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Why assume the Taliban will always be so violent?

By Jacob Shapiro

After the west leaves Aghanistan, the group may adopt more peaceful methods, says Jacob Shapiro

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Any assessment of Afghanistan's prospects must consider what the Taliban will do after western withdrawal. Most public debate typically assumes it will continue its current strategy of violent conflict, exerting influence by killing soldiers, attacking officials and seeking to take over the country. But this might be wrong.

The Taliban is a political organisation; it chooses its methods by taking into account a range of factors: how the public interprets its actions, what it can afford and what its operatives are willing to do. All of these factors will change as the western presence diminishes and the economy adjusts to a steady drop in foreign aid.

First, the optics of attacking the Afghan National Army will change when it is no longer so obviously allied with outsiders. Right now, the Taliban can credibly claim to be attacking a foreign proxy force when it strikes out at the ANA and Afghan National Police. That claim resonates because most Afghans are given regular, tangible reminders of the foreign presence as convoys of heavily armoured foreign military vehicles festooned with weapons and sensors roll noisily through their streets. But will the claim that the ANA is a tool of foreign occupiers still resonate when Nato convoys no longer pass through villages and down the main roads? Perhaps, but it will be a much harder sell.

Second, the Taliban will also face a very different set of challenges as key sources of foreign support dry up. Most analysts believe that the Pakistani security establishment has tolerated Afghan Taliban leaders on its soil because it viewed them as a means of forestalling the consolidation of an Indian-allied pro-American state on its northern border. But that does not mean it wants the Taliban to win power.

Pakistan has little to gain from an ethnocentric Pashtun state next door, especially as it is fighting a militant Pashtun movement on its own soil. As the amount of military power the Taliban needs to

prevent the Kabul government from controlling southern Afghanistan drops, so too will support from Pakistan. We can also expect a decline in Pakistan's willingness to allow the Taliban havens in the border regions.

Third, the Taliban will lose revenue as the western presence declines. The organisation's finances are, of course, opaque. But, right now, the group earns money by "taxing" logistics convoys supplying its enemies and charging fees to aid organisations seeking to work in conflict-ridden areas (the latter can be indirect, with the aid agencies paying security groups who then pay protection fees). As the foreign presence draws down, funding will dry up. Moreover, the Taliban's ability to appeal to donors to support the fight against non-Islamic invaders will shrink.

The changes will make it harder for the Taliban leadership to control its organisation. Press reports in 2010 and 2011 revealed that Taliban leaders in Pakistan had problems convincing mid-level commanders to fight as aggressively as they would like because the risks were so great during the US "surge". More recent reports suggest there is scepticism among rank-and-file fighters about their leaders' recent decision to open an office in Doha to explore reconciliation with the Afghan government. Just like any political organisation, Taliban mid-level operatives and fighters have their own interests and must be motivated to follow orders.

Exactly how the Taliban leadership responds to this environment will be a critical factor in determining Afghanistan's political future. The nascent negotiations in Qatar are an encouraging sign that the group may shift into less violent methods, using the threat of force to win policy concessions without violence. But other outcomes are possible. They could mirror the development of the Provisional Irish Republican Army and Palestine Liberation Organisation, conducting periodic terrorist attacks to gain policy concessions. Alternatively, the Taliban could splinter as the sources of external funding that give central leaders leverage disappear. At some point, the central leadership may no longer be able to follow through on its commitments and will then become largely irrelevant as peace – or war – is made between a string of local commanders and Kabul.

The group's leaders therefore face a narrow window of opportunity to lead the Taliban into Afghan politics. Right now, the differences between local commanders' political interests and those of the central leadership in Pakistan are small – and the leadership still has the resources to make sure that most of its followers do, well, follow. But it must make the leap before the flow of money starts to decline and local commanders no longer see much point in following through on commitments their leaders make at the bargaining table.

Right now, all sides have strong reasons to strike a deal and the power to enforce it. Here's hoping they do so.

The writer is an assistant professor at Princeton University and author of 'The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations'

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