



SADF

Activities Programme 2022

Introduction

The control of Kabul and the whole of Afghanistan by the Taliban was the most important political development in South Asia (and arguably in the entire world) in 2021. Its impact is perpetuated in the present year.

The Resolute Support Strategic Assessment Capability sponsored by NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) – to which SADF contributed – has formally ended in 2021, in the wake of the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, SADF will increase its attention regarding the country as it considers it deeply interwoven with all of today's major political challenges.

Our attention will focus on the geopolitical scenery; however, we will also investigate the cultural mind-set – most in particular the pervasive infiltration of Jihad – as well as the influence of private interests.

SADF will also do its utmost to develop its existing research on (1) fundamental environmental challenges such as water management and (2) education.

1. The fallout of the Kabul takeover

Pakistan's leaders revindicated the Taliban victory, which they called the 'breaking of the shackles of slavery', as their own. Pakistan is, therefore, the most important country under analysis in the present strategic framework. China enthroned the Taliban leadership in Tianjin shortly before the Kabul takeover and appears as the second most important player in the scene. Iran increased its support to the Taliban in the past few years; although it has been side-lined in the country's new power structure, it remains an essential element of this puzzle.

Otherwise, Russia seems to have understood the opportunity created by the Western retreat to build-up its pressure on both the European and Central Asian fronts. Both the European Union and India tried to rapidly adapt to a situation they did not foresee, attempting to intervene in Afghanistan's calamitous situation through humanitarian measures. The US administration seemed focused on a damage control exercises, or at least a rational strategic action is otherwise difficult to ascertain. Other than the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US decided not to give a new impetus to the Quad. Instead of tying the Quad with European countries such as France which have participated in joint actions, the US created a new



alliance, AUKUS, simultaneously with a strategic and commercial brawl regarding submarine contracts with France – which countered the emerging effort to contain Chinese expansionism.

Qatar has been the Taliban's main diplomatic sponsor, in particular regarding the US. After the Taliban takeover, Qatar appeared as the main interlocutor for negotiating the release of both foreign and Afghan nationals from the territory as well as a guarantee that there would be a Taliban 2.0, more civilised than the previous one, a guarantee that reality on the ground has rapidly shown to be baseless.

Central Asian countries seem to have followed the leading powers' (China, Russia, and US) approach towards the Taliban takeover. Their approach might however be changing in view of ground developments in Afghanistan. Recent popular demonstrations (followed by an attempted coup) affected Kazakhstan, previously considered as the most stable Central Asian republic. This is significant, as the Kazakh authorities referred to 'Islamist' elements as laying behind critical developments.

The tragic dimension of the Afghan debacle demands an analysis of democratic countries' dominant mindset. The so-called 'woke' or 'cancel' culture, supposedly related to the philosophies of deconstructivism and postmodernism, the challenging or even reversal of the concepts and the language used for defining a free and democratic society, are all crucial elements in the quest to understand the apparently absurd political decision-making processes followed in Afghanistan. Further to this cultural front, the facts on the ground also call for an analysis of all possible interest motors leading key democratic players.

In this context, SADF will dedicate its main efforts to the three countries that have been crucial in the making of the present Afghan tragedy – as well as to the 'cultural revolution' sweeping western democracies.

II. Pakistan

The dynamics of the Pakistan-Taliban relation are two-fold. Pakistan, through its armed forces, and particularly its famous Inter-Services Intelligence, was the key actor in organising, financing, and instructing the Afghan Taliban – as well as a string of other terrorist groups, mostly geared at destabilising India (Jammu & Kashmir on particular). However, the opposite is also true, that is, Pakistan is being moulded by the Taliban, through what SADF has been calling the 'talibanization of Pakistan', in a process not within the control of or in the direction desired by authorities.

The Taliban inherited the worst of Pakistan's Islamist drift, including enforced disappearances and open killings; attacks on religious minorities (such as Christians,



the Shia Hazara, the Ahmadiyya)¹; misogyny, including honour killings; extreme antizionism (as exemplified in Pakistan by the liberation of US journalist Daniel Pearl's convicted murderers); and ruthless treatment of ethnic groups and minority areas.

In this particular, Pakistan is responsible for one the twentieth century's worst crimes, the Bangladeshi genocide, for which it never tried the military responsible, never apologised or in any sense backtracked from. Exactly because it never repented, its policy regarding Baluchistan follows the same lines of that followed with East Bengal.

Yet there is also a boomerang effect, translated in developments such as the uncontrolled power of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, the sheltering of the Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) by the Haqqani network in Afghanistan, and the spread of the regional chapters of Al-Qaeda's off-spring, known as 'the Caliphate' or 'ISIS', which also challenge the Afghan Taliban. Paradoxically, although Pakistan claimed the Taliban takeover as its own victory (and openly campaigns for the international recognition of the Taliban as the rulers of Afghanistan), the two countries continue at loggerheads around the Durand line, with sporadic clashes between Pakistani forces and the Haqqani network.

The Jihadi spiral is destroying the remaining democratic and liberal features of Pakistan, such as an independent press and judiciary and some fundamental freedoms – as Pakistan is becoming similar to countries such as Turkey and China. It is also threatening to make the state become a clone of the present Taliban-Haqqani network rule in Afghanistan. The possible implications of this development in a nuclear-holding country like Pakistan could hardly be overestimated.

The main challenges we see as regards the European policy perspective are the following:

1. SADF considers education as the most important strategic instrument for curbing Pakistan's fanatic drift. Recent reforms introduced in the country reinforce supremacist principles and downgrade the use of native languages. The EU, as otherwise the United Nations, have completely ignored the role of official educational policy in fanatic indoctrination. How can this policy be reverted?
2. The European Union's attempt to appease fanaticism in Pakistan – namely by providing its most important international trade concessions, the GSP Plus label – have produced an impact directly opposite to what was expected. Pakistan's fanaticism was not only reinforced within borders but also exported to Afghanistan; it

¹ Sometimes referred by the derogatory term 'Qadiyani'



now threatens Europe directly. This disaster – which we have predicted – has now been acknowledged by most observers. What should be the new European policy?

3. The Financial Action Task Force, an organisation that has been trying to curb financial support to terrorism, has placed Pakistan in the grey zone, yet this has not been sufficient to curb its support to terrorism. What are the political options on the table? Should the FAFT blacklist Pakistan?

4. The globalisation and radicalisation of Blasphemy laws. From a major instrument of fanatic transformation inside the country, these became an instrument for provoking a negative polarisation or even the destruction of liberal values within European countries such as France. Starting with the logo 'Je ne suis pas Charlie', the fanatic crescendo has become louder, translated into new terrorist action, and has been endorsed by the Pakistani authorities. Europe ignored the need to press for the respect of humane values in Pakistan; however, fanatic Islamists did not forget to demand Europe to submit to their 'blasphemy mentality'. Europe should deeply rethink what are the challenges involved and how to answer them.

III. China

The fall of Kabul was greeted less than a day later by the Chinese Communist Party's daily 'Global Times' – as meaning that Taiwan had ceased to be defended by the US. In fact, the Biden administration tried to send the awkward message that US withdrawal from Afghanistan – a country with borders with China – was undertaken so that the US could give priority to China. A message that the Chinese leadership correctly dismissed as incongruous.

The August 16 Chinese declaration on 'Taiwan's defenceless statute' culminated a long series of positions that have been diplomatically called 'new assertiveness' – and less diplomatically labelled as 'expansionist'. In South Asia, this was translated into further militarization of Tibet's borders, in conjunction with land claims from both Bhutan and India, in this case including a military conflict in Ladakh. The benediction of a military coup in Myanmar and growing influence in the Bay of Bengal, as well as in the Maldives, have been a source of widespread concern.

China is developing a policy of radical persecution of Uyghurs and other autochthonous peoples in its far-West province it calls Xinjiang (New Territory), previously known as East Turkestan. This policy is widely seen as genocide. China articulates this policy as the need to respond to Islamic extremism within this population. However, the fact that a high number of Jihad fighters from Xinjiang are serving with the Taliban in Afghanistan did not stop China from endorsing the Taliban takeover. China only requested the Taliban to move these fighters away from the Chinese border. Otherwise, a high number of such Jihadi fighters also found their way to Syrian battle grounds. China does not seem to be excessively

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troubled by the Taliban's use of Chinese nationals in Jihad; neither does it seem much deterred by Islamist activities by both Pakistan and Iran. Conversely, these and other radical Islamist countries do not seem troubled by the persecution of Muslim populations in Western China either, restraining all their concerns regarding 'Islamophobia' to Western lands.

Within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China's presence has reached virtually everywhere, including of course South Asia. India has however denounced the initiative, as it is developed on the former principality of Jammu & Kashmir's disputed territory, and this without prior consultation with the parties involved. Several observers have been pointing to the drawback of this initiative in countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as they become unsustainably indebted.

In the past few months, a marked cooling of the Chinese economy has been observed, translated into an historically high number of micro-companies' deregistration, several times higher than the number of new registrations. A strong crisis in the real-estate sector seems to threaten the financial system, whereas the strict policy of 'zero-covid' has provoked supply-chain problems. The rhythm of foreign investments within BRI has markedly declined. China's role in Afghanistan has been so far limited to humanitarian assistance on a modest scale.

Otherwise, China did not yet engage in a military venture in Taiwan; its aerial incursions into Taiwanese airspace seem to have reached its peak in October. Since February last year, there is no registry of any major aggression on the Himalayan front either.

The most important questions in this context are the following:

1. How far should we see Islamic Extremism and Islamophobia, or otherwise geopolitical interests and goals, as the key driving forces of China's, Pakistan's, and Iran's political stands?
2. Should we perceive the present Chinese economic problems as temporary growing pains, because of the ongoing zero-covid policy or, otherwise, as a structural problem inherent to the Chinese growth model?
3. Will the slowdown of the Chinese economic expansion through BRI therefore prove to be temporary? Even if it will prove temporary, can it continue without major revisions of its modus operandi? In any case, will the expected massive Chinese investments in Afghanistan materialise?
4. Are we to expect the last decade's growing Chinese land and sea claims to become a broad military operation such as the invasion of Taiwan?

IV. Iran

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Since at least the fall of the Afghan monarchy, both Iran and Pakistan – the latter with strong support from Saudi Arabia – have backed Islamic armed groups within Afghanistan. The Islamic Revolution in Iran led to the approval of a Constitution mandating its leadership to wage Jihad on a global scale, placing the country's ambitions and the instruments to achieve them on a new dimension.

The Iranian theocracy has pursued an expansionist policy by manoeuvring proxies, promoting terrorism, and disregarding foreign sovereignties; however, its major successes came only in the present century by combining these elements with multisectoral infiltration, blackmail, and diplomatic manoeuvring – all of which recently allowed the leadership to publicly boast of its control of four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa).

The Iranian policy regarding Afghanistan has been similar to that developed regarding the Arab World, using in addition its ethno-linguistic closeness to the country's largest minority. Iran influenced the Afghan political scenario deeply through soft-power instruments, by playing the Shiite religious sect card, controlling a large part of the drugs traffic, organising a mostly Afghan 'foreign legion' (Fatemiyoun Division) used in Syria, and sponsoring some Taliban factions with weapons and financial means. Still, so far, Iran has been outmanoeuvred by Pakistan – its long-term rival for influence in the country – and has been very vocal in joining the UN's claim of an 'inclusive government' (by which one should understand a larger, ideally the largest, slice of power for Iran's proxies in the country).

Whereas Iran was also bypassed by Pakistan in its course to achieve nuclear weapons, it uses international negotiations to gain diplomatic points without major concessions.

The main questions suggested by this situation are:

1. How should we look at the Iran-Pakistan dynamics, taking in account their common Islamist fanatic threat and their rival geopolitical aims?
2. Should the international community presently see Iran's steps in Afghanistan as part of the solution or as part of the problem?
3. What is the viability of a Chinese Iranian corridor crossing Afghanistan to be used by China as a hedging instrument to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)?
4. Shall the growing dissatisfaction and turmoil in a developed society such as the Iranian be taken in consideration as a potential strategic notable change with vast geopolitical consequences, namely in Afghanistan?

V. 2001 Misperceptions on Afghanistan that remain in 2021



Over two decades ago, September eleven demonstrated how crucially erroneous were Western perceptions of the global challenges it faced. Following a persistent dichromacy syndrome, that only allowed to see nothing else but the Soviet threat, the West had decided to whitewash Jihad's potential, and woke up only through the sheer monstrosity of the slaughter committed at its very heart by what it could not see and even less understand.

The US national report on September eleven demonstrated how far the US attention had been driven away from reality, showing how Afghanistan became the launching pad of Islamic fanaticism – manipulated by the state-apparatus of both Iran and Pakistan, with the cooperation of a wide string of Saudi Arabian nationals. It explained that Iraq's lay dictator had nothing to do with the crime, clearly identifying as strategic disinformation all the supposed links between this country and the attack. It's implicit condemnation of the invasion of Iraq is clear.

The US' and other western countries' follow-up to the findings of that report was dismaying, allowing both Iran and Pakistan to continue the same strategy centred on the use of Jihad. Regarding the Arab peninsula, the US decided to align with the fanatic wing of bn Abd al-Wahhab's followers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia – against the Saudi reforming leaders.

In the follow-up of the Afghanistan takeover, the Biden administration announced a strategic partnership with Qatar, centred on the dominant position of both countries in the global gas market – in particular in its LNG segment – ostensibly to counter Russian energy-based power within Europe.

In this context, we suggest the following debate points:

1. Euphemism, language, culture, and policy. Orwell understood the use of euphemisms as a major step into totalitarianism. How can we tackle the contemporary use of these instruments to present the Taliban and other Jihadi outfits as the opposite of what they are?
2. SADF followed the trajectory of the 'EU DisinfoLab' creation from the 'Je ne suis pas Charlie' movement – through the yet most accomplished European disinformation act, responsible for the 'Benalla supposed Russian plot' and ultimately an insulting Islamist machine. How can these and other acts of disinformation count with the blessing of high-level institutions, both private and public? How far has the Jihadi infiltration on the Western world's institutional mechanisms been going?
3. How has the public control of actions by private, vested interests – associated with foreign hostile powers – been developed within Western democracies? What can be done to face this?



4. Oil and gas interests have in the past been crucial driving strategic forces. Are we still witnessing similar international scenarios? If so, how are these interests interplaying with other vested interests? What should be the role of the rule of law to insure the pre-eminence of public over private interests?

VI. Final remarks

This strategic list of items is indicative and does not preclude other domains of action that circumstances and means will allow us to tackle.

Global challenges within the environment, health, and education – all entwined with the strategic issues we raised here – will also be tackled whenever possible.

The questions presented here might be developed in presential conferences, on-line events and research papers created either by SADF or by independent researchers.