opium addicts and hosts over two million Afghan economic migrants and refugees. Furthermore, the recent US–Iran nuclear rapprochement, the rise of Sunni jihadists in Iraq, and President Obama's commitment to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016 may increase Iran's willingness to engage constructively in Afghanistan's transition.

India

India wants to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-Indian militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which previously ran training camps in eastern Afghanistan. Having historical ties to Afghanistan's northern groups, and seeing the Afghan Taliban as a geopolitical instrument of Pakistan – and Pakistan as the driver of anti-Indian militancy – India is staunchly anti-Taliban. India's central interest is in a strong, friendly government in Kabul that is capable of containing anti-Indian groups, resisting the Taliban and preventing deepening instability that might benefit the militants. Indian officials also see an alliance with Kabul as a means of gaining regional advantage over their rival Pakistan. These factors explain why India has a significant diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and an extensive aid programme. India also has certain mineral interests in Afghanistan and could benefit from greater trade through Afghanistan to northern markets – but these are secondary to its overarching concern: the influence of Pakistan. Some analysts believe the strong mandate of the new Indian premier, Narendra Modi, and his conservative credentials, may enable him to engage constructively with Pakistan, including on Afghanistan – but this remains to be seen.

China

Reflecting its increasing demand for raw materials, China has mineral-related interests in Afghanistan, especially the Aynak copper concession in Logar province, the world's second largest copper deposit, and an oil concession in Sari-i Pul. China also wants to avoid spillover from the Afghanistan conflict, and to avoid the possibility of Uighur militants from neighbouring Xinjiang gaining refuge in Afghanistan. It therefore has a clear interest in Afghanistan's stability, which Chinese diplomats say cannot be achieved without reconciliation with the Taliban. Over the longer term, China has an interest in expanding its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, especially as the Western presence recedes, and in averting any confrontation between India and Pakistan, its key regional ally. Consequently, in recent years China has enhanced its diplomatic activities, bringing Afghanistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as an Observer State, conducting high-level visits and even establishing channels to the Taliban. Later this year China will host a ministerial meeting of the Istanbul Process, promoting regional cooperation; further Chinese diplomatic and economic engagement on Afghanistan seems highly likely.

Russia

Given increased rivalry between Russia and the US as a result of the crises in Syria and Ukraine, Russia sees Afghanistan as an arena where it could enhance its influence at the West's expense. Yet, having concerns about the spread of Islamic militancy and narcotics-trafficking, it does not want the West to abandon Afghanistan to its fate. Russia therefore has somewhat ambiguous policies towards Afghanistan. It has allowed NATO to transport personnel and non-lethal equipment across its territory, and has urged Afghanistan to sign the BSA. At the same time, it has strengthened diplomatic relations with Kabul, is planning major reconstruction efforts, and may eventually invest in oil and gas. Mindful of the Soviet and American experience in Afghanistan, Russia will engage cautiously, but is likely to expand its presence in the country, perhaps in collaboration with its Central Asian allies.

Central Asia

Central Asian states have a clear interest in stability in Afghanistan, and could suffer significant repercussions if Afghanistan were to descend into full-scale civil war. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which border Afghanistan, have ties to respective Afghan ethnic minorities, and share an interest in limiting the spread of Islamic militants and narcotics-trafficking. Stability in Afghanistan would also serve Central Asian states' commercial interests, enabling them to reach export markets in South and West Asia, including the Gulf. Uzbekistan, for example, seeks the construction of a railway from Uzbekistan, via Afghanistan, to Iran; Turkmenistan seeks to build a gas pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan. None of these states, however, has significant leverage over the parties to the conflict.

Western Asia

Turkey and certain Middle Eastern states have strong links to Afghanistan. Turkey has long-standing ties to Turkic-speaking minorities and Uzbek political factions in Afghanistan. It seeks to expand its regional influence, which explains its participation in ISAF, its role in hosting regional summits, and its previous offer to host a Taliban liaison office. Saudi Arabia, a Pakistan ally, has ties to the Afghan Taliban, which espouses a fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam that strongly resembles Wahhabism. Saudi Arabia, seeing the Taliban as a hedge against Iranian influence in Afghanistan, has turned a blind eye to fundraising for the Taliban; it has also hosted Afghan peace talks and may do so in the future. Qatar, a Saudi rival, played a key role in facilitating US–Taliban talks during 2011, hosts the Taliban's *de facto* political office, and mediated the recent US–Taliban prisoner exchange. Qatar has a geopolitical interest in winning favour with the US, while cementing its Islamist credentials by association with the Taliban – but its future role may be limited by distrust between Doha and Kabul.

Afghan population

Obviously, the Afghan population's interests are kaleidoscopic and vary immensely. But field research and polling show certain interests and aspirations are widely shared among Afghans in both urban and rural areas. Above all, Afghans have an interest in peace and security. They want to live, work, travel and go about their lives in safety, and they yearn for an end to the conflict. Given the widespread abuse of power, corruption and impunity, most Afghans want to see fair and inclusive government, professional policing and the effective administration of justice. Given widespread poverty, Afghans have an interest in continuing international assistance and a functional government that provides essential services, especially in health and education. They also have a strong interest in successful management of the economy, along with measures to promote trade and investment, in order to create jobs. Perspectives on social, civil and political issues vary, but most Afghans have an interest in preserving their culture and traditions, while protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, including democratic rights, as underscored by the recent elections. The interests of Afghan women vary widely, but few Afghans favour the repressive and discriminatory treatment of women and girls during the Taliban regime. Overwhelmingly, Afghans support the protection of Afghanistan's national sovereignty and political independence.

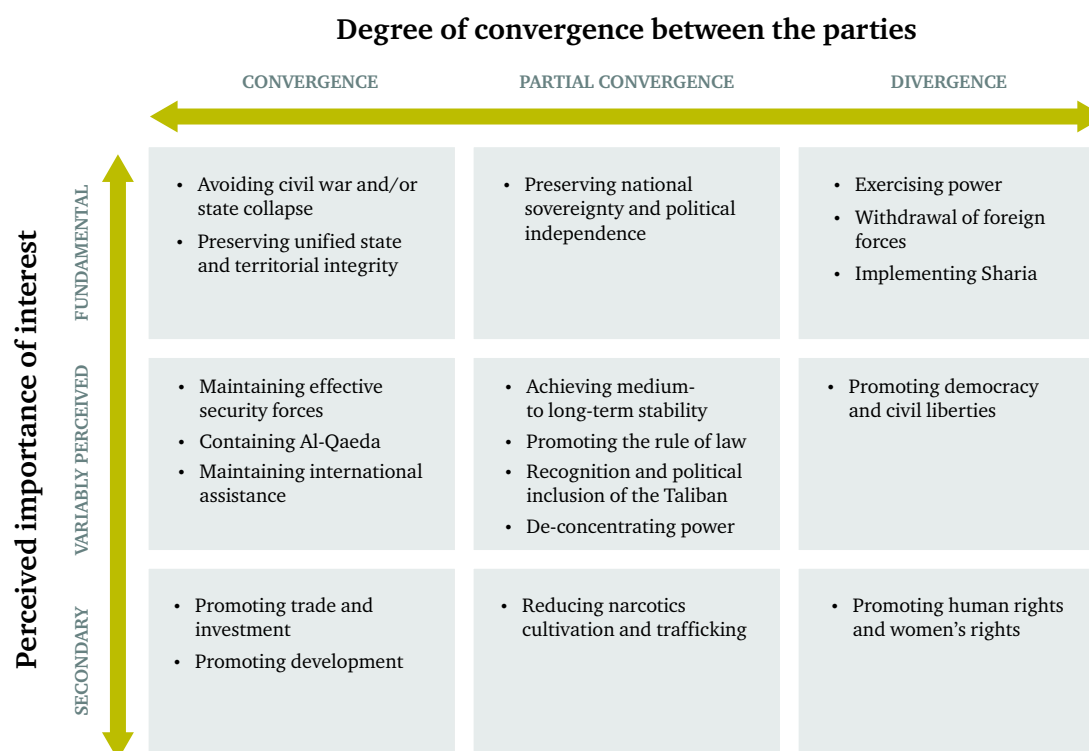
Map of Interests

To allow comparative interpretation of the interests discussed above, we present below a rough mapping of the parties' interests according to whether or not there is convergence between them and the relative importance of these interests in the parties' eyes. Being at the highest level of generality, this exercise is inherently imprecise. Inevitably, the convergence or divergence of interests is highly contingent, the parties differ in the weight they attach to certain interests, and they conceive of interests differently. But even the most approximate categorization is preferable to none at all, and might help inform a mediator or official involved in any future negotiations.

As noted earlier, the parties' interests are manifold, varying in substance, type and scope. To avoid omission we have therefore interpreted 'interests' widely, to include specific issues such as the withdrawal of foreign forces, policy agendas such as the promotion of human rights, or national goals such as the avoidance of all-out civil war.

In categorizing the interests, we have considered, above all, the perspectives of the Afghan parties to the conflict, but have also taken into account the interests of neighbours and foreign powers.³ Interests are divided into three groups: where they appear to converge, partially converge, or diverge; in each case, specific interests are addressed roughly in order of the apparent importance attached to them by one or more parties.

Figure 1: Map of the parties' interests by perceived importance and degree of convergence



³ Figure 1 does not include the issue of negotiation itself, given that it is heavily contingent on a wide range of factors.

Convergence of Interests

Avoiding civil war and/or state collapse

None of the major parties directly or indirectly involved in the conflict has an interest in full-scale civil war or state collapse. This would put events out of their control and jeopardize their influence, authority or access to resources; it threatens to cause serious spillover or knock-on effects for neighbours, especially Pakistan and Iran.

Preserving a unified state with territorial integrity

All of the warring parties support Afghanistan's territorial integrity, and none wants to see the partition of the country. Regional states and foreign powers do not consider this to be a critical issue, but they are likely to be deeply concerned about the implications of any fragmentation of the country. A caveat: Pakistan would like to see the Durand Line recognized as the official border between the two states, which Afghanistan is unlikely to accept. However, neither country has an interest in challenging the line as the *de facto* border for the foreseeable future.

Maintaining effective security forces

All of the Afghan parties, and the Afghan population at large, have a strong interest in Afghanistan maintaining effective security forces – both army and police – as a means of ensuring law and order and defending Afghanistan's territory. Paradoxically, the Taliban, being powerfully nationalist and committed to strong action against criminality, wants to see strong Afghan security forces but is reluctant to acknowledge this given its current contest with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the West's role in training, equipping and funding them. In the context of a political settlement the Taliban would be unlikely to seek the demobilization of the ANSF, but could be expected to insist on provisions for the integration of Taliban fighters and commanders into the army, as well as a Taliban role in running or overseeing the police, especially in the south and southeast. Most neighbouring states and regional powers have supported ISAF's efforts to build credible Afghan security forces, seeing them as contributing to stability and not as an external threat.

Containing Al-Qaeda

None of the major parties would benefit from Al-Qaeda or affiliated groups re-establishing themselves in Afghanistan.⁴ Larger powers – the United States, China, Russia and India – all share concerns about the spread of Islamic extremism. And although certain Taliban leaders may derive short-term operational benefits from links to Al-Qaeda, most of the Taliban leadership would see

⁴ In other words, the parties do not favour Al-Qaeda establishing a presence greater than the limited number of its operatives currently based in eastern Afghanistan.

the group's return to Afghanistan as high-risk, politically problematic and unpopular with ordinary Afghans. Thus a majority of parties share an interest in ensuring that extremists are, at a minimum, 'contained' – in other words, denied the opportunity to establish secure bases from which they can direct or launch attacks against other countries.

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Maintaining international assistance

All of the Afghan parties have an interest in the continuation of international assistance for Afghanistan, whether direct financial support to the government, technical assistance or overseas aid. Given the high expectations of Afghans and the Taliban's disastrous record in administering public services, this is clearly in the movement's interests – and the leadership has implied as much in recent statements.⁵ If, ultimately, there is a negotiated settlement to the core conflict, the parties may also have an interest in the presence of external actors, such as the UN, to support the implementation of any agreement and monitor compliance.

Promoting trade and investment

Most foreign parties perceive an interest in increased trade and investment; China and India, especially, are eyeing Afghanistan's natural resources. But, for the time being at least, geopolitics trumps economics. Generally speaking, regional powers consider commercial investments as secondary to geopolitical or national security interests. Despite massive unemployment, even Afghan political leaders may not regard trade and investment as a vital interest: international assistance is seen as assured over the short to medium term; personally, they have steady income streams, and face few industrial lobby groups or trade unions.

Promoting development

Generally speaking, the parties broadly favour social and economic progress, and most of the parties (including the Taliban but with caveats) favour improvements in and greater access to public services.⁶ However, while raising living standards is a central interest of the population, it does not appear to be so for any of the major parties.

⁵ Taliban statement, attributed to Mullah Omar, at Eid al-Fitr, published on 16 August 2012.

⁶ It is doubtful whether the Taliban would support full access to essential public services for women; for instance, it might seek to limit women's access to certain health and medical services, and place restrictions on secondary schooling for girls.

Partial Convergence of Interests

Preserving national sovereignty and political independence

Significantly, all of the Afghan parties share a strong commitment to Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence; yet, at the same time, each seeks to benefit materially or politically from external support. Neighbouring states and outside powers accept Afghan sovereignty in principle, but nevertheless seek to exert strong influence on Afghan politics or to use Afghanistan for their own ends. For example, as noted, India looks to contain the influence of Pakistan; and Pakistan's respect for Afghan sovereignty is circumscribed and conditional: it extends only insofar as Pakistan retains significant influence and 'strategic depth'.

Achieving medium- to long-term stability

Paradoxically, the majority of Afghan and foreign actors have an interest in Afghanistan's medium- to long-term stability. The Taliban have no short-term interest in stability: they are attacking national security forces and seeking to expand their territorial control. Certain power-holders, including warlords, drug-traffickers and local commanders, have an interest in continuing instability, given the profits available in the war economy. However, as the flow of international funding subsides, some of the principal actors may see political, economic or organizational benefits in stability. Protracted conflict will drain the resources and undermine the authority of the Afghan government, and prevent the lucrative extraction of minerals. Northern leaders may see their revenues fall and the Taliban make territorial advances. Even the Taliban may come to acknowledge the political costs of enduring armed struggle: despite likely gains, the legitimacy of their cause, overall unity and ability to recruit will diminish as foreign troops leave. A considerable number of Afghan actors may therefore have an interest in stability over the medium to long term – provided, of course, they believe that their principal interests have been secured.

Even the Taliban may come to acknowledge the political costs of enduring armed struggle: despite likely gains, the legitimacy of their cause, overall unity and ability to recruit will diminish as foreign troops leave.

Most neighbours and outside powers have a clear interest in stability, which reduces cross-border contagion, limits opportunities for extremists, reduces the prospects of civil war and improves the prospects for trade and mineral extraction. China, Russia and India would see clear security and economic benefits – assuming the emergence of a cooperative government in Kabul. For the United States and its allies, stability would not only allay concerns about Al-Qaeda and the risk of spillover into Pakistan, but would also reduce perceived reputational costs associated with continued conflict and unilateral Taliban gains.

Pakistan's military establishment may still believe that instability in Afghanistan is preferable to the risk of a strong, India-aligned government in Kabul. Nevertheless, with increasing Pakistani concern about the threat of 'reverse strategic depth', there is greater awareness of the opportunity costs of

supporting the Taliban. This suggests that if, eventually, Pakistani officials were reassured about the scope and purpose of India's presence in Afghanistan, and felt a political settlement in Afghanistan could address cross-border concerns without curtailing Pakistan's influence, they might perceive such a settlement as having genuine advantages.

Promoting the rule of law

The Afghan population has a strong interest in the enforcement of the law, and the new president may seek to build his credentials in this area. Paradoxically, the US-led coalition and the Taliban share an interest in the rule of law. They evidently hold very different views about the substance of the law and legal process – but have shared a mutual interest, rarely acknowledged, for the effective administration of justice, especially with regard to criminality and corruption. This is not to say that parts of the Taliban do not engage in crime and misconduct – in some respects this is systemic – but the leadership realizes that the movement's legitimacy rests, in large part, on demonstrating its ability to tackle the abuse of power and reduce criminality.

Nevertheless, as the US winds down its counter-insurgency efforts, its interest in promoting the rule of law diminishes. Arguably, a number of Afghan power-holders, on all sides, see risks in the law being upheld to the extent that this threatens their ability to use illicit means to achieve their personal or political ends. And most regional states see the rule of law as significant only to the extent that it helps or hinders them in securing their interests.

Recognition and political inclusion of the Taliban

In practice, this issue is likely to be contingent on the larger question of a political accommodation with the Taliban, especially as Taliban leaders may fear they would do poorly in a straight democratic contest. However, it may be in all of the parties' interests for the Taliban, in due course, to be recognized and allowed to operate within the political system. If the Taliban continues to expand its territorial influence – which is reasonable to expect given the movement's sanctuaries in Pakistan and weaknesses in Afghan forces – it may increasingly be in the interests of the Afghan government and northern groups to compete with the Taliban at a political level rather than militarily. And while it is currently focused on making military gains, as noted, many of its leaders are aware that these gains could precipitate the revival of a powerful, anti-Taliban coalition. They also seek domestic legitimacy and recognition by the international community – and know that this will ultimately depend on their engaging in politics, rather than violence. India would have concerns about Taliban recognition and inclusion, but most regional states are likely to see this as paving the way towards stability.

De-concentrating power

In different ways, both presidential candidates have said they support the de-concentration and decentralization of power, and, as noted, northern groups take the view that the current political system places too much power in the hands of the president and does not adequately reflect Afghanistan's diversity. These viewpoints help to explain the reported moves towards a parliamentary system of government. Separately, the strengthening of local powers (policy-making and budgetary) may be one of the practical outcomes of any future political arrangement that involves the Taliban. Indeed, this would reflect the decentralized nature of the insurgency. But so far the Taliban has not

articulated any support for the de-centralization of executive power, and national premiers, whatever their previous views, often oppose the diffusion of power. No regional state is likely to object to the de-concentration of power, and some, such as Pakistan, may see it as giving their Afghan clients greater influence – but for no regional actor is this a major interest.

Reducing narcotics cultivation and trafficking

While most neighbours and foreign powers have a clear interest in more effective counter-narcotics efforts, most Afghan parties, including warlords, government figures and the Taliban, would see this as a threat to their income and influence (regrettably, for many Afghan power-holders, this an area of convergence).

Divergence of Interests

Exercising power

The most obvious clash of interests is in the Afghan parties' aspiration to exercise power, which has generally been perceived in zero-sum terms. Notably, none of the parties, including the Taliban, has claimed the right to exercise power absolutely. And recent developments, such as the 2012 Chantilly meetings between representatives of the Taliban, Afghan government and northern groups, or the *de facto* opening of the Taliban office in Doha in 2013, suggest that elements within the Taliban are open to the possibility of some form of political settlement. Nevertheless, escalating violence in Afghanistan underscores the virulence of the struggle for power. Presently, hard-line views prevail and some insurgent leaders may view negotiations merely as a route to political supremacy.

Withdrawal of foreign forces

The Taliban has an interest in the full withdrawal of foreign forces, while other Afghan parties generally support a continuing international military presence. Neighbouring countries and foreign powers have been divided on the issue, with Iran having strongly opposed a long-term US troop presence. However, President Obama's recent announcement, indicating that US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2016, will attenuate the salience of this issue. Interestingly, some elements of the Taliban would not object to the presence of foreign forces so long as they were not engaged in hostilities against the Taliban (and presumably, operating under a new mandate). A Taliban spokesman in Doha unwittingly confirmed as much in an interview of June 2013.⁷ Nevertheless, given the views of foot soldiers and the movement's sustained and vitriolic campaign against the 'infidel occupation', it is unlikely that Taliban leaders will argue for anything other than a full withdrawal of international forces.

Interestingly, some elements of the Taliban would not object to the presence of foreign forces so long as they were not engaged in hostilities against the Taliban.

Implementing Sharia

All Afghan parties agree on the application of Sharia, and they agree, as the constitution provides, that Afghan law should be consistent with Sharia – but there is little agreement on the scope of Sharia and what it actually entails. A majority of the Taliban interprets Sharia as imposing a strict social and legal code involving harsh penalties, such as corporal punishment for 'moral crimes', to which many Afghans and other key actors would object.

⁷ Kathy Gannon, 'Taliban offer to free US soldier', Associated Press, 20 June 2013.

Promoting democracy and civil liberties

This may be a significant interest of the Afghan population, and is strongly supported by the West, but it is of little interest to regional powers, such as China or Pakistan. The Afghan presidency and most political actors have an interest in preserving basic freedoms, but they also have an interest in being able to manipulate the democratic process. The Taliban is likely to want to impose significant constraints on democratic participation and freedom of expression, and, judging by its 2005 'Constitution of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', it may seek constitutional change to elevate the law-making power of political appointees, especially *ulema*. The Taliban also objects to the current constitutional dispensation because it is seen as a product of a Western-dominated process, initiated at Bonn in 2001, from which it was excluded.⁸

Ensuring respect for human rights and women's rights

For large segments of the population, especially those in urban areas but in many rural areas, too, this is a fundamental interest. The overwhelming majority of Afghans, for example, want girls to be educated. Western states regard human rights as important, but, along with all the other major players, none regards this as a fundamental national interest. In fact, most other actors – Afghan and foreign – regard the issue with comparative indifference. Thus respect for human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan is precarious. It is likely to fall to Afghan community leaders and multilateral bodies, such as the UN or non-governmental organizations, to defend these values. Some Taliban leaders realize that achieving recognition and greater legitimacy depends on showing greater moderation than they did during their regime. It remains to be seen whether, in any negotiations, these leaders would speak out, or whether their views would carry weight with the rest of the movement.

⁸ The International Conference on Afghanistan, which agreed a constitutional roadmap for the country, was held in Bonn in December 2001. Reports suggest that a process to review and amend the Afghan constitution may be initiated in due course, as a result of the Kerry-brokered agreement between the presidential candidates, but it is questionable whether the Taliban would be invited or willing to participate in any such process.

Concluding Remarks

Although the above analysis is simplified and generalized, it suggests that at least in certain areas there is convergence between the parties' interests, including those they regard as fundamental or significant, namely, avoiding full-scale civil war, preserving Afghanistan's territorial integrity and, over the longer term, maintaining effective security forces, containing Al-Qaeda, and securing continued international assistance for the country. Such interests might form a foundation for constructive dialogue in any peace process. This dialogue might be reinforced by the acknowledgment of interests where there is at least a degree of convergence between the parties, such as in preserving Afghanistan's sovereignty and political independence, achieving medium- to long-term stability, promoting the rule of law and de-concentrating power. Surprisingly, recognition and political inclusion of the Taliban might, in due course, prove to be a convergent interest. This is not to say that it will be easy or even possible to secure agreement between the parties on these issues. The parties' public positions have often been more forward-leaning or aggressive than their true interests would warrant, which might make compromises difficult. But the analysis suggests that in these areas there is a basis for dialogue and the potential for agreement, which could pave the way for some form of political accommodation.

However, the analysis also highlights the divergence of interests, most obviously in the contest for the exercise of power and over the presence of foreign forces, although the latter will decline in significance. The Taliban has a strong interest in the strict application of Sharia, especially in justice and social affairs, which many other parties would resist. Conversely, the government and northern groups broadly share an interest in the preservation of democracy and civil liberties, as provided for by the current constitution, which the Taliban believes should be circumscribed. These differences, some of which concern fundamental interests, will prove difficult to resolve, and strongly suggest that effective external mediation or facilitation will be required.

Looking ahead, this analysis points towards the importance of efforts to understand not only the nature and dynamics of the relationships between the parties, but also the most important sources of leverage or influence over them.

There are also certain interests that parties' leaders do not regard as fundamental, but that are of huge importance to the Afghan population, namely, ensuring respect for human rights and women's rights, promoting development, or strengthening trade and investment. This strongly suggests that a peace process should involve representatives of Afghan society. It also suggests that any future mediator will have a dual challenge: to develop strategies not only to overcome major differences between the parties but to protect the interests of the population. Peace may require compromises, but it is unlikely to be sustainable or just if it does not reflect the interests and aspirations of ordinary Afghans.

Looking ahead, this analysis points towards the importance of efforts to understand not only the nature and dynamics of the relationships between the parties, but also the most important sources of leverage or influence over them. There is in addition a need for a greater awareness of instances where a party's positions do not align with its interests, or where a party's judgments about others' interests are mistaken – each of which creates barriers to dialogue. Such information will be essential for developing strategies to help the parties resolve differences and move the conflict towards an eventual close.

Appendix: Parties' Interests

This appendix seeks to catalogue the parties' main interests, and records insights and information shared by experts and officials. It is included for reference only, to provide detail, nuance and direct quotations which were not included in the main text.

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

The Afghan government is comprised of diverse political forces, factions and power-holders, whose configuration and relative strength vary over time, which makes its interests difficult to discern. However, by far the most significant of the Afghan government's constitutive parts is the institution of the presidency. Vested with paramount authority by Afghanistan's constitution, the presidency's foremost interest is in preserving political and economic power. Hence, as interviewees pointed out, President Karzai has ensured that executive power remains concentrated in the presidency, resisted the cession of powers to parliament or the regions, and impeded the emergence of political parties.

However, presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah has said he supports the establishment of a parliamentary form of government and the statutory devolution of powers to local level.⁹ Ashraf Ghani has argued for the strengthening of ministries, with some policy-making powers and a greater part of the national budget allocated to provincial administrations. As noted in the main text, in July 2014 it was reported that under an agreement brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry, the presidential candidates agreed to the eventual establishment of a parliamentary system of government headed by a prime minister.¹⁰ But it is unclear whether this agreement and the candidates' other commitments to reform will be upheld. Nor is it clear what exactly the proposals involve, what impact they would have or what the candidates would do in practice, given that premiers, regardless of their previous positions, are often disinclined to diffuse power.

Given the highly segmented nature of Afghan society, profusion of local power-holders, and limits to the state's coercive tools, the authority and influence of the Afghan presidency has long depended on powers of patronage. Essentially, it employs a divide-and-rule policy, whereby, as one interviewee put it, power is structured through a series of 'balancing acts',¹¹ a form of arbitration between 'a series of different fiefdoms'.¹² Thus the presidency has a strong interest in protecting its authority to make government appointments, especially provincial and district governors, and in presiding over the allocation of resources. If, in due course, the position of prime minister is created, the powers that are afforded to the holder of that position are likely to be highly contested. Having little domestic revenue, Afghanistan's political leadership has an interest in maintaining a continuous flow of foreign funding. Incidentally, it also has an interest in attracting an array of donors to reduce dependency on a few states that would wield disproportionate leverage.

⁹ Clark B. Lombardi and Shamshad Pasarlay, 'Might Afghans Amend The 2004 Constitution? Hints from a Televised Presidential Debate', *Int'l J. Const. L. Blog*, available at: <http://www.iconnectblog.com/2014/04/might-afghans-amend-the-2004-constitution-hints-from-a-televised-presidential-debate/>.

¹⁰ Matthew Rosenberg, 'Afghans to alter the government', *New York Times*, 13 July 2014.

¹¹ Interview, 22 October 2013.

¹² Interview, 25 October 2013.

Naturally, the president, or any future prime minister, has an interest in stability – and in security forces that are capable of upholding government authority, containing the insurgent threat and controlling Afghanistan's borders. Some observers argue the government has an interest in a certain level of instability in order to attract external resources, which are largely a function of Western security concerns. Nevertheless, the government has no interest in a level of violence that undermines its own authority or curtails potentially lucrative investments, such as concessions for the extraction of minerals. Separately, Afghan government leaders have an interest in good governance to the degree that it satisfies donor expectations, but not to the extent that it disturbs the governing *modus operandi* based on clientelism and resource-sharing among the ruling elite. As one interviewee put it: 'To a lesser or greater extent, Afghan politics has always been about divvying up the spoils.'¹³

The government has a clear interest in preserving Afghanistan's sovereignty and minimizing external interference in political and social affairs, which could undermine its domestic credibility and international status. Yet this is partially qualified by the interest of government leaders in securing external rents, and having plausible scapegoats for failed policies.

As for President Karzai personally, it would appear that he has sought to preserve his reputation and legacy. Some experts believe he may seek to retain influence, perhaps by presiding over a transition of power that will enable him to become an *éminence grise* or 'father of the nation'.¹⁴

Northern groups

According to experts, the coalition formerly known as the Northern Alliance consists of 'factions within factions' and is too fragmented to speak of collective objectives or positions.¹⁵ However, leaders predominantly from northern, as well as central and western Afghanistan (referred to here as 'northern leaders'), generally seek to consolidate and expand their power. As one interviewee put it: 'From power flows everything else, power for the Northern Alliance leaders means security, and from that power flows economic benefit, and the ability to deliver patronage ... They would do whatever is necessary to stay in power.'¹⁶ At both the local and national level northern leaders seek influence over major decisions or appointments, and access to resources and economic rents. 'Business and politics are inseparable.'¹⁷ It is unclear, at this stage, if and how these interests would be affected were Dr Abdullah to become president or prime minister, especially as not all northern groups have sided with him. An Abdullah premiership might attenuate the drive for power of some northern groups, while others might see it as an opportunity to strengthen their positions.

Broadly, northern leaders have an interest in constitutional change to reduce the power of the presidency and, though not favouring federalism, they want to see an increase in provincial-level powers. (For example, some leaders of Jamiat-i Islami, a majority Tajik party, are now in favour of elected provincial governors.) They also have an interest in a more representative electoral system, believing the single non-transferable vote system leads to their under-representation in parliament.

¹³ Interview, 23 October 2013.

¹⁴ Interview, 25 October 2013.

¹⁵ Interview, 22 October 2013. The most prominent parties and coalitions are: Jamiat-e Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), Jombesh-e Melli Islami-ye Afghanistan (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), Etelaf-e Melli-ye Afghanistan (National Coalition of Afghanistan), Jabbh-e Melli Afghanistan (National Front of Afghanistan), Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan) and Hezb-e Wahdat-e-Islami Mardom-e-Afghanistan (People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan).

¹⁶ Interview, 22 October 2013.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Interest in stability varies across the spectrum of northern leaders. Virtually all seek to exclude their long-time enemies, the Taliban, from national power and from their local areas of influence or control. They seek to ensure that they themselves, and their allies, remain safe. Having said this, a low or 'manageable' level of insurgent activity does not threaten, and may even suit, certain leaders, who have profited from direct Western support, as well as lucrative reconstruction and development contracts. As one interviewee put it, 'security is understood as gunmen guaranteeing a little bit less violence, so that various cartels can take ownership of state resources'.¹⁸ But none of the northern groups wants to see a return to the chaos of the 1990s, with the upheaval and unpredictability that would entail.

Looking ahead, most northern leaders are concerned about the impending withdrawal of international forces and, according to some reports, are re-arming, establishing local militias and consolidating links to regional sponsors. By the same token, if there is momentum behind negotiations with the Taliban, they are anxious to participate in talks in order to protect their interests; in fact, a number of northern figures have established channels to Taliban leaders.

Northern leaders have a secondary interest in maintaining their regional identity, which reinforces their support base and underscores their ability to act as a bridge between Kabul and their constituents. They have an interest in continued investment in education, which is generally popular with their supporters. However, given the widespread abuse of power by northern leaders, like their Pashtun equivalents they have little real interest in the rule of law, which could weaken their control of resources.

Looking ahead, most northern leaders are concerned about the impending withdrawal of international forces and, according to some reports, are re-arming, establishing local militias and consolidating links to regional sponsors.

Most interviewees played down the significance of party political or ideological interests of northern leaders, noting that party platforms and policy agendas are generally subservient to 'big man' politics. With the exception of some new, minor parties such as Rights and Justice, political parties are generally reluctant to commit to policy positions and tend to be pragmatic. As one diplomat remarked, 'a lot of apparently fixed principles can be thrown overboard ... I don't think there are any absolute positions anywhere'.¹⁹

Afghan Taliban

Much remains unknown about the Taliban's exact interests. There is a considerable gap between what the Taliban says and does, partly for tactical reasons but also because of the movement's diversity, its composite structure, and the flux it has experienced over the past three to four years. Fractures have emerged within the leadership, some of which are ideological, while others reflect factional power struggles. A fault-line exists between elements of the Taliban connected to the Doha office, and the military wing of the movement. The former is said to have lost credibility and influence internally since the abortive opening of the Taliban office in June 2013; rather, the military wing dominates and the movement's near-term focus is on making military gains. It remains to be seen whether the recent

¹⁸ Interview, 24 October 2013.

¹⁹ Interview, 25 October 2013.

release of five Taliban from Guantánamo, in the US–Taliban prisoner exchange, will alter this dynamic and, if so, how. Separately, although the presumed leader, Mullah Omar, and the leadership council retain a great deal of status and authority within the movement, there are tensions between fighters on the ground in Afghanistan and the leadership in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, experts interviewed for this paper pointed to certain goals and interests that are widely shared within the Taliban. Arguably, the movement's principal stated interest is in expelling foreign troops viewed, or at least portrayed, as invaders. The movement's other, principal stated interest is in establishing an 'Islamic system', in other words, effecting constitutional, legal and social changes which accord with its strict interpretation of Sharia. It is not exactly clear what this system would entail, but it is undoubtedly expansive, covering, among other things, the regulation of social affairs, harsh punishments for crimes, action against corruption, and constraints on the rights and freedoms of women.

There is recognition within some parts of the movement that it would be unwise to try to replicate the repressive social and legal codes instituted by the 'Islamic Emirate'. As one interviewee put it, the 'old commanders realize Afghanistan has changed markedly since 2001, and they won't be able to go back to the Islamic Emirate ideals they had in the late 1990s. They do talk about wanting to educate girls, they talk about having a rapprochement with the new society.'²⁰ Indeed, having caused years of upheaval and harm to civilians, some Taliban leaders recognize the need to strengthen their legitimacy among Afghans. Yet other parts of the movement, which is heavily influenced by fundamentalist *ulema*, appear to be committed to reviving their strict brand of Sharia. The Taliban's systematically brutal treatment of individuals seen to support the Afghan government, including local leaders, mullahs or teachers, and the rise of hard-line splinter groups such as the Mahaz-i Fedayeen, suggest the movement's forces for moderation may not be ascendant.

The Taliban has never said it seeks to acquire absolute power; in fact, Mullah Omar has repeated several times that the movement does not seek to monopolize power in Afghanistan. But it is difficult to see how the movement could implement its agenda without first acquiring power, and some of its statements appear to assume that the 'Emirate' will eventually acquire its former powers. That said, several experts interviewed believe a number of the movement's leaders would accept a political settlement if it met their minimum expectations. It is difficult to say what these expectations are, but there are indications that the Taliban leadership seeks, at minimum, to acquire national-level control of the administration of justice and religious affairs, very significant authority in anti-corruption measures, education and social affairs, and varying degrees of influence in other areas, such as foreign affairs and the economy.

The Taliban has an obvious short- to medium-term interest in demonstrating its ability to keep fighting, and in expanding its territorial control. In this way, it incrementally acquires more power and has greater strength in any possible negotiations. At the same time, it has a strong interest in maintaining overall unity – not an easy task given that it comprises various different factions, networks and sub-groups. The leadership has attempted to achieve greater cohesion through taking steps to establish a more effective system of command and control and by articulating unifying narratives about the movement's role in preserving Afghanistan's independence, protecting Islam and fighting corruption. All the while, it has maintained a degree of strategic ambiguity about its actual agenda. This allows for those with divergent views to work together, but means future tensions

²⁰ Interview, 25 October 2013.

and disagreements are likely. As one expert said, 'the Taliban leadership has to keep its objectives broad and simplistic. The great challenge for them is turning that into something more digestible and appealing to the Afghan population. The risk is that the more detail they get into, the more likely it is that they will generate tension internally.'²¹

The Taliban leadership, predominantly based in Pakistan, also has an interest in strengthening its organizational autonomy. The Taliban sees the Pakistani military's 'Inter-Services Intelligence' (ISI) as manipulating the movement, for which it is deeply resented. Arguably, this constitutes a further incentive for the movement to make territorial gains inside Afghanistan: it might enable Taliban leaders to move from Pakistan to Afghanistan, thus avoiding ISI pressure and interference. However, the same consideration could work in favour of negotiations, which might also enable Taliban leaders to return to Afghanistan, most probably with greater safety.

What has not been widely appreciated is that the Taliban leadership seeks international recognition as a legitimate political actor. Most of the movement's leaders want to avoid a reversion to the pariah status they experienced in the 1990s, which would deprive the Taliban of international assistance and render the movement dependent on Pakistan. Paradoxically, many Taliban leaders want the movement to be recognized by the West but are reluctant to acknowledge this, believing it would undermine their cause and be taken as a sign of weakness. Linked to the issue of recognition, the Taliban also has an interest in securing certain safety and welfare measures for its members, including removal from terrorist lists, social and economic support, and non-discrimination guarantees.

Taliban leaders realize that achieving recognition, safety and influence depends on the movement distancing itself from Al-Qaeda, as it has in recent statements.²² Although elements of the Taliban hold anti-Western beliefs that are shared by Al-Qaeda, the Taliban does not subscribe to the latter's transnational Takfiri ideology and links between the two movements are limited, deriving largely from expediency. Fearing reprisals, Taliban leaders are unlikely to disavow Al-Qaeda expressly. However, depending on the course of talks, the Taliban might well be willing to commit to denying extremists sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Most Taliban foot soldiers share some of the leadership's interests, in terms of forcing the withdrawal of foreign soldiers, implementing a conservative brand of Sharia, and establishing law and order. The movement gives many fighters a sense of purpose and a source of status and income. Foot soldiers may also have a greater interest in local goals, which often relate to community and tribal rivalries, disputes over land and resources, or grievances over exclusion from power. Some analysts believe that younger, more radical fighters are replacing those who have been killed or captured: 'there's a gap between the nice old men expressing willingness to negotiate and the people we are fighting'.²³ But the degree to which this affects the movement's policies or its relationship with Al-Qaeda remains an open question.

This short paper cannot cover all Afghan insurgent groups and factions, but one that merits brief mention is Hizb-i-Islami. This group has had a strained, sometimes confrontational, relationship with the Taliban and has links to a political party of the same name that has considerable influence inside the Afghan government. The group's foremost interests appear to be comparable to the Taliban's, in

²¹ Interview, 4 November 2013.

²² Taliban statement, attributed to Mullah Omar, at Eid al-Fitr, published on 6 August 2013: 'As to foreign policy, our fundamental principle, according to our unchanging policy, is that we do not intend to harm anyone, nor we allow anyone to harm others from our soil ... We will maintain good relations with all those who respect Afghanistan as an independent Islamic country and their relations and interactions are not domineering and colonial, whether they are the world powers or the neighbors or any other country of the world.'

²³ Interview, 26 October 2013.

promoting a conservative brand of Islamist politics and forcing the withdrawal of foreign forces. Yet Hizb-i-Islami is known for its pragmatism – witness its decision to participate in the first round of presidential elections – and its willingness to switch allegiances for its own advantage. This suggests that the group's central interest is in exercising power, which is consistent with the reputation of its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Nevertheless, having only a fraction of the Taliban's strength, Hizb-i-Islami is likely to remain a marginal player in terms of the resolution of the conflict.

United States

Different elements of the American administration – especially the White House, Department of State, and Department of Defense – have different perspectives on US interests in Afghanistan, and these institutions are themselves divided. Nevertheless, interviewees agreed that national security interests were pre-eminent. As one interviewee put it, there are many layers to US interests in Afghanistan, 'with security being the foundation'.²⁴ With this in mind, it seems the paramount interest of the United States is ensuring that Afghanistan does not revert to being a safe haven for extremists who seek to target American or Western interests. To realize this goal, the US sought to build a functional Afghan government and robust national security forces. This was seen as necessary to hold back the Taliban who might once again give sanctuary to Al-Qaeda (a view which is now far less prevalent among US officials). State-building was also seen by the US as the best means of avoiding a full-scale civil war, or even state collapse, that would give opportunities for extremists and generate adverse spillover effects, especially in Pakistan.

America's interest in mitigating the threat from extremists, and the related interest in stability, help to explain why the US has sought to establish a small, residual military presence in Afghanistan, as provided for under the Bilateral Security Agreement. As US officials see it, this would enable them to support Afghan armed forces and take action against emerging extremist threats in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Yet one interviewee described 'substantial division within the Obama White House over how much the stake [in Afghanistan] is worth to the United States'.²⁵ After President Obama's recent announcement that all US troops would be withdrawn by 2016, it appears that those officials who favoured an early exit from Afghanistan won the argument.²⁶

In the near term, the US also has reputational interests in Afghanistan, especially in ensuring a reasonably successful political and security transition. If the Taliban were to make major territorial gains, at least over the short to medium term, US war-fighting credibility and its influence in the region could be undermined. As one expert put it: 'There was the initial Rumsfeldian light footprint, then there was the heavy footprint counter-insurgency policy, and now we're into a retrograde, limiting embarrassment phase'.²⁷

The US has interests in limiting opium cultivation in Afghanistan, and in promoting good governance, development and respect for human rights. It also has a long-standing interest in promoting women's rights and freedoms. The US has invested heavily in all these spheres, but, as interviews confirm, in the eyes of US political leaders these interests are not regarded as fundamental. In other words, it is important to distinguish between the 'penumbra of aspirations ... and a narrower sub-set of vital national interests for the US in Afghanistan'.²⁸

²⁴ Interview, 24 October 2013.

²⁵ Interview, 22 October 2013.

²⁶ 'Statement by the President on Afghanistan', The White House, 27 May 2014.

²⁷ Interview, 26 October 2013.

²⁸ Interview, 22 October 2013.

United Kingdom and other US allies

The United States has a large number of major European and international allies in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom is a prominent example, and few others have been as directly involved in Afghanistan, in terms of troops, diplomacy and overseas aid. British officials say that the UK's principal interest in Afghanistan is mitigating the terrorist threat; in the words of a former diplomat, the objective is ensuring 'Afghanistan won't come back and bite us'.²⁹ The UK also shares American concerns that even greater upheaval in Afghanistan could destabilize Pakistan. In terms of securing these interests, the UK threw its weight behind the US-led counter-insurgency, which served another important interest. By deploying troops and providing aid to Afghanistan the UK was – and still is – demonstrating support for its single most important ally, the United States. Indeed, maintaining good relations with the US has been the principal interest of most other NATO troop-contributing countries. As one expert put it: 'Many capitals see the primary stake in the war as being their relationship with the United States rather than the outcome in South Asia.'³⁰ Nevertheless, as the US presence recedes, the salience of this interest diminishes.

The UK also has a reputational interest in Afghanistan. Initially, through troop deployments, the UK sought to burnish its credentials as a credible global power. But its influence in Afghanistan has declined significantly, and at this stage of the conflict one of its concerns is to withdraw without being seen as having failed to defeat the Taliban. In the words of one informed interviewee, 'the government just wants the whole horror show to end'.³¹ This may help to explain why the UK has been urging greater efforts to achieve a negotiated outcome, and has backed initiatives such as a new Afghan National Army Officers' Academy.

The UK is active in a range of non-security sectors in Afghanistan – including counter-narcotics, women's rights, education and healthcare – and has committed to providing long-term development aid. Yet, while British officials see advances in these areas as desirable and ultimately contributing to stability, they are not regarded as essential for British interests.

The United States has worked with other important allies in Afghanistan, most notably Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Australia, each of which made major troop contributions to ISAF. There is not sufficient space in this paper to address the interests of each of these states in Afghanistan, but, on the whole, they share concerns about the threat from Al-Qaeda, see the risks in regional upheaval, and have an interest in working alongside the United States and NATO. Other ISAF states, such as Norway and Sweden, or the European Union itself, have invested in promoting human rights. But none of these states, including the UK, believe that vital national interests are at stake in Afghanistan.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

As with other actors, it is impossible to speak of a single Pakistani perspective on Afghanistan, and there are differences of opinion within and between the civilian and military establishments. As one expert told us, 'the military itself is divided on what it wants to achieve ... and there is a multiplicity of understandings in Pakistan on what its interests are'.³² Nevertheless, for many Pakistani leaders,

²⁹ Interview, 28 October 2013.

³⁰ Interview, 22 October 2013.

³¹ Interview, 28 October 2013.

³² Interview, 19 October 2013.

the country's overriding interest in Afghanistan is to maintain its influence and, at all costs, to prevent the emergence of a strong, Indian-allied government in Kabul. In the words of one Pakistan expert, 'its goal is to keep Afghanistan out of the hands of India and prevent Afghanistan from becoming an Indian client state – to reduce or contain India's ability to use Afghanistan as a base for destabilizing Pakistan'.³³

This ambition is driven by Pakistan's long-running, latent conflict with India. Already facing India on its eastern border, Pakistan's military wants to ensure India has no substantive presence to Pakistan's northwest, where it believes it needs 'strategic depth'. As one interviewee put it, there is a 'constant, underlying existential angst in Pakistan about whether the country can even survive – and India is a central feature of that fear'.³⁴ Many observers question whether Pakistan's fear of India is justified – but it is rooted in recent history. Pakistan has fought four wars with India since its establishment in 1947, and suffered the devastating loss of East Pakistan in 1971, which, at the time, comprised around half of the country's population. The cumulative psychological impact, according to experts, is an enduring anxiety about national security – 'security forces infused with paranoia'³⁵ – which helps to explain Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan.

Some Pakistani leaders fear that if the Afghan insurgency makes major gains in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, as expected, the insurgency in Pakistan could become even more energized and establish sanctuaries over the border.

Notwithstanding the risk of 'blowback', Pakistan's military officials have sought to secure Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan by using the Afghan Taliban as a geostrategic asset. Some insurgent networks, such as the Haqqani group, are even seen as proxies. The Taliban, as one expert put it, 'is their ace in the hole'.³⁶ Yet, in an ironic reversal, the Pakistani government now has a major interest in preventing 'reverse strategic depth': Afghanistan being used as a sanctuary by Pakistan's own enemies, including the Pakistani Taliban and Baloch insurgents. Some Pakistani leaders fear that if the Afghan insurgency makes major gains in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, as expected, the insurgency in Pakistan could become even more energized and establish sanctuaries over the border. Reinforcing this concern, the Pakistani Taliban's new leader, Maulana Fazlula, is known to have previously operated from Afghanistan's eastern provinces.

It is largely this fear of 'reverse strategic depth' that explains why Pakistan does not want to see an outright victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This is reinforced by concerns about the disputed Afghan–Pakistani border and Afghan irredentist claims for Pashtun areas of Pakistan. Pakistani officials also recognize that 'with continued US backing for anti-Taliban forces the Taliban cannot march into Kabul – and if it looks as if the Taliban will do that, it is the recipe for what Pakistan fears most, which is increased Indian involvement'.³⁷

This does not mean that Pakistan necessarily favours a political settlement involving the Afghan Taliban. Instead, Pakistan is 'spinning lots of plates at once'.³⁸ True, it wants to project the image of playing a constructive role in Afghan reconciliation, which 'services their alliance with America

³³ Interview, 8 November 2013.

³⁴ Interview, 19 October 2013.

³⁵ Interview, 19 October 2013.

³⁶ Interview, 19 October 2013.

³⁷ Interview, 8 November 2013.

³⁸ Interview, 19 October 2013.

and the West more generally, and underlines their strategic significance'.³⁹ This is why Pakistan has released Taliban prisoners and expressed a willingness to cooperate with Afghanistan's High Peace Council. But Pakistan is unwilling to compromise on what it sees as its vital national security interests. According to the experts interviewed, there is deep scepticism among Pakistani officials about whether a political settlement in Afghanistan is something that is possible and that Pakistan could procure – and whether it is even in Pakistan's best interests. Pakistan, it is said, has learned from the past that 'you can't control the Afghans',⁴⁰ and some Pakistani officials fear that stability in Afghanistan could lead to a greater Indian presence. Consequently, Pakistan's military leaders continue to support the Afghan Taliban, and attempt to act as gatekeepers for talks with the movement – and they are unlikely to support any peace process unless it is one over which they believe they have significant influence.

Pakistan has other interests in Afghanistan: a collapse of the government and reversion to full-scale civil war could cause a massive influx of refugees, as happened in the 1990s, which would place strains on Pakistan's struggling economy and its already fraying social fabric. This would also reduce Pakistan's access for trade, and jeopardize cooperation on counter-narcotics and water supply. Nevertheless, so long as the military establishment dominates Pakistan's foreign policy-making, and the Afghanistan conflict is seen as one that can be contained, such considerations are unlikely to have a major impact on Pakistani conceptions of their interests in Afghanistan.

Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran has an interest in having a friendly, relatively stable government in Kabul, and, given regional rivalries, one that is not unduly influenced by Pakistan. However, given deep uncertainty about Afghanistan's future, and in order to maintain influence and leverage in the country, Iran is hedging its bets. Iran has cultivated a relationship with the Presidential Palace in Kabul (to which it has regularly provided large sums of money) and a wide range of Afghan political actors. It has maintained good relations with northern factions, which it previously supported. Meanwhile, Iran has also established diplomatic channels to the Taliban leadership. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have apparently facilitated the supply of munitions to the Afghan Taliban and the establishment of training camps for Taliban fighters in southeast Iran.⁴¹ This is an insurance policy that causes difficulties for a mutual enemy, the United States, and was seen as reducing the prospects of long-term US bases in the country. As a regional expert put it: 'They were playing a little bit with the Taliban, simply to ensure they [the Taliban] would continue to make life for the US and the UK as difficult as possible.'⁴² Indeed, Iran does not want the Saudi Arabia-linked Sunni Taliban, with which it nearly went to war in 1998, to increase its power or influence in Afghanistan; nor does it want to see escalating conflict that could lead to civil war, given the potential for spillover effects.

Iran has an interest in deterring espionage activities by the US along its eastern border with Afghanistan. It also seeks to protect its cultural and economic interests in west and southwest Afghanistan, which is home to Hazaras, an ethnic minority who are also Shia Muslims. In these areas, over recent years Iran has expanded its political contacts, funded the construction of mosques, seminaries and technical institutes, and offered scholarships to Iranian universities.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview, 8 November 2013.

⁴¹ Kenneth Katzman, 'Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy' (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 4 March 2013), p. 48.

⁴² Interview, 31 October 2013.

And while Iranian leaders do not necessarily follow a sectarian, pro-Shia policy in Afghanistan, they would be likely to react if Hazaras were actively targeted by the Taliban.⁴³

Iran also has cross-border interests in Afghanistan. Iran wants to limit immigration – it hosts over 840,000 Afghan refugees and up to 1.5 million Afghan economic migrants – and seeks to stem trafficking in narcotics: over two million Iranians are addicted to opium, the highest national incidence in the world. However, as one expert reflected, ‘they have few illusions ... that any government in Afghanistan will be capable of controlling the narco-trade in the foreseeable future’.⁴⁴ Iran looks to ensure Sunni militants in Sistan-Baluchistan province, in southeast Iran, do not have sanctuary or support in Afghanistan. Iran also looks for further opportunities for trade and investment, underscored by its current economic difficulties – and has funded road-building in Afghanistan’s west and southwest. For all these reasons, Iranian leaders have a strong preference for stability in Afghanistan over the medium to long term. There are indications that they may be prepared to sacrifice this in order to retaliate for any US attack on Iran, but this seems unlikely in the near term given the rapprochement with the United States on the Iranian nuclear programme. Recent developments, especially President Obama’s recent announcement on early troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, might encourage Iran to engage constructively in Afghanistan’s on-going political and security transition.

Republic of India

India has an interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-Indian militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which originally ran training camps in eastern Afghanistan. Although interviewees did not see this scenario as likely, India’s concern is Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan, ‘not so much Pakistan’s influence in and of itself, but Pakistani influence as a driver of extremism and militancy’.⁴⁵ India therefore seeks to provide a counterweight to Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan.

One expert summarized India’s dual interest in promoting stability and cultivating allies in Kabul:

If we don’t keep Afghanistan as a stable, coherent state ... the danger is there that Afghanistan writ large turns into a platform for anti-Indian actors, but even without that there are elements within Afghanistan who will be turned against us, and therefore we need allies within Kabul to contain those people. There have continuously been anti-Indian actors in Afghanistan for the last 12 years – Lashkar-e-Taiba in the northeast; the Haqqani network maintains ties with anti-Indian actors; other groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed – these have always been there. So even if Afghanistan is not collapsing and going back to Taliban rule, you still have to have good relations with Kabul to contain these percolating anti-Indian forces on Afghanistan’s periphery.⁴⁶

This helps to explain why India has established four regional consulates in Afghanistan, has made significant economic investments in a range of sectors, and runs an aid programme worth over \$1.5 billion, which includes funding for the construction of Afghanistan’s parliament. In addition, every year India offers 1,000 higher education scholarships for Afghans, its largest such programme anywhere in the world; it also annually trains several hundred Afghan Army officers. India reportedly runs a substantial intelligence network in Afghanistan, and has attempted to expand and diversify

⁴³ In public statements, the movement has gone to some lengths to reassure minority groups that they do not face a threat from the Taliban.

⁴⁴ Interview, 29 October 2013.

⁴⁵ Interview, 11 October 2013.

⁴⁶ Interview, 11 November 2013.

its ties with Afghan actors, which are far broader than they were in the 1990s and include a range of influential Pashtuns. All the while, India is taking care not to undercut President Karzai; it does not want to repeat the kind of mistake it reportedly made in 2009 presidential elections by backing the losing presidential candidate, Abdullah Abdullah.

According to experts, what India is 'trying to achieve in Afghanistan in [these] other realms – development, political, economic, transport, energy – it is all backstopped by this vision of an Afghanistan that is perhaps once again essentially under Pakistan's influence'.⁴⁷ Arguably, this is reinforced by India's perception of Afghanistan as a 'testing bed for India's regional diplomacy'.⁴⁸ By this account, India asserts its soft power at a regional level, as a stepping-stone towards its long-term goal of playing a larger role in world affairs. Nevertheless, India is also aware of the risks of too obviously expanding its presence in Afghanistan: the Haqqani network, which is closely linked to the ISI, carried out major suicide attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009; the Indian consulate in Herat was attacked in May 2014. It is therefore pursuing a policy of 'proceeding cautiously, neither pulling out, nor going all in'.⁴⁹

Countering Pakistani influence explains why India has opposed reconciliation with the Taliban, seen as a Pakistan proxy. However, since 2011, when the Doha process unfolded, Indian officials have softened their opposition to negotiations. They are reluctant to flatly contradict the stated policy of the United States and Afghan government, and, recognizing the strength of the Taliban, see risks associated with unilateral Taliban gains.

Finally, India has certain commercial and mineral interests in Afghanistan. In 2011, Indian companies won the concession for the Hajigak iron ore deposit in Bamyan province, reportedly the largest untapped iron ore deposit in Asia. In the longer term, Afghanistan could once again become a trading hub for Central Asia, connecting India's producers to northern markets – notably, the Indian government is collaborating with Iran on potential road and rail links across Afghanistan. It has supported the construction of roads that would give Afghanistan access to the Iranian port of Chahbahar on the Persian Gulf, thereby reducing its reliance on Pakistan to access the sea. As this last point suggests, India's commercial interests in Afghanistan are significant, but they are not of comparable importance to India's enduring and overarching geopolitical concern: the influence of Pakistan.

People's Republic of China

China has significant economic, especially mineral-related, interests in Afghanistan – for example, the Aynak copper concession in Logar province, which is the second largest copper deposit in the world, and an oil concession in Sari-i Pul. For extraction, China seeks a minimum level of stability, a consideration underscored by the Taliban's significant presence in Logar province. Despite this, China will not pursue these interests at all costs; security, profitability and infrastructure considerations have led to a degree of caution, especially with regard to the Aynak initiative.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

China also has an interest in preventing Afghanistan being used as a safe haven for Uighur extremists.⁵⁰ In the words of one expert, 'because they are so concerned with the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan and what they see as the inevitable growing instability in Afghanistan post-transition, they have got a far more forward-leaning policy on engaging with the Taliban than they did last year'.⁵¹ Having witnessed the Taliban survive the US surge of 2009–11, China is 'adjusting to a new reality' and may have calculated that at some point it will need to do business with the Taliban.⁵² Indeed, according to one expert, providing that Uighur militants are denied any kind of support or refuge, China 'really sees that there needs to be some type of political settlement in Afghanistan'.⁵³ Indeed, a senior Chinese diplomat told us that 'peace [in Afghanistan] can only be achieved through the reconciliation process. ... We want to help the Afghan government set up a broad-based and inclusive government in which all parties participate, including the Taliban'.⁵⁴ China has therefore encouraged US officials in their efforts to pursue peace talks with the Taliban, and urged Pakistan to improve its relations with Afghanistan, while believing there ultimately needs to be an 'Afghan to Afghan arrangement'.⁵⁵ China's security concerns may also help to explain why it is becoming more engaged in Afghanistan's security policies and is now providing funding for the Afghan National Police; Chinese diplomats have even suggested that there may eventually need to be an international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.

More broadly, China has a long-term interest in expanding its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, especially as the Western presence recedes. This may explain why, in 2012, China brought Afghanistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with full observer status. It has hosted tripartite talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan for the past four years and is looking to upgrade the level of representation. Later this year it will host a ministerial meeting of the Istanbul Process, which promotes regional cooperation. Given its security and economic interests, greater engagement by China is also a way of guarding against the possibility of increasing instability, on the one hand, and deterring or offsetting a longer-term US presence, on the other. China is likely to be reassured that the US military presence in Afghanistan is due to end in 2016. Over the past decade there was ambiguity in China's ambition to play a more active global role, including in Central Asia, but an unwillingness to devote resources and diplomatic capital to support this. Its recent diplomatic activity on Afghanistan suggests that may be changing.

Separately, one dimension of China's interest in Afghanistan is, in the words of one expert, 'almost a negative one: it wants nothing to happen that raises the temperature between India and Pakistan'.⁵⁶ Looking to promote regional stability, China is 'very keen to prevent India and Pakistan facing off against each other in any proxy sense within Afghanistan'.⁵⁷ Thus China carefully seeks to preserve relations with its ally, Pakistan, without being forced to take a more clearly defined position in any confrontation with India. It continues to urge Afghanistan to 'balance the interests of India and Pakistan', and achieve good relations with both.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Experts differ on whether China gives greater weight to its security or economic interests in Afghanistan. Some believe security is the greater priority, as China can extract minerals elsewhere; others argue that the threat of Uighur terrorists using Afghanistan is – so far – more a product of Chinese imagination than a reality.

⁵¹ Interview, 4 November 2013.

⁵² Interview, 12 November 2013.

⁵³ Interview, 4 November 2013.

⁵⁴ Discussion, 7 May 2014.

⁵⁵ Interview, 4 November 2013.

⁵⁶ Interview, 5 November 2013.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Discussion, 7 May 2014.

Russian Federation

As analysts point out, Russia has 'relatively little interest in Afghanistan, per se'.⁵⁹ Instead, its concern is that instability and Islamic militancy in Afghanistan could spill over into the Central Asian republics – which it regards as part of its sphere of influence – and potentially even reach Russia itself. (Its particular concern is Dagestan and Chechnya in the North Caucasus, where it has fought Islamic separatists; notably, the Taliban's 'Islamic Emirate' was the only government to recognize the abortive Chechen government in 2000.) Given its concern about Islamic militancy, Russia does not want to see either a Taliban takeover or the Afghan state to fail. There is therefore an inherent tension in Russian interests. It has a geostrategic interest in bolstering its own position in Central Asia and weakening that of the US and NATO, but, simultaneously, it does not want the West to abandon Afghanistan to its fate.⁶⁰ This helps to explain why Russia has allowed NATO to transport non-lethal equipment and personnel across its territory, through the Northern Distribution Network, and has urged the Afghan government to sign the BSA.⁶¹

It remains to be seen whether this cooperation will survive the recent escalation of US–Russian tensions over Syria and Ukraine, and the imposition of EU–US sanction. There are indications that Russia may see Afghanistan as an arena where it could gain an advantage over the West. In any event, with the withdrawal of NATO forces, Russia intends to expand its influence in Afghanistan. It has strengthened diplomatic ties with Kabul and is planning to make substantial investments in the rehabilitation of Soviet-era projects.⁶² Diplomatically, it may attempt to exert its influence through multilateral vehicles such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which is strongly affiliated with Moscow. Even so, given uncertainty about Afghanistan's future, having seen the West's difficulties, and mindful of the Soviet experience, Russia is likely to exercise a degree of caution in the form and scope of its involvement.

Russia has certain other interests in Afghanistan: it seeks to limit the flow of narcotics into Central Asia and Russia, and has urged ISAF to step up its counter-narcotics efforts. It may eventually invest in oil and gas fields in the north of the country, although, given security and infrastructural constraints, these are currently less attractive than others in the region that Russia could exploit.⁶³

Central Asia

The interests of Central Asian states in Afghanistan vary considerably but all could be adversely affected by state collapse or full-scale civil war.⁶⁴ Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, each of which borders Afghanistan, have ties to respective Afghan ethnic minorities (Turkmen, Uzbeks and Tajiks) and share an interest in limiting the spread of militant Islam.⁶⁵ Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have security concerns about fighters belonging to the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, predominantly Uzbeks, who have moved from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.⁶⁶ Central Asian governments also have

⁵⁹ Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko, 'Afghanistan: A View from Moscow' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), p. 13.

⁶⁰ 'Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan' (CIDOB – Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, December 2012).

⁶¹ Andrew S. Bowen, 'Why Russia is Worried About the "Zero Option" in Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, 13 August 2013.

⁶² Kevin Sieff, 'As US war ends, Russia returns to Afghanistan with series of investment projects', *Washington Post*, 21 March 2014.

⁶³ Ekaterina Stepanova, 'Russia's Concerns Relating to Afghanistan and the Broader Region in the Context of the US/NATO Withdrawal' (CIDOB Policy Research Project, June 2013), p. 5.

⁶⁴ Uwe Halbach, 'Afghanistan 2014: Shadows over Central Asia?', *Security and Human Rights* 24 (2013), pp. 137–48.

⁶⁵ Joshua Foust, 'Post-Soviet Central Asian National Interests in Afghanistan' (Century Foundation Report, 2010), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Notwithstanding these concerns, independent analysts do not believe the Islamic Movement of Turkestan currently poses a serious threat.

concerns about increasing opium-smuggling from Afghanistan, although there are questions about the extent to which border security agencies collaborate with traffickers, for influence, intelligence or rewards.⁶⁷

Central Asian states have an interest in seeing sufficient stability in Afghanistan for the country to play a role as a trading hub, which would enable them to export markets in South and West Asia and the Gulf. Uzbekistan, for example, is seeking the construction of a railway from Uzbekistan to Iran (the first leg, from Hairatan to Mazar-i Sharif, has already been built). Similarly, resource-rich Turkmenistan seeks to establish an ambitious gas pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.⁶⁸ In this respect, there are indications that Central Asian states may look to Russia to facilitate greater regional cooperation, which has so far been lacking.⁶⁹

Western Asia

Given constraints of space, there is scope for only a brief review of the interests of relevant Western Asian/Middle Eastern states, namely Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Building on long-standing ties to Afghanistan, the Republic of Turkey has an interest in maintaining links to Turkic-speaking minorities and to Junbesh-i Milli, the Uzbek political party led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum. Turkey also has an interest in extending its regional influence and has sought to demonstrate its credibility as a member of NATO through taking on a substantial role in ISAF. (Turkey has assumed ISAF command roles, operated two 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' and assisted with the training of Afghan police.) Turkey has reinforced this with significant diplomatic initiatives: it has hosted several summits with the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and recently explored the possibility of hosting a Taliban liaison office.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has long held ties to the Afghan Taliban, which espouses a fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam that strongly resembles Wahhabism. Indeed, Saudi Arabia was one of the three states to recognize the Taliban's 'Emirate' in 1997. (Pakistan, the Saudis' regional ally, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also recognized the Taliban regime.) Although relations between Saudi Arabia and the Taliban were apparently severed in 2001 owing to the Taliban's links to Al-Qaeda, they were revived in the mid-2000s, and the Saudi government is said to turn a blind eye to fundraising for the Taliban. Saudi officials may see the Taliban as a hedge against Iranian influence in Afghanistan, and have an interest in shaping the outcome of any Afghan negotiations. On several occasions since 2008 they have attempted to facilitate peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government officials, but with no apparent success. Separately, Saudis have also long maintained links with Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the conservative presidential candidate, and leader of Tanzim-e Dahwat-e Islami-ye.

Although Qatar had contacts with the former Taliban government in Afghanistan, otherwise its links to Afghanistan have been limited. That changed in late 2011 when it played a key role in facilitating dialogue between the US and the Taliban, and it now hosts the latter's *de facto* political office. (The Taliban's liaison office in Doha is not officially recognized as such after an abortive attempt to open it in June 2013.) Qatar also acted as an intermediary for the recent US–Taliban prisoner exchange.

⁶⁷ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Next Congo: Regional Competition for Influence in Afghanistan in the Wake of NATO Withdrawal' (Afghanistan Regional Forum, 2013), p. 7.

⁶⁸ Martha Brill Olcott, 'Central Asia: Living in Afghanistan's Shadow' (Noref Policy Brief, No. 1, November 2009).

⁶⁹ Ahmed Rashid, 'Central Asia concerns over US pullout from Afghanistan', BBC, 5 October 2013; Halbach 'Afghanistan 2014' (2013), p. 143.

Having an activist foreign policy, Qatar appears to have seen the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: to win favour with the United States while expanding its ties to a resurgent Islamist movement. However, the extent of Qatari influence remains an open question owing to mistrust between Doha and Kabul, and the lack of progress in the Doha talks. Qatar may also be forced to share its Taliban liaison role with its neighbour, the UAE, which has hosted a number of meetings involving the Taliban in recent years, or indeed with Saudi Arabia.

The Afghan population

A brief outline of the shared interests of the Afghan population is included here so that its interests can be compared with those of the major parties, and because the interests of the population should be central to any political settlement. This is also consistent with the approach to conflict resolution that considers those affected by a conflict as the 'third side'. Understood as the emergent will of the community, and anchored in shared interests, the third side is seen as able, through collective mobilization, to play an important role in containing, resolving and even preventing conflict.⁷⁰

Obviously, the interests of different elements of the Afghan population vary immensely, depend on multifarious factors and change over time. However, it is possible to identify certain interests and aspirations that are widely shared among ordinary Afghans of various backgrounds, ages and ethnicities, and are consistently reflected in field research, surveys and opinion polls.⁷¹

Above all, it is apparent that the vast majority of Afghans, in both urban and rural areas, want peace and security; they want to live, work, travel and go about their lives in safety. There is therefore a powerful interest, for most Afghans, in seeing an end to the conflict and in the establishment of law and order. Given widespread poverty, they have an interest in the emergence of a functional government that provides essential services, especially in health and education, builds and sustains infrastructure, and administers resources fairly. In general, Afghans want to see better governance, and limits to the abuse of power and impunity. Given massive unemployment, they have an interest in economic progress to create jobs.

Although perspectives on social, civil and political issues vary widely, most Afghans have an interest, on the one hand, in the preservation of country's culture, traditions and the central role of Islam, and, on the other, in the protection of their fundamental rights and freedoms. They want freedom of speech and the right to elect local and national political leaders. Many also want to see measures to ensure non-discrimination and the protection of minorities. The interests of Afghan women also vary widely, but few Afghans favour the repressive and discriminatory treatment of women and girls during the Taliban regime. Finally, after years of foreign interference, the overwhelming majority of Afghans support the protection of Afghanistan's national sovereignty and political independence.

⁷⁰ William Ury, *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

⁷¹ For example, 'Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace' (Kabul: UNAMA et al., December 2011).

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