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# Afghanistan: 'spoilers' in the regional security context

NISHANK MOTWANI AND SRINJOY BOSE\*

*The ongoing international military withdrawal from Afghanistan has set the stage for energising the activities of Afghanistan's external stakeholders to re-evaluate their activities. The possible return of the Taliban in some form could compel Afghanistan's current external partners—Iran, India and Russia—to turn into limited spoilers. The absence of an international guarantor in Afghanistan from December 2014 is likely to encourage Pakistan—a greedy spoiler—to intensify its meddling as a means to reposition the Taliban—a total spoiler—at the helm of Afghan affairs. The combination of limited, greedy and total spoilers threatens to undermine security and state-building processes.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; Pakistan; spoilers; Taliban

## Introduction

Within the context of Afghanistan's ongoing military and political transitions, this article argues that the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will press countries with vested interests in developments in Afghanistan to re-evaluate their activities, and most likely increase their engagement and presence. For example, one could envisage Pakistan and India bolstering their activities in Afghanistan. An important question for analysis is therefore: What will the strategies of neighbouring states be after withdrawal?

International withdrawal is energising the activities of Afghanistan's external stakeholders—Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia and some Central Asian republics—to fill the political and strategic vacuums in a post-ISAF/NATO environment. Political and military developments have the potential to create fissures between Kabul and some of its stakeholders—namely, New Delhi, Tehran and Moscow—driving them to behave more as 'limited spoilers' and less as partners. The contributing factors resulting in uncertainty relate to

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the consequences of a return of the Taliban and the concomitant influence Pakistan would regain in shaping Afghan affairs. Moreover, even a limited Taliban comeback threatens to craft a narrative which could have far-reaching consequences. For instance, the contagion effect of the defeat of a second superpower (and its coalition partners) at the hands of committed radical Islamic combatants could potentially fuel a new rise in Islam-inspired extremism in the region. In order to determine whether Afghanistan's stakeholders can play a stabilising role, this article assesses the complex interplay of two security-specific Afghan national goals and those of its key partners—namely, India, Iran and Russia. This will be followed by an analysis of Afghanistan's 'greedy spoiler' problem (Pakistan) and the extremities of a 'total spoiler' (the Taliban). The analysis will identify areas of conflict and convergence, and indicate emerging signs of spoiler behaviour which may imperil bilateral relations vis-à-vis Afghanistan as the latter struggles to prevent the Taliban from returning.

### **Assessing spoiler behaviour: Afghanistan's 'regional' context**

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) is used to express the Afghan government's vision for its people and country. The last Afghanistan National Development Strategy agenda (for the period 2008–13) articulated a list of goals encompassing several sectors, including socio-economic development, investment in infrastructure, agriculture and rural development, education delivery for all Afghans (particularly women), health services distribution and targeted assistance of vulnerable social groups. However, the agenda emphasised that security and nationwide stability were the fundamental pillars upon which the aforementioned goals would be built (Afghanistan National Development Strategy Secretariat, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2008; United Nations Development Program 2008; Ministry of Interior Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2013). In the priorities listed in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, second only to security and stability was targeted governance—i. e. strengthening democratic practice and institutions, and bolstering the rule of law. It is widely accepted that the absence of security and stability would imperil all other desired objectives, which would prohibitively cause blanket ruin. Potential harmful effects in relation to failing governance include elevating strongmen whose personal and political expediency enhances the continuity of personalised political processes at the expense of political institutionalisation. The combination of the security-centric and governance goals of the Afghan government is also the primary strategic focus of Afghanistan's external backers. The external stakeholders pay particular attention to the fluctuating gains and losses of the Afghan government either to provide additional support, stay the current course or exploit weaknesses. The weakness of the Afghan state and serious reservations about the Afghan peace and reconciliation process have motivated some of the country's external partners to inch closer to the precipice of spoiler behaviour, while for others this detrimental status has been confirmed.

At the time of writing, the Afghan government's attempts at a peace process to find a political settlement with the Taliban are dead. Nevertheless, the peace process roadmap articulated by the High Peace Council (2012) in November 2012 envisioned five goals: (1) the Taliban and other insurgent groups would renounce violence, including cutting ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups; (2) all insurgent groups would be converted into legitimate political groups; (3) these groups would recognise and operate within the boundaries of the Afghan constitution; (4) all disarmed and demobilised groups would be reintegrated into Afghanistan's political space and co-exist with one another, where they could vie for political power in a peaceful manner through elections; and (5) the Afghan National Security Forces would be the sole legitimate security organ of the state, responsible for protecting Afghans and providing security for the country against internal and external threats.

The Afghan peace process roadmap's reconciliation goals include significant weaknesses. For instance, they assume, optimistically, that the Taliban and other insurgent groups would abide by the Afghan government's formalised processes and respect the laws enshrined in the constitution, which has been disregarded thus far. The capacity woes plaguing Afghan institutions further raise the question of how checks and balances would be applied, by whom and to what end. These arrangements also open up the possibility of the reintegrated insurgent commanders subverting the political process from within, which could 'Balkanise' the country (Chayes 2012). Other risks include Afghan groups rejecting the peace process altogether because of how it could be viewed as unjustly rewarding Taliban aggression. This could further intensify tensions and lead groups opposed to the peace process to take up arms against what they view as the re-Talibanisation of the country (ibid.). Afghanistan's external stakeholders also share these concerns, thus incentivising each fault line for potential spoiler behaviour across the region.

In early January 2009, General David Petraeus, who at the time was serving as the commander of United States Central Command, remarked that: 'It's not possible to solve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges, especially in terms of security, with Afghanistan's neighbors. A regional approach is required' (Carden 2009). In the five years since that statement, the rhetoric of a 'regional approach' has been articulated far too often in the discourse on Afghanistan's stability in a post-ISAF/NATO milieu (see, for instance, CSS ETH Zurich 2012; USIP 2012). The assumption of a regional solution is that engaging with Afghanistan's territorially linked neighbours and those located further away, including extra-regional states with stakes in the country, will engender the conditions necessary for confidence-building among its respective stakeholders, and hence lead to overall stability in the long term. Despite the difficulty of defining a regional approach/solution, and what it might mean in practice and who would lead it, the assumption at least correctly appreciates the multiplicity of interconnected competing interests and clashing objectives of the key identified external stakeholders. There is no doubt that

addressing these intertwined challenges would require a grand undertaking of time and resources—human, capital and material—which in the current climate have been depleted to the point of exhaustion. The military withdrawal date of December 2014 confirms this political fatigue, which is underwritten by the beating retreat currently under way. Moreover, as competition for securing national security interests ensues among these diverse external stakeholders, the risk of states on the losing end turning into potential spoilers to the detriment of Afghanistan is significant.

The history of Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion of December 1979 until now has confirmed a basic finding that there is no shortage of spoilers. The degrees of spoiler behaviour, however, can vary from ‘limited’ to ‘greedy’ to ‘total’, thus impacting Afghanistan’s stability, its state and state-building programs, and its peace and reconciliation initiatives (Stedman 1997). Although the latter typology was devised by Stephen J. Stedman (*ibid.*) for discerning spoilers in recognised peace processes, it nonetheless remains useful in diagnosing key potential and current external spoilers in Afghanistan. According to Stedman’s typology of spoilers, limited spoilers have narrow goals and are situated at one end of the spectrum. For example, they seek recognition and redress of grievances, are willing to share power or constrain power through a constitution and opposition, and require basic security guarantees. In contrast, greedy spoilers are located between limited and total spoilers, and have goals that inflate or shrink based on assessments of cost and risk. Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum are total spoilers, which pursue total power and whose objectives are not subject to change. This spoiler typology raises difficult questions—while not all external stakeholders can be classified as a ‘spoiler’, the challenge is to assess whether their categorisation will change as the context unfolds.

In Afghanistan’s case, limited spoilers pertaining to external actors are those that see their national interests as mostly converging with Kabul’s national goals, but which also have a few differences. Such differences could prove problematic in terms of finding a consensus at the bilateral level, thus encouraging a degree of interference by external actors in Afghanistan’s sovereign affairs, but with enough room to leverage accommodation with Kabul. Moving up the spectrum, greedy spoilers widely see their national interests as having only moderate to weak convergence with Kabul’s objectives, and in several instances are opportunistically ambivalent and even opposed to certain goals. These external stakeholders can possibly be accommodated if their contra-interests are met or are threatened with higher costs. Thwarting or limiting greedy spoilers is particularly challenging, as it requires a state to possess a strong, competent and resilient military, capable of withstanding the high costs of armed conflict and communicating a credible threat to the relevant belligerents of the costs of non-compliance. The Afghan military machinery, though far more capable now than it was at the start of its regeneration, would be hard-pressed to limit any interference by greedy external stakeholders. At the other end of the spectrum,

the demands and objectives of total spoilers remain unconscionable, meaning that they cannot be accommodated or forced into compromise. The only option that can be considered to offset the toxic effects of total spoilers is their total defeat or marginalisation to the point where they present a negligible prospect for future harm. A nascent Afghan military cannot be expected to defeat the Taliban insurgency where the US-led ISAF/NATO 12-year military mission has failed.

*External partners or emerging limited spoilers?*

In relation to limited spoilers, the Afghan government's security-centric goal of preventing the return of the Taliban is not shared by all of Kabul's external stakeholders. The exceptions are India, Iran and Russia (Tellis 2010). The implication of this convergence is that after the US-led withdrawal, the trio can be expected to work independently or in concert to leverage the next government in Kabul to deny the Taliban from reasserting control over Afghanistan. Alternatively, they could also use indirect methods of backing northerners (Uzbeks and Tajiks) and the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance without Kabul's consent. While the latter opposition force could be revived in some form if Kabul appears helpless or constrained, Iran and India have formalised security cooperation agreements with Kabul in the form of bilateral strategic partnership agreements (SPAs) not only to address mutual security interests, but also extending to other spheres. The Kremlin, on the other hand, lacks an SPA with Kabul, but is nevertheless paying close attention to the military withdrawal and can be expected to work with its partners, Iran and India.

Although support for Kabul's peace and reconciliation dialogue with the Taliban is approved of and maintained as the official policy in New Delhi, Tehran and Moscow, the contrary also holds true. These countries have been backing the process primarily to keep an oversight over the reintegration and possible legitimisation of the Taliban as a political actor. Their involvement gives them access to insider information and the developments of the Afghan government's bargaining positions concerning the Taliban, which aids their own planning for this eventuality. It would thus be a mistake to interpret their official stances as demonstrating support of the peace process or its outcome.

The recent Afghanistan–Iran SPA, which was signed in August 2013, includes planned cooperation in the fields of military training, combating terrorism and crime, conducting joint exercises, sharing intelligence in relation to national security, and economic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2013). The order of these points underlines that the agreement is essentially centred on security. It is also noteworthy that the SPA explicitly singled out India and Russia for trilateral cooperation with the two signatory powers, clearly in reference to their convergence of security interests in relation to a common threat. The agreement does not mention Pakistan—a deliberate exclusion that projects the latter as the regional menace

(Ruttig 2013). Iran has its reasons not to see Pakistan as a partner for Afghanistan's stability or its own in a post-2014 milieu. For Tehran, its blood-tainted history with the Taliban and the latter's anti-Shia sentiment continue to serve as a persistent reminder of the consequences of their return (Chaudet 2012; Human Rights Watch 1998).<sup>1</sup>

Although questions remain about how much of the SPA's text will actually be translated into meaningful action, the signing of the agreement is an indicator of how Afghanistan sees its partners—Iran, India and Russia—as playing key roles in preventing Pakistan from re-establishing strategic depth. However, differences may emerge due to the Afghan government's efforts at reintegrating the Taliban leadership, which may push some current partners into becoming limited spoilers. For Kabul, the delicate balancing of interests with those of its partners remains fraught with risk. Any misalignment of interests in the post-withdrawal political and strategic vacuum could precipitate more dilemmas for Kabul than it can handle.

Iran remains unconvinced about the SPA's ability to safeguard the country's national security and geopolitical position against being harmed. A senior diplomat assigned to the Afghanistan headquarters at the Iranian Foreign Ministry underlined that the Taliban leadership are irreconcilable, and their reintegration would subvert the political process from within. He questioned: 'Who would put checks and balances on the Taliban from wanting more power?' Furthermore, he stressed that accommodation with the Taliban would never result in their containment. Consequently, Iran has to prepare itself to work outside the SPA and beyond the Afghan government in order to prevent a resurgent Taliban from taking root. Another Iranian diplomat from the Afghanistan headquarters warned about the implications of a Taliban comeback for provoking Sunni-inspired violent extremism in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> They candidly noted that Iran's support for the Afghan government's peace process was conditional and had three purposes: (1) to provide public support, and remain engaged and relevant to negotiation proceedings; (2) to prepare a 'Plan B' and develop networks with domestic and foreign partners that would challenge the Taliban should they gain the upper hand; and (3) to limit foreign countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, from using Afghanistan to spread Sunni-inspired violent extremism. These points are sufficient to indicate that, despite Iran's official rhetoric, it remains deeply sceptical about the Taliban's peace overtures and any kind of reconciliation. This outlook also signifies that Tehran is willing to operate outside of its formal relationship with Kabul to provide for its security interests, and could thus act as a limited spoiler.

Akin to Tehran's trepidation, New Delhi has its own rationale for seeing the permanent marginalisation or ruin of the Taliban leadership and movement. Under the Taliban regime, the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence began using Afghanistan as a base to cultivate and train insurgents to challenge India's writ in Kashmir (Desmond 1995). The Taliban's interest in Kashmir troubled New Delhi—after all, the successful asymmetric warfare waged against



the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan suggested that perhaps a similar strategy could be used to compel India to withdraw from Kashmir (or at least coerce it to the negotiating table). Evidence has already emerged of Kashmir being the next target of 'liberation' in the minds of some Taliban ideologues, such as the Doha-based Islamist cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has called for a jihadist struggle to create an Islamic state in Kashmir (Swami 2013). Hence, for India, the security and stability of Afghanistan, in which the Taliban are a spent force, cannot be overstated.

The possibility of the Taliban re-injecting themselves into Kashmir and the Afghan government's peace and reconciliation overtures towards the insurgents' leadership have led to a considerable shift in India's policy, although indignantly, of rebuffing conditions-free talks with the insurgents. At a time when all external stakeholders in Afghanistan are supporting the Afghan-government-backed High Peace Council's peace process roadmap, New Delhi has been compelled to change its firm stance, which required armed groups of all ranks to meet strict preconditions for talks (Roy-Chowdhury 2011). The significant policy shift now cautiously supports the dialogue process with the insurgents, particularly the reintegration of lower-level Taliban fighters into the Afghan mainstream. India's prerequisites for peace and reconciliation talks, however, remain in force when dealing with the Taliban leadership: India would support the initiative only if the 'red lines' remain enforced. These red lines include the Taliban unconditionally renouncing violence, severing their ties with anti-India groups in Pakistan, and veritably acceding to the Afghan constitution (Kasturi 2013). However, none of these commitments were forthcoming in the June 2013 Doha peace process, which ended in a diplomatic disaster when President Karzai learned that the Taliban were using the country's former flag and name—the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—leading him to abandon the talks and accuse the USA of granting legitimacy to the insurgency (Osman 2013). For India, the Taliban leadership's portrayal of their Doha office as an embassy of a government in exile revalidated its case that you cannot negotiate without preconditions or redraw red lines for appeasement purposes. If reconciliation leads to the return of Mullah Omar as part of some coalition government, thereby setting the stage for undermining the government from within, it also threatens to push New Delhi to forego its respect for Afghan sovereignty to balance its interests without the latter's consent.

The Doha imbroglio arguably tested the Afghanistan–India SPA. As reported in the UK *Telegraph* on July 9, 2013, the closure of the Taliban's Doha office in July 2013 has done little to reassure New Delhi, or for that matter Kabul, as more debacles could be in the making. From New Delhi's perspective, a Taliban return could present opportunities for Pakistan to amplify its support for insurgents fighting to wrestle control of Kashmir from India—a situation that might lead to a radical Islamic ideology spawning a new wave of terrorism in India. Consequently, differences between New Delhi and Kabul could force New Delhi to recalculate its Afghanistan policy.



The positions of Afghanistan's two presidential candidates, Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Dr Ashraf Ghani-Ahmadzai, on negotiating with the Taliban are also being watched closely by India. Although the former favours serious negotiations, he is clear on dealing firmly with the Taliban if they do not stop violence (Kumar 2014). In contrast, his contender has stressed on finding a 'lasting peace' by reaching out to the Taliban and uncovering their grievances (Jablonska 2014). The dichotomy in pursuing a peace process appears to have split negotiations down the middle: holding either conditions-based or conditions-free talks. Although New Delhi's stance on the Taliban is more convergent with Dr Abdullah's outlook, neither candidate has dispelled its concerns regarding a potential Taliban comeback. India, however, is likely to find a stronger partner in Dr Abdullah, if he were to become the next Afghan president, than Dr Ghani-Ahmadzai, who believes that there is a fundamental change in the Pakistani government's orientation on using terrorism in pursuit of its foreign policy interests. India is unlikely to find the latter perspective helpful, since the evidence on the ground does not match the rhetoric emanating from either Dr Ghani-Ahmadzai or Pakistani officials. Consequently, India's current approach is to remain engaged in the peace process as a way to craft its own response should its primary concerns fall victim to Taliban demands or appeasement. This kind of positioning by India is sufficient to indicate limited spoiler behaviour.

The third leg in this tripartite calculation is Russia, which similarly sees the return of the Taliban in any form as detrimental to its security interests. According to a report in *Russia Today* on November 9, 2012, Russian leaders fear that a Western defeat in Afghanistan would trigger an uncontrollable rise in Islamist radicalism across the region, eventually reaching its doorstep. The latter appears to be happening already, as organisational links are growing between radical Islamists in Russia and Syria, and this has intensified fears in Moscow that a Taliban return would amplify extremist trends along its troubled southern front (Malashenko 2014). Despite endorsing President Karzai's peace talks with the Taliban, Russian officials are developing their own options in the Afghan endgame. For instance, one option is to support the recreation of ethnic enclaves within some of the Central Asian republics that share a border with northern Afghanistan (Weitz 2014). The logic behind this hedging strategy is drawn from Russia's experience in the 1990s, when it set up a buffer zone between itself and the Taliban. Recounting this experience, the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, has suggested creating 'territorial formations' within Afghanistan to enhance border security in its southern hinterland (Weitz 2014). The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, echoed this sentiment on May 23, 2014, when he stated: 'We are concerned about the degradation of the situation in Northern provinces of Afghanistan, from which terrorist activities flow to neighbouring countries of Central Asia, which are allies to the Russian Federation' (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO 2014).

References made to ethnically based territorial buffer zones suggest Moscow's dissatisfaction with the ongoing peace dialogue with the Taliban. Consequently,

it would be difficult to picture Russia remaining passive if the incentives for cooperation with the Afghan government fail to prevent the Taliban from energising their security challenges. The combination of the withdrawal of international military forces from Afghanistan, an unending insurgency and a weak state straddling its historical zone of influence gives Moscow more reasons to work outside of its formal relationship with Kabul in order to serve its own strategic interests. For these reasons, it would be unsurprising to see Russia act as a limited spoiler in its engagement with Afghanistan.

Russia's concerns are not baseless, as the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 arguably contributed to the global spike in Islamist terrorism. Moreover, the Taliban regime's recognition of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as a separate country in January 1999, together with Mullah Omar's decision to support the separatist movement against Russian rule, markedly irked the Russian government. Making matters worse for Moscow was Pakistan's role in granting a visa to a former Chechen president, Zelmkhan Andrabayev, who visited Pakistan and received a financial contribution of US\$200,000 from Jamaat-i-Islami for the Chechen war effort under the guard of the Pakistani government (Anand 2000). Sympathy for the Chechen armed struggle was also captured in a statement by the former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, who said: 'They are my brothers. They are Muslims. The only solution is to help Chechens'. He then claimed to have sent Taliban 'troops' to provide reinforcements against Russia's second intervention in Chechnya in 1999 (ibid.). Consequently, Moscow is deeply concerned that a second superpower's defeat in the same country at the hands of yet another Islamist insurgency would result in emboldening the forces of radicalism to an unprecedented level. It is thus unsurprising that the Kremlin is inclined to look at Afghanistan in the same way as Washington views Mexico and Cuba. The other primary concern for Russia is the narcotics trade that is trafficked through Afghanistan into Russia, which has become a serious social problem (Menkiszak 2011). For instance, under the Taliban rule, opium production peaked to a record 4580 metric tons in 1999, a figure which represented approximately 75 percent of global production—97 percent of which was grown in Taliban-held territories (Rubin 2000). As expected, any form of Taliban return threatens to worsen an already serious narcotics problem.

Although the relationship between Moscow and Kabul has not yet been cultivated to the level of a strategic partnership, on April 11, 2013, the *Belarusian Telegraph Agency* reported that Kabul's desire to forge a security-centric agreement with Moscow had become evident when it was granted observer status in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in April 2013. Afghanistan's interest in establishing formal ties with the CSTO could be due to a mutual convergence of fundamental security interests. The CSTO's charter lists the following security-centric objectives: national and collective security; combating international terrorism; developing intensive military–political cooperation and integration; and foreign policy coordination

on international and regional security issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Belarus [n.d.](#)). Notably, the CSTO has a Joint Rapid Reaction Force, which holds annual military exercises with its partner nations, although its small budget and size do not allow it to be compared against NATO in any measure. Nevertheless, according to the former commander of the Soviet 40th Army, which previously occupied Afghanistan, the joint responder force is being trained to mop up any spillage of the Afghan conflict across the borders of CSTO member states in the event of chaos and state collapse following NATO's withdrawal (Gromov and Rogozin [2010](#)). Reflecting this trend, in a recent CSTO summit in May 2013, members convened to specifically discuss the measures to be adopted to 'minimize the negative impact' of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan in December 2014 (Radio Free Europe [2013](#)). The summit conveyed the deleterious state that Afghanistan is being left in to fend for itself. The insecurities of CSTO members have signified their common fear that an impending structural downfall of the Afghan government could lead to a 'Talibanisation of Central Asia', the effects of which would reverberate across the region (Badrakumar [2005](#)).

Afghanistan's observer status in the CSTO does not give it the benefit of 'collective security', as enshrined in the organisation's charter. It is doubtful, however, that, even if it were a full member, Russia would intervene on its behalf, as the trauma induced by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has led to an 'Afghan syndrome' in post-Soviet society and among the ruling elite, which effectively rules out any new military engagement in Afghanistan (Trenin and Malashenko [2010](#)). Russia's interests in Afghanistan have been limited to the north of the country, and primarily the Uzbek and Tajik populations. It has continued to cultivate these relations and provided military assistance to bolster the Northern Alliance in its resistance against Taliban rule, playing a major role in toppling the latter (*BBC News* [2001](#); O'Flynn [2001](#)). The resilience of the Taliban insurgency and their plausible return in some form in Afghanistan has, however, revived Russia's security concerns, which could see it emerge as a limited spoiler to protect its interests after NATO's withdrawal. Despite the cordial relations between Moscow and Kabul, the former may be inclined to hedge its position by working outside of formal bilateral frameworks as a means to counter a rise in Taliban-inspired Islamist radicalism from crossing into Russia's southern neighbours. The latter scenario could transpire if the Afghan government and its forces are overrun by the Taliban and cannot protect themselves, let alone enforce any containment measures against their opponents. In such circumstances, it would be extremely challenging for an embattled Afghan government to prevent its external stakeholders from pursuing their own security-led agendas outside of official frameworks. There are already some indications that Russia, India and Iran are consulting each other on how to respond to a potential breakdown of the Afghan state, where one possibility lies in rekindling the remnants of the Northern Alliance (Jacob [2010](#)). Although the latter may or may not come to pass, Russia is exploring the option of forging a

close working relationship with Iran, and extended an invitation to Tehran to join the CSTO in May 2007, possibly with a view to security cooperation and threat reduction. Iran has yet to join the organisation. Keeping in mind Russia's security-centric approach to Afghanistan, it should not come as a shock that it would be prepared to protect its primary security interests in a post-withdrawal milieu using either independent or coordinated action with armed Afghan groups opposed to the Taliban and like-minded external stakeholders.

The cumulative effects of the ISAF/NATO withdrawal and the region's temperament in responding to the looming political and strategic vacuum have driven Kabul to become a member of several security and strategic partnerships at bilateral and multilateral levels. This is reflected in the signing of a strategic partnership between Afghanistan and Norway in February 2013, and, subsequently, an 'Agreement on Security Cooperation' between Afghanistan and the United Arab Emirates that was entered into in August 2013. These agreements strongly indicate Kabul's desire to construct a safety net as a means to convince its external stakeholders to remain committed to Afghanistan's security following the departure of ISAF/NATO. The other, and equally important, consideration is to rein in greedy and total spoilers, such as Pakistan and its Taliban protégé.

#### *Pakistan: a greedy and total spoiler*

Pakistan's role in the ongoing Afghan conflict has conferred on it titles ranging from 'duplicious' to the more unforgiving 'ally from hell' (Astill 2011; Goldberg and Ambinder 2011). These labels reflect the menacing levels of undulating greed and often total spoiler behaviour of the Pakistan Army and its spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, over the past 12 years. At one level, Pakistan has provided the ground lines of communication to facilitate the ISAF's military mission; cooperated in counterterrorism and in sharing intelligence with its Western partners; and paid a heavy price in both blood and treasure in partnering with the US-led 'War on Terror'. On the other hand, Pakistan has been actively supporting the Taliban insurgency and their local affiliates, such as the Haqqani Network, which has kept the Afghan conflict simmering; sponsored attacks aimed at diplomatic missions in Afghanistan; undermined peace and reconciliation efforts between the Afghan government and those Taliban leaders who were willing to negotiate; and hosted Osama bin Laden (knowingly or not). The continuity of the Pakistan military's praetorian role could be characterised as *mala in se* for Afghanistan's future, as the latter grapples with deteriorating nationwide security, structural failures in governance, and a resilient Taliban leadership who are unwilling to recognise, let alone negotiate with, President Karzai's government. Despite these pitfalls, and Pakistan's total spoiler traits, there appears to be a certain degree of leverage that may restrain it to the less damaging category of a greedy spoiler. Regrettably for Afghanistan, it does not possess the tools for coercive leverage,

but rather they lie with the USA, which has had only limited success in engendering small changes in Pakistani policies directed at Afghanistan. Kabul may have some carrots to offer but, in a post-withdrawal environment, such sweeteners might be perceived as rewarding poor behaviour.

From Pakistan's perspective, there are several carrots that the Afghan government can offer or be forced to surrender. One of these carrots relates to limiting India's presence in Afghanistan, but the New Delhi–Kabul SPA is a hindrance. In spite of the serious bilateral problems between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the latter has attempted to garner an equal footing with New Delhi and has 'ambushed' the Afghan government on the issue of signing a strategic partnership between them (Hewad 2013). Since then, the Afghan foreign minister, Zalmay Rassoul, has reiterated that his government will not sign a strategic agreement with Islamabad as long as the country shows no sign of honest cooperation towards peace and stability (Maudoodi 2013). Echoing the sentiments of the Afghan government on the far-fetched idea of a Pakistan–Afghanistan SPA, Rahmatullah Nabil, the deputy national security advisor, called on the international community to blacklist Pakistan's powerful spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (Amiry 2013). An Afghanistan–Pakistan strategic partnership is clearly not in the making, but the lack of an official agreement has seldom stopped Pakistan from interfering in Afghanistan's sovereign affairs. A more historical and secondary objective for Pakistan has been to settle the Durand Line issue—a border that has never been recognised by any Afghan government. Afghanistan's refusal to accept the 1893 Durand Line as the international border separating the states has continuously posed a weak, but nevertheless irredentist threat to Pakistan's territorial unity. There is little evidence to suggest that either the current or any future Afghan government would have an interest in settling this dispute until there is a demonstrable change in Pakistan's security-centric approach towards Afghanistan. Although these incentives would be well received in Islamabad, Kabul cannot afford to relinquish them so easily. Moreover, there is no guarantee that giving Pakistan what it wants would translate into a meaningful reorientation in Pakistan's doctrine of strategic depth—the defining principle of its relationship with Afghanistan.

Since 2001, the influx of external actors has undercut Pakistan's hitherto doctrine of strategic depth. The doctrine sought to deny Afghanistan's political independence, and is intended to constrain Kabul's foreign relations and economic freedom in order to necessitate its near total dependence on Pakistan. This strategy licenses Islamabad to exploit Afghanistan's sovereignty by attempting to monopolise control over its neighbour's political, security and economic levers of policy making. For instance, Pakistan's call to establish an 'inclusive' government in Kabul intends to give the Taliban political legitimacy, and hence ownership in a future Afghan government (Waldman 2010). The inclusion of the Taliban, however, is more likely to undermine stability itself, as they have openly expressed their intentions to overthrow the government in

Afghanistan; enforce sharia; disregard or change the Afghan constitution to serve their interests alone; impose severe restrictions on women; and establish an Islamic government akin to their previous rule. Therefore, the scheduled withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan presents Pakistan with the opportunity to reassert strategic depth by elevating its support for Afghan non-state actors. To such an end, Pakistan benefits by inflating and shrinking its spoiler behaviour based on a mixed calculus of its own desired goals and the respective positions of Afghanistan and its external partners' political and security standings.

### *The Taliban: a total spoiler?*

Not all of the Taliban are total spoilers. The Taliban are not a unitary actor. Although analysts recognise a core leadership network, various mid-level commanders may or may not report to the same leadership, and have remarkable autonomy in their short-term and tactical decision making. A corollary of such autonomy is that mid-level commanders—and increasingly newly appointed/promoted ones (most middle-aged Taliban commanders have been killed or kidnapped in targeted and surgical operations)—recruit foot soldiers locally and rely on extractive financial structures. Despite this characteristic, the Afghan government's preference has been to attempt direct communication with the Taliban leadership. The present analysis, therefore, is concerned with the group's *core leadership* and its hard-line elements—Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network—who typify a total spoiler in the Afghan conflict.

Firstly, there is nothing to suggest empirically that the goals of the core leadership are minimal; the leadership have remained focused on driving out the international military forces from Afghanistan and toppling the current Afghan government and any future ones that follow. They have rejected any recognition of the Afghan constitution; consider President Karzai to be the USA's puppet; have undermined peace and reconciliation initiatives spearheaded by the Afghan High Peace Council; assassinated the latter's chief and the former Afghan president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in September 2011; have killed teachers working at girls' schools; have poisoned dozens of schoolgirls because of their opposition to women's education; and continue to kill minority Hazaras and Shia Muslims (Evans 2013; Roggio 2012; Roggio and Lundquist 2011; Rubin 2010; Salahuddin 2010). These heinous acts confirm a basic finding that negotiating with the Taliban is not just difficult, but an approach that is stillborn. If there were ever any doubts about the Taliban's total spoiler behaviour, the breakdown of the Doha peace talks in June 2013 should have dispelled them. More recently, the Taliban leadership have declared (repeatedly) that the ongoing transition process (embodied by the presidential and provincial council elections of April and June 2014) is illegitimate—partaking in the process would not only legitimise the Afghan constitution, but also affirm the transition process. Stedman's (1997) warning about total spoilers deserves

repeating here—namely, that such actors cannot be accommodated or forced into any compromise, as they seek total power, view all negotiations as a zero-sum game, have unchanging goals, and champion the violent transformation of a society in pursuit of total power.

Next, as has already been alluded to, the question of representation looms large—who is the Taliban spokesperson or commander present at High Peace Council meetings speaking on behalf of and representing? The government of Afghanistan and its international partners are not fully clued in on this critical issue. Both before and after the assassination of Rabbani, the government struggled to establish a line of direct communication. Instead, it established discursive negotiation channels comprising various Taliban associates and groups, often with disparate concerns and demands. For example, although the government hailed the release in 2011 of the imprisoned former Taliban leader Mullah Baradar as a measure of success and progress, his capacity to influence negotiations has been minimal (since he was out of the picture for several years) or virtually non-existent. Neither did the USA's attempts to set up the so-called Taliban 'liaison office' in the emirate of Qatar help the prospect of meaningful negotiations. The policy was a catastrophic failure, as it had not sufficiently appreciated the representation concern. Had the Taliban been sincere, they would have sought better coordination and improved communications with the government of Afghanistan. These structural shortcomings have aided the Taliban core leadership's attempts to further vilify the government as a puppet regime and sabotage the peace process.

Finally, the core leadership's commitment to sabotaging peace processes and undermining security and stability in Afghanistan cannot be appeased through inducements, as it may risk strengthening the leadership by rewarding them. The only two strategies that can be used to offset the deleterious effects of a total spoiler in a successful way are the employment of force and empowering opposition groups to delegitimise the spoiler. Going by the former prescription, it is highly improbable that the Afghan military machinery could succeed where the US-led ISAF mission has failed. The latter's overwhelming conventional military superiority has failed to translate its tactical successes into sustainable military and political gains for the benefit of Afghanistan. In relation to the second prescription, which suggests empowering opposition forces to delegitimise the Taliban, President Karzai and his team suffer from serious deficiencies in political and institutional capacities, legitimacy and military capabilities. The combined shortages would be unable to forge together a determined coalition that could withstand internal fracturing and the clandestine intrusion of Pakistan's military and its surrogate, Inter-Services Intelligence. Moreover, as Pakistan finds that its motivations, interests and objectives converge with the Taliban's, it would be unrealistic to believe that a rift in their partnership could transpire. The Pakistan military's approach of maintaining ties with the Taliban leadership is strategically calculated to exercise leverage in reconciliation talks by presenting itself as the principal negotiator representing the insurgent group



(Masadykov, Giustozzi, and Page 2010). For Pakistan, the Taliban represent a 'guarantee' that its generals in Rawalpindi will preserve their ability to impose their agendas on Afghanistan, irrespective of the outcome of any reconciliation process. As for Kabul's strategic partnerships with India, Iran and other external stakeholders, the possibility of any direct military intervention from an external partner is fanciful, but a more nuanced form of military aid and financial backing is probable, given the security concerns these countries share regarding a Taliban comeback.

## Conclusion

Recognition that Afghanistan's dilemmas are interlocked with its adjoining and distant neighbours in South-West Asia is not lacking. What is nearing a point of total exhaustion is the political and military will, alongside the material resources required from the USA and other Western countries, to engage in this unresolved range of issues before retreating. The chances of a stable post-2014 settlement are therefore slim, given the surfeit of potential spoilers and the weakness of the government in Kabul. The withdrawal of the US-led ISAF/NATO forces by December 2014 threatens to precipitate a political and strategic vacuum in Afghanistan—a fitting milieu for institutional collapse, Taliban gains and spoiler activity.

In military terms, a downsizing military presence has encouraged the Taliban to intensify attacks in the south and east of the country in order to test the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces. Although the Afghan National Security Forces are currently combating the escalation in Taliban violence, serious questions remain as to whether the Afghan military can hold its ground. In such a climate, crafting a peace settlement with the Taliban is not viable; a resilient Taliban would find little reason to negotiate a peace settlement with the Afghan government, as profiting from its weakness would provide far greater benefits. Thus, the High Peace Council's peace overtures, though well intentioned, are unlikely to yield more than a hollow agreement. In political terms, it remains to be seen if the current institutional set-up has the strength and skill to prevent the government from coming under Taliban control if they were legitimised as political actors. Here, the ongoing 2014 electoral crisis, which has witnessed ethnic tensions, rears its ugly head again. Some of Abdullah Abdullah's Tajik supporters, who are strongmen, were very close to declaring a parallel administration, and this could play into the hands of the Taliban should they see benefit in exploiting Pahlstun electoral grievances.

The broader implications for peace and security are bleak for Afghanistan and the region. Afghanistan's external partners—Iran, India and Russia—are deeply concerned about Afghanistan's institutional weaknesses and the disengagement of its hitherto Western allies. Although the trio may decide to support Kabul, there is more reason for them to act independently, and hence as limited spoilers, to safeguard their own security and maintain spheres of influence in the

event of a Taliban return. Their security priorities, however, conflict with Pakistan's across the board, which is likely to intensify its greedy interference in Afghanistan based on a flexible cost-benefit calculus. The eventual extraction of a security anchor in Afghanistan provides greater incentives for regional actors to project their security priorities and rivalries onto an institutionally fragile state. This will further challenge the writ of the Afghan government's (limited) control and may lead to competing spheres of influence, fashioned by its regional neighbours and the Taliban vying for conflicting objectives.

A final challenge of import is the sustainability of the Afghan state. So long as Western partners remain committed to their pledges of funding, the country and its institutions will stay afloat. If this economic lifeline is cut, however, the likelihood of state collapse will increase. There is no guarantee that funding for Afghanistan will continue unabated after the withdrawal, as the USA and its allies shift their strategic priorities. These doubts have merit—for instance, the Bilateral Security Agreement between the USA and Afghanistan remains unsigned, thus heightening the latter's insecurity. Afghanistan's current external partners—Iran, India and Russia—may provide some stopgap funding, but none have the financial or material capacity to meet the levels provided by its Western stakeholders. The unravelling of the Afghan state will plunge the country into renewed civil strife, which, like in the past, will spill over and create instability across the region.

## Notes

1. The Taliban's vehement anti-Shia sentiment was confirmed in August 1998, when thousands of Hazaras were massacred in Mazar-e-Sharif. The following month, Taliban members killed nine Iranian diplomats living in the same city—a provocation that nearly led Iran to declare war on the Taliban regime. Given these incidents, Tehran is watchful of any inroads the Taliban is making and has no interest in seeing its neighbour turn into a 'rogue' state or 'failed' entity again.
2. Interview with a senior Iranian diplomat at the Institute of Political and International Studies, Tehran, May 2014.

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