

Giandomenico Picco

## A possible framework for Afghanistan negotiations<sup>(\*)(\*\*)</sup>

The “enemy” has been a primordial tool of government management. For a large part of human history, the “enemy” has helped to define the identity “of the other side”. This was exploited by “poor” rulers; extremist narratives need an “existential” enemy. In other words, “poor” rulers are defined by “the negative other” as they seem unable to provide a full identity by themselves; thus they cannot survive without an enemy. Our history is full of such cases – as it still is – though perhaps slightly less.

Are there leaders who can lead without an enemy? Great leaders certainly do not copy the pages of the past. They write new chapters of human history, both morally and institutionally. They built national projects around positive values and they have the courage to look into the unknown. A bad leader uses negative narratives rather than positive values. He looks for an enemy – so he can stay on top. He repeats the old adages: «we are better than others», or «God is with us», which implies the need for an existential dichotomy between “us and them”; this requires the demonization of the “other”. Statesmen are defined by institutional and cultural innovation while the furthering of negative images of the “other” is the trademark of lesser rulers.

The past four decades of Afghanistan history have offered many examples of the latter. It seems to me that the Soviet project of the nineteen eighties, the Taliban project of the nineties, with its roots in the “extreme Islamisation” of the Pashtu by President Zia Ul Haq, (in good part to deal with the Pashtunistan issue) and to a significant extent, even the Western project of the last ten years, all may have something in common. For different reasons those projects seemed to have moved far away from the original “national project” which kept Afghanistan in one piece since 1747 even though some territory was lost in the East and in the West of the country: one part was incorporated in the Persian Empire and another in the Mogul Empire.

The Kingdom of Afghanistan had a national project which was centered on two pillars: one of domestic reality and one of external reality. The domestic pillar was the organizational principle of “primus inter pares”; the “primus” being Kabul and the

No. 59 – JULY 2011

### Abstract

The real issue for Afghanistan today is what, if any, is its “national project”? And as Afghanistan political settlement is increasingly being discussed, what is the best framework for any talks? And what are Afghanistan negotiations supposed to produce and who can make such negotiations successful?

From a forgotten Central Asian country in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, to a land of East-West confrontation in the 1980’s, to a failed, discriminatory religious state in the late 1990’s, to a potential encounter of different religions and cultures and an opportunity to re-set the geopolitics of an entire region and more. A nine country negotiation may become the harbinger of a new world set-up, where national projects will no longer necessarily be based on a “choice-less” identity and on an “existential enemy”.

*Giandomenico Picco is now a business negotiations consultant. For 20 years (1973-1992) he was a UN negotiator involved in the Geneva Agreements on the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan; the cease fire between Iran and Iraq, the liberation of Western hostages in Lebanon and others detained without due process.*

(\*) Published in a different version by the Carnegie Council in UK and on the site of Oxford Research Group, in April 2011.

(\*\*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

Pashtu tribe and the “pares” being the other regional areas under the daily rule of other tribes or sub-tribes, as managed by their elders. While the religious centre was the mosque, the “civil side” of life was run by the “hujrah”, the group of elders. This separation was at the core of Afghan life, a sort of separation of powers *ante litteram*.

Over the last 40 years or so, the concept of “primus inter pares”, the separation of civilian and religious sides, as well as the tribal construct; the basic ingredients of the national project, all appear to have been undermined to different extents.

The Soviets, the Taliban and the Western actors appeared to look at Afghanistan as a somewhat centralized state in which they had their proxies in control of Kabul. The Taliban project, which has its roots in the religious extremism, from the Deobandi roots of the madrassas – where most Taliban were taught, together with elements of Wahabism. This provided the Taliban with a *Weltanschauung* where national borders lost relevance to religious borders.

It is interesting to remember that even after the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, with Pakistani help, they did not recognize the Durand line, the British-imposed border-line with Pakistan. Last but not least, the tribal nature of the Pashtu was indeed affected by religious extremism and by the large movement of refugees, who having left their homes, had to adjust to a different life where some of their tribal points of reference were lost.

Indeed, the last three decades have brought about an even-wider change affecting not only Afghanistan. Its traditional role was as a buffer state between Empires. More recently it has been an area of contested influence between Pakistan and India. This means that the very role of Afghanistan as an entity may have to be looked at in a rather more modern way. In other words, is there a “new national project” for Afghanistan based on the new reality – internal and international?

The Soviet, the Pakistani (Taliban) and the Western national project for Afghanistan seemed to be still part of a vision of a Westphalian nation state. While one could argue that Afghanistan never was a Westphalian state (this is a matter of historic debate), the fact is that the very world of Westphalia is morphing into something that has still yet to emerge fully. I would submit that the Westphalian nation state, with its successful secret weapon – namely the “choice-less identity”: what Amartya Sen calls the communitarian view of identity where identity is derived from one’s mother and the land of one’s birth. This, cannot, in my view, be the last invention of social and political institutions. Is it not the case that we may well see the emergence of post-Westphalian states in various part of the globe within the next decades perhaps starting in Europe, or perhaps in South Asia?

Thus, the real issue for Afghanistan today is what, if any, is its “national project”? It cannot be as a buffer between empires, it cannot be as a ping-pong ball between India and Pakistan, and it cannot be as a jumping board or as a safe haven for terrorists aimed at striking countries far away.

Again, after many centuries some may say that the national project of Afghanistan for the twenty-first century is being defined by the enemy. It seems to me it still is. Over the past three decades the world has come to know about Afghanistan because of war and destruction. This cannot be the way to shape a national project. Surely the Afghans deserve better than that? Everybody deserves better than that.

And so we are back to the question of leaders who can lead without an enemy. Can a future nation be built if the corner-stone of the edifice is the enemy?

### **Negotiating the future of Afghanistan**

The first question is whether it is possible to return even to a loose unitary state among the various groups/tribes and if it is possible to do so without tempting its neighbours to take advantage of it? More than one nation state in the region relies on an existential – or at least a national enemy – to pursue their respective projects to different extents.

There may now be a last opportunity for negotiations between various countries – and among Afghans themselves. These days, some of the Afghan actors are playing a transnational role – indeed they operate across borders. Several countries are active on the chess board of Afghanistan and some Afghan groups may find their existing role non-negotiable as it would mean putting the clock back 40 years. Much has happened in the last decades and more especially with regard to a deterioration of tribal relations, while a more centralized constitution was adopted in January 2004. The Afghanistan of the 1970's, or earlier, is no more and I doubt it can be reconstructed.

Thus, the issue is what are Afghanistan negotiations supposed to produce and who can make such negotiations successful?

The porosity of the Afghan-Pakistani border, the religious/territorial dimension of the Taliban, the political military in-breeding between Taliban and Pakistani institutions, requires that Pakistan be involved in whatever negotiations may develop.

At the same time, the anti-Indian dimension of the Taliban phenomenon, both within the borders of Afghanistan and outside, over several years, raises the question of what can be an “effective” Pakistani role on the Afghan question without an Indian contribution to the mosaic? However, the possibility that New Delhi accepts to be clustered with Islamabad and Kabul in a limited tripartite setting, to sort out the Afghan quagmire is rather unlikely. And it is even less likely that Pakistan would make concessions on other issues, within a bilateral context with New Delhi, in the absence of more clarity in Afghanistan. To overcome the issue of Indian participation the grouping may have to be wider.

The presence of Iran in the negotiations would be justified by the Shiite Tajiks/Hazaras and the anti-Taliban role that Tehran played before 2001, and indeed by its continued influence as a neighbour. Equally, Indian and Iranian participation would likely encourage Pakistan to call for a Saudi presence at the table. The closeness of Riyadh and Islamabad over the last three to four decades may not have been a subject of interest to many but it has assumed a great significance both on the religious, economic and political fronts. Again, there is both an anti-Indian dimension and an anti-Iranian dimension to the linkage.

This “minilateral approach to negotiations” on Afghanistan engaging Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia, may be complemented by a slightly larger table which would include the US, NATO, the EU, Russia and China – nine participants plus Afghanistan.

Afghans will have to agree, of course, on the kind of nation state Afghanistan can be.

The extreme Islamisation of the Taliban, meant basically the Pashtu tribe, as President Musharraf himself stated: «the Taliban are Pashtu and the Pashtu are Taliban». Events inside Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 – i.e. the quasi genocide of the Hazara by the Taliban, the tribal war between them and the Tajiks, and indeed the new political and military role the Tajiks have taken on in Kabul after 2001, may be at the core of an impossible compromise. Will the Tajiks accept going back to their valleys and will the Hazaras forget their genocidal killing by the Taliban?

It is equally relevant that any agreement reached among the Afghan players is supported by its neighbours and other states. This is especially the case because a loose federation may well be a possible result of the process among Afghans. In this case, the support of the neighbours would be even more relevant. A code of conduct *vis à vis* the new Afghanistan by all participants to the negotiations may well help the entire future of the region.

Furthermore, it is evident that several issues of the Afghan saga are inextricably connected with issues between its neighbours and these issues would have to be addressed in some way – even if not completely resolved – if an Afghan solution is to be given a fighting chance.

Thus the existing Afghan borders, as they have been known over the last 60 years, may well have to be reaffirmed by all participants and declared by the neighbours, to be “beyond temptation” – so

to speak. Their participation may also give further support to the new Afghanistan agreed upon by the Afghans which may be a new version of a state, different from Westphalia, or those devised by the West.

“Multiple identities” may be the way to go; one can be a Tajik and an Afghan – a Tajik by language, religion and culture yet with loyalty to an Afghan identity different to that of its neighbours. “Kabul as an open city” may be another result of an intra Afghan dialogue, and a new version of a unitary state, a confederation of sorts based on features coming from the 1,000 year history of that land, and others that Afghans may yet devise, learning from the horrors and mistakes of the last 40 years – the main feature of which was “the demonization of the other”. In other words a unique unitary state, the world has yet to see; a state which would be sustainable, as much as because of the commitments of the Afghans, as much because of the commitments of its neighbours and the other participants to the negotiations.

Is it possible to reconstitute in Afghanistan today the mix of cultural and religious identities, which were kept together for two centuries when distance, and poor communications allowed the traditions to be rather separate and distinct, and when the unity of tribes was rather the result of outside dangers and external enemies?

Can the old construct be rebuilt when conditions have changed so much, both in the surrounding world and in the world at large and when the relationships between the various Afghan groups have been altered so significantly? Thus, I would suggest that the negotiators will not be able to go back to the past – even if they wanted to. The only option is to invent a future.

In other words; the intra Afghan negotiations will have a great opportunity for they will have to produce a “new Afghanistan”, or to declare the *de facto* end of the country. I think the choice is so stark because the old pieces of the construct are no more and the new ones require great leadership – if they are to be put together without leading to a failed state, with further disintegration likely. The option of inventing a new national project based on an outside enemy contains within it also the roots of its own disintegration. The component parts of the Afghan nation may well see different enemies and not the same enemy for all.

The Taliban movement – like anybody else in the world today – may well have to be confronted with a choice dictated by these new times. Borders hardly separate us from anybody – however far or close they may be. The new realities imply that the imperative to co-exist with “the other”, “the different”, “the enemy” is a growing necessity for the societal evolution of a more and more crowded and interconnected/interdependent world.

To create a national project on the strength of a negative concept, namely “the enemy”, raises the question of what kind of leaders does that nation have? Negotiations have to include a number of actors and interconnected issues and they have to be tackled looking forward not backwards. Any construct build only on the concept of enemy will destabilize more than one country of the region.

Thus, the “minilateral” framework may also make it easier to leave outside the room, the entire religious issue as the participants at the table would be rather heterogeneous when it comes to religious traditions.

Indeed the “minilateral” approach would offer also the “benefit” of having more than “two sides” to an issue and thus offering more than just “zero sum solutions” to any given problem. It would seem to me that the issues involved require more imagination to be solved than a simplistic “friend-enemy” approach.

I would submit that this is indeed the key to successful “minilateral” negotiations of the Afghan quagmire: the realization that the roots planted by some, over the last 40 years may in fact undermine more than just Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan may actually offer very much needed leadership in this regard *vis à vis* the Taliban groups and their supporters from outside the region. Yet I should stress that the lack of leadership in such negotiations does contain dangers: it might show that “other national projects” in the region are also rooted in the need for an existential enemy.

The umbilical link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda will necessarily have to be severed as well as with any other group which uses these territories as a jumping board for terrorist activities in other countries. This will have to come to an end – in deeds – not just in words. This would need to be achieved by handing over a number of individuals to the countries they have attacked.

Negotiations on Afghanistan by a limited number of countries offer in my view, a possibility, paradoxically, to lay the foundations of a new geopolitics for the region and more.

From a forgotten Central Asian country in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, to a land of East-West confrontation in the 1980’s, to a failed, discriminatory religious state in the late 1990’s, to a potential encounter of different religions and cultures and an opportunity to re-set the geopolitics of an entire region and more. A nine country negotiation may become the harbinger of a new world set-up, where national projects will no longer necessarily be based on a “choice-less” identity and on an “existential enemy”.

Undoubtedly such an enterprise will need the right convener: was it to be the Afghans or an international entity like the UN or its Secretary General. However, it seems to me that we have entered the world of “non-institutionalized” (or lightly institutionalized) “minilateralism” – as the cases of Kosovo, Iran, North Korea, have already demonstrated and we are leaving the world of multilateralism of WWII roots.

Thus, one should hope, in my view, that the “minilateral” group on Afghanistan would be convened by the Afghans and would be arranged on two levels: a plenary one and an Afghan one.

However, it is evident that the target of setting a new national project does require something else: it needs a small group of Afghan leaders, who can look beyond today’s horizons and who can unleash the positive value of their history and their future expectations as a group of different identities in a multidimensional future, where discrimination of any kind is recognized no legitimacy and no dignity. The new Afghanistan if it is to exist, would hardly survive if it is based on enemy and destructions and on the hypothesis of homogeneity of population and too rigid centralized institutions

Whether that was the project of the Taliban and their supporters may be beside the point now, as long as it is realized that any neighbouring country whose national project is anchored only to an existential enemy is doomed as well. Equally, a national project built on religious exclusivity, cultural exclusivity, ethnic exclusivity is destined to crash as much as the global reality at more and more levels is giving less and less space to “Bantustan or ghetto” kind of projects.

In 1942, in the middle of the Second World War, and when Germany was in the ascendancy, a few “leaders,” a very few indeed, gathered to design the project for the international system that would emerge “after the war”. They invented the multilateral system of the UN and Bretton Woods in the middle of the war: and so it came to pass after 1945. That construct worked for some 45 years till the early 90’s. Then, the change in geopolitics and globalization affected the functioning of the structures which had served us well for half a century. Suffice here to recall the five years between 1986 and 1991 will remain in history also for the successes of the construct of 1945 especially in conflict resolution: the Geneva Agreements on Afghanistan, the end of the Iran/Iraq war, the independence of Namibia, the liberation of Kuwait, the end of the civil war in El Salvador, marked the apogee of an international system and institutions of an era which ended. Indeed those achievements compare rather starkly well with what followed between 1992 and 1997: Balkan wars, Somalia, Rwanda genocide and conflicts in the neighbouring countries of central Africa, some of which

continue to this day, indeed also the descent of Afghanistan into a failed state, really accelerated following 1992, to reach a new the bottom by 1996 and the subsequent years..

Indeed the world as it is always said has changed in the last decades: the multilateral system is changing: group of 6 on North Korea, 5 plus 1 on Iran, 6 on Kosovo, Group of 20 for economics: this is not the profile of the multilateral system of WWII memory and of 1980's successes. But the invention of the new *modus operandi* and structures will need leaders who can imagine the empty pages and fill them.

### Conclusion

Will the Afghans find leaders who will not mistake conciliation with fear, and forbearance with weakness? A "minilateral" forum at two levels: intra Afghan and "regional" may offer an opportunity to change the paradigm of the political project for Afghanistan, and some of its neighbours. It may offer countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and others the chance to take on a leadership role rarely offered by history and not yet written; it may also assist in introducing a new dimension within the international cultural/civilizational and political discourse that goes beyond "the choice-less identity" and beyond the "existential" need for an enemy.

**La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.**

**I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:**

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici
- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Cina e Asia Orientale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Internazionalizzazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

**Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.**

**ISPI  
Palazzo Clerici  
Via Clerici, 5  
I - 20121 Milano  
[www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)**

© ISPI 2011