



Old Soviet fort, Faryab province.
Tim Foxley, July '08

Revolutionary Outcomes? How the Afghanistan conflict might evolve after 2014

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Abstract

Afghanistan's complex conflict shows little sign of abating. This paper looks at the nature of the conflict and factors that might influence its post-2014 direction. It treats Afghanistan as a qualitative intrinsic case study and positions itself in the middle of historical context, civil war theory and the post-2001 political and military situation. Although disagreements within broader civil war theory make analysis of Afghanistan challenging (how to address complex conflicts and concepts of stalemate might benefit from further exploration), Charles Tilly's work provides a fresh perspective and a flexible platform from which to view the conflict. The paper identifies areas analytically "less-travelled": the idea that a military stalemate might be a long-term result after 2014 and that other political/military factions might also get drawn in to contest control of the state. It finds that a struggle for army loyalty is plausible and could become a further danger to the stability of the country. The international community and the Afghan population could perhaps give thought to three issues: the implications of the term "civil war", how to consider and address the notion of stalemate and, finally, that the Taliban might not be the only group contesting state control.

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Revolutionary Outcomes? How the Afghanistan conflict might evolve after 2014.

Q: What changes do you see in the coming five years?

A: I have no idea. There are too many imponderables. If you had asked five years ago what Afghanistan would be like today, I would have been completely wrong and I don't expect that I would be right this time.

Internationally acclaimed Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin, 20 June 2006.¹

1. Introduction

In September 2011 I was working as a political/military analyst in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. The headquarters is in the centre of the city, heavily populated by embassies and Afghan government buildings. It is fortified and defended by members of both Afghan and international security forces. A tempting target in its own right, the proximity of the headquarters to the US Embassy just across the road confirmed this.

On the morning of the 13th, my civilian ears detected what appeared to be someone dropping a couple of chairs on the floor above. This heralded a “complex” series of attacks across the city, with the main targets ourselves and the US Embassy. We went into security “lock down” until nine o'clock the following morning.² Amidst some understandable confusion, at one point we were told that a suicide bomber might have entered the camp.

After several coordinated suicide attacks in other parts of the city, the focus of the battle became a 13-story building site pre-selected by the insurgents that overlooked ISAF and the US Embassy. This combat appeared on Youtube within minutes.³ Unusually for the insurgents, they were armed with something more than small arms and rocket propelled

¹ Rubin, B., 'Afghanistan: Interview with regional analyst Barnett Rubin', *IRIN*, 20 June 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=34410>.

² Healy, J., Rubin, A. and Rivera, R., 'U.S. Embassy and NATO Headquarters Attacked in Kabul', *New York Times*, 13 Sep. 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/world/asia/14afghanistan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

³ I was located (suitably protected, I should add) approximately 100 metres behind the combat shown here, which took place at the edge of the motor pool I used regularly in a corner of the ISAF compound, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H47Jx2OpoRs>

grenades. They had sited an 82mm recoilless rifle in the building and had a direct line of sight to ISAF and the US Embassy, making the threat very real.⁴

Afghan security forces, mentored by ISAF, took the lead in the fight. Although assessments of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are quite critical, some of the rapid response troops had two or three near-identical incidents under their belt and were acquiring experience. Through night-vision equipped TV cameras, most of the ISAF headquarters was able to view the Afghan-on-Afghan battle unfold a few hundred metres away, as government forces fought their way, floor by floor, up the building. It made grim viewing. Numerous small puffs of smoke spurting from the walls denoted the impact of bullets, larger clouds showed where grenades had detonated. Night combat in a building is painfully slow and dangerous. Occasionally we would see a group of soldiers carry a dead or wounded comrade down multiple flights of stairs. Periodically, ISAF and Afghan combat helicopters would spray bullets at the building from a safe distance.

Although the media coverage was intensive for 24 hours, this was a relatively minor engagement and one that has been repeated before and since in central Kabul. Thousands of civilians are still highly vulnerable, caught in the middle of a conflict that some have been experiencing for decades – and some for their whole life.⁵

The incident focused my mind on some key questions. Who is winning and what does it mean? Is this a stalemate? Is this the way the Taliban can retake the country? Will the Afghan security forces really be capable of providing security after 2014?⁶

2. Problem – whither the conflict post-2014?

I still cannot understand how we...have managed to arrive at a situation in which everything is coming together in 2014 — elections, new president, economic transition, military transition and all this — whereas the negotiations for the peace process have not really started

Departing French diplomat Bernard Bajolet, Kabul, April 2013.⁷

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B-10_recoilless_rifle

⁵ Rashid, A., *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, (Penguin Group: London, 2008).

⁶ Rodriguez, D., 'Leaving Afghanistan to the Afghans', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011.

Many fear that Afghanistan is descending into a new civil war.⁸ US intelligence officials assessed in 2012 that the Taliban are confident of retaking Afghanistan once the international military presence leaves.⁹ This concern is echoed across analytical communities.¹⁰ The UK House of Commons Select Committee was pessimistic about progress made.¹¹ Internationally respected academics, Ahmed Rashid and Thomas Ruttig were similarly negative at a conference in Copenhagen on the prospects for Afghanistan beyond 2014.¹²

Although 2014 will be a significant landmark in the country's future, it is difficult to judge with confidence, other than in general terms, where the country might go after this. The two ends of a spectrum of outcomes are "fragmentation" and "peace deal". Both have been extensively commented upon.¹³ However, I sense that there is potential for a stalemated conflict after 2014 and that current insurgent groups may not be the only threat to the country's stability. My intention is to explore this question:

How might the Afghan conflict evolve after 2014?

I will use elements of conflict theory to consider aspects of the conflict that might have an impact on Afghanistan's future. I particularly want to engage with some of the ideas of conflict theorist Charles Tilly. Although an academic paper, I hope that it might additionally give policymakers "pause for thought".

3. Civil war theory and Afghanistan

The Frightful Inadequacy of Most of the Statistics

Laurie Nathan on civil war analysis, 2005¹⁴

⁷ Rubin, A., 'Departing French Envoy Has Frank Words on Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 27 April, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/world/asia/bernard-bajolet-leaving-afghanistan-has-his-say.html?_r=0

⁸ Maas, C. and Ruttig, T., 'Is Afghanistan on the brink of a new civil war?', *Stiftung, Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP Comments 21*, Aug. 2011 and 'Civil War risk in Afghanistan', *Euronews*, 7 Oct. 2011, <http://www.euronews.net/2011/10/07/civil-war-risk-in-afghanistan/>

⁹ 'U.S. military says Taliban set to retake power: report', *Reuters*, 31 Jan. 2012,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-afghan-nato-report-idUSTRE81006N20120201>

¹⁰ Foust, J., 'Five lessons we should have learned in Afghanistan: strategic issues in policy planning', *American Security Project* paper, July 2012.

¹¹ Bamford, E., 'MPs fear Afghanistan civil war after withdrawal', *The Independent*, 10 Apr. 2013,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/mps-fear-afghanistan-civil-war-after-withdrawal-8566607.html>

¹² Author's notes, <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/afghanistan-towards-2014-diis-conference-key-points/>

¹³ Maley, W., *Rescuing Afghanistan*, (C. Hurst and Co: London, 2006).

¹⁴ Nathan, L., 'The Frightful Inadequacy of Most of the Statistics': a Critique of Collier and Hoeffler on Causes of Civil War', *Crisis States Research Centre*, Paper No.11, Sep. 2005.

I want to consider the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan. To do that I will review some of the general theories related to civil war, together with a look at two particular aspects – the potential for stalemate and for other powerbrokers to enter the contest to govern Afghanistan. This will help understand Afghanistan's situation and allow framing of three research questions that I intend to explore: a) the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan; b) the likely outcome of the conflict and c) what are the risks of political and military contenders emerging beyond the Taliban.

Scholars of conflict appear to be in broad agreement that, since the Second World War, incidences of intrastate conflict have significantly increased across the world and such conflicts are generally more complex than wars between nations.¹⁵ Tilly, amongst others, asserts that: "Since World War II, civil war has displaced interstate war as the dominant setting for large-scale violent death".¹⁶ Although much analysis has been undertaken it still seems apparent that definition and measurement of this form of conflict is unclear and controversial.¹⁷ The notable civil war theorist, Nicholas Sambanis, recognises this: "...literature on civil war has seen tremendous growth...but there is no consensus on the measurement of civil war...it is difficult, if not impossible, to define and measure civil war".¹⁸ Nathan has been particularly scathing in a critique of quantitative analysis:

The greatest problem is that [they] seek to ascertain the causes of civil war without studying civil wars, and attempt to determine the motives of rebels without studying rebels and rebellions.¹⁹

A diversity of terminology appears to confirm the weakness of definitional boundaries: revolution, coup, rebellion, insurrection, civil war, guerrilla war, insurgency, terrorism and even "The Troubles" (Northern Ireland) are but a few of the terms employed to describe armed conflict taking place within the confines of a state. Most of these terms have been used in the context of intrastate conflict in Afghanistan. Many analysts employ the term

¹⁵ Mason, D., Gurses, M., Brandt, P. and Quinn, J., 'When Civil Wars Recur: Conditions for Durable Peace after Civil Wars', *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 12, 2011.

¹⁶ Tilly, C., 'Violence, Terror, and Politics as Usual', *Boston Review*, Summer 2002.

¹⁷ Human Security Centre workshop, 'Mapping and explaining civil war: what to do about contested datasets and findings?', Oslo, Aug. 2003.

¹⁸ Sambanis, N., 'What is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operation Definition', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, Number 6, Dec. 2004.

¹⁹ Nathan, L., 'The Frightful Inadequacy of Most of the Statistics': a Critique of Collier and Hoeffler on Causes of Civil War', *Crisis States Research Centre*, Paper No.11, Sep. 2005.

“civil war” without defining it more carefully; others appear to prefer use of the term “insurgency”.²⁰

Caution should be applied in the use of what is clearly a subjective term. Tilly observed that the “...distinction between revolutionary situations and civil wars begins to dissolve before our eyes”.²¹ Connable and Libicki describe “insurgency”, thus:

...the violent struggle by a non-governmental armed group against its government or an interceding force, with the intent of overthrowing the current regime, expelling an interloper, gaining greater rights, or obtaining independence.²²

This would seem to work well as a definition of civil war, although theorists also note that terms employed can shape perceptions, judgements and expectations. Tilly recognised this:

...labelling a form of politics as ‘civil war’ or ‘terror’ activates and justifies certain responses on the part of external actors and because each term calls up precedents that shape the behaviour of participants, victims and third parties.²³

Sambanis suggests “civil war” provokes two international reactions: “let them fight it out” and “nothing can be done”.²⁴ Kalyvas does not see it quite as bluntly as this, but notes the definitional dilemma, concluding that civil wars are:

...prone to serious semantic confusion, even contestation. The description of a conflict as a civil war carries symbolic and political weight since the term can confer or deny legitimacy to a warring party. Indeed the very use (or not) of the term is part of the conflict itself.

As an example of some of the definitional difficulties, it is perhaps worth considering the Sambanis and Doyle definition of a civil war:

1. armed conflict meets all the following conditions:
2. more than 1,000 deaths overall in at least a single year;
3. challenges the sovereignty of an internationally recognized state;

²⁰ Walter, B., ‘Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3, May 2004, pp. 371-388.

²¹ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006), p.163.

²² Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’, *Rand NDRI*, 2010, p.220.

²³ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006), p.158.

²⁴ Collier, P., Elliot, V, Hegre, H., et al, ‘Breaking the conflict trap: civil war and development policy’, *A World Bank policy research report*, 31 May 2003.

4. occurs within the recognized state boundary;
5. involves the state as a principal combatant;
6. includes rebels with the ability to mount organized armed opposition to the state;
7. has parties concerned with the prospect of living together in the same political unit after the war.²⁵

There are problems in applying this to Afghanistan, where the conflict nature (combatants, tactics and goals) has changed several times since the late 1970s. Many insurgent groups operate from “safe havens” in Pakistan. The Afghan border with Pakistan is porous and unrecognised by the insurgents, conflicting with point four that the conflict “occurs within the recognized boundary of the state”. During parts of the 1990s, there was no recognisable state to form a “principle combatant”, conflicting with point five. Finally, it remains difficult to define what the Taliban’s ultimate perceived “end state” for Afghanistan is, leaving it open to question whether the last aspect of the Sambanis and Doyle definition applies. Kalyvas offers a definition of civil war as: “armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities”.²⁶ This is problematic where Afghanistan is concerned, given the fluid and shifting nature of factional alignment.

Outcomes and potential for stalemate

Understanding of the causes, progress and aftermath of such conflicts, whether for predicting or explaining, remains limited.²⁷ Or rather, a wealth of analysis identifies potential causes and influential variables, but there is little agreement on which causes might work best to explain particular conflicts. Dixon studied forty-six separate studies of the causes of civil war, finding there were as many as *two hundred* distinct variables at play, with strong consensus on only seven.²⁸ Walter suggests negotiated settlements are comparatively rare as outcomes. While over half of interstate wars between 1940 and 1990 were resolved through negotiation, only 20 per cent of civil wars ended similarly: “most internal wars ended with

²⁵ Doyle, M and Sambanis, N., ‘International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis’, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Dec., 2000), pp. 779-801.

²⁶ Kalyvas, S., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2006).

²⁷ Human Security Centre workshop, ‘Mapping and explaining civil war: what to do about contested datasets and findings?’, Oslo, Aug. 2003.

²⁸ Dixon, J., ‘What causes Civil Wars? Integrating Quantitative Research Findings’, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 11, 2009.

the extermination, expulsion, or capitulation of the losing side.”²⁹ Despite the efforts and expectations arising from the desire for a political settlement for Afghanistan, statistics appear to weigh against such an outcome.

Fearon notes: “The most common form of civil war in the post-World War II period has been the stalemated guerrilla war confined to a rural periphery of a low-income, post-colonial state”.³⁰ Nevertheless, there appears to be little analysis in civil war theory of the role that a stalemate might play. Connable and Libicki followed 89 insurgencies, between zero and forty years in duration and observed that “such deadlocks seldom occur”.³¹ However, their sense of what a stalemate is seems based on physical and political exhaustion, which looks narrow. A stalemate is not an outcome in itself and represents a period of time in which fighting, talking or both could take place without any significant progress. In this respect, it shows up only in quantitative analysis assessing the duration of intrastate conflicts.³² Conflict resolution theory offers the “hurting stalemate”, whereby parties are mutually exhausted by the struggle and negotiation is preferable to going nowhere at great cost of human, political and financial capital.³³ Clearly some forms of stalemate offer the potential for positive progress, whether in terms of dialogue or reconstruction.

Tilly, multiple sovereignty and control of the coercive means

The work of the conflict theorist, Charles Tilly, has much to offer for a study of Afghanistan's conflict. His later work looks at the politics of collective violence – how types of political contention (from social protest, through civil wars to coups) interact and impact in different ways with different regimes.³⁴ He also examines the increasing use of non-officially constituted “violence specialists”, for which there is a plethora of nomenclature: paramilitaries, militia, death squads, secret police, suggesting many areas for Afghanistan analysts to investigate.³⁵ For my purposes, Tilly's earlier work, ‘From Mobilisation to

29 Walter, B., ‘The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement’, *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer, 1997), pp. 335-364.

³⁰ Fearon, J., ‘Civil war since 1945: Some facts and a theory’, *Paper presented at the American Political Science Association*, Sept. 2005.

³¹ Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010.

³² Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010, p.28.

³³ Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T, and Miall, H., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, (Polity Press; Cambridge, 2005), 2nd Edition, p.166-167.

³⁴ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006).

³⁵ Tilly, C., *The Politics of Collective Violence*, (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2006).

Revolution', identifies three theoretical angles of help for our understanding of Afghanistan.³⁶

The first is the exploration of how a *revolutionary situation* – the desire and potential for political change – transforms into a *revolutionary outcome* – the actuality of regime change. Tilly argues that a *situation* requires three elements: a contender (or contenders) making a competing claim for control of part or all of the state; significant numbers of the population endorsing and following this alternate claim and the inability or unwillingness of the existing regime to either suppress or embrace these contentious claims. An *outcome*, in which power actually changes hands, is much less common than the existence of a *situation*, requiring the defection of regime members, the development of revolutionary armed capability and the capture of state military and political means of control.³⁷

This takes us to consideration of *multiple sovereignty* which, for Tilly, is the “identifying feature” of a revolutionary situation. Tilly explores how rival contenders for sovereign power can emerge – an existing political faction or factions trying to subordinate other factions, the emergence of new factions or the fragmentation of dominant factions into competing pieces. In 21st century Afghanistan alone we already have two – possibly three – different examples: the Northern Alliance coalition contesting a Taliban-controlled state (2000 to 2001); a swirl of warlords competing in the power vacuum that arose after the Taliban's rapid defeat against a fledgling transitional government (2001 to perhaps 2003) and the re-emergence of the Taliban as an insurgency but still offering an alternate claim to government (perhaps from around 2004 to the present). Tilly's views very much help to remind us that *multiple* does not necessarily mean one alternative contender, but two, three, four or more.

It is clear to Tilly that “control of the coercive means” is key to a revolutionary outcome:

Control over the major organised means of coercion within the population is pivotal to the success or failure of any effort to seize power. Within all contemporary states, that means control of the armed forces.

This has great potential relevance for Afghanistan, which has now has a huge army, created in haste by an international community that sees the force as a bulwark against the Taliban and, perhaps most important, as a means of enabling its own withdrawal. Both the military's

³⁶ Tilly, C., 'From Mobilisation to Revolution', *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977.

³⁷ Tilly, C., 'From Mobilisation to Revolution', *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977.

political independence and its resilience on the battlefield are likely to be greatly tested in the years immediately after 2014, which will see the bulk of the international forces withdrawn, a still powerful insurgency and the potential for much political turmoil, starting with the election scheduled for April 2014.

Tilly does not offer the perfect model for Afghanistan. In many ways he was focused on the big revolutionary moments in history - and European history at that – where ideologies, ideas and intellectuals played a more important role. His understanding of popular support to contenders jars slightly with the reality of war-weary acquiescence with which the Afghan population now view most aspects of the conflict.³⁸ However, he does offer a broad and flexible set of ideas within which to frame this complex conflict and lift us out of the quantitative statistical “battle” favoured by many civil war theorists, counter-insurgency students and the military. Judging Afghanistan from a “Tillian” perspective suggests that the Taliban might be less of a genuine contender than we think and that other possible contenders for power in Afghanistan deserve consideration, if for slightly different reasons. This analytical angle is not commonplace and, I would argue, is probably worth exploring.

4. Methodology

I want to consider the nature and possible direction of the complex conflict in Afghanistan beyond 2014. There are no “correct” answers for selecting an appropriate study method. Because I am intending to look into the future, a quantitative-based approach, with the application of rigorously testable and predictable hypotheses, looks much less suitable than a qualitative approach, which offers a more adaptable platform for analytical exploration. However, flexibility for some analysts means lack of rigour for others. In the previous chapter, I attempted to highlight some of the problems with quantitative analysis in the context of civil war theory. Stake notes the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research as being: “...a difference in searching for causes versus searching for happenings”, or explanation and control versus the understanding of complex interrelationships.³⁹ Yin’s understanding of qualitative research, noting the cross-disciplinary difficulties of studying real life events in a real world environment, prefers to highlight five *features* rather than give a precise, single, definitional statement. For Yin, research permits “insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behaviour,” and he notes the

³⁸ Tilly, C., ‘From Mobilisation to Revolution’, *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977.

³⁹ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005).

benefit of using “multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source”.⁴⁰ I will be attempting to explore and understand Afghanistan in conflict as a case study using multiple sources of information.

Case studies themselves are quite a flexible tool. Fry's and Mann's definitions are, respectively, as follows:

...complex examples which give an insight into the context of a problem as well as illustrating the main point.⁴¹

...a situation of unique interest to challenge a generalised or universal assumption.⁴²

Merriam offers useful case study distinctions between *particularistic* (focusing on a single event or phenomenon), *descriptive* (qualitative descriptions to analyse situations) and *heuristic* (illuminating understanding, discovering new meaning and confirming what is known) case studies and constructively compares these three types with Olsen's more detailed interpretation.⁴³

Although there are attractive aspects in each of these three case study types, I am drawn to Robert Stake's understanding of the “art” of case study research for *unique* cases: “...the study of a particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances”.⁴⁴ He offers two distinct case study types: *instrumental*, which aims to understand issues beyond the case itself, and *intrinsic*, in which the case remains of interest, in and of itself. Although I will certainly make some generalised observations about peace and conflict, I consider Afghanistan to be of an intrinsic interest that goes beyond the value of generalising about other world situations. The precarious situation of Afghanistan has significant implications for the people of Afghanistan, the region and the international community.

Attempting to set boundaries for the “case” of Afghanistan is difficult. Although I have attempted to focus on internal political and military developments, I have still spilled across multiple subjects and disciplines, I have minimised detailed comment on regional,

⁴⁰ Yin, R., *Qualitative research from start to finish*, (Guilford Press: New York, 2011), pp.7-8.

⁴¹ Fry H, Ketteridge S and Marshall S, *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, (Kogan Page: Glasgow, 1999), pp.138.

⁴² Mann, B. L., *Selected Styles in Web-Based Research*, (Idea Group Inc: Pennsylvania, 2006).

⁴³ Merriam, S., ‘Case studies as qualitative research’, Chapter two in *Qualitative Research for Education*, (Jossey-Bass Inc; San Francisco, 1998).

⁴⁴ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.xi.

international, economic, developmental and social issues unless I considered it directly relevant. In terms of time frame, I am trying to look beyond 2014, a key political and military milestone, and into the next ten years. I do not consider it necessary to be precise about this time frame, however, because I am exploring concepts rather than very specific events.

Outline of research questions

I will therefore undertake a qualitative intrinsic case study using theoretical guides, particularly from the work of Charles Tilly, to explore the post-2014 future for Afghanistan. I want to look at the nature of the conflict, likely outcomes of the conflict and possible other risks and have generated three more specific research questions in order to reflect and focus my enquiries, as recommended, *inter alia*, by Stake and Yin.⁴⁵ I will examine and discuss these, making use of civil war and insurgency theories, Afghan history and Charles Tilly's work on conflict.

At present, "insurgency" seems to be the most common term applied to the current Afghan intrastate conflict, with "civil war" reserved for apocalyptic warnings for a generally unspecified, but near-future, timeframe, or to evoke the brutal and messy period of internal conflict in the 1990s.⁴⁶ The predominance of the use of the term "insurgency" is possibly due to the dominance of the international community – and in particular, the United States military – in prosecuting the conflict and concern regarding the credibility that "civil war" might confer upon the Taliban, implying not only military but political status and capability. Many definitions of civil war suggest that this is where Afghanistan is currently located in conflict terms. Thus my initial question:

Research Question 1:

What is the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan?

⁴⁵ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), pp.17-20 and Yin, R., *Qualitative research from start to finish*, (Guilford Press: New York, 2011), pp.67-69.

⁴⁶ Crilly, R., 'Afghanistan 'facing civil war when US troops leave': Afghanistan will slide back into civil war when American troops leave, according to a key insurgent negotiator who says peace talks now have no chance of success.', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 Sep. 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9543738/Afghanistan-facing-civil-war-when-US-troops-leave.html>

A military stalemate after 2014 seems plausible but analytically overlooked. Political talks have yet to begin and both military combatants remain in the field. No obvious “winner” is evident. If the Afghan government, populace and international community reflected more upon what a stalemate might mean, it might remove some of the unseemly haste that many actors are currently demonstrating in throwing together a political deal. An element of longer-term and strategic thinking might be brought to bear. A pragmatic awareness of (and even “embracing”) the stalemate, using the time to slowly develop local and national governance and security capabilities, might be good for Afghanistan. Thus my second question:

Research Question 2:

What is the likely outcome of the fighting in Afghanistan after 2014?

From a review of Afghan history it looks possible for armed and capable contenders to emerge in addition to the Taliban. With reference to Tilly's theories, I will explore the extent to which the biggest threat to Afghanistan's future is the emergence of *multiple sovereignties*, where other groups develop the capability, intent and support to compete for power, either with, against or independent of, Taliban challengers. Hence my third question:

Research Question 3:

What risks of conflict post-2014 might emerge from other contenders for state control?

There are limitations and risks inherent in single-case studies. The complex specifics of Afghanistan limit the generalizable value for considering other conflicts. Flyvbjerg is quite defensive of this “misunderstanding” about case study research.⁴⁷ Although I intend this case study to be intrinsic, I believe that my study of civil war, stalemates and multiple active political and military contenders may have implications for other conflict areas worthy of future study. Syria, to name one recent and complex example, appears immersed in the themes I analyse here. In Egypt, control of the army looks to be of crucial importance.

Stake is clear that research questions can be reworked as necessary, to accommodate new findings or replace fruitless avenues of exploration, even during the research process: “Initial

⁴⁷ Flyvbjerg, B., ‘Five misunderstandings about case study research’, from *Qualitative Research Practice*, (Sage: London and Thousand Oaks, California, 2004), pp.420-434.

research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study...If early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed.”⁴⁸ As I looked at the risks from other political and military factions (research question 3), it became clear, from both theory (Tilly) and Afghanistan's recent history, that the fate of the newly created Afghan army might be quite significant in determining the fate of the current regime. Although this was not originally an issue I was intending to explore in detail, further analysis suggested the issue should be addressed. I therefore include, at chapter nine, a consideration of the role of the army as a follow on question to research question three. Two other angles I researched – the risks of secession of part of the country and a detailed breakdown of conflict scenarios – I discarded early on. Both themes are of importance and value, but the time, space and analytical resources necessary detracted from the paper's focus.

Source material

I found that civil war theory alone was insufficient to help to understand and address the issues I raise here. Stake was clear that a case study is about subjective analysis derived from multiple sources and I have made use of an extensive range of primary and secondary sources, with the latter forming the bulk of the material. Most of this resides inside my own personal computer database and has been collected and compiled over approximately a decade of study of Afghanistan. Most of the data has not, therefore, been compiled specifically for the purpose of this paper, but it has been consistently directed towards the broader issue of the study of the current and possible future political and military condition of Afghanistan. As such, it is a highly relevant resource, containing interviews, photographs, video, media, internet, academic papers, conference reports and surrounding discussions, historic works, government, military and NGO reports and analysis. Most of my specific targeted research was conducted via this resource, books, journals and the internet.

I have also made use of observations, interviews, discussions and field trips from my own time spent on the ground in Afghanistan. I undertook five short field trips into Afghanistan in 2002-2003 that took in Kabul and the surrounding provinces, Mazar-e Sharif in the north and Kandahar in the south. I spent four months in Kabul in 2006, including short visits to Helmand and Mazar-e Sharif. In 2008 I spent two weeks with a Norwegian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Faryab province in northern Afghanistan and recorded some formal

⁴⁸ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.9.

field notes.⁴⁹ My final period in Afghanistan to date was in 2011, when I spent two months in the ISAF military headquarters in Kabul and did not travel beyond the city confines. These are primary sources, although I have had to treat them with care and in the end I consider that they have been of perhaps less value than I initially hoped, other than to assist my own broad and subjective understanding of Afghanistan. My experiences and conversations – sometimes with quite senior political and military figures – were not driven with the paper in mind. Confidentiality means source and content information is sometimes limited or non-existent. However, this is all informing my context, my interpretation and my analysis. Many activities were limited by language, geographic and security issues, but, by bringing the variety of sources together, I am achieving a better personal understanding of the situation and challenges in Afghanistan. Stake uses the term “triangulation” to describe the process of using diverse sources from different directions to permit a more coherent and plausible “location” of the analysis.⁵⁰ The concept appeals as an explanation for my treatment of sources here.

Each particular source has strengths and weaknesses, particularly where reliability and accuracy are concerned and I have carefully attempted to allow for this in my analysis. The Taliban present a vision of the conflict very different to ISAF or the Afghan government or different groups of the population. The conflict in Afghanistan – like many conflicts – is as much about perceptions as it is battle casualties and the taking and holding of ground. I do make regular use of media reports, sources and outlets. I have done this for several reasons. Some of the journalists I quote routinely produce high quality, well researched analysis, having crucial access to events and personalities. They have a long-term engagement in, and in-depth understanding of, Afghanistan. Other times, the tone of media reporting gives a sense of the “multiple realities” being created (intentionally and unintentionally) in and around Afghanistan – for example the evolution and employment of the term “civil war”. This is all, I would argue, integral to a qualitative case study of this sort, even if it means, as per Stake, “New puzzles are produced more frequently than solutions to old ones”.⁵¹

The risks of my own personal bias must be acknowledged. I have periodically been involved in Afghanistan in various capacities. Although I am not intentionally supporting policy lines

⁴⁹ Foxley, T., *Faryab notes, July 08*, field notes taken in Afghanistan, July 2008.

⁵⁰ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), pp.107-116.

⁵¹ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.45.

from any government or non-government organisation, bias might justifiably be pointed to in the specific reports, papers and quotes I chose to include in the paper and those (by far the bulk of my data set) that I excluded. There is no guard against this other than to declare it at the start and avail myself of Stake's defence: "Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential of understanding".⁵²

5. Conflict in Afghanistan: a discussion of historical context

...a tribe of Persians called Afghans. They hold mountains and defiles and possess considerable strength, and are mostly highwaymen...

Ibn Battúta, Moroccan explorer, 14th century.⁵³

Having introduced my analytical problem – how the conflict in Afghanistan might evolve – together with my theoretical and methodological approaches, I will look briefly at Afghanistan from a historical perspective. This contextual groundwork is important for understanding the complexity of the conflictual factors still apparent today. Although Afghans as a people are referred to from as early as the 10th century, it was not until the mid-18th century that "Afghanistan" as a nation came into being.⁵⁴ For thousands of years before this, it was a patchwork of smaller territories existing in a fluid space between three major civilisations: Persia in the west, Central Asia to the north and India to the south east. Foreign invasions of this region probably began with Aryan tribes in approximately 1,500 B.C., pushing south from Central Asia.⁵⁵

As these empires (Graeco-Bactrian, Seleucid, Mauryan, Kushan, Ghaznavid and Timurid) rose and fell, so was this region culturally, ethnically and religiously chopped, shaped and reshaped (see Annex).⁵⁶ The area now known as Afghanistan had been dissected by several invading armies even before the British Empire tried its luck, most notably (but not exclusively) by Alexander the Great (330 B.C.), the Arabs (652 A.D.) and Genghis Khan (1219 A.D.), whose conquering armies dispelled the myth beloved of Afghans that they have never been defeated and left behind strong linguistic, cultural, social and genetic traces of

⁵² Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.45.

⁵³ Battúta, I., *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, (G. Routledge & Sons Ltd: London, 1929).

⁵⁴ Griffiths, J., *Afghanistan*, (Pall Mall Press: London, 1967), p.7.

⁵⁵ Leeming, M and Omrani, B., *Afghanistan: a Companion and Guide*, (Airphoto international Ltd: Hong Kong, 2005), pp. 30-36.

⁵⁶ Emadi, H., *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan*, (Greenwood Press: London, 2005).

their presence.⁵⁷ The city of Kandahar is believed to be named after a local linguistic corruption of the ancient Greek name of Alexander the Great, “Iskander”.

The first Afghan state was created in 1747, but internecine strife between tribes and against rulers made the region turbulent. Afghanistan became the goal in the “Great Game” between the Russian and British empires, as both employed political, military and economic assets in a paranoid struggle for influence in a country which the Russians saw as gateway and the British saw as buffer. This competition lasted well over a hundred years and saw Britain engaged in three military campaigns (1839–42, 1878–80 and 1919) inside Afghanistan and innumerable skirmishes in and around the ill-defined border areas.⁵⁸

Internecine squabbles, coups, rebellions and uprisings remained a continuous feature in the 19th and early 20th centuries, hampering all manner of state building. Abdul Rahman, the “Iron Emir”, managed, through sheer brutality, to establish his own dynasty’s central authority from 1880 to 1929.⁵⁹ After another bloody change of dynasty, including a civil war in 1924, Barfield notes that the period 1929 to 1978 “...gave Afghanistan its longest interval of peace and internal stability...”.⁶⁰

This stability was deceptive. The post-World War II environment saw the emergence of a new competition for dominance between Soviet and American “empires”.⁶¹ In 1979, the Soviet Union intervened to support Afghan communist proxies who were faltering in their efforts to introduce a high speed socialist “modernisation” highly inappropriate for Afghanistan. The US covertly supported the armed resistance that arose as a result of the Soviet occupation in December 1979.⁶²

The guerrilla-style resistance from a multi-factional “Jihad” became a “bleeding wound” for the Soviet Union, who withdrew in 1989.⁶³ The extensive societal and infrastructural destruction was surpassed in the ten-year civil war that was to follow.⁶⁴ The proxy regime left by the Soviets managed, to the surprise of most, to cling on until 1992, before collapsing

⁵⁷ Leeming, M and Omrani, B., *Afghanistan: a Companion and Guide*, (Airphoto international Ltd: Hong Kong, 2005), pp. 30-36.

⁵⁸ Hopkirk, P., *The Great Game*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991).

⁵⁹ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), p.164.

⁶⁰ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), p.169.

⁶¹ Jalalzai, M., *Afghan National Army*, (Al-Abbas International: Lahore, 2004).

⁶² Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010).

⁶³ Feifer, G., *The Great Gamble: the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, (Harper Collins: New York, 2009), p.191.

⁶⁴ Rubin, B., *The fragmentation of Afghanistan*, (Yale University Press: Yale, 2002).

as the financial, military and economic aid from the Soviet Union dried up when it succumbed in the early 1990s. The victorious Afghan political factions could not reach agreement and soon Afghans were fighting Afghans in a confused and bloody civil war. A new group of disillusioned Pushtun students and religious fundamentalists emerged in the south to fight corrupt former Mujahideen.⁶⁵ The group, known as the Taliban (literally “seeker of truth”), under Mullah Mohammed Omar, gained the attention and support of Pakistan military and intelligence elements who were looking for a way to regain influence – if not downright control – in Afghanistan.⁶⁶

The UN had a painful and bruising experience as it attempted and failed to negotiate any credible transitional government or a cessation of hostilities beyond the most temporary of ceasefires.⁶⁷ By mid-2001 the Taliban controlled most of the country, although the civil war – by now a contest between a fluid coalition of northern ethnic groups and the southern, predominantly Pushtun, Taliban, had become a stalemate. The Taliban were never universally popular in Afghanistan. Their backward-looking, fundamentalist-driven approach was harshly and strictly applied to all aspects of life: human rights, women's rights, education, governance and justice.⁶⁸

This stalemate was over-turned. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a US-led international military coalition combined with Afghan warlord groups on the ground to attack the Taliban, who crumbled. They melted away, either to return to their old jobs as Pushtun farmers or to retire to Pakistan to lick their wounds, regroup and reconsider.⁶⁹

In the immediate aftermath, a UN-brokered conference at Bonn in December 2001 laid the groundwork for an interim regime under promising compromise candidate, Hamid Karzai. This was later confirmed by elections, a constitution and extensive international assistance. Optimism was high throughout the country: in 2003, a very senior former Northern Alliance official, then highly placed in the Karzai administration, responded to my query that he had

⁶⁵ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001).

⁶⁶ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp.26-29.

⁶⁷ Saikal, A., ‘The UN and Afghanistan: A case of failed peacemaking intervention?’, *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 3, No.1, Spring 1996, pp.19-34.

⁶⁸ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001).

⁶⁹ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), pp.268-270.

failed to mention the Taliban once in a discussion about the future challenges for Afghanistan with a curt and dismissive shake of his head, “the Taliban are gone”.⁷⁰

Well-intentioned international assistance was incoherent and wasteful, causing frustration and resentment amongst the populace. The Afghan government failed to rise to the challenges of creating an effective, nepotism- and corruption-free central administration.⁷¹ The issue of what form of governance is best for Afghans is still intensely debated, many favouring a more decentralised vision of the country.⁷² Taliban fighters began to re-emerge in southern and eastern power vacuums, recruitment aided by Afghan unease over the foreign military presence and the flaws of the new regime.⁷³ From late 2005/early 2006 a new insurgency was emerging, resembling (in fact, consciously aping), the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad. Neighbouring Pakistan re-emerged as “bête noire”, regularly accused by the Afghan government and the international community of providing support to the Taliban despite officially committing itself to supporting the Afghan government and international reconstruction efforts.⁷⁴

As the insurgency grew in intensity, international responses were inconsistent, unable to decisively decide which approach to take.⁷⁵ Many nations were unwilling or unable to effectively engage in a coherent fighting campaign, vice the aid-giving, non-conflict, activities they preferred and had planned for.⁷⁶ Military and civilian casualties began to rise. If the 1990s civil war was decisively ended by international intervention in late 2001, by the middle of the decade, the situation in Afghanistan, by most definitions, again resembled civil war.

General Stanley McCrystal, ISAF commander from 2009 – 2010, ironically (and likely unintentionally) echoed Gorbachev's 1988 “bleeding wound” assessment of Afghanistan when he described operations against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan as a “bleeding

⁷⁰ Author's conversation with senior Transitional Government official, Kabul, 2003

⁷¹ Rosenberg, M., and Bowley, G., ‘Intractable Afghan Graft Hampering U.S. Strategy’, *The New York Times*, 7 Mar. 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/08/world/asia/corruption-remains-intractable-in-afghanistan-under-karzai-government.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁷² Ahmad, K., ‘Tribal reps call for decentralised govt’, *Pajhwok News*, 26 Feb. 2012, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/02/26/tribal-reps-call-decentralised-govt>

⁷³ Giustozzi, A., *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 2007).

⁷⁴ ‘Afghan army chief: “Pakistan controls Taliban”’, *BBC News*, 3 July 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23152159>

⁷⁵ West, B., *The Wrong War*, (Random House: New York, 2012).

⁷⁶ Foxley, T., *Faryab notes, July 08*, field notes taken in Afghanistan, July 2008.

ulcer".⁷⁷ His pragmatic analysis set the tone for acknowledging the military difficulties involved.⁷⁸ The international combat effort peaked in 2010 – US President Obama resolved to reduce American troop levels from 2011 with Afghan armed forces required to fully take responsibility for internal security from 2014.⁷⁹

6. Discussion of Question 1: What is the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan?

You do not wake up one morning and the radio says it's civil war...The ingredients are already there...Under the very watchful eyes of the international community...In Kunduz, there is already a civil war.

Amrullah Saleh, Afghan government Head of Intelligence, 2004-2010.⁸⁰

There are two issues of particular note about the manner in which the conflict is described. The first is how rarely the term “civil war” is employed for the present situation, with “insurgency” seemingly preferred. The second is that the term seems to be reserved to describe the Afghan conflict of the 1990s or as a warning of what could happen in the future. Connable and Libicki highlight the issue of subjectivity of the terminology (“one person’s insurgency in another’s civil war”), before offering a definition of insurgency thus:

...the violent struggle by a non-governmental armed group against its government or an interceding force, with the intent of overthrowing the current regime, expelling an interloper, gaining greater rights, or obtaining independence.⁸¹

Barfield suggests there are two identifiable types of Afghan civil war: *dynastic wars of succession*, lasting perhaps months and more protracted *wars of regime change*, normally associated with foreign intervention. He argues the former is more common in Afghan history and involves regions of the country, not the entirety. The latter is a more recent phenomenon, usually more widespread and bloody.⁸² The British engagements in the 19th

⁷⁷ Nissenbaum, D., ‘McChrystal calls Marjah a ‘bleeding ulcer’ in Afghan campaign’, *McClatchy*, 24 May 2010, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/05/24/94740/mcchrystal-calls-marjah-a-bleeding.html#.UZ8WkpyK_s

⁷⁸ McChrystal, S., ‘COMISAF’s Initial Assessment’, *ISAF*, Aug. 2009.

⁷⁹ Woodward, B., *Obama’s Wars: The Inside Story*, (Simon and Schuster: London, 2010).

⁸⁰ Filkins, D., ‘Will civil war hit Afghanistan when the US leaves?’, *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/07/09/120709fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all

⁸¹ Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010.

⁸² Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), p.191.

century, the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and the US-led intervention in the 21st century would fit this category.

The Taliban's insurgency, although borrowing heavily in style, tactics and language from the 1980s insurgency (in which many of the leadership took part) does not have the scale, intensity or popular support of the 1979-1989 period. It was not always like this. At the start of the 21st century, the Taliban controlled 90 per cent of Afghanistan. At this point the country had been in a civil war since approximately 1992.⁸³ In October 2001, US-led international attacks against the Taliban caused their rapid collapse. The civil war that emerged in the 1990s can be judged with confidence to have ended at this point. What happened since is harder to define. Much of the Taliban leadership fled to Pakistan. When it became clear they were not to be included in peace discussions, a period of regrouping and reflection took place. Taliban groups re-infiltrated back in the south and east of Afghanistan – the ethnic heartland from where they derived most of their support – and returned to the guerrilla combat with which most were familiar, being sure to “reach-out” to the population. Playing on a range of contemporary and historic concerns – Islamic, xenophobic, economic, ethnic and tribal – an insurgency developed, the scale of which was only really discovered when British forces deployed in strength to southern Afghanistan in 2006.⁸⁴

Then, the insurgency was localised, but slowly increased in confidence and capability. They developed a media section, political wing, financial commission and, most recently, a “Call and Guidance/Recruitment Commission”, intended to bring over defectors from the regime.⁸⁵ International intelligence estimates traced the growth of the armed strength of the insurgency from the low thousands in 2005, to somewhere around 25 – 35,000 in 2013.⁸⁶

Most definitions of civil war demonstrate three elements: the fighting is broadly within the confines of a defined national boundary, between at least two militarily active protagonists originating from, and competing for political power within, this geographic boundary and that casualties reach certain levels (Sambanis and Doyle, Kalyvas, Singer and Small). This looks very much like Afghanistan from about 2005 to the present. Tilly, considering revolutionary *situations* and *outcomes*, argues that it is more about the scale of power transfer at stake. For

⁸³ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), p.322.

⁸⁴ Tweedie, N., ‘Troops use up ammo as war with Taliban claims 14th life’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 Aug. 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1527468/Troops-use-up-ammo-as-war-with-Taliban-claims-14th-life.html>

⁸⁵ See the Taliban official website, <http://shahamat-english.com/>

⁸⁶ Foxley, T., ‘How many Taliban are there?’, *Afghanhindsight analytical blog*, 8 Nov. 2012, <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/how-many-taliban-are-there/>

him, revolutions, civil wars and insurrections are graduations of power transfer that can greatly overlap, with revolution at the top end of the scale and insurgencies at the lower end.⁸⁷

Are the Taliban sufficiently viable military and political contenders to make this a civil war? Since their defeat in 2001, the Taliban have taken a while to present a challenge to the new Afghan government – recruiting, training and commanding many local groups proved difficult in the early years. The Taliban have made considerable effort to develop political credentials. In 2012, a hitherto confidential NATO assessment noted the following:

...the Taliban leadership continued to refocus from military operations to the establishment of alternative civilian governance. The Taliban have recognized that the public has been dissatisfied with [the Afghan government] for many years, but with no ability to act as a substitute and little control over subordinate personnel, they could not generate widespread support among the population. While Taliban military operations continue to gain media attention, their growing ability to provide essential governmental services has become a strong source of appeal for Afghans.⁸⁸

Taliban media effort presents the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” as a counter to the Afghan government, which they reject as illegal. This year they announced talks with Iran over the plight of Afghan refugees.⁸⁹ They also revealed that they were considering dialogue with the UN over civilian casualties.⁹⁰ Their official goal is the restoration of the Emirate, although intentions are perhaps ahead of capability. Opinion polls have difficulties operating in Afghanistan and should be treated with caution, however, regular polling by the Asia Foundation regarding the level of Taliban support noted:

A majority of respondents say they have no sympathy at all (63%), while 10% say they have a lot of sympathy and 20% say they have some level of sympathy for these groups...There has been a decline in the number of people who sympathize a lot or little with these armed

⁸⁷ Tilly, C., ‘From Mobilisation to Revolution’, *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977.

⁸⁸ NATO, ‘The State of the Taliban’, *declassified report by TF-3-10 Bagram*, 6 Jan 2012.

⁸⁹ Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Afghan Taliban send delegation to Iran: Insurgents' trip to Tehran presented as meeting of governments, which is likely to fuel reports of co-operation between countries’, *The Guardian*, 3 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/afghan-taliban-send-delegation-iran>

⁹⁰ Cahall, B., ‘Afghan Taliban willing to meet U.N. officials to discuss civilian casualties’, *AfPak Channel, Foreign Policy*, 11 June 2013, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/11/afghan_taliban_willing_to_meet_un_officials_to_discuss_civilian_casualties

opposition groups that use violence, and there has been an increase among those who have no sympathy at all for them.⁹¹

The Taliban are not widely popular although this, for Tilly, would be the key to converting a potential revolutionary *situation* where power is contested into an *outcome* where power can transfer. What seems to have happened in the 2002 – 2013 period is the mutation of the heavily defeated and fragmented Taliban regime into limited local insurgencies that evolved and expanded to fill vacuums that the new regime was unable to control. Momentum and coordination developed once it became clear just how incoherent were the Afghan government and international efforts to stabilise and rebuild the country. The Taliban have natural constituencies of support in the rural areas, amongst Pushtun tribes in the south and east of the country, but this is clearly not a Jihad of anti-Soviet proportions, which Barfield describes as Afghanistan's first (and, thus far, *only*) nationwide period of insurgency.

Conclusions

Although definitions are a little inconclusive, I find that Afghanistan is currently in a state of civil war that began at some point after the Taliban's defeat in late 2001, when the previous civil war ended. A noticeable leap in Taliban political and fighting capabilities took place around 2006 and casualties surged: it is plausible to suggest that the new civil war began at around this time, giving us two opponents compatible with Tilly's contested revolutionary *situation*, if not an actual *outcome*. Formal definitions are not always helpful and use of the term "insurgency" risks clouding our understanding. Some see the term as synonymous with "civil war", others that an insurgency is but one form of civil war, others still that an insurgency is generally of a smaller scale than a civil war.⁹² I would incline to side with Fearon and Laitin here, seeing rural insurgency as a particular expression of civil war. This is primarily what we are seeing inside Afghanistan.⁹³ The main distinction between use of the terms "civil war" and "insurgency" appears to be subjective, with the terms applied for reasons of perspective and political agenda, in which an insurgency is conceived as something smaller in scale and more manageable – a localised armed protest against government, rather than a credible attempt to remove or replace it.

⁹¹ 'Afghanistan in 2012: a survey of the Afghan people', The Asia Foundation, 2012, <http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/1163>

⁹² Regan, P. and Norton, D., 'Greed, grievance, and mobilisation in Civil Wars', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No.3, June 2005, for a suggested 12 "sliding scale" of civil conflict.

⁹³ Fearon, J. and Laitin, D. 'Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War', *Stanford University*, 20 Aug. 2001.

It is tempting to ask whether it matters that Afghanistan is defined as a civil war or not. At the moment it may not. However, the term recognises at least two formal combatants with pretensions to governance of the country. For Afghanistan to be in a condition of “civil war” might undermine the position of the current government by confirming that there is a valid potential alternative government system. The use of the term provides valuable propaganda. At time of writing, the Afghan government are extremely concerned that international recognition for a Taliban office in Qatar intended to facilitate talks might form a potential legitimisation of the Taliban as a viable alternative political contender.⁹⁴ We can watch with interest to see how the use of the term evolves in the future – a conflict that becomes “someone else’s civil war” could provide the cue for international abandonment. Conversely, mindful of reported improving relations between the Taliban and Iran, as well as Pakistan’s long-documented and controversial support for the Taliban, it also becomes possible to envisage countries formally recognising a Taliban political contender, reinforcing the notion that Afghanistan is in a civil war.

7. Discussion of Question 2: What is the likely outcome of the fighting in Afghanistan after 2014?

We are looking at a situation where the war is very likely to be stalemated with no formula for ending it.

Stephen Biddle, GWU, January 2013.⁹⁵

I will now develop an analysis on the possible direction of the conflict. In Helmand province, in June 2008, the then commander of British forces in southern Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carlton-Smith, gave an upbeat assessment of the counter-insurgency campaign, claiming the Taliban had been “decapitated”. In London, in October, on completion of his tour of duty, he seemed to have had a change of heart:

...Carleton-Smith said the British public should not expect ‘a decisive military victory’ and that he believed groups of insurgents would still be at large after troops pulled out. In June, he claimed that British forces had reached a “tipping point” against a weakened Taliban after their leadership was “decapitated”. But on Sunday the army officer said it was time to lower

⁹⁴ AFP, ‘Afghans say US assures Taliban office is not recognition’, *Express Tribune*, 19 June 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/565622/afghans-say-us-assures-taliban-office-is-not-recognition/>

⁹⁵ Gwertzman, B., ‘Stalemate in Afghanistan looms’, Interview with Stephen Biddle for Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Jan. 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/stalemate-looms-afghanistan/p29813>

expectations and focus on reducing the conflict to a level which could be managed by the Afghan army.⁹⁶

ISAF has made strenuous efforts to defeat the Taliban-led insurgency, but a “surge” of an additional 33,000 US troops in 2010 was almost certainly the peak of this effort.⁹⁷ The international military perspective has been that counter-insurgency takes time and incremental progress can be demonstrated.⁹⁸ The international community and the Afghan population are less convinced.

Can the government militarily defeat the Taliban?

I suggested in the discussion of Research Question 1 that the Taliban have problems of support, recruitment and military and political capabilities. Government forces have a range of problems of their own. The ANSF comprises the army, police, air force, border guards, local militias and other specialist units including counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist groups. The force is still new and developing, having been created more or less from scratch. After the fall of the Taliban, the concern was to disarm the numerous armed groups controlled by warlords who presented a threat to Karzai's interim government, which had limited coercive power of its own and depended on the international coalition. A new force, loyal to central government, was sorely needed.⁹⁹

Attempts to construct a new army and police force were hesitant and haphazard as plans and concepts came and went. In 2003, I had the opportunity to witness ANA training. At that time the French were teaching the Afghan officers, the British the non-commissioned officers and the Americans the soldiers. There was undoubted enthusiasm amongst many parts of the new army, but still a strong culture of entitlement and nepotism: ex-warlords expected to be given high-ranking positions without being qualified.¹⁰⁰ An appropriate size for the ANSF,

⁹⁶ Gammel, C., ‘War in Afghanistan cannot be won, British commander Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith warns’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 Oct. 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/onthe frontline/3139702/War-in-Afghanistan-cannot-be-won-British-commander-Brigadier-Mark-Carleton-Smith-warns.html>

⁹⁷ Woodward, B., *Obama's Wars: The Inside Story*, (Simon and Schuster: London, 2010).

⁹⁸ Starr, B., ‘Petraeus: Progress being made in Afghanistan’, *CNN*, 31 Oct. 2010,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/10/30/afghanistan.petraeus/index.html>

⁹⁹ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010), p.314.

¹⁰⁰ Author's field trip, 2003.

one based on cost and threat assessment, has always been a source of hot debate.¹⁰¹ Original targets looked for an ANSF of around 70,000 but this figure crept upwards each year. NATO now confirms that the goal for the ANSF is a force of 352,000.¹⁰² The force has been trained and equipped along Western models which conflict with Afghan attitudes to fighting, resources and educational levels.

Rapid force generation created many problems. Quality of personnel is poor, desertion commonplace and corruption widespread. The ability to maintain the force – crucial if they are to stand alone from 2013 – is limited. Casualties are high, adding to the attrition rate.¹⁰³ It has proved easy to generate quantities of men willing to take money to put on a uniform, carry a gun and man a checkpoint, but harder to train them to coordinate and operate at higher levels of command. Skills such as logistics, intelligence, air support, medical, artillery, engineers and planning are crucial but much less advanced.¹⁰⁴ Insurgents have infiltrated ANSF units and ISAF personnel have been killed by Afghan soldiers.¹⁰⁵ The similarly low quality police are being worryingly misused:

We have built the Afghan police into a less well-armed, less well-trained version of the Army...nobody is doing the job of actual policing—rule of law, keeping the population safe from all comers...providing justice and dispute resolution, and civil and criminal law enforcement. As a consequence, the Taliban have stepped into this gap...¹⁰⁶

None of this suggests a force that will be able to adopt population-sensitive counter-insurgency techniques or inflict a military defeat on the Taliban any time soon.

Can the Taliban militarily defeat the government?

¹⁰¹ Bruno, G., 'The Afghan National Security Forces', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 Aug. 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/afghanistans-national-security-forces/p19122>

¹⁰² NATO media backgrounder, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), training and development, NATO, 5 Dec. 2012.

¹⁰³ Hopkis, N., 'Taliban kill 1,100 members of Afghan security forces in six months: Casualties have doubled and desertion rates spiked over past year as Nato steps back, figures reveal', *The Guardian*, 23 Jan. 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/23/taliban-afghan-security-forces-nato>

¹⁰⁴ Felbab-Brown, V., 'Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force', *The Brookings Institute*, 2 Aug. 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2012/08/02-afghanistan-security-felbabbrown>

¹⁰⁵ Kovanen, S. and Gualler, A., 'The Rising Danger of Insurgent Infiltration within Afghanistan's National Security Forces and Government: Methods, Tactics and Influences', *Indicium Consulting*, Apr. 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Packer, G., 'Kilcullen on Afghanistan: "It's Still Winnable, But Only Just."', *The New Yorker*, 14 Nov. 2008, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2008/11/kilcullen-on-af.html>

The Taliban have considerable experience in the type of warfare they have adopted. The Taliban's fighting strength originally developed from the experiences that the first generation of Taliban – including leader Mullah Omar – underwent during the Jihad against the Soviet Union. Ahmed Rashid noted the physical impact of this:

The Taliban leadership can boast to be the most disabled in the world today... Mullah Omar lost his right eye in 1989 when a rocket exploded close by...The war wounds of the Taliban leaders also reflect the bloody and brutal style of war that took place in and around Kandahar in the 1990s...¹⁰⁷

Their initial rise in the south in the mid-1990s saw a tried and tested guerrilla style of fighting. Later, the “trademark” method of operating was employment of hundreds of light, highly mobile, 4 x4 pick-up trucks. As the civil war intensified, their fighting style embraced heavy weapons – as did their opponents. The Taliban and their opponents made use of the large amounts of Soviet equipment – tanks, artillery, aircraft and rockets left behind or donated subsequently.¹⁰⁸ Many so-called “battles” were decided through negotiation, once it had become clear, pre-combat, who was likely to win. Deals could be struck and sides changed with relative ease. This worked in the Taliban's favour as their momentum swept them rapidly through the country, capturing Kandahar in 1994, Herat in the west in 1995, Kabul in 1996 and Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan in 1997. The Taliban were to experience this in reverse in late 2001 as their front lines unravelled under attacks from northern Afghan Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek militias as they combined with US airpower and US Special Forces.

Shifting allegiances among Afghan tribal armed forces were common in times of unrest and uncertainty over who would be the ruler. This risk did not disappear when a more modern army was established in the twentieth century...¹⁰⁹

The Taliban returned to their roots and evolved into a credible, capable and powerful guerrilla force. Using a safe haven in the mountainous and rugged tribal areas of north-west Pakistan and well-honed insurgency tactics, they regrouped, rearmed and returned to

¹⁰⁷ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp.17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), p.35.

¹⁰⁹ Byrd, W., ‘Lessons from Afghanistan's History for the Current Transition and Beyond’, *USIP Special Report*, Report No. 314, Sep. 2012, <http://www.usip.org/publications/lessons-afghanistan-s-history-the-current-transition-and-beyond>, p.5.

Afghanistan to continue to the fight.¹¹⁰ This was a slow process but resolve is still strong. A NATO report from January 2012 made the following assessment:

Taliban commanders, along with rank and file members, increasingly believe their control of Afghanistan is inevitable. Though the Taliban suffered severely in 2011, its strength, motivation, funding, and tactical proficiency remain intact. While they are weary of war, they see little hope for a negotiated peace. Despite numerous tactical setbacks, surrender is far from their collective mind-set. For the moment, they believe that continuing the fight and expanding Taliban governance are their only viable courses of action.¹¹¹

Taliban tactics now embrace suicide bombings and assassinations, a result of exposure to international terror techniques and the Taliban's own links to Al Qaeda. President Karzai's brother, Wali Karzai, a major political figure in southern Afghanistan was assassinated in July 2011.¹¹² The Head of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was killed in a suicide attack in September 2011.¹¹³ At time of writing, the Taliban appear to be stepping up their attacks on "soft" targets, such as NGOs: in May 2013, the International Organisation for Migration office in Kabul and the Red Cross compound in Jalalabad were hit by suicide attackers within a week of each other.¹¹⁴

The Taliban have problems, however. They are not controlling territory to any significant degree: there is no territorial conquest they can use as a bargaining tool. They are dependent upon Pakistan safe havens and are not achieving the levels of popular support appropriate to Jihadic demands, which many of the leadership would recognise as essential from their anti-Soviet experiences. Taliban fighting strength seems to have "plateaued", neither growing nor shrinking. Membership of the Taliban is fluid. Many fighters identified as "Taliban" could just as easily return to farming, join up with a local police group or forge links with local

¹¹⁰ Maley, W., *Rescuing Afghanistan*, (C. Hurst and Co: London, 2006), p.60.

¹¹¹ NATO, 'The State of the Taliban', *declassified report by TF-3-10 Bagram*, 6 Jan 2012.

¹¹² Semple, M., 'Death of Ahmad Wali Karzai leaves Afghan power vacuum', *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8633302/Death-of-Ahmad-Wali-Karzai-leaves-Afghan-power-vacuum.html>

¹¹³ BBC, 'Afghan peace council head Rabbani killed in attack', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 Sep. 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-14985779>

¹¹⁴ Constable, P. and Salahuddin, S., 'Afghan militants hit Red Cross compound in second attack on a charity within a week', *Washington Post*, 29 May 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-militants-hit-red-cross-compound-in-second-attack-on-a-charity-within-a-week/2013/05/29/4c031a68-c881-11e2-9cd9-3b9a22a4000a_story.html

militia commanders. Most groups of Afghan society are either opposed to the Taliban or at least waiting to see how the conflict plays itself out.¹¹⁵

This suggests limitations to the military and political capabilities of the Taliban – possibly borne out by what appears to be an increasing reliance on terrorism.¹¹⁶ Many studies of guerrilla warfare have highlighted the transition from guerrilla fighters to organised regular forces that a rebel force must undergo in order to wrest control from a government in power.¹¹⁷

It is likely the Taliban will struggle to develop the capacity to launch larger scale, conventional, attacks that could pose a real threat to the Afghan government.

If the Taliban tried to re-shape into a conventional military force, it would be fraught with danger for them: command, control, discipline and logistics become much more difficult and complex. Concentrating their forces would offer the perfect target for artillery and aircraft. The Mujahideen assault against the city of Jalalabad in 1989 with thousands of massed troops ended in bloody catastrophe (“...a textbook example of how not to fight a battle”), with uncoordinated, naïve, enthusiasm proving no match for a well-supplied and entrenched Afghan Army that was asked to do little beyond point a gun and shoot.¹¹⁸

Is a political settlement likely?

Political settlements appear less durable than outright military victory.¹¹⁹ Mason et al concluded that negotiated settlements were at greater risk of collapsing in the early years after the conflict than outright military victories.¹²⁰ A political settlement is still widely touted as the only viable solution for Afghanistan's current conflict situation.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ ‘Afghanistan in 2012: a survey of the Afghan people’, The Asia Foundation, 2012, <http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/1163>

¹¹⁶ Roggio, B., ‘Afghan Taliban lauded suicide bombings days before opening 'political office' *The Long War Journal*, 11 July 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/afghan_taliban_laude.php

¹¹⁷ Kitson, F., *Low Intensity Operations*, (W.S.Cowell Ltd: Ipswich, 1971), p.5.

¹¹⁸ Yousaf, M and Adkin, M., *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's untold story*, (Leo Cooper: London, 1992), p.223-232.

¹¹⁹ Toft, M., ‘Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?’, *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 7–36.

¹²⁰ Mason, D., Gurses, M., Brandt, P. and Quinn, J., ‘When Civil Wars Recur: Conditions for Durable Peace after Civil Wars’, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 12, 2011.

¹²¹ International Crisis Group, ‘Talking about Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan’, Asia Report No. 221, 26 Mar. 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/221-talking-about-talks-toward-a-political-settlement-in-afghanistan.aspx>.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen...expressed cautious support for expanded political contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban. 'I am not going to guess about motives and intentions within the Taliban leadership. However, I commend all efforts to try and find a political settlement'...¹²²

Much discourse on Afghanistan – political, military, analytical, academic, media – refers to the importance of political dialogue to a peace settlement. However, what becomes apparent is how many potential dialogue participants there are and the complexity of this goal. There are at least three separate insurgent groups: the Taliban themselves, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and the Haqqani Network. The latter two are smaller and more localised in reach, but operate in the same manner and reject the international presence and the Afghan government. The Afghan government is clearly key but has problems. It established a High Peace Council (HPC), comprising diverse members of Afghan society (including women, former Mujahideen and ex-Taliban), charging it with dialogue with the Taliban. President Karzai has involved himself personally, often unhelpfully.¹²³ But the Taliban reject the Afghan government and do not recognise the HPC, going as far as to assassinate its head, Burhanuddin Rabbani, one of Afghanistan's most senior religious and political figures, in 2011.¹²⁴ Other political factions are believed to have initiated talks independently with the Taliban.¹²⁵ Pakistan and the United States both demand a place in talks and it is generally accepted that neighbouring countries and near neighbours should all be considered to have legitimate interests. This brings Iran, Russia, India, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Arab states into the dialogue arena as "interested parties".¹²⁶

Recent historical precedent for talks between warring factions in Afghanistan is not encouraging. The UN struggled for years, without any real success, to bring factions to the table, establish ceasefires and develop transitional governments during the civil war in the

¹²² 'Afghanistan, NATO-Russia Talks Make Little Progress On Missile Defense', *RFE/RL*, May 29 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/nato-foreign-ministers-meeting/24965761.html>

¹²³ Dyer, G. and Kazmin, A., 'Karzai withdrawal from Afghan peace talks leaves tough road ahead', *The Financial Times*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d1a5df7c-d8ba-11e2-84fa-00144feab7de.html#axzz2blqyfNVi>

¹²⁴ Wendle, J., 'Rabbani's Killing Pushes Peace with the Taliban Further Out of Reach', *Time*, 21 Sep. 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2094186,00.html>

¹²⁵ Trofimov, Y. and Hodge, N., 'Taliban to meet with Northern Foes', *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 Dec. 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324001104578163590509546514.html>

¹²⁶ Rashid, A., 'Afghanistan: after the war is peace possible?', *The New Republic*, 28 Mar. 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112680/afghanistan-after-war#>

1990s.¹²⁷ Efforts were continually frustrated by outbreaks of fighting, groups changing sides, agreements failing to be honoured and combat taking place between parts of the same government.

Although the Taliban now appear to have been permitted to establish a political office (in Qatar) in order to enable dialogue to commence, little appears to have taken place of substance.¹²⁸ Many experienced analysts remain very pessimistic, given that there is so little clarity about who is to talk to whom, what is to be discussed, who can approve (let alone enforce) any deals and how the Afghan population might endorse any decisions.¹²⁹

The Taliban had their morale boosted by the impending withdrawal of international military forces in 2014 with the conflict still underway.¹³⁰ The US government continue to insist that the Taliban publically renounce Al Qaeda, support the Afghan constitution, disarm and declare support for human rights.¹³¹ The Taliban's perspective is simple – why does a retreating army think it is in a position to dictate terms?

In reality, they want surrender of Mujahideen under the title of peace; give up arms, abide by the constitution created under the shadow of invaders and bow your heads to our orders and we won't say anything to you! Is this peace? Do they think that the Afghan nation gave colossal sacrifices for the past eleven years to surrender to the invaders?¹³²

Blurring things further is the state of the combat between the Afghan government and international forces on the one hand and the insurgents on the other. With the ISAF forces withdrawing, this burden of combat is being picked up by the fledgling Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Neither the ANSF nor the Taliban yet seem ready to concede the

¹²⁷ Saikal, A., 'The UN and Afghanistan: A case of failed peacemaking intervention?', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 3, No.1, Spring 1996, pp.19-34.

¹²⁸ Nordland, R., 'At the Taliban Office, waiting for progress on talks', *The New York Times*, 20 June 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/asia/taliban-talks-afghanistan.htm>

¹²⁹ Author's notes, <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/afghanistan-towards-2014-diis-conference-key-points/>

¹³⁰ Taliban website, 'Reaction of Islamic Emirate regarding announcement of troop reduction from Afghanistan by Obama', 13 Feb. 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/29200-reaction-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-announcement-of-troop-reduction-from-afghanistan-by-obama>

¹³¹ Greenwood, M. and Sheikh, M., 'Taliban Talks: Past, present and prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan', DIIS Report 2013:06.

¹³² Statement from Taliban website, 'Text of speech enunciated by Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at research conference in France', 24 Dec. 2012, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/28777-text-of-speech-enunciated-by-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-at-research-conference-in-france>

field of battle. There is little evidence of a “hurting stalemate” pushing anyone into talks.¹³³ Some Western analysts and advisors continue to believe that the Taliban can be militarily defeated and that substantial numbers of US forces should remain in Afghanistan.¹³⁴

Finally, there is the poor use of language and terminology in the dialogue process: “talks”, “cease-fire”, “dialogue”, “settlement”, “negotiations”, “reintegration”, “reconciliation” and even “peace” are all being applied in different (and misleading) contexts. This has the effect of raising expectations and complicating processes. An Afghan government initiative, the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) was introduced in 2010, intending to *reintegrate* individual insurgents and *reconcile* larger insurgent groups. The APRP process has been criticised for being little more than a counter-insurgency tool, intended to fragment and erode Taliban capabilities by bringing over small groups of fighters weary of combat.¹³⁵ ISAF publically described its role in the process thus:

Reintegration is an essential part of the [counter insurgency] campaign, not an alternative to it. Reintegration removes fighters from the battlefield.¹³⁶

Whereas reconciliation and reintegration might usually be undertaken after a settlement and fighting has ceased, the APRP seemed designed as a means of stopping the fighting in a fashion wholly designed to achieve a victory for government forces. Perhaps it is hardly surprising that the APRP is rejected by the Taliban and has achieved little.¹³⁷

The case for stalemate

Periods of protracted military stalemate look less common in Afghanistan's history. Internal wars of succession, Barfield suggests, are usually resolved in months.¹³⁸ While genuine dialogue progress is certainly possible – even probable - after 2014, given the problems getting the parties together and the lack of decisive military capability on either side, there

¹³³ Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T, and Miall, H., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, (Polity Press; Cambridge, 2005), 2nd Edition, p.166-167.

¹³⁴ ‘What went wrong in Afghanistan?’ Foreign Policy, Fred Kagan section, 4 Mar. 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/04/what_went_wrong?page=full

¹³⁵ International Crisis Group, ‘Talking about Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan’, Asia Report No. 221, 26 Mar. 2012.

¹³⁶ ISAF publication, ‘A Guide to the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)’, ISAF Force Reintegration Cell (FRIC), Mar. 2012.

¹³⁷ Derksen, D., ‘Impact or Illusion? Reintegration under the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program’, *USIP Peace Briefing paper No. 106*, 22 Sep. 2011, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PB%20106.pdf

¹³⁸ Barfield, T., *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2010).

looks to be a likelihood, from what we have seen of the 1990s (and more recently) that talking and fighting will co-exist, with the latter generally hampering the former. This might point towards messy stalemate. Although the lessons of history are perhaps less valuable as we move further back in time, in the last four decades of conflict in Afghanistan, it is possible to identify several instances of stalemate:

1. The Soviet military efforts in the mid-late 1980s failing to make headway.
2. The Najibullah regime and army resisting the Mujahideen from 1989 to 1992
3. The struggle between the “warlords” from 1992 to approximately 1994
4. The struggle between warlords and the Taliban from 1998 to 2001
5. The insurgency led by the Taliban against the government and international forces from approximately 2005 to the present

This suggests that we can entertain the idea of a protracted conflict beyond 2014 in which neither side develops significant advantage over the other and credible dialogue simply does not take root. The international community's financial, military and political support to the Afghan regime will be important but perhaps only *decisive* if it ceases. While the West might not allow Afghanistan to fail over this period, and is highly likely to retain some military presence, it does not appear to possess the appetite for sustained political or military effort beyond a “propping up” exercise after 2014.¹³⁹

So how might the conflict play out after 2014? Certainly the historical parallel that catches the eye is the situation facing the Afghan regime under Najibullah after the Soviets departed in 1989.¹⁴⁰ This saw the military forces of a superpower being extricated (“a well-planned and superbly executed nine-month withdrawal”) while an insurgency was on-going.¹⁴¹ Responsibility for continuing the fight was handed over to a large but weak Afghan national army. Many international observers expected a rapid collapse. Early indicators seemed to confirm this, with insurgent attacks increasing in intensity and a military coup (involving government and rebel elements in collusion) only narrowly averted.¹⁴² However, over-

¹³⁹ Allen, J., Flournoy, M. and O'Hanlon, M., 'Towards a successful outcome in Afghanistan', *Center for a New American Security Report*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.cnas.org/towardasuccessfuloutcomeinAfghanistan>

¹⁴⁰ Grau, L., 'Breaking Contact without leaving chaos: the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, April-June 2007, Volume 20, Number 2.

¹⁴¹ Fivecoat, D., 'Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union's Withdrawal From Afghanistan', *Parameters*, Summer 2012.

¹⁴² Fivecoat, D., 'Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union's Withdrawal From Afghanistan', *Parameters*, Summer 2012.

confidence on the part of the Mujahideen led to major casualties as they attempted to assault Jalalabad.¹⁴³ After these “wobbles”, the conflict settled into a stalemate, with the government holding the major urban centres and communication routes and the insurgency many rural areas. Weitz, writing in 1992, called this the “unexpected military stalemate”, noting that:

After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghan government troops proved unexpectedly successful at attaining their minimum objective of retaining control of the cities. The insurgents, so skilled at guerrilla warfare, were unable to defeat government forces in large-scale conventional warfare.¹⁴⁴

This stalemate was only broken when the Soviet regime in Moscow itself dramatically collapsed, causing the rapid end to the military and economic support going to the Afghan regime.

Conclusions

There is a good chance that the ANSF, after early teething problems, will prove capable of holding the cities and the main communications routes if US financial and military support remains, particularly air power, logistics and intelligence. The insurgent groups will continue to attack at the edges, penetrating into areas where government reach is less advanced and continuing the campaign of targeted terrorist actions. The Afghan army, despite its many flaws, looks better equipped, trained, resourced and motivated than Najibullah's Soviet-backed army of conscripts. The insurgency, although undoubtedly capable and experienced, will probably be unable to generate high levels of popular support. Although a stalemated conflict is an unpleasant enough scenario, it might be preferable to more apocalyptic predictions that Afghanistan will simply return to the multi-factional and brutal civil war of the 1990s.¹⁴⁵

Prospects for credible and sustainable dialogue look poor, certainly before 2014. In 2014 and 2015, the situation may well see some fluid political and military developments – absorbing the aftermath of what will probably be another difficult election, together with the impact of

¹⁴³ Yousaf, M and Adkin, M., *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's untold story*, (Leo Cooper: London, 1992), pp.226-232.

¹⁴⁴ Weitz, R., ‘Moscow's Endgame in Afghanistan’, *Conflict Quarterly*, 1992.

¹⁴⁵ Rafiq, A., ‘The Coming Civil War in Afghanistan’, *Foreign Policy*, 3 Feb 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/03/the_coming_civil_war_in_afghanistan?page=full

international military disengagement. After 2015, I suggest that both main combatants will still be willing and able to continue the fight. Dialogue would need to lead to ceasefire, negotiated settlement, implementation, monitoring (perhaps enforcement) and only then, some form of wider popular reconciliation. Historic patterns of allegiance shifting have been documented, most recently in the 1990s civil war. Many key figures from that time are still active within government or insurgency. This suggests that, even if a basic political power-sharing deal could be struck, it could unravel or reverse before getting a chance to solidify.

My examination of the development, capabilities and potential problems within insurgents and counter-insurgents suggests that neither side is capable of a military resolution of the conflict in their own favour. Counter-insurgency has not worked, but neither has the Taliban version of “Jihad”.¹⁴⁶ Neither party yet exhibit signs that they are sufficiently hard-pressed to support genuine and coherent political dialogue. Absent a major military or diplomatic breakthrough, both sides still in the field and dialogue at an unimpressive “talks about talks” stage, this points to a continuation of the conflict for some years to come.

8. Discussion of Question 3: What risks of conflict post-2014 might emerge from other contenders for state control?

Insurgencies with more than two clear parties involved have longer, more-violent and more-complex endings.

Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’¹⁴⁷

Each year of stalemated conflict will hold out the possibility that aspects of economic, social and political development will take root. Conversely, a persistent and virulent insurgency, though it may not be capable of overturning a government, might indirectly create conditions for a damaging escalation in fighting by undermining and eroding it.

Although the likelihood of the Taliban regaining political power (or a majority share of it) looks small, the sort of persistent civil war I am suggesting clearly contains risk of greater destabilisation and even state fragmentation through other factors, given the country's overall and extensive political and economic fragility. The following outcomes could be created by a continued insurgency:

¹⁴⁶ Jones, S., ‘Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan’, *Rand Corporation*, 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Connable, B and Libicki, M., ‘How Insurgencies End’, *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010, p.xvi.

1. A violent event, such as a key assassination of a particular person or mass-casualty event at a particular time (such as an election, peace talks or other significant political event).
2. War-weariness causing disengagement of the international community.
3. Worsening interference by neighbours – particularly Pakistan.
4. The failure of central government: inability or unwillingness to function, leading to inertia and popular frustration.¹⁴⁸
5. Re-emergence of “warlords”, regional military and political leaders seizing – or attempting to seize – power for themselves.

My particular interest here are ethnic or political factions currently aligned with the government that might start pulling away from the centre, causing a more damaging fragmentation. These groups would not necessarily support the Taliban (although short-term, tactical, alliances should certainly not be ruled out) but neither will they be content to support the current central government system any longer. It is perhaps more in keeping with recent Afghan history to think again of *multiple* groups with regional powerbases contending for power as the major risk for the country than it is a single group (thus far, the Taliban) versus the Afghan government.¹⁴⁹

Charles Tilly's writings are particularly helpful here as a means of visualising this. Tilly outlines the notion of revolutionary *situations* – i.e. proximate potential causes that might bring about transfers of power – and revolutionary *outcomes* concluding with a transfer of power.¹⁵⁰ He identifies three drivers: the emergence of a contender (or coalitions of contenders) to the government; groups of the population committing themselves in support of these groups and the inability or unwillingness of the government to suppress or otherwise resolve these competing claims.

Tilly notes that many revolutionary situations have existed in the world that failed to lead to the full transfer of power he describes as a revolutionary *outcome*.¹⁵¹ This seems to have been the case for Afghanistan in the 1990s, with the emergence of numerous groups vying for power. There was much conflict among factions powerful in their own local areas, but with

¹⁴⁸ Reno, W., 'Somalia and Survival: In the Shadow of the Global Economy', *QEH Working Paper No. 100*, Feb. 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Barfield, T., 'Afghanistan's Ethnic Puzzle', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Tilly, C., 'From Mobilisation to Revolution', CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan, Mar. 1977.

¹⁵¹ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006), p.159.

insufficient power and support to finally tip the balance in their favour. In Afghanistan, examples of betrayal and side-changing are numerous – Dostum, Hekmatyar, Pahlawan.¹⁵² Even the most famous Mujahideen commander, the ethnic Tajik, Ahmad Shah Massoud was alleged to have reached a temporary deal with the Soviets in the 1980s to gain respite from attack. Ahmed Rashid suggests it is a positive step that members of the Afghan political opposition are also engaged in dialogue with the Taliban, but perhaps there is more to be concerned about here – raising, as it does, the notion of some factions of government aligning with some insurgent factions (Hezb-e Islami, for example, have a foot in both camps). This would point to a return to the swirling, complex and destabilising military alliances of the 1990s.¹⁵³

Barfield offered two civil war “styles” in Afghan history: the short war of succession and the messier and protracted foreign-backed “regime change”. Tilly gives us two additional ideas why we might see a stalemated civil war as more likely than one that resolves itself quickly. Firstly, in Afghanistan today, after four decades of conflict with the population suffering in the middle, there is little strong political or ideological commitment to any side:

Competing armies, furthermore, sometimes battle for control of a government with little or no civilian support. Lack of widespread commitment to the revolutionary coalitions disqualifies these civil wars as revolutionary situations...recent civil wars in Angola, Uganda, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Colombia have all pitted against each other armies that inspired more fear than love among reluctant civilians.¹⁵⁴

The Afghan population have developed a finely-tuned defence mechanism during these periods of conflicts. They understand the need to “wait and see” until it becomes clear who is winning before committing one way or the other. And commitment, when it comes, will be cautious, pragmatic and, as necessary, temporary.¹⁵⁵

Secondly, Tilly suggests that revolutionary *outcomes*, where a conclusive power transfer actually takes place, are more likely in medium- to high-capacity non-democratic regimes (China and Russia, for example) as control, communications and power infrastructure

¹⁵² Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp.57-59.

¹⁵³ Rashid, A., ‘After the war: is peace possible in Afghanistan?’, *New Republic*, 28 Mar. 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112680/afghanistan-after-war#>.

¹⁵⁴ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006), p.163.

¹⁵⁵ Washington Times, ‘Afghan village “on the fence”’, *The Washington Times*, 29 Apr. 2007, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/apr/29/20070429-104417-2986r/?page=all>

facilitates political and military consolidation post-transfer, more effectively than in low capacity states:

Control of the state apparatus by members of revolutionary coalitions, however, faces severe obstacles in low capacity, non-democratic regimes, since the apparatus itself tends to fragment during such seizures of power.¹⁵⁶

Despite international efforts, we might still judge Afghanistan to be in the low capacity category, pointing to a contestation for fragmenting (or fragmented) government power being a messy, protracted and bloody process mirroring the 1990s – a stalemate of sorts.

So, what evidence do we have of potential alternative sovereignties? Many of the main warlords are still evident. The Tajiks have expressed extreme disquiet at what they see is a Pushtun President bending over backwards to accommodate the Pushtun Taliban. Amrullah Saleh (a former intelligence head and a politician) recently declared that: “the Taliban are not our brothers they are our killers”.¹⁵⁷ The Tajik ethnic grouping have many leaders in key government positions – including a vice-presidency - and are well-placed within the armed forces.

The Hazara are ethnically very distinct and are Shia Moslem (they form 20 per cent of the population with the Sunnis – including the Taliban – accounting for 80 per cent). They were brutally handled by the Taliban regime and do not look favourably upon a Taliban return to government.¹⁵⁸ Other individual warlords still wield power, even though donning the trappings of government. Ismail Khan, from Herat province in the west is the Minister for Energy and Water.¹⁵⁹ He has recently talked of the need to rearm the Mujahideen as neither the central government nor ISAF was capable of protecting the country.¹⁶⁰ Abdul Rashid Dostum is an ethnic Uzbek warlord in the north of the country. He controlled a significant

¹⁵⁶ Tilly, C., *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2006), p.161.

¹⁵⁷ Farmer, B., ‘Afghanistan's former spy chief: 'Never trust the Taliban'’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 Aug. 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8700028/Afghanistans-former-spy-chief-Never-trust-the-Taliban.html>

¹⁵⁸ Rashid, A., *Taliban*, (Pan Macmillan: London, 2001), pp.76-77 and also Duparcq, E., ‘Afghanistan's oppressed Hazaras dread Taliban return’, *AFP*, 19 Mar. 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jDZQaM7FErxV6XAubD2gVrBAEyBA?docId=CNG.1411cd01df64d8f14a45e3962493fb9a.5f1>.

¹⁵⁹ Dietl, G., ‘War, Peace and the Warlords: The Case of Ismail Khan of Herat in Afghanistan’, *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.3, No.2 and 3, Summer and Fall, 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Bezhan, F., ‘What's Behind Former Afghan Warlord Ismail Khan's Public Call to Arms?’, *The Atlantic*, 15 Nov. 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/whats-behind-former-afghan-warlord-ismail-khans-public-call-to-arms/265226/>

part of the north in the 1990s and ran it as a state, with its own currency and airline.¹⁶¹ He has also often talked about forming his own army to defeat the Taliban.¹⁶²

Conclusions

Afghan recent history very starkly demonstrates the implications of the existence of powerful multiple armed factions only loosely controlled by central government, particularly the difficulties of *any* group achieving a decisive result. Theory suggests the mess and complexity implicit in a contest between multiple groups. To be sure, the international community's engagement (particularly the military side) looks to be keeping the worst aspects of these forces in check, but the lessening of the grip and other growing uncertainties engendered by "2014" suggest that the days of the warlords may yet return – if they ever went away.

9. Follow up question: How politically robust is the army?

Control over the major organised means of coercion within the population is pivotal to the success or failure of any effort to seize power. Within all contemporary states, that means control of the military forces.

Charles Tilly, 1977.¹⁶³

A recalcitrant warlord, bent on rejecting central control - and even replacing it - needs fighters. Tilly's thinking is clear: the control of the army and police – the “violence specialists” - is crucial for the survivability of a regime or for a new regime seeking to replace it.¹⁶⁴ In the context of Afghanistan, the International Crisis Group (ICG) wrote, in 2012, that:

History has shown that failure to build a cohesive national army has often led to the diffusion of state force among disparate actors, hastening the collapse of governments in Kabul.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Dostum's biography, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/dostum.htm>

¹⁶² Hamilton-Little, M., 'Top Afghan General: Taliban Defeat Would Take Less Than a Year', *The Daily Beast*, 31 July 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/31/top-afghan-general-taliban-defeat-would-take-less-than-a-year.html>

¹⁶³ Tilly, C., 'From Mobilisation to Revolution', *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977, p.7-41.

¹⁶⁴ Tilly, C., 'From Mobilisation to Revolution', *CRSO Working Paper 156, University of Michigan*, Mar. 1977.

¹⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, 'A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army', Asia Report No. 190, 12 May 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190-a-force-in-fragments-reconstituting-the-afghan-national-army.aspx>

How politically robust and loyal are the Afghan security forces, given that it is a fledgling forces? The 2010 paper from the ICG made a further stark assessment:

Ethnic frictions and political factionalism among high-level players in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the general staff have also stunted the army's growth. As a result, the army is a fragmented force, serving disparate interests, and far from attaining the unified national character needed to confront numerous security threats.¹⁶⁶

The ICG judge that the Tajiks dominate control of the army. It is hard to get an accurate sense of the ethnic imbalance, but the US Government Accountability Office recorded this in 2011:

Tajiks were especially overrepresented in the officer corps, constituting 40 percent of all ANA officers, as compared with a target of 25 percent. NTM-A/CSTC-A officials noted that they were concerned about ethnic imbalance in the ANA and had taken steps to limit overrepresentation of Tajik officers, such as keeping a number of eligible officers in reserve and not assigning them to units in order to avoid increasing the imbalance. However, some ethnic imbalance within the force still remains.¹⁶⁷

Army loyalty is critical if the viability of the state is to rest on the ANSF's ability to withstand military pressures on the battlefield and political pressures at government level.¹⁶⁸ At a conference on Afghanistan in Copenhagen in April 2013, the issue of army loyalty came up several times:

...although the majority of the officer corps was now Tajik, the "identity" of the officers was "fluid" – many having fought in several armies of wildly different affiliations. This political identity was important to understand. Ruttig said loyalty to the government is the key. Rashid was downbeat – he had seen 6 or 7 armies break up in Afghanistan since 1979 – ethnic loyalty drives it all in the end...the ANSF...was loyal neither to the state, the institutions or the President. Who was it loyal to? Answer – their own ethnicity. Ruttig

¹⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, 'A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army', Asia Report No. 190, 12 May 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190-a-force-in-fragments-reconstituting-the-afghan-national-army.aspx>

¹⁶⁷ US Government Accountability Office, 'Afghanistan security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined', *GAO-11-66*, Jan. 2011.

¹⁶⁸ Filkins, D., 'Will civil war hit Afghanistan when the US leaves?', *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/07/09/120709fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all

countered by suggesting that it went deeper and broader than ethnic loyalty and down to individual commanders.¹⁶⁹

Ruttig's last comment raises the spectre of a potentially devastating fragmentation of the army, were it to be pushed around politically. In this scenario, multiple groups contending for power would have access to very powerful, modern weapons systems, trained personnel able to use them and, perhaps most critical of all, would be contesting power at a time when the international community is reluctant to re-engage.

10. Conclusions

...Afghanistan almost always tended to fragment: its few moments of coherence were built on the successes of its armies, never of its administration."

William Dalrymple, historian, 2013¹⁷⁰

Perhaps characteristic of many theses, I found my initial intention and research for the paper migrated during writing, sometimes because of analytical difficulties, other times because new approaches suggested themselves. I will consider briefly my intentions, methods and experiences in writing the paper and then reflect upon my findings.

Intentions and methods

I treated Afghanistan as a qualitative intrinsic case study, using multiple sources that I subjectively analysed and interpreted. Guided by research questions, I looked at the nature of Afghanistan's conflict and some of the factors that might influence its direction after 2014. Positioning myself in the middle of historical context, civil war theory and the complex post-2001 political and military situation, I considered the prospects for continued conflict, likely outcomes and the triggers and risks of additional armed contestation for state control state.

Experiences

Analytically, Afghanistan is a very complex subject. Many theorists will point to the need to resolve popular grievances as a means of ending an insurgency. This is hard to disagree with but, with four decades of ever-shifting grievance and violently contested politics in Afghanistan, it becomes hard to sift through and identify exactly what the relevant "causes"

¹⁶⁹ Author's notes, Danish Institute of International Studies conference, 'Afghanistan Towards 2014 – Prospects for Development, Security and a National Political Settlement', 11 Apr. 2013, <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/afghanistan-towards-2014-diis-conference-key-points/>.

¹⁷⁰ Dalrymple, W., 'Return of a King: the Battle for Afghanistan', (Bloomsbury: London, 2013), p. 26.

might be, let alone resolving them. It was a struggle to avoid diverting down a multitude of avenues of analysis. Initially I thought I would produce a paper looking at all aspects of Afghanistan post-2014 - security, political, economic and social - to, in effect, “solve” the problem. Early on it became clear that this was neither viable nor desirable.

Instead, I looked at some analytically “less-travelled” but relevant issues. These themes were interwoven and combined well to create, not only an important analytical and narrative thread (a civil war stalemate could fracture the government, triggering further contestation), but a constructive exploration from a new perspective. Here, I found the Taliban still important, but less decisive and for different reasons.

Findings

If political dialogue is unsuccessful, a military contest remains indecisive and international support remains cautious, a form of stalemate is highly plausible for Afghanistan after 2014. This could last for many years. With reference to Tilly, I concluded that a threat to Afghanistan's future beyond the Taliban could be the emergence of *multiple sovereignties*, where other political groupings develop the capability and intent to contest state control. This could come from ethnic or political factions already in existence or from coalitions yet to form. It could certainly involve “pro-government” factions aligning with “pro-insurgent” groups. In this scenario, the Taliban become relegated – important, but not necessarily directly decisive. Control of a powerful but fledgling army, whose loyalty is untested, would be crucial in a violent contestation for power. Combining an extant insurgency with new contesting factions all struggling to control the army would produce a much more devastating civil conflict than would a stalemate.

How might theory inform the case?

Making use of various aspects of conflict theory allowed me to examine the nature and likely course, of the conflict. I made use of two “clusters” of theory. One was a wider exploration, using aspects of qualitative, quantitative and counter-insurgency theory, to help me consider the concept of civil war in the context of Afghanistan and the issue of stalemate. The other made more specific use of the ideas of Charles Tilly and let me explore notions of multiple sovereignties contesting power.

Although theory is less than consensual on nature, cause and course, it helped me to conclude that Afghanistan was in a state of civil war. This was in spite of the fact that the term is barely used to describe the current conflict and only deployed when discussing past history and possible future. This is probably because – as theory also notes - the subjective nature of the term itself makes it an important political and propaganda tool, with significant implications for particular behaviours within the Afghan and international communities.

Although civil war theory does not offer a “solution” to the conflict as such, the work of Charles Tilly was particularly instructive as a prism through which to view the conflict. Afghanistan's unique history lends itself well to an examination of the role of fluid multiple sovereignties vying for power. Tilly's work on the control over the coercive means also points to the importance of understanding the strength and loyalty of the new Afghan army and to consider the implications of its “failure”.

How might the case inform the theory?

After comparing “theory” to “Afghanistan”, I tend to sympathise with Nathan's criticism (cited by Tilly) that quantitative analysis is undertaken without sufficient grounding in the peculiarities of the specific conflict. The lack of consensus (Sambanis, Nathan, etc.) on the specific nature and causes of civil war was compounded, I felt, by the “hyper-complex” nature of the Afghan conflict. On top of multiple layers of historic, ethnic, geographic and societal challenges, we must overlay four decades of swirling, destructive, conflict and a bewildering array of grievances, opponents, causes and external interventions. For this reason it is possible to find many shades of civil war theory, however contradictory, present in Afghanistan.

Charles Tilly's broad and flexible ideas enabled me to step out of the complexity and take a less cluttered perspective of the conflict and to stimulate thinking that took me beyond standard assumptions. Exploring the potential for a stalemate in Afghanistan – which I conclude is a very plausible option after 2014 – was difficult to develop as I could find little detailed theoretical writing on this phenomenon, with significant disagreement on how and when a conflict finally concludes. Theory perhaps could reflect further upon how “hyper-complex” conflicts can more effectively be studied and how concepts of “stalemate” could be refined.

Final remarks

The international community and the Afghan population could give thought to three areas: the wider implications of an Afghan “civil war”, how to consider and address the idea of a long-term stalemate after 2014 and, finally, whether the Taliban are the only alternative contenders to government and, if not, how and why others might emerge. The international community has frequently taken a short-term approach to Afghanistan: consideration of the themes I have explored here, and how they might be engaged with, could encourage a more practical, constructive and longer-term perspective on the country.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Foxley', with a stylized, cursive script.

Tim Foxley, August 2013

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Annex: Map of Afghanistan showing ethnolinguistic groups, major cities and neighbouring countries.

