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# THINK SOUTH ASIA16

## THE FUTURE OF THE AFPAK REGION

## EDITORIAL



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Dear Think South Asia Readers,

The case of Afghanistan has shown the limitations of the USA, which has led many to believe that the 21st century heralded the decline of the superpower. The unipolar world order seems to be coming to an end, which makes the analysis of rising, aspiring powers ever more interesting and compelling. Afghanistan is one global hotspot, where the passing of the torch, from the sole superpower to regional giants in a multipolar world is becoming increasingly evident. Not only have India, Pakistan and China expanded their engagement in Afghanistan, the US has acknowledged its limitations. Although it has decided to keep a nominal force of around 10 000 troops, it has favored the rising influence of regional actors. Pakistan is a very interesting case. In the past it has used Afghanistan to gain “strategic-depth” vis-à-vis India, at times supporting

and sponsoring terrorism, and slowly but surely, Pakistan started realising that it is not India it should fear, but radical militants from within who work together with their counterparts in neighbouring Afghanistan. This view, however, is not shared by all Pakistani actors.

NATO is in the midst of heavily reducing its presence in Afghanistan. It is up to the regional actors to fill the security gap that the ISAF mission has left as its legacy. Although tensions were running high between the presidential candidates post elections, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani managed to implement a power-sharing model. This was one of the few, albeit a strong positive commitments to democracy. It would be naïve to assume that Afghanistan is now “good to go”. It will need and seek help from its neighbours. This issue will focus on the “Af-Pak” region. Even though Pakistan and

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Afghanistan are actors in their own right and addressing all issues with the same brush would be futile. The security environment of the Southern Sindh province and Lahore are vastly different from the situation in Kabul and Kandahar. Nonetheless, Pakistani and Afghani affairs are often so intertwined that bringing both together in one issue makes absolute sense. But our notion of Af-Pak must also bear a regional dimension and include states such as India and China as well.

The state of Afghanistan's eroding institutions, the poorly trained and equipped Afghan National Army (AFN) and Afghan National Police (AFP), the factionalism amongst tribal, cultural and ethnic lines, atrocities being committed against minorities, and the unfortunately strong resilience of terrorist and fundamentalist forces does not only impact Afghanistan itself, but also have a severe regional impact. India for example is confronted with a double threat. Similar to China, although not bordering Afghanistan directly, it is concerned over terrorist elements being trained and equipped in Afghanistan, and moved to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, where they are used as tactical assets against India by Pakistan's ISI. Groups such as the LeT have called for a Jihad in Kashmir and the attacks in Mumbai in 2008 have once again shown the threat potential of extremists. Although Indian policy makers acknowledge that a volatile, fragile, disintegrating Afghanistan, with a weak central government is also dangerous for Pakistan, they fear

Islamabad's influence in such a state, which could function as a proxy state for Pakistan's interests. In contrast to Beijing, which has been very open on talking to whoever assumes power in the future in Kabul, India has banked on its alliance with the Northern Alliance and has promoted institution building and good governance.

The articles and interviews in this edition will focus on India's strategic commitment in Afghanistan, the future role of the EU and the US, Pakistan's eroding democracy, the China-India-Pakistan triangle, fundamentalism in Afghanistan as well shed light on the plight of minorities in the Hindu Kush state. This, our 16th edition will not be able to cover all aspects and themes of this complex region. It does however demonstrate the complexity by highlighting certain aspects revolving around "Af-Pak".

I hope you all enjoy Think South Asia 16 and that it enriches your day in some way or form. Please feel free to contact me at [djan@sadf.eu](mailto:djan@sadf.eu) if you wish to comment on our published articles or would like to publish an article\* with "Think South Asia" yourself.

Yours Truly,  
Djan Sauerborn

\* The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and not of SADf. The authors are responsible for the content of their work.

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## Jan Deboutte

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# The India-Pakistan-China Triangle\*

**Think South Asia (TSA): As a former diplomat how would you describe the historical trajectory of this trilateral relationship?**

Jan Deboutte (JD): In 1893, the Durand Line established the border between British India and the “state” of Afghanistan. This border did insufficiently take the tribal realities of the area into account. After serving as a “buffer” between the British and Russian empires, Afghanistan gained independence from British control in 1919. Independence of India and Pakistan had as consequence that Afghanistan and its eastern neighbour, Pakistan inherited the long standing conflict between Afghanistan and British India. Historical situations and decisions have thus put the stage for a difficult triangular relation.

**TSA: Which impact does the China-India-Pakistan relationship have on the regional as well as global level?**

JD: China is obviously militarily and economically the heavier element in the equation. Whereas for some thirty years India could make use of its political stature through the non aligned movement, this global political advantage has been seriously diminished after the implosion of the Soviet Union.

**TSA: Is Pakistan only a “tool” in China’s foreign policy portfolio, which the People’s Republic is using**

**to counter India and entrench itself in South Asia?**

JD: Geography and history have left Pakistan with a number of ‘relational’ problems: towards India, towards China, towards Afghanistan and towards the “West”, and in particular the United States. Pakistan has been trying to get maximum advantages out of this situation. The risk is however that this may result in more disadvantages than advantages.

China is certainly using this situation in its favor.

**TSA: There have been recent reports that China is in support and favours an Indo-Pak rapprochement. Do you think this is just rhetoric? What incentive does China have to see improvements in the 60-year-old rivalry?**

JD: Like any other country, China prefers stability above turmoil in its neighbourhood. By supporting an Indo-Pak rapprochement, China gains a number of advantages: stability, influence onto both India and Pakistan, international respectability as “peace maker”.

**TSA: Is China’s “String of Pearls” in the Indian Ocean, in which Gwadar deep sea port in Pakistan is pivotal, a real threat to security or is just another case of fear-mongering?**

JD: Geographical and strategic maps don’t lie: this is a strategic move.

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\* The views expressed are those of Mr. Deboutte and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Belgian Foreign Ministry.

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However, this doesn't necessarily mean it is a security threat. It may also be security insurance for China. Only if the string of pearls is used to choke it's wearer, it's a security threat, not as such.

**TSA: All three countries have a strong interest in gaining a stronger foothold in Afghanistan. China has won the tenures for several major mines, India has invested heavily in Nation-building and Pakistan has always viewed Afghanistan as its own backyard, which provides strategic depth to Pakistan's security concerns. How would you evaluate and forecast the future of Afghanistan as a chessboard for the three countries?**

JD: Afghanistan is certainly an area of rivalry between India, Pakistan and China. However, it is much more than a possible playground to the three countries. It has its national issues to deal with and on top of that its global

relevance. After the departure of NATO, it seems not unlikely that China may try to play a more prominent role.

**TSA: Both China and Pakistan have had wars and conflicts with India in the past. Modi promised to improve Indo-Sino relations, especially with regards to trade. But he has also been very clear on defending Indian territorial claims in the border region with China? Do you think there is potential for conflict?**

JD: P.M. Narendra Modi is a clever politician. He knows very well he can only gain the next elections if he plays the right tune to the Indian public. As we all know, in the very end all international politics are local. Improving trade with the "shop floor" of the world will improve the income of the average Indian citizen ("it's the economics, stupid...") and at the same time claiming to defend India's territory

and thus playing to the nationalist feelings, is a smart combination of politics and interests.

**TSA: How do you think the US and the EU view China-India-Pakistan relations?**

JD: Both the US and the EU have multi dimensional and complex relations with the three countries. However they have different priorities and accents. The US Government is mostly interested in the fight against terrorism and aims to imply the three countries in its world order. Except the military means, the EU has a number of policy instruments but seems to lack an overall strategic approach. Hopefully the newly appointed EU Commission and especially the EU High Representative will establish a clearly defined policy with the adequate means to implement it. ■



## Asking the wrong questions! Islamic State and its potential impact on the Af-Pak region



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The contemporary world is witnessing the emergence and expansion of the most successful and brutal Islamic terror group ever, the Islamic State (IS). IS is an extremely radical Sunni Islamic group, which was formerly known as The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham/Syria/Levant (ISIS/ISIL), or ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyya fil'Araq wa-Sham (Daesh). Being an offshoot of al-Qaida, IS follows the tradition of Salafist-orientation in Islam and is deeply attracted by the ideology of the Jamaat-e-Islami/JI. Especially Abul Ala Maududi's (founder of JI) vision of the creation of an Islamic state and his respective notion of full citizenship which is only available to Muslims, inspires IS. Subsequently, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on 29 June 2014, IS declared the founding of a new Caliphate and called on all Muslims to swear allegiance. Since starting its state-building efforts, IS fighters are brutally capturing province by province in Iraq and Syria and erasing Shias and religious minorities. In this context, one has to be clear about the ideology and historical allusions of IS, which are clearly directed towards the reestablishment of the medieval Khilafah (caliphate) system. This system experienced its final demise in the wake of the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire – which can be considered as the last relict of the Caliphate – in 1916 through the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France. Having this in mind, IS is looking far beyond the borders of

the Middle East, not only towards the West but also to the East – particularly in the direction of the larger Indian subcontinent.

However, by reading current news of international and regional media and comments of analysts dealing with South Asia in general and Afghanistan and Pakistan (AfPak) in particular, one cannot help but feel that history is repeating itself. Besides the fact that the region has been for many years now suffering from an extremely militant Islamic fundamentalism and state sponsored terrorism, it is quite surprising that neither Western nor regional governments are still not willing to perceive and tackle the full scale of potential upcoming threat scenarios caused by IS. It seems that dealing with militant Islamic fundamentalism on both sides of the Durand line, the contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is still trapped in old patterns. In lieu of decisive decision-making regarding appropriate measures how to counter terrorism, militancy and religious fanatics one is still confronted with a kind of 'cautious and silent apathy' among politicians, military and intelligence. Despite years of armed confrontation and numerous failed negotiations for political solutions (Pakistan) or certain power arrangements (Afghanistan) security circles in the Af-Pak region still tend to ask -deliberately or unintentionally - the wrong questions.

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First of all, IS does not believe in boundaries between Islamic countries, therefore asking the question if IS will restrict itself and its struggle to the Syria and Irak could lead to an ignorance of the threat for South Asia. It marks a tremendous waste of valuable time in countering IS because the goal and scope of IS is obvious: the creation of a caliphate comprising all current and former Muslim majority countries and countries formerly ruled by Muslims which includes South Asia besides Spain, Northern Africa and large parts of South-East Europe. A map issued by IS shows unequivocally Afghanistan and Pakistan as parts of the new Caliphate. In this context, it is even more stunning that neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan is undertaking sufficient measures to avoid that IS can take root in the Af-Pak region, either directly through recruiting and 'promotion' campaigns or indirectly through the forming of alliances with local militant groups.

Second, besides the fact that there is no concrete evidence yet that IS is planning to take root in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a realistic review of concrete aims and strategies of this terror group indicated that indicated that it will enter the region rather sooner than later. Taking the geographical strategic importance of Af-Pak area for the global Jihad and the proclaimed caliphate into account, one must expect that IS is planning to gain a permanent foothold in South Asia. If not directly, than with the help of some Taliban factions or other Islamic fundamentalist and militant extremist groups inspired by a right wing religious ideology. They might differ with regards to the scale of the goals, military strategies

and leadership structures, but due to strong ideological bounds and common enemies they will most likely overcome their differences. Having this in mind, the debate if IS has or does not have a remarkable presence in the Af-Pak region is absolute necessary and justified. But it must be put in perspective. Focusing on assessments of IS leverage in the region only with regards to the physical existence and concrete activities of active IS fighters in Afghanistan or Pakistan is far too narrow. Instead, the mapping of threat scenarios should focus on the forging of alliances of IS and local militant groups functioning as operational proxies. These proxies offer room to manoeuvre for IS to propagate their narrow and truncated interpretation of Islam as well as to build up first state structures in conflict-ridden areas like the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. With the support of local partners, IS can gain strategic space to grow and expand its influence over the Af-Pak region. Therefore, one should rather watch very closely IS propaganda and rhetoric regarding its radicalisation and Islamisation of the people and how far it will inspire Islamist militants. Especially the younger generation of terrorists are attracted by the successes of IS in Iraq and Syria. In case there is no significant decisive victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan over the new government and the remaining international combat troops, young Islamists might turn towards IS. This might also happen in Pakistan in case the military is finally successful against the Taliban in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The fact that IS has much more financial resources available and can offer better military training in combination with the rising significance and recognition

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among global jihadist circles, South Asian Islamic fundamentalist might be even more attracted to the 'new arrival' from the Middle East.

Third, the differentiation between "good" and "bad" Taliban sounds extremely artificial if one takes the strong ideological bonds, especially the allegiance to Mullah Omar, as a spiritual leader (Amir ul-Momineen, literally commander/leader of the faithful) into account as well as their common commitment to same ideological principles and strategic goals. After years of tremendous efforts in the official political rhetoric by regional governments as well as western states involved in Afghanistan to create an artificial distinction between Pakistan and Afghanistan Taliban as well as between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban, it finally seemed that this fruitless exercise came to an end. Of course all three camps – the former Karzai administration in Kabul, the security establishment in Pakistan, and the governments of NATO members involved in the Afghanistan imbroglio

had their very own reasons why they invented the idea of 'good Taliban'. However, the common bottom line of their rhetorical manoeuvres remained the same: the Taliban are serious fractious and one can cooperate with some sections (the 'good ones') and the rest (the 'bad ones', the terrorists) must be overpowered by force. Most disastrous in this direction is the fact that in Pakistan this 'line of thinking' might experience a revival. In other words, Pakistani security circles could continue to believe that certain extremists Islamic fundamentalists groups and other extremist organisations are still an option for the country's foreign policy portfolio or to counter and balance different militants' streams on its own soil.

Closely linked with the notion of 'bad' and 'good' Taliban -which includes the attempt to exaggerate the weakening impacts of potential splits- is the claim of rising conflicts between major terrorist groups, especially between IS and Taliban as well as IS and al-Qaida. This rationale

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was inspired by rumours about the emergence of severe factionalism within the Taliban movement after several Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan/TTP) commanders declared their allegiance to IS Chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, TTP leader Maulana Fazlullah made it clear that his allegiance remains with Mullah Omar and the Afghan Taliban. In addition, a larger confrontation between IS and al-Qaida in the AfPak region sounds more like an offspring of 'wishful thinking' than a result of a realistic assessment of a future scenario. Doubtless, IS and al-Qaeda are currently engaged in an open competition for leadership in the global jihadi movement. But the battlefield for this conflict is primarily the Middle East with its specific context and dynamics. Instead the belief that these confrontations between major jihadist groups will help to break the swing of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in South Asia is a perilous misperception.

Having this in mind, the important question, which one should ask, is what do IS, Taliban and other local extremists groups have in common. First of all, both IS and Taliban follow an approach of strict implementation of Islamic government in territories under their control. More concrete, both groups are not only interested in governing and extending their territories but also to engage in state-building efforts, especially to enforce an extreme and narrow interpretation of Sharia law. The setup of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the Taliban (1996-2001) and the unilateral declaration of the Caliphate by IS prove that both are aware of the importance and benefits of governing the areas

under their control and that IS and Taliban over time developed clear state-building agendas. In this context, one also has to be aware of the fact that all of these groups are inspired not only by Abul A'la Maududi's (founder of Jamaat-i-Islami/JI) concept of Islamic citizenship which is only granted to Sunni Muslims but also by the ideology of "takfirism". A takfir is convinced that the Muslim "umma" (community of believers) is weakened by deviations in the practice of Islam. Therefore, the takfirists are focus on the elimination of the enemies from within, like the Shias or Ahmadiyyas, and all kinds of moderate Islamic reformist movements. Despite the competition and conflicts between IS, Taliban, al-Qaida, it is most likely that the AfPak region will constitute a 'Islamic fundamentalist level playing field' for the major Jihadist groups rather than a ground for existential rivalries. In other words, shared ideological bounds, the joint commitment to fight the infidels from within as well as outside the "umma", and the common aim to establish Islamic state entities will help to bridge major differences regarding spiritual and political leadership.

In sum, the essential question to ask, is not if the days of the Taliban are numbered, if al-Qaida has become weakened and which kind of inroad IS is currently making into the AfPak region. The major puzzle one has to address, is how far will IS enforce the merger of global Jihad with local sectarian war (especially Shia-Sunni conflict) and how will groups work together in future in order to enforce the Islamic fundamentalist challenge for the states and societies of the entire South Asian region. ■

## Securing the AfPak Region Through Multi-Lateral Cooperation



### Satgin Hamrah

Commissioning Editor at E-International Relations. She has conducted extensive research on the Middle East, North Africa, the AfPak region, and international security issues

As Afghan men gather around the bodies of suicide attack victims in Gardez, Afghanistan on November 23, one is again reminded of the continuous cycle of terrorism and violence that plagues the AfPak region and its horrific impact. Terrorism continues to tear apart the fabric of Afghan and Pakistani societies. Its security implications have been immense not only for these two nations, but for the global community as well. As such, it is vital for Afghanistan and Pakistan to not allow animosities and distrust between them to get in the way of countering the challenges associated with extremism and terrorism within their borders. While the two neighbours have long accused each other of harboring anti-government insurgents across their shared border, their security and future prosperity are closely interlinked. Therefore, despite years of mistrust and hostility, they need to work together to tackle their inter-dependent security challenges. In addition, they need to work with other stakeholders who have also been adversely impacted by terrorism. Stakeholders such as Europe and the United States can provide key resources and skills to decrease the disconnect between Afghanistan and Pakistan and counter terrorism threats. Moreover, through the utilization of a multi-lateral and pragmatic approach, these stakeholders can effectively develop a

viable strategic partnership within the framework of a comprehensive security infrastructure.

The security landscape of Afghanistan and Pakistan is closely interlinked. Both are plagued with extremism and terrorism associated with groups that are in close alliance with similar groups across the border. As such, any instability in Pakistan affects Afghanistan and instability in Afghanistan adversely impacts Pakistan. Given these realities, in order to curb extremism and foster a more secure environment, both nations need to overcome years of mistrust and hostility. It may be difficult at times. But they need to focus on their common goals and the importance of eradicating terrorism from their region. Their growth, prosperity and the security of their citizens are contingent on their ability to productively work together. At this critical juncture, there is an immense need for strategic partnerships aimed at a common strategy and consistent policies in fighting terrorism. A component of this approach should be the inclusion of international stakeholders, Europe and the United States.

Terrorism represents a threat to the AfPak region, as well as the security, freedom and values of the European Union and its allies, such as the United

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States. Terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan directly and indirectly impacts these international stakeholders. This became clearly evident by the September 11 attacks in the United States and the attacks in Europe, such as the 2004 Islamist terrorist attacks in Madrid, Spain and the 2005 London Bombings. Given the fact that terrorism transcends borders, a multilateral and coordinated approach is needed to decrease vulnerabilities. To accomplish this, Afghanistan and Pakistan need to create a viable strategic alliance with European partners and the United States. Moreover, European partners and the United States should establish a sustainable link between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the goal of diminishing their mutual distrust and animosity while simultaneously enhancing regional cooperation. The goal of all stakeholders should be to jointly develop a uniform vision of a strong, comprehensive and enduring

partnership, which serves as a platform to establishing consistent policies that ensure the emergence of a secure and prosperous AfPak region and a more secure global community.

Terrorism puts lives at risk and seeks to undermine progress, stability and tolerance. This has been explicitly evident in the AfPak region and globally. As terrorists continue to focus on internal and external targets such as the Karachi airport, the need for multi-lateral cooperation becomes even more clear. The lack of political resolve in launching decisive and consistent regional operations against extremists have had extremely negative consequences for the region and globally. A well coordinated and consistent European, U.S. Afghan and Pakistani action plan is key to confidence building and successfully tackling the formidable terrorist challenge. ■

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## The future of Afghanistan: What role for India?

**Think South Asia (TSA):** Historically Afghanistan and India have shared rather warm relations. In Afghanistan, India has much higher approval rating amongst the people than Pakistan, China and many other countries. What do you attribute this to?

Dr.S Kulshrestha (SK): Traditionally India and Afghanistan have shared very cordial relations and cultural ties spanning centuries. Kabul was an important trade hub between the east and the west. This led to mingling of cultures and sharing of knowledge in fields like medicine and science. Invaders from the north, like the Mongols, resulted in people from cities like Herat and Balkh taking refuge in India. Literature in Dari, found place in India alongside the dry fruits and pomegranates from Afghanistan, where as Sufism, pakoras, dal and paranthas from India found acceptance in Afghanistan.

India has engaged Afghanistan multilaterally since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. India's focus has been assistance at all levels to rebuild the country but has shied away from direct military assistance. In the recent times, unlike Pakistan, the absence of semi-porous and contiguous

border between the two countries has also amply contributed in building a healthy bilateral relationship. Afghans look upon Indians as trustworthy friends.

**TSA: India has donated over US \$2 billion in aid and development to Afghanistan in the past decade. Do you think the investments have been a success?**

SK: Indian effort in development of Afghanistan covers, infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, small and community based development projects, and education and capacity development. India's assistance has not only been monetary in nature, Indian personnel have been physically helping in the rebuilding effort (power lines, dams and roads), in a region where terrain is very difficult. India has provided engineers, workers, vocational teachers, etc who have even sacrificed their lives during attacks by Taliban. Indian personnel and the work that they have been doing has been appreciated by the local population. Given the turmoil affecting the country the investments are a long term effort to make Afghanistan stand on its feet, keeping that in mind I would say that the effort has been reasonably successful.

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**TSA: Afghanistan is often viewed as a hub for natural resources, especially copper, lithium, gold and iron ore. In addition many are of the opinion that Afghanistan is the gateway to Central Asian gas and oil. What role does this economic potential play for Indian policy making?**

SK: Indian assistance to Afghanistan is not based upon cornering a chunk of natural resources for itself but on the premise of development and democracy. Further since India does not share a geographical boundary with Afghanistan, any tangible benefits accruing due to use of Afghanistan as a potential gateway for gas and oil has to take into account routing through Pakistan, which itself has been on the verge of instability for a long time. Alternate routes through Iran are available but being longer may not be that beneficial to India. India has focused on making trading routes available to Afghanistan through building of road links to bordering Iran from there to Chahbahar port. This would free land locked Afghanistan from using routes through Pakistan.

A consortium of Indian firms has won a bid for developing the Hajigak iron ore mine. However there are major concerns regarding transportation of iron ore and steel as the rail line to Chabahar port in Iran is not yet built. The Iran-Pakistan-India and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline projects are as good as shelved. Entries and exits from Afghanistan for Indian trade purposes

are not conducive in the present regional security environment, and these are likely to remain so over the next decade. Under this backdrop, to infer that Indian policy would be solely guided by the economic considerations may not be appropriate. The policy of supporting and developing a stable democratic regime in Afghanistan holds much more potential in the long run. This coupled with normalizing relations with Pakistan would usher in an era of unprecedented regional prosperity.

**TSA: As highlighted before, aid and development have played a major role in India-Afghanistan relations. With the departure of NATO troops, do you think India will invest more in the defence and security sector?**

SK: The effort to rebuild Afghanistan has always faced strong objections from Pakistan, which holds that it will be caught between two unfriendly neighbors, a view which had found resonance in the US also. India had therefore desisted from providing direct military aid to Afghanistan, however with withdrawal of American forces, India has agreed to increase training for soldiers and police officers. It will not deploy combat troops in Afghanistan. In my opinion 'passive' defence cooperation may further increase as it will aid in stabilizing Afghanistan, but at present the country faces a very uncertain future and nothing can be said as to which way the situation will develop. India

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does not favour direct engagement in security operations and deploying military personnel just to enhance its presence in the region, however India would have to take a view if violence against its personnel engaged in developmental projects in Afghanistan escalates in the coming year.

**TSA: Do you think Afghanistan is a geostrategic chessboard on which Pakistan and India are jousting for influence and goodwill in order to out maneuver each other?**

SK: No, India is not out to score points against Pakistan. It genuinely wants to rebuild Afghanistan. In my view, Pakistan is taking a short-term look at the regional development, whereas it holds the key to make the Afghanistan-Pakistan –India region a powerhouse gateway to Central Asia

and provide a bridge to South Asia. India is genuinely keen to develop the SAARC region under its present proactive development oriented regime.

**TSA: How do you foresee the future of India-Afghanistan relations?**

SK: India and Afghanistan relations would be ascendant if a climate of reasonable peace prevails in Afghanistan. However, if the country plunges in to civil war with Taliban in forefront then it is going to be difficult to continue the developmental effort in a predominantly hostile environment. The key to regional peace lies in the hands of Pakistan, the sooner it realizes this, the better it is for all the three. ■



## The Hazaras: An Ethnic Community under Threat of Siege



**Joe Frederick**

Assistant Director and Senior Analyst at the UK-based business risk consultancy Drum Cussac

The narratives of ethnicity vary across social and political communities, and in many cases can be highly controversial and destabilising to national identity. In many national identities, ethnicity can be distinguishable and an asset while in others it can be diluted subverted or ignored in total. In Afghanistan, “wahadat e milli” or national unity operates under the assumption that the country’s multiple ethnic representations are distinct yet woven together to form a cohesive singular narrative aimed at strengthening national stability.

At the opposite end of that spectrum, ethnic identity can be exploited and drive political behaviour to the detriment of the polity and country at large. In the Afghan case, this has been the dominant story line, especially in recent decades.

Instability and insecurity in Afghanistan is continually moving in a downward trajectory. Driven by a reinvigorated Taliban, the war-torn state is inching perilously close to plunging into another heightened state of conflict that will likely have severe consequences for the country’s Hazara ethnic community. Political and socio-economic suppression as well as intolerance of the Shia religion that most Hazaras practice in the Sunni-dominated country has long

meant that this community has lived on the margins of society. Today, they make up about 2.7 million or roughly 9 percent of the Afghan population. In Pakistan, the numbers are even less, about 1 million.

Racially, they are believed to descend from the Mongol armies that conquered Iran during the 12th century. They speak a Persian dialect of Dari, further adding to the disparity along ethno-linguistic lines that is often exposed to justify exclusionary practices and xenophobic violence. During the 19th century, they were even sold as slaves among the various Pashtun tribes. The following centuries and decades saw very limited loosening of the grip of oppression and persecution. Limited social mobility also meant that Hazaras were forced to seek refuge in relatively distant lands, mainly in Pakistan and Iran, where they met comparatively equal the amount of discrimination and persecution.

During the 1990s, the Taliban targeted Hazaras for ethnic cleansing and there are mounting concerns and anxieties over another incarnation of systematic killings on a mass scale. But Afghanistan’s “outsiders” have for centuries been targeted for persecution by the panoply of ethnic communities and colonial powers.

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Hazaras reside in a Sunni-dominated state, which has relegated them to the relative bottom of the social hierarchy. Up until the promulgation of the 2004 Constitution, the Shia sect and their practices were not officially recognised. They attract the ire of fundamentalist Sunni movements, such as the Taliban, who during their reign (1996-2001) exercised *carte blanche* when targeting the Hazaras for a special kind of wrath. The Taliban have a saying: “Tajiks to Tajikistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, Turkmen to Turkmenistan, and Hazaras to Iran or ‘goristan’ (graveyard)—this is Afghanistan.” Former Taliban governor of Mazar-i-Sharif, Mullah Manon Niazi, once said: “Hazaras are not Muslim. You can kill them. It is not a sin.”

After the Taliban wrested control of Kabul from the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1996, they advanced on Mazar-i-Sharif in pursuit of the Northern Alliance – a collective of Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Pashtun militias. In the spring of 1997, the Taliban laid siege to the Balkh provincial capital and what ensued was a bitter contest with the Northern Alliance for control. When the Taliban took over in August 1998, they launched a virulent cleansing campaign against non-Sunnis and non-Pashtuns.

Specifically, they looked for the Hazaras. Human Rights Watch estimated that 2,000 people were massacred, with the vast majority consisting of Hazara civilians. However, it should be noted that around 2,000 Taliban were summarily executed the year prior by the Northern Alliance in Mazar-i-

Sharif. The Hazara community would experience more massacres as the Taliban surrounded their homeland, Hazarajat, which occupies the central range of the Hindu Kush. Provincially speaking, the region mainly entails Bamiyan and Daykundi provinces and partially covers Ghazni, Wardak, Uruzgan and Ghor. In 2001, Taliban violence against the Hazaras continued at a high operational tempo in Bamiyan and crescendoed in September, when al-Qaeda brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Prior to this in March, Taliban tanks destroyed the iconic Buddha statues of Bamiyan, which had towered and nestled into the cliffs of the Bamiyan valley since the sixth century. The destruction of the statues, not only garnered worldwide condemnation, but locally it demonstrated the extent of control that the Taliban had over the province as well as its inhabitants. The US and NATO led intervention in Afghanistan has largely proven beneficial to the Shia Hazaras and to Hazarajat. Hazaras, as well as other Afghan minority communities, have had much improved opportunities to better their social, economic and political standings. Ex-president Hamid Karzai had a Hazara vice president (Karim Khalili, 2004-2014), and there has been a gradual infusion of Hazaras into the structures of governance.

Reaching ethnic parity in Afghanistan’s complex political environment ostensibly bodes well for democratic pluralism, but the downside is that it paves the way for potentially

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destabilising polarisation along ethnic lines. As the Taliban seek greater control of the country, concerns will mount over the sustainability of the Hazaras participation and inclusiveness in national politics.

Today, an estimated 2.7 million Hazaras reside in Hazarajat and more than four million in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Hazara diaspora communities have always been in these two countries, especially since the Afghan king Abdul Rahman (1880-1901) confiscated Hazara land and killed the majority of the population in the process.

Not all Hazara descendents in Pakistan for example live in destitute. Many families in Quetta are quite wealthy and well-educated, and this uplift in socio-economic status has created resentment among certain fundamentalist Baluchi and Pashtun communities and movements. This resentment has fuelled racial discrimination, and in its worst manifestations—violence. Not

a year goes by in Pakistan, especially in Quetta, without media headlines portraying the brutal violence meted out against the Hazara community by militant groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

Recently on 23 October, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a bus in the Baluchistan provincial capital, killing eight people, most of whom were members of the Hazara community. Another Hazara was killed about an hour later on a Quetta street. Then on 5 November, a six-year-old Hazara girl was found strangled to death in Quetta. Her death triggered protests and rare collective condemnation by mainstream political parties.

Arguably, the security situation in Pakistan is comparatively better than in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban are making significant exterminatory runs against the state security forces, rivals and minority ethnic communities, including the Hazaras. There have been numerous high-profile attacks,

both serving a local tactical purpose as well as the strategic performative ones. The message that they are clearly broadcasting is ominous, both in terms of its impact on national stability as well as national identity.

After a 13-year conflict aimed at marginalising the Taliban and bringing about national cohesiveness, the current uptick in hostilities and violence is acting with powerful centrifugal force to rip the country apart. And the logical fault lines will very much be along ethnicity. For the Hazaras, and the rest of Afghanistan's minority ethnic communities, any meaningful strategic gains achieved during this recent decade of conflict is under serious risk of a volte face. ■



**Paulo Casaca**

Founder and Executive Director of  
the South Asia Democratic Forum

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#### NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

## Modi's New Modus Operandi

On the 13th of November we held a conference labelled „The new Government in India: A Global View“. The insights we gained, the debates we had as well as the conclusions we drew were all an invaluable and intriguing experience. Guests and colleagues from all around the world met at the European Parliament to dwell on India's new “modus operandi” and its global impact.

Half a year ago, India was considered to be the archetypical example of a young democracy, which has overcome a lot of cultural, ethnical, linguistic, religious and social challenges, but lacked a coherent vision and a worthy leadership. Corruption, a slow bureaucratic apparatus, party factionalism, inadequate policy-making and weak governance are all symptoms of the largest democracy.

And yet, the recent elections in India provided a landslide victory unheard of during the last three decades. The BJP gained the absolute majority, and with that majority came the hope of a new political dawn. In the aftermath of the elections the party of Narendra Modi, India's new prime minister, maintained the same level of energy shown in the electoral campaign.

On the domestic scale, the core objective of the BJP is to reform the monetary sector, thus opening up banking facilities to everyone, everywhere. Without this reform a strong energy, sanitation and food subvention scheme remain a pipe dream.

In macroeconomic terms the authorities refused to follow the austerity prescription and kept unchanged the fiscal objectives of their predecessors, while announcing the intention to combat inflation and to achieve 7-8 per cent growth rates in the coming 3 to 4 years.

So, what's the issue of the “new Modi modus operandi”? Yes, to a large extent a matter of governance. It makes a difference when a political leader brakes with the bureaucratic code of double talk in ceremonial occasions as the day of the Nation to speak down to hearth; it makes a difference when a Prime Minister gets the broom in front of the cameras and invites his fellow citizens to follow his example.

The nineties saw an emerging pragmatism of a power too big to be ignored, too weak to be seen as a paramount power, and we reached our

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times with an India divided by three major standings: a standing of firmness facing terrorism and aggression based on the nuclear deterrent and capable armed forces; a negotiating standing trying to get a compromise with difficult neighbours and an Indian version of soft-power based on the impact of Indian culture, diplomacy and diaspora.

Ultimately, the three traditional standings should not be seen as mutually exclusive and the proportion of its use has to be adapted to the way the stakeholders decide to play their part in the global scenery.

Since the very beginning, Prime Minister Modi set the objective of revitalising relations with its neighbours of South Asia Association for Regional Co-operation as a top priority. SADF has been defending the reinforcement

of regional co-operation as a major tool for development strengthening and democracy building, and we applaud such an initiative full heartedly.

SAARC has been the regional integration laggard at the global level, and we consider that the potential for growth, peace and democracy of a successful bid to revamp such an association comprising the biggest region in the World to be tremendous. As we have seen during this conference, the World has its eyes on Prime Minister Modi. We know that his success will be the success of his country and the success of the World peace.

In the name of SADF and this conference, I would like to convey my best wishes for the success of Prime Minister Modi. ■



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