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Options in Afghanistan

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RECENTLY the top UN representative in Kabul grimly remarked that in 2016, success for Afghanistan would be measured in binary terms: whether it

survived or not. Afghan security forces are routinely approaching collapse. Annual fatalities of Afghan civilians and security forces have doubled in five years to roughly 10,000 in 2015. Since 2001, Afghanistan has suffered roughly 75,000 fatalities. For perspective, that death toll would be the equivalent of Pakistan — a country with six times the population — losing nearly half a million people.

Deteriorating security conditions pose political consequences for the Afghan government. With nearly 30pc of fatalities occurring in the past two years despite Afghan President Ghani's failed outreach efforts, insecurity is driving Afghan disillusionment as the national government approaches collapse. Sixty-five per cent of parliament expressed dissatisfaction with President Ghani. His public disapproval ratings outstrip his approval ratings, which plummeted by more than half by August 2015 at such a precipitous rate they could be in the single digits today.

Of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group parties, Kabul is too weak, Beijing too removed, and Washington uneager to do more than “run out the clock” or develop “modest” Plan Bs. But Pakistan does not possess the luxury of distance nor is time on its side. Islamabad has made major strides countering militancy, despite the recent devastating Lahore attack, but these gains are in jeopardy.

An all-out Afghan civil war could produce nasty spillover effects for Islamabad.

As an increasingly successful Afghan Taliban flexes greater autonomy and eschews reconciliation with the faltering Afghan government, violence could escalate into an

intensifying, prolonged, all-out conflict, involving multiple externally backed parties and resembling wars of the 1990s Afghanistan as well as the present-day Middle East. Estimating the consequences for Pakistan could motivate new types of efforts to stave off disaster.

An all-out Afghan civil war could produce nasty spillover effects for Islamabad. First, experiences from Syria demonstrate that escalating civil wars trigger tipping points of consequential refugee flight. Most Afghan refugees headed for Europe in 2015, but if the conflict intensifies, a new onslaught of refugees could flood across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. One-third of Afghans turned refugees in the 1980s, and half of those fled to their neighbour. Similar proportions today could land five million new refugees in Pakistan. Scholarly research identifies how refugee spillovers disrupt the ethnic balance and local politics, intensify ethnic economic competition, facilitate the spread of arms, combatants and ideologies, and prime a region for conflict. Pakistan witnessed these consequences firsthand in the 1980s-1990s, particularly in Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Second, civil wars create opportunity, breeding grounds, and contagion effects for unpredicted but dangerous new groups. The Afghan wars of the 1980s-90s paved the way for Al Qaeda and the eventual emergence of the Taliban. Conflicts in Fata galvanised growth of Tehreek-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat Mohammadi and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. And the civil wars in Iraq and Syria gave way to the rise of the militant Islamic State group, which can gain stronger footholds in Afghanistan and Pakistan if instability intensifies.

Third, a collapsing Afghan state fighting for its survival will be even less concerned or capable of controlling its territory and curtailing anti-Pakistan militant groups. This means

the TTP, Al Qaeda, Laskhar-i-Jhangvi, IS, and other radical groups may enjoy safe havens in Afghanistan's remote and treacherous terrain from which to train, operate, and launch attacks.

Fourth, civil war enables diffusion of militant capabilities and ideologies. New militant tactics, developed on one battlefield can spread to others as they did from Iraq and Afghanistan. Encounters with foreign militants can transform ideologies of local militants into transnational ones.

Second-order effects of civil war could compound the strategic challenges. If chaos and instability engulfs the region, China could choose to redeploy its robust investments elsewhere. Finally, a new US president could also step back from the region, withdraw troops, and secure core security interests from a distance. Disrupting militant threats with periodic missile or drone strikes would leave Pakistan to contend with the fallout. Pakistan seeks a stable Afghanistan mindful of its security interests, where the Taliban are included within the government, but do not dominate it. Thus, Pakistan faces a "pivotal deterrence" challenge. In order to prevent all-out war and induce productive reconciliation talks, it could pivot support between each side to ensure sufficient bargaining power, willingness to negotiate, and capability to deliver on commitments.

Failure to return the Taliban to the table — despite the ability to pressure Taliban leadership acknowledged by the foreign adviser — suggests current efforts have proved insufficient. To regain some leverage and resurrect reconciliation efforts, Pakistan could experiment with new forms of military pressure to induce a "hurting stalemate".

Such a move would hamstring rather than kneecap the Taliban to alter their incentives. A range of overt and covert means — intelligence-sharing, coordinated planning, border movement crackdowns, or direct operational support like air strikes — could help the Afghan state interdict, deny, or even rollback Taliban advances and violence. Pakistan could employ military coercion in the service of reconciliation efforts to urgently return the Taliban to the bargaining table.

Reductions in violence and resumption of reconciliation talks may yield a virtuous cycle. Ghani may be empowered to control hardline opposition. China, the US and others would be reassured by Pakistan's costly military efforts, which could motivate reciprocal strategic cooperation, curtailment of Afghan detractors, and border control support. Finally, by "throwing an elbow", Islamabad could reassert influence over all warring parties in Afghanistan.

Some fear military pressure is counterproductive to reconciliation efforts. But this neglects the Clausewitzian tenet that war is politics by other means and militarised pressure a bargaining tool. Diplomatic persuasion and political coercion are not working. Avoiding the abyss requires calibrated coercion to restructure Taliban incentives.

Admittedly, there are risks — that it might compromise influence over the Taliban, or that Afghan government factions play spoilers — but these pale in comparison to the consequences of Afghanistan sliding into total chaos, which could swamp Pakistan's hard-fought security gains. Pakistan could resign itself to its constraints or it could discover a sense of urgency, fashion a creative strategy to return the Taliban to the negotiating table, and stave off an escalating civil war.

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