



ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, faint, light-colored mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features intricate geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Nicola Mocci (nmocci@uniss.it) and Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk); book reviews should be sent to Oliviero Frattolillo (oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it) and Francesca Congiu (fcongiu@unica.it).



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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

AFGHANISTAN 2019: BETWEEN PEACE TALKS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS,
ANOTHER YEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

Filippo Boni

The Open University
Filippo.Boni@Open.ac.uk

Afghanistan in 2019 was characterised by the Presidential elections, held on 28 September, and whose results were announced at the end of December 2019, and by the peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Against such backdrop, the analysis presented in this article traces the evolution of peace talks between the US and the Taliban during the year under examination, and accounts for the developments that characterised the peace process. The latter had also an important intra-Afghan dimension, with the Consultative Loya-Jirga, which was held between 29 April and 3 May 2019. The socio-economic situation of Afghanistan is also analysed, with a specific focus on the role of women in the country's political and economic life. With regards to Afghanistan's international relations, this study dissects the geopolitical alignments taking place in 2019, with an assessment of the role that Russia, India, Pakistan and China played in the country during 2019.

1. Introduction

During the year 2019, Afghanistan's political developments were characterised primarily by three major processes. The first was peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban, which saw an acceleration and then an abrupt halt in early September, only to be restarted towards the end of the year. The second was the Consultative Loya Jirga, an intra-Afghan process aimed at providing a framework for negotiations with the Taliban, which saw the participation of 3,200 delegates from across the country, and a relatively fair representation of women. Third was the Presidential election, held on 28th September after repeated postponements, whose results were announced on 22 December 2019, and from which Ashraf Ghani emerged with a thin majority of votes.

While on the domestic front «uncertainty» was a key word in defining the country's political landscape, as far as the geopolitics of Afghanistan are concerned, the year 2019 registered the continued involvement of key regional partners, Russia, India, China and Pakistan above all, in trying to shape the political trajectory in Kabul for the years to come.

In order to analyse these developments in greater depth, section 2 of the article dissects the dynamics characterising the Presidential elections, both in the run-up and in the immediate aftermath, as well as the main controversies surrounding the announcement of results. The ensuing section 3

provides an assessment of the US-Taliban peace talks, tracing the evolution of the latter during 2019, as well as of the Consultative Loya Jirga. Section 4 of the article outlines the economic situation in Afghanistan, and also provides an overview of the role of women in the country's political life during the year under examination. Finally, section 5 focuses on the positioning of Russia, India, Pakistan and China about the future of Afghanistan.

2. *The 2019 Presidential Elections: Ghani's victory, amid delays and low turnout*

Presidential elections were held on 28 September 2019 for the fourth time since the Taliban were ousted in 2001 (the previous ones were in 2004, 2009 and 2014). The results, originally to be announced in their preliminary form on 18 October, and then officially on 7 November, were postponed to 14 November and then eventually made public on 22 December 2019. This was somewhat in line with the unfolding of post-election dynamics in 2018, with the official results of the Parliamentary elections only announced 7 months later, on 14 May 2019, after the counting of the votes in Kabul were finally released and confirmed.¹ Fifteen Candidates contested the Presidential elections, including the incumbent President, Ashraf Ghani, and the incumbent Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, but there were no women candidates to the Presidency. However, as each candidate entered the race on tickets that included first and second running mates, three women were included in the tickets of three different candidates.²

According to the preliminary results announced by the Independent Elections Commission (IEC), with 50.64% (934,868 votes) of the total votes casted, President Ashraf Ghani was the one who emerged as the leading candidate after this electoral round. Abdullah Abdullah followed with 39.52% (720,099 votes) and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar with 3.85% (70,243 votes).³ In celebrating the results, President Ghani praised the Afghan Republic and its citizens: «The republic is firm in its place. The republic (government) will continue and citizens will be its center. Today is the citizens' celebration.

1. 'Final Results Of Last Year's General Elections In Kabul Announced', *RadioFreeEurope*, 15 May 2019. For the full elections results, see: Independent Election Commission, '2018 Afghanistan Wolesi Jirga Elections' (<http://www.iec.org.af/results/en/home>).

2. These were: Massuda Jalal, running mate of Rahmatullah Nabil; Farida Mohmand, running mate of Ahmad Wali Massud; and Khadija Ghaznawi, included in Mohammad Ibrahim Alekozai's ticket. Frud Bezhan, 'Who's Who Among The Afghan Presidential Candidates', *RadioFreeEurope*, 27 September 2019. In 2004, 2009, and 2014 there was at least one woman candidate in the Presidential elections, although in 2014 she was disqualified before the poll. See: Ali Yawar Adili, 'Afghanistan's 2019 elections (2): Who is running to become the next president?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 11 February 2019.

3. 'Ghani Tops Preliminary Election Results: IEC', *Tolo News*, 22 December 2019.

The people of Afghanistan made this success happen.»⁴ On its part, the runner up Abdullah Abdullah, did not concede and claimed that «no doubt, we are the winning team based on the people’s clean votes. The Stability and Convergence is the winning team in this election», also adding that some «fraudulent» votes «were added» to the total number in Ghani’s favour.⁵ Before results were announced, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) had conducted a partial vote recount to address concerns from the election teams about frauds in the electoral process, but this did not stop Abdullah to file an appeal against the results. It is important to bear in mind that, according to the Afghan constitution, if no candidate achieves a majority (and this could happen if enough complaints are validated), a second round is required between the two most voted candidates in the first round, which is what happened in 2014 with Ghani and Abdullah. However, winter weather conditions make large parts of the country difficult to reach, and this may lead to a delay in the Presidential runoff until spring 2020, which is likely to exacerbate political uncertainty.⁶

Turnout for this Presidential election was at historic low, with the IEC revising its figure downwards from the initial 2.7 million voters to 1.8 million towards the end of November, out of a total of more than 9 million registered voters.⁷ If this latter figure was to be confirmed, this would amount to nearly 20% of registered voters, and it would have clear implications on the legitimacy of the results, given that only 1 in 5 Afghans casted their ballot.

Table 1 – Turnout in Afghanistan Presidential Election 2004-2019

Year	Registered Voters	Votes casted	Turnout (%)
2004	10,567,834	8,128,940	69 %
2009	~ 16,000,000	4,823,090	~ 30%
2014	20,845,988	6,604,546	31.6 %
2019	9,665,745	1,823,948	18.8 %

Source: author’s own calculations of data from multiple sources.⁸

4. ‘Ghani: «Today a Republic Was Ensured»’, *Tolo News*, 22 December 2019.

5. ‘Abdullah Says His Team is the «Winner» Based on «Clean» Votes’, *Tolo News*, 22 December 2019. The Stability and Convergence team was the campaign team led by Chief Executive and Presidential Candidate Abdullah Abdullah.

6. Clayton Thomas, ‘Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief’, *Congressional Research Service*, R45122, Updated 5 December 2019.

7. ‘Abdullah Blasts IEC for «Ignoring» Candidates’ Demands’, *Tolo News*, 17 November 2019.

8. See: Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, ‘Afghanistan Presidential Election Result – 2004, ‘Turnout by Province’; European Union Democracy And Election Support Mission, ‘Afghanistan. Presidential Election 9 October 2004’, *Final Report*. Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, ‘Final Certified Presidential Results by Vote Order’. There are no exact figures on registered voters in 2009, hence the rough estimates based on reported turnout by UNAMA. Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, ‘Presidential Elections Final Results’, 15 May 2014.

Some observers noted that three main factors, namely uncertainty, election fatigue, and threat from the Taliban, may explain the low turnout: first, uncertainty has dominated the run-up to the elections, since up until the week before 28 September, it was unclear when the elections were going to be held; second, election fatigue, with these elections coming a little more than one year after the 2018 parliamentary ones and whose final results were announced only four months before the Presidential elections; third, the threat from the Taliban who, as they have made clear over the years, considered the elections a farce.⁹ The latter point is of particular importance, especially if put in comparison with the dynamics preceding the 2018 Parliamentary elections. According to data from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), civilian casualties «were significantly lower in 2019 as compared to the 2018 parliamentary elections – both in the lead up to election day and on polling day.»¹⁰ At the same time, it is important to note how the Taliban were able to carry out two symbolic attacks, one in Charikar and one at the Massud roundabout in Kabul, in the weeks preceding the 2019 elections. The aim was to continue the Taliban's fight against the government in Kabul as well as to send a signal to the US, given that the Massud Roundabout is very close to the US Embassy in Kabul.¹¹ This episode of pre-election violence, considerably worsened the situation concerning the peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban, that are analysed in the ensuing section.

3. Peace talks: *The Consultative Loya Jirga and the US-Taliban negotiations*

Low turnout and uncertainty, with the resulting lack of trust in elected representatives, besides hindering the prospects of democratic governance in Afghanistan, have eroded public trust in constitutional and democratic processes, at a time in which the Afghan government needed to be seen as a credible interlocutor in the ongoing peace talks between the United States and the Taliban. 2019 was a year which saw a great acceleration in the negotiation between March and early September, an abrupt stall between September and November, and the resumption of talks in December.

In March 2019, after almost one year of constant interactions with the Afghan Taliban delegation, the Afghan government and regional part-

9. Srinjoy Bose & Nishank Motwani, 'Afghan elections: Impressions from polling day', *The Interpreter*, 10 October 2019.

10. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan. Protection Of Civilians In Armed Conflict. Special Report: 2019 Election-Related Violence*, Kabul, October 2019.

11. 'Taliban suicide attacks kill at least 48 before Afghan elections', *Al Jazeera*, 17 Sept 2019

ners, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, announced that the two sides had agreed on a draft agreement and that once the agreement was going to be finalised, «the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire».¹² As the eyes of the world were on the talks between the Taliban and the US government, an important intra-Afghan process began in parallel in the spring of 2019. Between 29 April and 3 May of the same year, President Ghani convened a consultative Loya Jirga – the sixth since 2001 – aimed at seeking views on, and discussing a framework for, peace negotiations with the Taliban.¹³ The Jirga consisted of 3,200 delegates, out of which 30% were women, who featured well also in the administrative boards of the Jirga, where four out of ten members were women, as well as in the various committees in which the Jirga was divided, with 13 heads and 28 secretaries of the fifty committees being women.¹⁴ The delegates taking part in this Jirga were asked to consider four questions:

- 1) how can we convince the Taliban to participate in [an intra-Afghan] negotiation?
- 2) What are the values and achievements that the Afghan government should not compromise on?
- 3) What are your views on the make-up of the Afghan delegation for peace?
- 4) How should the Afghan government deal with the neighbouring countries, especially the country which is financially supporting the Taliban and providing them weapons?¹⁵

Each of these groups reported back and the results were condensed into a 23-point communiqué, which reflected the road map of the government on the peace process with the Taliban.¹⁶ Analysts observed that the communiqué reflected some of the views from the Palace, but most of the participants agreed that the final result was also a fair representation of the views expressed during the days of discussion.¹⁷ In a nutshell, some of the main recommendations included placing the government at the centre

12. Clayton Thomas, 'Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief', *Congressional Research Service*, R45122, Updated 5 December.

13. Jelena Bjelica & Thomas Ruttig, 'AAN Q&A: Between «Peace Talks» and Elections – The 2019 Consultative Peace Loya Jirga', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 26 April 2019.

14. Kate Clark, Ehsan Qaane & Ali Yawar Adili, 'The End of the Jirga: Strong Words and Not Much Controversy', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 3 May 2019.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Canberra, Australia, 'Communique - The Consultative Peace Loya Jirga 2019', 14 May 2019.

17. Scott Smith, 'Loya Jirgas and Political Crisis Management in Afghanistan: Drawing on the Bank of Tradition', *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report N. 457, September 2019.

of any peace talks, calling for a ceasefire, the need for an end to interference by (unspecified) neighbours, the prospect of the withdrawal of foreign troops, as well as the protection of women's rights, a theme which is discussed in greater detail in Section 4 of this article.¹⁸

While the Loya-Jirga had set a framework for the intra-Afghan component of the process, towards the end of August 2019, the negotiations between the US and the Taliban were on course for being concluded after nine rounds of talks, with a number of media outlets reporting some of the details of the agreement. In particular, in an interview with «TOLO News», the US Special Representative said that the two sides had «reached an agreement in principle» for a phased out deal, which would include the following points: a) the US would withdraw 5,000 troops in 135 days, provided the Taliban were going to scale down violence in Kabul and Parwan; b) the US would withdraw the rest of its troops by the end of 2020.¹⁹ In exchange, the Taliban would «bar al-Qaeda from activities such as fundraising, recruiting, training and operational planning in areas under Taliban control».²⁰ In addition, US officials were expecting that the ensuing step would have been the Taliban-Afghan government direct negotiations.²¹

Critics of the agreement in Washington had warned against a withdrawal, invoking President's Obama decision to withdraw troops from Iraq as one of the reasons behind the emergence of the Islamic State.²² In a similar fashion, nine former US diplomatic officials wrote an article for «The Atlantic», in which they argued that «a major withdrawal of US forces should follow, not come in advance of real peace agreement» and that «a fundamental mistake of the Obama administration was the constant repetition of dates for departure. This encouraged the Taliban to fight on and undercut confidence among friendly Afghans».²³ They concluded that «it is critical that the United States make clear that full withdrawal will not occur on fixed dates but will, on the contrary, require conclusion of a real and clearly defined peace».²⁴

18. Clark, Qaane & Adili, 'The End of the Jirga', 3 May 2019.

19. 'US And Taliban Reach Agreement In Principle: Khalilzad', *Tolo News*, 2 September 2019.

20. Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, Anne Gearan & Philip Rucker, 'Trump and senior aides discuss withdrawal from Afghanistan as talks with Taliban advance', *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2019.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Michael Crowley, Lara Jakes & Mujib Mashal, 'Trump Says He's Called Off Negotiations With Taliban After Afghanistan Bombing', *New York Times*, 8 September 2019.

23. James Dobbins, Robert P. Finn, Ronald E. Neumann, William Wood, John Negroponte, Earl Anthony Wayne, Ryan Crocker, James Cunningham, & Hugo Llorens, 'US-Taliban Negotiations: How to Avoid Rushing to Failure', *Atlantic Council*, 3 September 2019.

24. *Ibid.*

This process was ended by President Trump himself following an attack by the Taliban in Kabul, which killed a number of people including a US soldier. The announcement came in a series of tweets, in which the US President disclosed that he had arranged to meet both the Taliban leaders and the Afghan President Ghani at Camp David, but that he called off the meeting as a result of this attack, questioning the Taliban's willingness to enter the ceasefire.²⁵ After nearly three months, in another coup-de-theatre, Trump visited Afghanistan on Thanksgiving day, ostensibly to support American troops on that day, but clearly with an eye to re-opening negotiations with the Taliban. In what was Trump's first visit to the country since he became president, not only he declared that peace talks with the Taliban were reopened, but he also invited Afghan President Ghani to officially visit Washington.²⁶ The visit was important since it came at a time when President Trump was looking for a foreign policy achievement, to be presented as a success story in the election campaign for the 2020 Presidential elections.²⁷

On 18 December 2019, while on a two-day visit to Afghanistan, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad stated that peace talks have reached an «important stage», after meeting among others, with President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.²⁸

4. *The socio-economic conditions*

The domestic dynamics discussed in the previous sections of this article are inextricably intertwined also with Afghanistan's 2019 economic outlook. According to the World Bank, «without [...] an improved security situation, growth is likely to remain slow with limited progress in reducing poverty from current very high levels.» The World Bank has also mentioned the uncertain outcome of the presidential elections and peace negotiations with the Taliban as reasons behind low business and investor confidence.²⁹

According to the Asian Development Outlook 2019, Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate is set at 2.7% in 2019, up from the 2.5% projection in April of the same year.³⁰ According to the report, favourable weather conditions allowed agriculture to recover from last year's

25. Donald J. Trump, Tweet, 7 September 2019, 11:51pm.

26. Zachary Cohen, 'President Trump announces Taliban talks have restarted on surprise Afghanistan visit', *CNN*, 28 November 2019.

27. Michael Crowley, 'Trump Visits Afghanistan and Says He Reopened Talks With Taliban', *The New York Times*, 28 November 2019.

28. 'US-Taliban Afghan peace talks at «important stage»: Khalilzad', *Al-Jazeera*, 19 December 2019.

29. The World Bank, *Afghanistan Overview*, 13 October 2019.

30. Asian Development Bank, *Afghanistan's Economic Growth Improves Slightly in 2019 Amid Challenges*, 26 September 2019.

drought stronger than expected. As a result, with a rising agricultural production, the forecast predicts an upturn in household income which will eventually support growth in private consumption.³¹ Alongside an increased agricultural production, exports also increased by 2.1% in the first half of the year, and imports have declined by 7.7%, compared with the same period in 2018. Finally, inflation in 2019 is now expected to be 2.0%, lower than the earlier forecasted 3.0%.³²

In addition to these economic indicators, it is important to assess women's participation in the economic and political life of Afghanistan during the year under examination. One of the national development priorities that the Afghan government has set since 2016, in collaboration with the World Bank, has been the economic empowerment of women. By establishing the Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Program (WEE-NPP), the Afghan government aims at removing obstacles and constraints to women's active participation in the economy. The WEE-NPP is part of the Afghan government's Gender Strategy, which is included in the wider Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), the country's five-year development plan for the period 2017-2021. A look at the role of women in Afghanistan's political landscape, provides some important insights into the way in which a proactive role of women in the Afghan society is being encouraged.

As previously noted, there were no women candidates in the 2019 Presidential elections. However, the 2018 parliamentary elections registered an important milestone with regards to the role of women in the Afghan Parliament. 68 women were elected out of 244 seats available, and nearly one third of the available seats is now occupied by women.³³ With Afghanistan ranking 57th in world for number of women in parliament, ahead for instance of the United States, it is not just the number of women in Parliament which has improved, but also the fact that women have been appointed to key positions. Ambassador Adela Raz is a case in point. She is Afghanistan's first female permanent representative to the United Nations, and she has started a U.N. group to protect the rights Afghan women have gained since 2001.³⁴ Similarly, Roya Rahmani was appointed in December 2018 as the first female ambassador to the United States, and in an interview with «France 24» in August 2019, she argued that «women inclusion is a matter of national security for us [...]; peace will not be possible if women are not included in a meaningful way.»³⁵

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Percentage of women in national parliaments' (<https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=9&year=2019>).

34. 'Afghan Woman Ambassador Forms Group to Help Afghan Women', *The Associated Press*, 19 November 2019.

35. 'Taliban «must accept the Afghanistan of 2019», says Afghan ambassador to US', *France 24*, 28 August 2019.

Besides the above data, concerning top level appointments, others must be quoted. Roughly 3.5 million girls out of 9 million children are now enrolled in schools.³⁶ However, according to data released in 2019 by Afghanistan's newly formed National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) about the number of female students and teachers in Government Higher Education Universities, there are only 816 female teachers, out of a total number of 5,876. In terms of students, the figure is slightly more positive, with 49,071 female students out of 186,025 students in total. Overall, the number of universities increased from 19 in 2002 to 38 in 2018.³⁷ If we turn to the number of governmental employees, 86,919 are women out of 404,151 in total, recording the lowest number of women employed by the government since 2013, although the overall number of employees increased of 16,000 units during the 2013-2018 period.³⁸

A final aspect that it is important to discuss in this cursory survey of Afghanistan's economic situation is the state of narcotics in the country. As of December 2019, the annual report produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Ministry of Counter Narcotics has not yet been published.³⁹ However, the chief of UNODC, Yury Fedotov, reported that opium poppy cultivation is expected to show a decrease from the record high levels in 2017 and 2018.⁴⁰

5. *Afghanistan's international relations*

While the United States were certainly the most prominent actor in Afghanistan's peace process, a number of other regional countries have continued being involved, to varying extents, in having a say on the country's future. Bearing in mind the fluid nature of the regional alignments that took place regarding the future of Afghanistan, this section provides a survey of the geopolitical positioning that each of the major players took in 2019. These include Russia, India, Pakistan and China, which all have a stake in having a politically stable and economically thriving Afghanistan in the years to come. However, all these countries have positioned themselves

36. USAID, *Afghanistan* (<https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>).

37. National Statistics and Information Authority, 'Number of Government Higher Education Universities, Students and Teachers by Sex 2002 – 2018' (<https://nsia.gov.af/services>).

38. National Statistics and Information Authority, 'No. of Governmental Employees by Ministry, Independent Organizations and Sex in the Year 2004 – 2018', (<https://nsia.gov.af/services>).

39. From 2019, the report will be produced by Afghanistan's National Statistics and Information Authority in collaboration with UNDOC.

40. United Nations Information Centre, 'Un Afghanistan Envoy Briefs Security Council', 10 September 2019.

by throwing their weight behind different actors, who are all competing for a stake in the future political settlement of Afghanistan.

5.1. *Russia and India in Afghanistan*

Russia has been cultivating its ties with the Taliban over the past few years, in particular since 2016, under the strategic steering of Zamir Kabulov, President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan. As Ankit Panda and Srinjoy Bose have noted, Kabulov has been at the centre of two important shifts in Russia's policy towards Afghanistan, the first being a greater engagement between Moscow and the Taliban, and the second represented by Russia supporting a strong Pakistani role in Afghanistan.⁴¹ The events of 2019, which marks the 30th anniversary of the Red Army's withdrawal from Kabul, were in line with the two trends just outlined. In early February 2019, Russia hosted peace talks between the Taliban and Senior Afghan politicians, a meeting which excluded the US-backed Afghan government, and which was thereby criticised by Afghan foreign ministry spokesman Sebghat Ahmadi, who defined the negotiations backed by Moscow as unhelpful to the peace process, also adding that they were «little more than a political drama».⁴² According to the Afghan government, the Kremlin-supported gathering was aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the government in Kabul, as the delegates present there were not representative of Afghanistan's institutions.⁴³ This instance demonstrates Russia's approach to the peace talks in Afghanistan. Moscow's concerns that a deteriorating relationship with the Afghan government could lead to its (Moscow's) diplomatic isolation, have translated into an attempt at subverting President Ghani's authority «by throwing its weight behind opposition figures and strengthening its relationship with the Taliban».⁴⁴

On the opposite end of the spectrum to Russia, India has advocated for giving centre stage to the elected government in Afghanistan, when it comes to deciding the country's future. Soon after US President Trump called off talks with the Taliban, Raveesh Kumar, the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, said that India believes «that all the section of the Afghan society including the legitimately elected government should be

41. Ankit Panda & Srinjoy Bose, 'The Conflict in Afghanistan: Interlocking Strategic Challenges as a Barrier to Regional Solution', in Takashi Inoguchi (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Asian Foreign Policy*, London: SAGE Publication, November 2019, pp. 361-368.

42. Mujib Mashal, 'Taliban to Meet Afghan Politicians (but Not Ghani) in Moscow', *The New York Times*, 2 February 2019.

43. Andrew Higgins & Mujib Mashal, 'In Moscow, Afghan Peace Talks Without the Afghan Government', *The New York Times*, 4 February 2019.

44. Samuel Ramani, 'In the Demise of the Taliban Peace Talks, Russia Is the Winner', *Foreign Policy*, 11 September 2019.

part of the process».⁴⁵ While India's position has been relatively consistent, throughout 2019, there have been calls from within India to engage with the Taliban. In particular, during his annual press conference in January 2019, the then Chief of the Army Staff, General Bipin Rawat, advocated for an engagement with the Taliban. In his words, «a number of countries are talking to this group [the Taliban], do we have interest in Afghanistan is the first issue. Does India have interest in Afghanistan. If the answer is yes then you cannot be out of the bandwagon».⁴⁶ However, New Delhi has reiterated his position in support of elected representatives in Kabul and for an «inclusive» Afghan peace process. The main driver of India's policy in Afghanistan «is to ensure a continuing strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan; [...] this means that India wants to ensure that Pakistan does not manipulate the terms of peace talks and undermine Indian interests in Afghanistan».⁴⁷ The way in which Pakistan has sought a role in Afghanistan during 2019, is discussed in the ensuing section of the article.

5.2. *Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2019: charting a new course?*

There are two aspects concerning Pakistan's role in the international relations of Afghanistan that are key to understand developments occurred in 2019: first, the evolution of the relations between Islamabad and Kabul, characterised by tensions in the first part of year and by the potential for a fresh start from June onwards; second, Pakistan's centrality in the US-Taliban peace negotiations.

With regards to the bilateral ties between the two countries, in March 2019, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, reportedly said that the Afghan government was «a hurdle in [the] peace process that was insisting that Taliban should talk to it» and that establishing an interim government would have made the peace efforts easier.⁴⁸ The push back from Afghanistan was strong, with foreign affairs ministry spokesman Sibghatullah Ahmadi, claiming that the statement was «an obvious example of Pakistan's interventionist policy and disrespect to the national sovereignty and determination of the people of Afghanistan».⁴⁹ In addition, the Afghan government recalled its Ambassador to Pakistan. Tensions somewhat diffused in early May, when Prime Minister Imran Khan invited President Ashraf Ghani to visit Pakistan. Interestingly, especially to understand where the locus of power lies

45. 'India closely following developments in Afghanistan: MEA', *Business Standard*, 12 September 2019.

46. 'No change in India's position on Afghanistan, it supports «inclusive» peace process: MEA', *The Economic Times*, 11 January 2019.

47. Avinash Paliwal, 'The «India Question» in Afghanistan', *Lawfare Blog*, 6 October 2019.

48. 'Afghanistan recalls ambassador in row over Pakistan PM remarks', *Reuters*, 26 March 2019.

49. *Ibid.*

within Pakistan when it comes to Afghanistan, the groundwork for the visit was laid by a meeting in Rawalpindi, at the end of May, between, on the one hand, a high-powered Afghan delegation, including the Afghan Interior Minister and Hamdullah Mohib, the Afghan national security adviser, and, on the other, senior Pakistani military and intelligence officials, including the Army Chief, General Bajwa, and Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Mr. Sohail Mahmood.⁵⁰ President Ghani's visit to Pakistan occurred on 27-28 June 2019, and it came after a hiatus of 5 years. During the visit, the two sides agreed to «open a new chapter of friendship and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan» and the Pakistani Prime Minister reiterated his country's commitment «to bring about a qualitative transformation in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations as part of his vision of a 'peaceful neighbourhood'».⁵¹

While the visit certainly represented a positive development in the often tense bilateral relations between the two countries, a similar enthusiasm accompanied President Ghani's first visit to Pakistan in November 2014. According to a Pakistani diplomat interviewed by «The Guardian» at the time of the first visit, «there is a real desire among both the military and civilians to start a new chapter with Ghani».⁵² The history of the past five years, characterised more by tensions than cooperation, demonstrates how claims of new beginnings should be treated with caution.

The second dimension around which Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan have evolved in 2019 is the role that Islamabad has had as a key interlocutor and mediator in the peace talks between the US and the Taliban. During Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to the US in July 2019, President Trump was hopeful that Pakistan was «going to help us [the US] out to extricate ourselves [from Afghanistan]». The American President also said «I think Pakistan will save millions of lives in Afghanistan. As of this moment, they are working very hard».⁵³ Earlier that month, the US had designated the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) as a terrorist organisation, a long-standing request from Pakistan and, as observers noted, it may have come in exchange for Pakistan's support in the Afghan peace process.⁵⁴

The substantiation of Pakistan's role in the latter came in October 2019, following the abrupt halt to the talks in early September 2019, and it enabled the parties to return to the negotiating table. Two rounds of talks

50. 'Afghan security czar visits Pakistan to remove irritants in ties', *The Express Tribune*, 29 May 2019; Tahir Khan, 'Afghan NSA, interior minister hold talks with senior Pakistani officials', *Daily Times*, 29 May 2019.

51. 'PM Imran, Afghan President Ghani look to «opening new chapter of friendship»', *Dawn*, 27 June 2019.

52. Jonathan Boone, 'Ashraf Ghani visit may mark new chapter in Afghan-Pakistan relations', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2014.

53. Michael D. Shear & Salman Masood, 'Trump Tries Cooling Tensions With Pakistan to Speed Afghan Peace Talks', *The New York Times*, 22 July 2019.

54. 'U.S. Designates Pakistan's Balochistan Liberation Army As Terrorist Group', *RadioFreeEurope*, 3 July 2019.

were held in Islamabad between the Afghan Taliban delegation, led by Mullah Baradar, co-founder of the Taliban movement and Chief of the group's diplomatic office in Doha, and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. As reported by «The Express Tribune», a senior Pakistani official observed that Pakistan «has been pressing the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire or at least give a commitment for reducing the level of violence.»⁵⁵ With the talks resuming in December 2019, as the previous parts of the article already discussed, it becomes clear how Pakistan's role in the peace process was a key one.

5.3. *China in Afghanistan: multilateralism and mediation*

Another key player in the international relations of Afghanistan during the year under examination is China. Beijing's interest in Afghanistan has primarily revolved around security considerations as well as economic engagement with the country. The statement released after the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Afghan counterpart Ashraf Ghani in June 2019, during the SCO meeting in Bishkek, epitomises the security-economy nexus driving Beijing's engagement with Kabul. According to a Xinhua report, Xi Jinping «called on the Afghan side to continue to firmly support China in its fight against the terrorist force of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)» while simultaneously reaffirming China's commitment to strengthen and deepen cooperation with Afghanistan within the BRI framework, and to «steadily promote practical cooperation in economy and trade».⁵⁶ With these drivers in mind, and similarly to what we have seen in 2018, China's policy in Afghanistan has been characterised by two directives. On the one hand, there is a multilateral approach, aimed at discussing about present and future Afghan dynamics in a number of multilateral fora.⁵⁷ On the other hand, there is the willingness to act as a mediator in the Afghan peace process.

On the first aspect, throughout 2019, Afghanistan has been increasingly involved in a number of China-sponsored multilateral organisations and consultation mechanisms. As the Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, stated in November 2019, «China admittedly has limited strength. We have therefore actively increased cooperation with other members of the world community to jointly help Afghanistan.»⁵⁸ The year

55. Kamran Yousaf, 'Pakistan in push to revive Afghan peace process', *The Express Tribune*, 20 October 2019.

56. 'Chinese, Afghan presidents pledge joint efforts to promote ties', *Xinhua News*, 14 June 2019.

57. For a discussion of China's Afghan policy in 2018, see: Filippo Boni, 'Afghanistan 2018: Parliamentary elections and regional power shifts', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX, pp. 377-392.

58. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, H.E. Wang Yu, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Afghanistan, *Chinese Contribution to Afghanistan Obvious to All*, 28 November 2019.

2019 was a case in point. In April, Afghanistan chaired for the first time a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Contact Group, which was held in Bishkek.⁵⁹ Participants discussed about progress on the Afghan peace process and reviewed the Contact Group's draft road map for further action.⁶⁰ In September, Afghanistan participated in the third Afghanistan-China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, in Islamabad.⁶¹ During the meeting, the three sides «agreed on a list of initial projects of enhancing counterterrorism cooperation» as well as to continue to build political mutual trust and support reconciliation efforts.⁶² They also agreed to explore «China-Afghanistan-Pakistan plus» cooperation. Finally, at the beginning of November, Afghanistan participated as an observer in the 18th meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Heads of Governments, in Uzbekistan.

With regards to China's role in the Afghan peace process, according to Raffaello Pantucci «Beijing has clearly concluded that the road to resolution in Afghanistan includes bringing the Taliban to the table».⁶³ This trend was set in motion in previous years, during which China reportedly met several times with Taliban representatives, to discuss about the peace process in Afghanistan.⁶⁴ The developments in 2019 confirm this wider trend of engaging directly with the Taliban. In June 2019, the «South China Morning Post» reported about a meeting between Taliban representatives and Chinese authorities which had occurred in an unspecified date earlier that month, and in which the two sides discussed the US withdrawal «in exchange for guarantees that Afghanistan will not be used as a base for militant attacks».⁶⁵ In September 2019, after US President Trump had called off the peace negotiations, Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Afghan Taliban, said that a nine-member Taliban delegation travelled to Beijing and met with Deng Xijun, China's special representative for Afghanistan, to

59. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Contact Group Meeting on Afghanistan Kicks Off*, 19 April 2019. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Contact Group, was originally established in 2005, but it only started operating in 2017, with the first meeting held in Moscow during the same year.

60. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 'SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group held its third meeting with SCO participation in Bishkek', 19 April 2019.

61. 'Trilateral dialogue: Pakistan, China, Afghanistan agree on enhancing counterterrorism cooperation', *Dawn*, 7 September 2019.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Raffaello Pantucci, 'Does Beijing grasp the portent of embracing Afghanistan and the Taliban?', *South China Morning Post*, 10 February 2019.

64. Farhan Bokhari, Kiran Stacey & Emily Feng, 'China courted Afghan Taliban in secret meetings', *Financial Times*, 6 August 2018.

65. 'China hosts Taliban delegation to discuss Afghan peace process, counterterrorism issues', *South China Morning Post*, 20 June 2019.

discuss about the suspension of peace talks with the US.⁶⁶ Finally, on 28 October 2019, a Taliban delegation met in China for two days with representatives of the Afghan government, for two days of intra-Afghan peace talks.⁶⁷ This final meeting came in the wake of another meeting held in Moscow a few days earlier, on 25 October, in which the US, Russia, China and Pakistan issued a joint statement, calling for a ceasefire, for the release of prisoners (both from the Afghan government and the Taliban), and for the start of intra-Afghan dialogue.⁶⁸

6. Conclusion

As the analysis presented above demonstrated, Afghanistan in 2019 was a country in flux, with a high degree of political and economic uncertainty looming large on the country's future. On the domestic front, while the announcement of preliminary results, even if delayed, strengthened the credibility of the electoral process, allegations of voting frauds, coupled with low voter turnout, may undermine the legitimacy of the new president, at a time in which peace talks would require unity among political forces. Yousof Rasheed, the executive director of the Free and Fair Election forum for Afghanistan, noted how «there is a great lack of public confidence in the political environment. If the opponents start putting on pressure and more protests now, it will not be helpful or improve the process.»⁶⁹

Internationally, very much like in previous years, 2019 was dominated by the US and their peace negotiations with the Taliban. At the same time, an array of actors, including Russia, Pakistan, China and India, vied to position themselves in the international relations of Afghanistan, by supporting key political actors, who were likely to have a stake in the future political framework of the country. Interestingly, China, Russia and Pakistan, all three have engaged to varying degrees with the Taliban and are trying to accommodate them as legitimate interlocutors in the intra-Afghan equilibrium that will emerge in the coming years.

66. 'Afghan Taliban meet with Chinese officials after talks with US collapse', *Deutsche Welle*, 22 September 2019.

67. 'Report: Taliban Delegation Touches Down In China For Peace Talks', *Gandhara*, 28 October 2019.

68. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, 'U.S., Russia, China and Pakistan Joint Statement on Peace in Afghanistan', 28 October 2019.

69. Pamela Constable, 'Afghanistan's Ghani wins slim majority in presidential vote, preliminary results show', *Washington Post*, 22 December 2019.

