Afghanistan's Decentralised Regional Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Afghanistan's lack of a state monopoly of violence reflects on its foreign policy in a number of ways. First, various non-state organizations developing their own relations with foreign countries. Second, enforcing coherent policy making within the institutions of the Afghan state itself has been sometimes problematic as officials could rely on the patronage of organizations external to the state to delay the implementation of official policies. This article discusses the cases of Afghan foreign policy towards Pakistan, India, China and Iran.

Keywords

Afghanistan – foreign policy – Pakistan – China – India – Iran

The implications of a weak or partial monopoly on legitimate violence for state-building are widely discussed in the literature as far as the administration of justice, the expansion of tax collection, and, in fact, directly or indirectly, almost every function of the state, are concerned. However, little attention is paid in practice towards the implications of a weak/absent monopoly on violence for foreign policy making. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the topic in the context of post-2001 Afghanistan.

That the Afghan state was unable to reclaim the monopoly on legitimate violence after 2001 is an issue widely discussed in the literature and needs little elaboration. It is useful, however, to point out here that there are two dimensions in regard to this absence of monopoly on violence. The first – that of the insurgency, the main protagonists being the Taliban – is the most widely

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discussed. Less known, but not necessarily less important, is the presence of illegal armed groups which are not opposed to the state, but which are not integrated into its armed forces either. These groups were targeted in the so-called Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) programme, managed by UNDP from 2005 onwards, but virtually inactive by 2011, as its very modest successes became increasingly offset by an emerging generation of new armed groups, or the remobilisation of old ones. What makes these armed groups significant is that they tend to be connected to individuals and groups who have a political agenda, whether or not active within the state apparatus. As a result, a relatively large number of political actors are able to break off from state-imposed discipline and violate another key monopoly advocated by the modern state: the monopoly on foreign policy.

Of course, the desire of powerful individuals and groups to have their own foreign policy as separate from that of the Afghan state, or to exercise undue influence in the foreign policy making of the Afghan state, would have little impact if foreign governments were *not* willing to engage with them. While examined in more depth in this paper, suffice it to mention here that foreign states have, or at least in some cases, interacted with theoretically illegitimate foreign policy actors out of the belief that the Afghan government which emerged from the Bonn Agreement of 2011 is not fully legitimate, nor durable,and is viewed as the product primarily of foreign intervention. Another reason is the pragmatic consideration that since the Afghan state remained weak for several years after the fall of the Taliban regime and that regional politics remained very competitive and fluid, entertaining relations with such actors was the only viable option for neighbouring states to protect their interests. For states to maintain relations with non-state actors is a fairly common phenomenon, not just in the case of Afghanistan. Decentralised foreign policy making is, for example, common in Switzerland, but in this case the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs coordinates the different influences and activities of federal offices into a coherent whole.[1] Central coordination of decentralised foreign policy making has been weaker or even absent in the United States, although the member states of the federation and other sub-national foreign policy actors have limited themselves to specific issues, such as Florida's concerns over Cuba, individual states' attempts to attract foreign investment, and so on.[2] In these cases, however, decentralisation is limited to state agencies other than the ministry/department dedicated to foreign affairs. Rather more peculiar, as can be seen in Afghanistan, is for non-state actors to have their own foreign policy.

1 Laurent Goetschel, Magdalena Bernath, Daniel Schwarz, *Swiss Foreign Policy: Foundations And Possibilities* (London: Routledge, 2005).

2 John Dumbrell, *The Making of US Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 19970.

This article will not deal in detail with all the states of the region that surround Afghanistan; instead it focuses on the most active actors: Pakistan, India, Iran and China. Specific states aside, however, some general considerations also apply to Afghan foreign policy making as a whole.

Afghan diplomats sometimes opine that neighbours and world powers alike tend to treat them and their country as lesser partners. As they put it, foreign countries often issue 'requests' to Afghanistan which violate the diplomatic protocol and imply a less than equal relationship.3 This might in part derive from the fact that neighbouring countries have in some cases far more experienced and professional diplomatic corps than does Afghanistan. Kabul's options in appointing diplomats are limited not only by the dispersion of the old diplomatic corps due to 30 years of war and several regime changes, but also by the persisting tendency to use diplomatic posts as spoils to be distributed to appease political supporters of one faction or another within the coalition government in Kabul. By contrast, countries like Pakistan and Iran have managed to maintain relatively more professional diplomatic corps, particularly Pakistan (in Iran ideological and factional infighting have takena toll), and their bureaucracies have not suffered as much as Afghanistan's from continuous regime change. The pool of highly educated individuals from which these countries, and indeed all countries in the region, can draw upon toselect diplomats is also much wider than in Afghanistan's case.

There are other issues at stake, however. The evident fact that the Afghan regime is propped up by a coalition of foreign powers, centred around the US, clearly diminishes its legitimacy among most neighbouring countries, which tend to be fearful or resentful of Western interference. Even India, which does not object at all to Western intervention in Afghanistan in principle, is quite defensive of its own internal autonomy and reacts bitterly to any outside effort to exercise influence.

As a result of these factors, Afghan foreign policy makers have struggled to cope with a complex diplomatic environment. Moreover, as what will form the main focus of this article, they have faced competition and interference in their work from within Afghanistan.

Policies towards Pakistan

While Kabul's official policy towards Pakistan has fluctuated since 2001, tensions have predominantly characterised relations between the two countries.

3 Personal communication with an Afghan diplomat, Kabul, October 2009.

Even in the early post-2001 years, when Pakistan maintained a low profile vis-à-vis Afghanistan and did not yet stand accused of subversive intentions, Pakistani diplomacy had little influence in Kabul.4 Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan found itself headed by figures well known for their hostility or suspicion towards Pakistan. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, former advisor to Ahmad Shah Massud, was foreign minister between 2001 and 2005. He was involved in fighting the Pakistani-supported Taliban for several years. Further, his family lives in India, a country to which he is quite close. He was succeeded by Rangin Dadfar Spanta in 2005-2010, a leftist who had been in exile for many years. The current foreign minister is Zalmai Rasul, an Afghan nationalist.

Regardless, the Pakistanis seem to have failed, initially at least, to notice the anti-Islamabad bias in the choice of foreign ministers. Ahmed Rashid relates one episode whereby Karzai refused to meet two ISI emissaries in 2001 as Operation Enduring Freedom was unfolding.5 Other low-profile attempts by Pakistan to reclaim some influence in Kabul in 2001-2003 were also frustrated. For example, the Pakistanis sponsored an attempt by some former Taliban to establish a legal political party in Afghanistan, a move which was rebuffed by the Afghan authorities.6

Thereafter, Islamabad came to the decision that it needed to exercise pressure on Kabul in order to recover some influence. In part this was done through the manipulation of trade policy, a tool which had proved effective in previous years. By delaying discussions on transit trade and then imposing burdensome conditions, Islamabad hoped to force Kabul to recognise Pakistan's interests and power vis-à-vis a landlocked Afghanistan.7 However, Kabul reacted by developing an alternative main trade route through Iran, encouraged by the Indians who offered to build a new highway connecting the Iranian border with Afghanistan's cities through Nimruz province. Work started in 2005 and was completed in 2009. This route is much shorter than the already existing one through Herat, and so contributes to cutting transport costs. This decision was a major turning point in Pakistani-Afghan relations, not least because it

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4 Frederic Grare, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations in the Post-9/11 Era," *Carnegie Endowment Paper*, September 29, 2006.

5 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into chaos* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 23.

6 Thomas Ruttig, "The battle for Afghanistan. Negotiations with the Taliban. History and Prospects for the Future," *National Security Studies Program Policy Papers*, May 2011.

7 Saeed Parto et al., "Afghanistan and regional trade. More, or Less, Imports from Central Asia?" *University of Central Asia Working Papers*, no. 3, 2012; M.B. Naqvi, "Indo-Pakistan Rivalry In Afghanistan Intensifies," *Inter Press Service*, September 6, 2005.

involved contracting an Indian road construction agency linked to the Indian military, and resulted in the deployment of a substantial number of Indian paramilitaries next to the Pakistani border.8 Probably not coincidentally, Pakistani support for the insurgency in Afghanistan started to grow in 2005, and the Taliban subsequently went from being an irritant to a major threat to the Afghan state.

As the Pakistani security services started becoming increasingly overt in supporting the insurgency, Kabul's hostility towards Pakistan increased. Kabul struggled, however, to find ways to express its rage, beyond issuing some rhetorical statements. Border clashes between Afghan border police and other security forces on one side and Pakistan border forces or Frontier Corps on the other began to become more frequent, leading also to occasional loss of life.9 While this might have been a way to express Afghan frustration, it hardly applied serious pressure on Pakistan. The fact that Afghanistan was playing host to Baluch nationalists was a more serious irritant, considering that at the same time the Baluch insurgency in Pakistan had started to worsen. In this context, the Pakistani authorities started accusing India – as well as Afghanistan – of supporting the insurgency.10

Rightly or wrongly, policy circles in Kabul were fairly unanimous in pointing the finger at Pakistan for explaining the constant growth of the insurgency south of the Hindu Kush. The typical Pakistani reply was as follows:

> President Karzai, failing to expand his government's writ over all parts of Afghanistan and being incapable of winning popular support, attempts to divert people's anger by blaming his domestic disorder on Pakistan.11

A minority within the Afghan government argued that antagonising Pakistan was not leading anywhere, given that the latter was much more powerful. Indeed, the Afghan government seems to have badly miscalculated its chances

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8 Eray Basar, "The Roles of India & Pakistan in Afghanistan's Development & Natural Resources," *Civil-Military Fusion Center Papers*, March 2012; Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan," *RAND Occasional Papers*, 2012.

9 Skirmishes started in 2007, when a Pakistan patrol came under fire. See "Afghanistan 'bor- der fence' clash," *BBC News,* 19 April 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6572399 .stm (accessed December 7, 2013).

10 Zeeshan Haider, "Pakistan accuses India, Afghans, of Baluch meddling," *Reuters*, April 22, 2009, http://in.reuters.com/article/2009/04/22/idINIndia-39181020090422 (accessed December 7, 2013).

11 Humera Iqbal, *Pak-Afghan Ties In The Light Of Pak-Us Strategic Dialogue* (Peshawar: Institute of Regional Studies, 2010).

of turning Washington in particular, and the NATO countries more generally, against Pakistan. Afghan foreign policy as a whole seems to have been predicated on the assumption that this was possible; in this context, even the border clashes with the Pakistani armed forces might have made sense as a way of attracting Washington's attention. As early as January 2002, Karzai sent his for- eign minister, Dr. Abdullah, to Washington to ask that it prevent the Pakistanis from helping the Taliban regroup. Already in 2003 Karzai was becoming frus- trated that despite mounting evidence of Pakistani support for the insurgents, no senior US official was criticising Islamabad for allowing the Taliban to oper- ate out of Pakistan. Musharraf's assurances were not believed in Kabul, but were believed in Washington. Among US officials, only the Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, was willing to side with Karzai on this issue, and he even travelled to Islamabad to lobby the Pakistani authorities, albeit without success. Karzai followed suit with a list of Taliban leaders based in Pakistan, but Washington declined to support him in public.

It was not until 2004 that President Bush confronted Musharraf for the first time about Taliban bases in Pakistan, worried that the Afghan presidential elections to be held that year would be seriously disrupted. Reportedly, Musharraf reacted to the warning by acting to limit Taliban operations during the elections. For further Western efforts to reduce Pakistan's interference, Karzai had to wait until October 2006, when ISAF commanders in southern Afghanistan, worried about escalating attacks on Kandahar city, warned Musharraf that the fall of Kandahar would not be tolerated. The pressure was not kept up, however, and the Pakistani authorities only did as little as possible: they were mostly concerned with 'deflect[ing] American criticism' without undertaking a serious change of policy.12

As it became clear that the West would disengage from Afghanistan, the idea that Washington would (let alone could) convince the Pakistanis to change their strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan started to become increasingly less plausible. And while the 'appeasers' in Kabul started gaining ground, they still remained a minority. Certain Pakistani provocations (like the bombardment of

12 Joshua Partlow, "Karzai accuses Pakistan of supporting terrorists," *Washington Post,* October 3, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/karzai-criticizes-pakistan-for-supporting-terrorists/2011/10/03/gIQAWABWIL_story.html (accessed December 7, 2013); Barnett R. Rubin, "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2007, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62270/barnett-r-rubin/saving-afghanistan (accessed December 7, 2013); Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul* (London: Harper Collins, 2011), 21, 50-1, 68-71, 73; Rashid, *Descent into chaos*, 229, 241, 259, 364, 369, where the quote at the top of the paragraph comes from.

Kunar in the summer of 2012 or the Goshta incident in spring 2013) contrib- uted to making it difficult for anyone in Kabul to advocate appeasement with Islamabad; the purpose of these provocations appears to have been to humili- ate the hardliners in Kabul by highlighting how powerless they were in the face of Pakistani influence and strength. In the short term at least, however, they made it almost impossible for Kabul to change tack. Privately, some officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed their belief that there was no credible option left but to somehow appease Pakistan.13

It would appear that President Karzai himself considered this option, particularly from 2010 onwards. Over the years Karzai interspersed criticism of Pakistan with proclamations of friendship, once even stating that Afghanistan would side with Pakistan if the Americans were ever to attack the latter.14 This appears to have been related to efforts to sound out whether a deal with Pakistan was possible and on what terms; in a sense it was a bargaining tech- nique. Although it is often claimed that the Durand Line is the main outstand- ing issue between Kabul and Islamabad, it seems that in reality the Pakistani military holds low expectations of gaining significant Afghan concessions on this front.15 Afghan diplomats have instead claimed that one of Islamabad's key demands concerning a settlement between the two countries is the dra- matic downgrading of relations between Afghanistan and India.16 Implicitly the Pakistanis have also been arguing against Karzai's role in negotiations and in a future settlement, which might be the toughest condition to swallow for the Afghan president.17

Within the Afghan government, the domination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by anti-Pakistani elements (themselves divided into two main groups, the northerners and the Pashtun nationalists) has not gone unchallenged. A group of cabinet members with a background in Hizb-i Islami has also been weaving a parallel diplomacy with the Pakistani authorities, at an unofficial level. This was facilitated by Omar Daudzai's appointment as ambassador to Pakistan in April 2011, while Faruq Wardak was appointed in 2010 as Chairman

13 Personal communication with Afghan MFA official, March 2013.

14 Ewen MacAskill and Declan Walsh, "Hamid Karzai claims on TV his country 'will side with Pakistan if US attacks'," *The Guardian*, October 23, 2011, http://www.theguardian .com/world/2011/oct/23/hamid-karzai-us-pakistan-afghanistan (accessed December 7, 2013).

15 Rashid, *Descent into chaos*, 267.

16 Ghanizada, "Pakistan terms for Afghan peace talks unacceptable: Faizi," *Khaama Press*, March 29, 2013.

17 Meena Haseeb, "Afghanistan to continue peace talks without Pakistan help: Ludin," *Khaama Press,* March 28, 2013.

of the International Affairs Committee of the High Peace Council, in the capac-ity of which he frequently travelled to Pakistan.18 While the exact content of discussions involving this group and the Pakistani authorities is not known, a number of signals indicate they have revolved around assessing Pakistani demands for engineering a deal with the armed opposition to the Afghan government and the mechanisms for kick-starting a peace process. In particu-lar, a key theme appears to have been the possibility of using the Afghan presi- dential elections of 2014 as an opportunity for sealing a new political settlement, inclusive of the armed opposition. The deal would seem to entail a 'consensus candidate', acceptable to the outgoing president, Karzai, as well as to the Pakistanis and the opposition. By late 2012 the name of Daudzai was emerging as the most likely consensus candidate, as mentioned by Karzai himself to some foreign diplomats.19

In spite of this, the above strand of foreign policy making remained in com-petition with the official one. In fact, the presence of two strands of foreign policy making allowed Karzai room for manoeuvre, playing one strand against the other depending on the circumstances and the interlocutors, while remain- ing formally committed to a rather anti-Pakistani line, one which is prevalent both within the cabinet and among the wider Afghan public.

While the second foreign policy making strand discussed above enjoyed some kind of unofficial endorsement, a number of parties, organisations and strongmen also pursued their own 'foreign policy' concerning Pakistan. In the Pashtun belt it is not uncommon for individuals and communities to entertain some relationship with the Pakistani authorities, more so for those living near and trading across the border. In the majority of cases, this relationship takes the form of patron-client relations. These Afghan actors have to some degree the opportunity of influencing the policy-making of the Afghan state, with several strongmen and community leaders having direct relations with members of the cabinet and an even greater number indirect relations, often through parliamentary members. Evaluating the overall impact of their

18 Casey Garret Johnson, "A party with many faces," *Foreign Affairs*, May 31, 2013, http:// afpak.foreignpolicy.com/category/topic/afghanistan (accessed December 7, 2013); personal communication with UN diplomats, Kabul, April 2011.

19 Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban and the 2014 elections* (provisional title) (Washington, D.C.: USIP, forthcoming); Mujib Mashal, "The question of succession," *AAN Blog*, May 18, 2012, http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/guest-blog-the-question-of-succession (accessed December 7, 2013); Thomas Ruttig, "Ustad Atta for President? The 'Northern Front' Summit and other Pre-Election Manoeuvres," *AAN Blog*, February 6, 2013, http://www .afghanistan-analysts.org/ustad-atta-for-president-the-northern-front-summit-and -other-pre-election-manoeuvres (accessed December 7, 2013).

lobbying is very difficult: strongmen and communities who were hostile to Pakistan also carried out lobbying activities, which in part offset the efforts of the first group.20 The Afghan security services certainly believe that Afghans who own property, have family, or maintain other interests in Pakistan are vulnerable to Pakistani pressure.21 Government officials often accuse those of their colleagues who spend time in Pakistan of being on the payroll of Pakistani intelligence.22 More obviously, the influence or even control that the Pakistani authorities exercise over the Afghan Taliban means that they are able to impose their conditions – essentially the safeguarding of Pakistani interests – as key to any deal between Kabul and the armed opposition.23

Taking stock of the debates in the Afghan parliament provides some indica-tion of the strength of the anti-Pakistani lobby. In May 2013, for example, a group of Meshrano Jirga members were said to have argued that "the incoming Pakistan government would not help Afghanistan and asked the Karzai admin- istration to review its policy toward the neighbouring country."24 At about the same time, several Wolesi Jirga members 'alleged Pakistan had issued identity cards to a number of residents of the Goshta border town in eastern Nangarhar province', thus trying to force the Afghan government into a more aggressive confrontation with Pakistan.25 These rhetorical statements are probably meant

20 In the 1970s, the Pakistani authorities promised help to opposition groups in exchange for support against Kabul's claims to Pakistani 'Pashtunistan' (personal communication with Niamatullah Ibrahimi, Afghan researcher, 2010). On the Pakistani ISI's connections to communities and local strongmen in Afghanistan in about 2000 (connections which have presumably survived to date) see Thomas Ruttig, "Flash to the Past: An Alternative to the Taleban?" *AAN Blog*, March 28, 2011, http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/flash-to -the-past-an-alternative-to-the-taleban (accessed December 7, 2013).

21 Interviews with Afghan army officers in various localities in Afghanistan, March-April 2013.

22 Personal communications with government officials, Kabul, 2010–2013.

23 Kabul has repeatedly been accusing Islamabad of interfering with its efforts to negotiate with the Taliban (see, for example, "Kabul: Rabbani killing plotted in Pakistan Afghanistan says suicide bomber who killed former president tasked with talking to the Taliban was a Pakistani citizen," *Al Jazeera*, October 2, 2011). On Pakistani influence over the Taliban, see Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky. The relationship between. Pakistans ISI and Afghan insurgents," *Crisis States Research Centre Discussion Papers*, no. 18, 2010.

24 "MPs suggest rethink on Pakistan policy," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, May 13, 2013, http://www .pajhwok.com/en/2013/05/12/mps-suggest-rethink-pakistan-policy (accessed December 7, 2013).

25 "Pakistan has issued ID cards to Goshta residents: MPs," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, May 6, 2013, http://www.elections.pajhwok.com/en/2013/05/06/pakistan-has-issued-id-cards -goshta-residents-mps (accessed December 7, 2013).

to curry favour with Afghan public opinion, but also reflect the personal views of many members of parliament. However, the cohesiveness and influence of this lobby should not be overestimated. The Wolesi Jirga vote to dismiss the security ministers in the summer of 2012 was on the surface motivated by their inability to respond to Pakistan's provocations on the border and, as such, it could be argued to have exercised a major influence on foreign policy making, but in reality it was believed to have been driven by factional infighting rather than by foreign policy concerns.26

Policies towards India

Relations between Kabul and New Delhi have been consistently friendly ever since 2001, a relationship that has gradually become increasingly important. Indeed, New Delhi has resumed the traditionally close relations it had enjoyed with Kabul prior to 1992. Indians enjoy a high degree of popularity among Afghans today, with the exception of the clergy, which tends to resent the spread of Indian culture. The Indian government has mostly kept a low profile in Afghanistan, presumably not wanting to embarrass Kabul vis-à-vis Pakistan. Nevertheless, Kabul sees India as the most important counter-balance to Pakistan's role in Afghanistan: since 1947 Kabul has viewed India as a natural ally against Pakistan, and the more strained relations between the two have been, the more cordial the relations with India. The Afghan authorities know very well, however, that the Indian embrace is a double-edged sword: it incurs Pakistan's wrath and because of its geographical position Pakistan can do much more harm to Afghanistan than India can do good. While some have argued that "President Karzai has managed to secure large-scale Indian aid and invest- ment without causing Islamabad to retaliate by undermining his regime or stir- ring up even greater unrest,"27 such an interpretation would plainly appear unwarranted. Taliban sources describe an ever-rising overall level of support either provided by the Pakistani services, or channelled through them.28 President Karzai in fact opted to play the Indian card more openly and tried to raise the profile of India's activities in Afghanistan only after he appeared to have lost hope in a rapprochement with Pakistan in 2013 (see above).

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26 Fabrizio Foschini, "Parliament sacks key ministers: Two birds with one stone?" *AAN Blog*, August 6, 2012, http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/parliament-sacks-key-ministers-two-birds-with-one-stone (accessed December 7, 2013).

27 Hanauer and Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan".

28 Interviews with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, July-September 2012.

Undoubtedly the Indians have been more willing to listen to Kabul's complaints about Pakistani provocations than anybody else. Most importantly, they seemed to be the only ones willing to act on those complaints by striking back against Pakistan, as shown by their support for the Baluch insurgency in Pakistan. Pakistani allegations of Afghan complicity in this support might well be unfounded, apart from the hospitality offered to Baluch insurgents.[29] However, there is more substance to allegations that the Afghan authorities, complicit with the Indian security services, gradually built relations with groups of Pakistani Taliban opposed to the Pakistani establishment. In fact groups of Pakistani Taliban have been operating from Afghan territory, attack- ing Pakistani outposts. When Mawlavi Faqir Mohammed, a senior commander of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, was captured by the Afghan authorities, Kabul refused to hand him over to Islamabad.[30]

All in all, however, this pressure amounts to little in comparison to Pakistani activities inside Afghanistan, and it does not appear likely that Kabul might seriously hope to force Pakistan to abandon its support for the insurgents. It seems more likely that Kabul is mainly playing up India's role as a way of putting pressure on Pakistan; that is, it does not seriously consider India to be its main international ally. When in spring 2013 President Karzai intensified his courting of Delhi to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan's security sector, he was reacting to a new set of Pakistani demands for a peace settle- ment in Afghanistan; this after promising developments in Afghan-Pakistan negotiations in late 2012 and early 2013. Overtures to India to become more involved in the Afghan economy were repeated many times after 2001, and there was also talk of it playing a greater role in training the Afghan security forces. However, the 2013 proposition went beyond this, as Karzai for the first time openly asked India to supply direct military aid, in the shape of artillery and military transport equipment, among other supplies. The Indian response was muted, as New Delhi must obviously be suspicious that the invitation might only be meant to extract better conditions in deal making with Pakistan. Karzai even came under fire at home for the poor preparations and timing of

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29 Western intelligence agencies do not believe this is happening and argue instead that support to Baluch insurgents inside Pakistani is channeled through Dubai. See Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 286.

30 Laura Rozen, "Can the intel community defuse India-Pakistan tensions?" *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2009; US Embassy Abu Dhabi cable dated 2010-01-07, ref. 10ABUDHABI9 (accessed December 7, 2013); personal communication with foreign diplomats in Kabul, April 2013; personal communication with UN officials, Kabul, April 2013; Tahir Khan, "Afghanistan refuses to hand over Maulvi Faqir," *Express Tribune*, February 22, 2013.

the visit to Delhi, where he delivered his invitation, as it also coincided with the visit of the Chinese premier.31

As in the case of Pakistan and Iran, there have been examples of individual strongmen and organisations maintaining direct relations with agencies of the Indian state. These have been spread across different parts of the country. A cluster of Indian sympathisers was found in Kandahar, particularly Arghandab district, where strongman Mullah Naqib and his associates (first and foremost Akram Khakrizwal) long maintained relations with India, thus serving to counter-balance the Pakistani connections of some of their local rivals, as well as the Kabul connections of yet other rivals. This cluster, however, was greatly weakened in a campaign of assassinations, which left most of the leaders dead or crippled.32

Most of India's clients in Afghanistan are found in the northern provinces. General Dostum, an influential Uzbek strongman, was supported by India in the late 1990s and again after 2011, but because of his bad relations with Kabul, Dostum is not the kind of client who could positively influence policy making within the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Given that India already enjoyed excellent relations with Kabul, there was in any case little need for any actor to lobby on India's behalf – that is, until President Karzai attempted a rapproche- ment with Pakistan from 2010 onwards. At which point pro-Indian actors in Afghan politics started a campaign to oppose a peace deal with the Taliban, although it is difficult to say to what extent they were motivated by Indian pressure or had their own reasons for doing so. The Indian government, aware of the existing tensions between Karzai and his uneasy northern allies, has always been wary of advertising its support for General Dostum and other northern actors, which include some figures in Jamiat-i Islami. In general, the Indian government maintains very good relations – whether patron-client or not – with all anti-Taliban factions. These groups have been actively lobbying India to increase its level of support, not only directly to them but to Afghanistan

31 Tahir Khan, "Neighbourhood watch: Karzai overshadowed by Chinese premier in New Delhi," *Express Tribune*, May 24, 2013, http://tribune.com.pk/story/553991/neighbourhood-watch-karzai-overshadowed-by-chinese-premier-in-new-delhi/ (accessed December 7, 2013): Mujib Mashal, "Karzai's India Gamble," *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/31/karzais_india_gamble (accessed December 7, 2013).; Melkulangara Bhadrakumar, "Karzai Brings a Riddle to Delhi," *Strategic Culture Foundation Online Journal*, May 27, 2013, http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2013/05/27/karzai-brings-a-riddle-to-delhi.html (accessed December 7, 2013).

32 Personal communication with UN officials, Kabul, October 2011; Kim Barker, *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Random House, 2011), 105.

more generally, to help the country counter Pakistani encroachment. In this case, therefore, it could be said that official and unofficial/non-state foreign policies have been coinciding in their aims. The results have, however, been modest, as the level of Indian involvement, as of June 2013, has remained well below Afghan wishes.33

Policies towards Iran

Official Afghan foreign relations with Iran have been characterised by considerable friendliness, particularly in the early post-2001 days, when the reformist Khatami was Iranian president. The Iranians were happy to see the back of the Taliban government; and Western presence in Afghanistan was still modest and, more importantly, mostly focused on the distant eastern Afghanistan. From 2005 onwards ISAF started re-orienting its efforts to also include western Afghanistan. It is at this time that the Iranians became more concerned, the more so as Ahmadinejad had replaced Khatami as president and was already strongly inclined towards a more confrontational relationship with Western powers. Iran-Afghan relations remained friendly as far as official policy making was concerned, with Iran contributing to Afghanistan's reconstruction and Afghanistan reciprocating by issuing friendly statements – this even at a time when Kabul's Western allies were not keen to see good relations being established between the two countries. Iran controlled a major lever of pressure on Afghanistan: its immigration control policy. At least two million Afghans living in Iran at any given time, most of whom are temporary eco- nomic migrants, Iran could do much to destabilise Afghanistan if it so desired. Indeed, the Iranian authorities periodically remind Kabul of their power by announcing the tightening of immigration controls and expulsions of illegal migrants, which then are only partially implemented. Furthermore, Kabul has been relying on imports through Iran to circumvent Pakistan's partial blockade and cannot afford to have bad relations with the only two countries that can grant Afghanistan access to the sea.34

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33 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and Onwards," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, December 2012; interviews with political figures close to Dostum and Jamiat-i Islami, north and north-eastern Afghanistan, summer-autumn 2012.

34 For a summary of Iran's policies towards Afghanistan, see Antonio Giustozzi, "The Next Congo: Regional Competition for Influence in Afghanistan in the Wake of NATO Withdrawal," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, No. 10, September 2013.

Arguably, therefore, Kabul finds its hands quite tied vis-à-vis Iran. As in the case of Pakistan, the Iranian authorities have made sure to establish patronage relationships with many key Afghan political actors. There is in fact a consider- able dissonance between the views echoed by many Afghan officials in the west of the country, particularly in the security sector, which tend to be hostile to Iran and focused on reports of Iranian underground intelligence activities, as well Iranian support for insurgents, and the views expressed by high- ranking officials and politicians in Kabul, who deny the existence of any prob- lem between the two countries.35

Kabul's official foreign policy towards Iran has differed from its Pakistan policy, in that it has not been dominated to the same extent by antagonistic elements. While during his tenure as foreign minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta was known for his suspicion of the intentions of the Iranian regime, his predecessor, Abdullah Abdullah, had been friendlier. Zalmai Rasul's personal views are not known, but he has been promoting good relations between the two countries.36 In practice, as long as relations with Pakistan have showed no signs of improving, every Afghan foreign minister has known that confront- ing Teheran over any failure to behave correctly towards Afghanistan is not feasible – this in a situation where Kabul has been relying on the opening of a new highway connecting Afghanistan to Iran's ports as a way of reducing dependency on Pakistan. Even when waves of anti-Iranian sentiment swept through Afghan public opinion, like in the case of the execution of alleged Afghan drug smugglers in Iran, the Afghan government was muted in its response, initially not going beyond Rasul, reminding Iran of an agreement according to which the two countries ought to consult each other concerning court cases in which each other's citizens are involved. Reportedly he then managed to delay the executions.37

A number of Afghan strongmen and political organisations have even been maintaining relations with Iranian authorities, bypassing the Afghan foreign ministry. Ismail Khan, for instance, the main strongman in western Afghanistan,

35 Personal observation of the author, particularly in western Afghanistan. The Afghan press often reports warnings by Afghan officials serving in western provinces about Iranian activities.

36 Personal communication with foreign advisers to the Afghan government, April 2010; US Embassy Kabul confidential Cable (#2998/01 2511423), 'Boucher And Karzai, Spanta On Jirgas, Drugs, Econ Cooperation, Governance, Iran', 10 July 2007.

37 Bethany Matta, "Iran executions anger Afghan families," *Al Jazeera*, June 6, 2013, http:// www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/06/201366102037670360.html (accessed December 7, 2013); "Afghan minister persuaded Iran to delay executions – official,"*BBC Monitoring International Reports*, March 3, 2013.

has maintained relations with Iran since the 1990s and is still widely believedto do so today.38 In the north, meanwhile, Balkh governor Atta Mohammed was also widely thought to enjoy Iranian patronage. Other beneficiaries of Iranian patronage include a number of Shiite groups and individuals: Sheikh Mohseni and Haji Mohaqqeq, among others, as well as Afghan government officials in Kabul including several members of parliament.39

The delivery of Iranian cash to President Karzai's office was officially acknowledged by the office itself.40 These individuals were presumably meant to act as a lobby in favour of Iranian influence, as well as a tool to orient Afghan foreign policy making in a direction more favourable to Iran's interests.

Most recently (as of early 2013) the Iranians have been lobbying in favour of a rapprochement between Jamiat-i Islami and the Shiite groups and the Pakistani authorities, with an eye to a possible peace settlement. This is the result of improved Pakistan-Iran relations and of the convergence of the two countries towards a common 'Afghan policy'. A number of important political actors and members of the cabinet abided by Teheran's recommendations and travelled to Pakistan, including Haji Mohaqqeq and Bismillah Mohammadi, the Minister of Defence, also associated with Jamiat-i Islami. Although report- edly Mohammadi expressed the view, upon returning to Afghanistan, that he believed the Pakistanis were genuinely changing their policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, in practice it was not clear whether Iran's lobbying was effectively making a peace settlement any easier.41

While Iranian patronage was welcomed, the actual extent of Iranian influ- ence and the leverage that Iran might have gained through the distribution of funds appears to have been modest. Sources within the armed opposition

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38 Thomas Johnson, "Ismail Khan, Herat and Iranian influence," *Strategic Insights* III, Issue 7 (July 2004); personal communication with members of provincial council, Herat, October 2009; personal communication with Afghan officials, Herat, October 2009.

39 Interviews with security analysts and notables, north and north-eastern Afghanistan, summer-autumn 2012.

40 Jon Boone, "Hamid Karzai admits office gets 'bags of money' from Iran," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/25/hamid-karzai-office-cash-iran (accessed December 7, 2013).

41 "Pakistan wants sustainable peace in Afghanistan: Qamar," *The Dawn,* January 29, 2013, http://www.dawn.com/news/782209/pakistan-wants-sustainable-peace-in-afghanistan-qamar (accessed December 7, 2013); Kamran Yousaf, "Deal in the making: Pakistan Army likely to begin training Afghan forces," *Express Tribune*, January 29, 2013, http://tribune.com.pk/story/500094/deal-in-the-making-pakistan-army-likely-to-begin-training-afghan-forces/ (accessed December 7, 2013); personal communication with Western diplomats, Kabul, April 2013.

indicate that the Iranians, irritated by the failure of old clients to act according to Iranian requests, have increasingly been shifting the focus of their distribu-tion of patronage towards the Taliban. This has certainly resulted in a dramatic change in the Taliban's views concerning Iran, which started being seen as a positive actor, despite continuing deep-seated prejudices, past friction, and sectarian divisions. The extent to which Iranian patronage will succeed in re- orienting Taliban policy making in the future remains to be seen, however.42

Iran's improving relations with the Taliban are unlikely to have pleased its old protégés and Teheran's efforts to get the two sides to talk to each other appear to have been unsuccessful, at least as of June 2013. An assassination attempt on Haji Mohaqqeq in June 2013, clearly attributable to the Taliban, suggests that Mohaqqeq might have been resisting the Iranians' effort to get him to talk to the Taliban.43 It has also been reported that the Taliban rejected an Iranian invitation to meet Bismillah Mohammadi when he visited Pakistan in January 2013.44

Policies towards China

The Afghan government has little appreciation for Chinese political interests in Afghanistan, although Afghan diplomats are of course aware that China is a close ally of Pakistan. Kabul assesses Chinese interest in Afghanistan as essentially economic in nature.45 Afghan politicians and diplomats tend to overstate the economic interests of foreign countries in Afghanistan, and this is the case for China too. On the basis of this assessment, the Afghan govern- ment has been trying to lure Chinese companies (which are believed to be well connected with Beijing) into investing in Afghanistan as heavily as possible. Chinese success in winning two of the first three tenders in the Afghan extrac-tive sector might thus have been politically and economically motivated by the desire of enticing investors with financial resources at their disposal and whose home economy is hungry for raw materials: such investment may result in quick growth and revenues accruing to the Afghan state. Another objective may have been getting Beijing to exercise influence over Pakistan towards a

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42 Interviews with Taliban commanders in several provinces, autumn 2012, winter 2012–2013, and spring 2013.

43 "Kabul blast ahead of Afghanistan security handover," *BBC News*, June 18, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22947483 (accessed December 7, 2013).

44 Personal communication with Western diplomats, Kabul, April 2013.

45 For a summary of China's policies towards Afghanistan, see Giustozzi, "The Next Congo".

political settlement of the conflict, which would stabilise the country and make it a more attractive proposition for foreign investors. Sources in Kabul describe former Minister of Foreign Affairs Rangin Spanta as having conceived and initiated this strategy of wooing China to Afghanistan, which included Spanta placing an associate at the head of the Ministry of Mining. Indeed, even after he left his ministerial post, Spanta continued to serve as a relatively influential adviser to President Karzai.46

According to one account, such a strategy did work to an extent, as growing Chinese involvement in talking to the armed opposition was reported from 2012 onwards; China also inked a strategic agreement with Kabul and ushered Afghanistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as an observer.47 Even accounts provided by the Taliban indicate that the Chinese authorities have been playing a growing role towards shaping a political settlement in Afghanistan, but not necessarily in terms that would please all actors in Kabul. Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan in fact pale in comparison to similar interests in Pakistan; and, in addition, much of the Chinese assessment of Afghanistan derives from information passed on by the Pakistanis. The Chinese therefore probably share Pakistan's assessment that the latter holds all the winning cards in Afghanistan and that it is only a matter of time before it reaps the rewards for its long-term investments there. Accordingly, Chinese views on a political deal concerning Afghanistan remain more aligned with those of Pakistan than with Kabul, the more so as the Chinese are not particularly likely to resent Pakistan's demands that India's role in Afghanistan be minimised. The Chinese will also view favourably that Pakistan and Iran, another country with which China has good relations, are converging on an Afghan settlement. The Pakistanis are also believed to be able to gain Saudi Arabia's acquiescence to a deal with Iran, another factor that strength- ens the credibility of the Pakistani 'peace plan'.48 In this case too, therefore, Kabul's assessment of the surrounding diplomatic environment might have been flawed.

Contrary to the other powers discussed in this paper, China has few connec- tions to Afghan political actors besides the government. Apart from its

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46 Personal communication with foreign advisers in Kabul, October 2011; US Embassy Kabul confidential Cable (#2998/01 2511423), 'Boucher And Karzai, Spanta On Jirgas, Drugs, Econ Cooperation, Governance, Iran', 10 July 2007.

47 Andrew Small, "Why Is China Talking to the Taliban? Inside Beijing's plan to set up shop in post-Karzai Kabul," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/20/why_is_china_talking_to_the_taliban (accessed December 7, 2013).

48 Interviews with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta, summer 2012 and spring 2013.

contacts with the Taliban, little else is reported. An exception was in 2012, following protests against Chinese operations in northern Afghanistan, when the Chinese tried to engage with local political actors, in particular General Dostum. The level of engagement, however, is very modest when compared to that of other countries.

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The impact of decentralised or fragmented foreign policy making in Afghanistan is difficult to assess with any precision, because information is fragmentary at best; in addition many of these 'diplomatic initiatives' are still on-going. Still, some consequences of the fragmentation of foreign policy making are obvious, as are outlined below.

The first is that the vicious cycle of weak state legitimacy becomes reinforced. Faced with a state that does not have a monopoly on its foreign policy means that neighbouring states cannot be expected to place much trust in its leadership and long-term viability.

The second is that the existence of multiple, uncoordinated actors in foreign policy making may offer opportunities to foreign states to manipulate Afghanistan's policy making, sometimes bypassing the Afghan foreign minis- try altogether. Because the central state has to accommodate to some extent regional power brokers, and even more so central coalition partners, influenc- ing one of these actors can twist policy making within the foreign ministry.

The third could, to some extent, be described as a positive consequence. Faced with a demanding environment and a weak hand enables the Afghan leadership to play on multiple tables with a degree of plausible deniability: it can always claim not to be responsible for any of the parallel efforts. Thus, it can test the waters on multiple fronts without committing to any option until the right alternative has emerged. This was, for example, the case in 2012-2013 regarding Karzai's negotiations over a peace settlement.

The fourth is negative again, however: alternative centres of foreign policy making can by establishing relations with foreign powers utilise such relations to mobilise patronage and therefore consolidate their autonomous role vis-à-vis the central state. The risk of state disintegration looms.

A fifth consequence is that much foreign policy making is not executed by professionals, but is improvised by amateur policy makers dealing with profes- sional agencies of foreign states. While non-professional lobbying in foreign policy making is not the prerogative of Afghanistan, the leverage of the foreign ministry appears particularly limited.

Sixth, even if a policy option emerged which the Afghan leadership decided to fully adopt, some if not all of the autonomous and semi-autonomous foreign policy making circles would still need to be brought on board for the policy to become operational. Whether or not this would be achievable, it would in any case be time-consuming and so crucially delay implementation.

Finally, there are consequences to be considered for foreign actors. While there might be specific advantages for each of the foreign states involved in being able to manipulate Afghan foreign policy making, they are also in com- petition with one another in seeking to impose their influence. The end result is a fluid, slow, and unstable policy-making process in Afghanistan, which can potentially contribute to instability in the region.