

## POLICY DIRECTIONS

# CYCLES OF WAR AND PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

## UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONFLICT



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### HIGHLIGHTS:

- War and peace have commonly been understood as separate processes, requiring separate strategising and separate analysis. Our research concludes that 'conflict resolution' and 'peace building' must be brought together.
- Critical points in the life cycle of conflict exist, and actions taken at these points can determine whether conflict continues or whether a new cycle, of peace, begins. Contrary to the commonly held view that war is made explicable through analysis of its causes, the cycle of war analysis argues that drivers of conflict *mutate* as war proceeds.
- Similarly, key fault lines can be identified in what can usefully be seen as a 'cycle of peace', whereby a toxic mix of circumstances and (in)action can lead to the peace cycle breaking, and a new cycle of war emerging.
- This policy brief flags the importance of recognising and understanding the critical points in cycles of war and peace, and suggests actions therein with specific reference to the conflict in Afghanistan.

### WAR AND PEACE CYCLES

Participants and observers of violence often find themselves caught up in a seemingly unstoppable spiral that leads only to ever-increasing violence. Those in the midst of such developments often find it difficult to interpret what is happening in rational terms. As a result of extensive research by CSRC, in particular with regard to the last forty years of conflict in Afghanistan, we suggest that an underlying logic underpins the escalation from peace to war and, crucially, the opportunities during war for peace and its consolidation.

The former process, towards conflict, can be defined as a 'war cycle', where the build-up to conflict is understood as a seemingly perpetual cycle of collapsed order and security, reciprocal fear and mistrust between groups and individuals, and the deteriorating ability of the central government to make its structures and organisations respond and function. Thus what might have been initially a limited challenge to authority turns into an attractive vehicle for wider collective action to challenge state authority through armed conflict. Financial, social and political accumulation start to provide incentives for the continuation of the conflict.

This cyclical interpretation of the political economy of conflict contrasts directly with commonly held interpretations of war that depict it as a chaotic and incoherent process, which is nevertheless explicable by an analysis of its causes. But understanding what

may have started a conflict does not necessarily explain why a conflict continues over time. Using the cycles of war perspective, drivers of conflict mutate as war proceeds. This has been evident in Afghanistan where perception that the central government was weak has invited political and military actors other than the original violent opposition, warlords at one moment and the Taliban or local commanders at another, to mobilise and seek to redress grievances or expand their power or influence (Giustozzi 2009a).

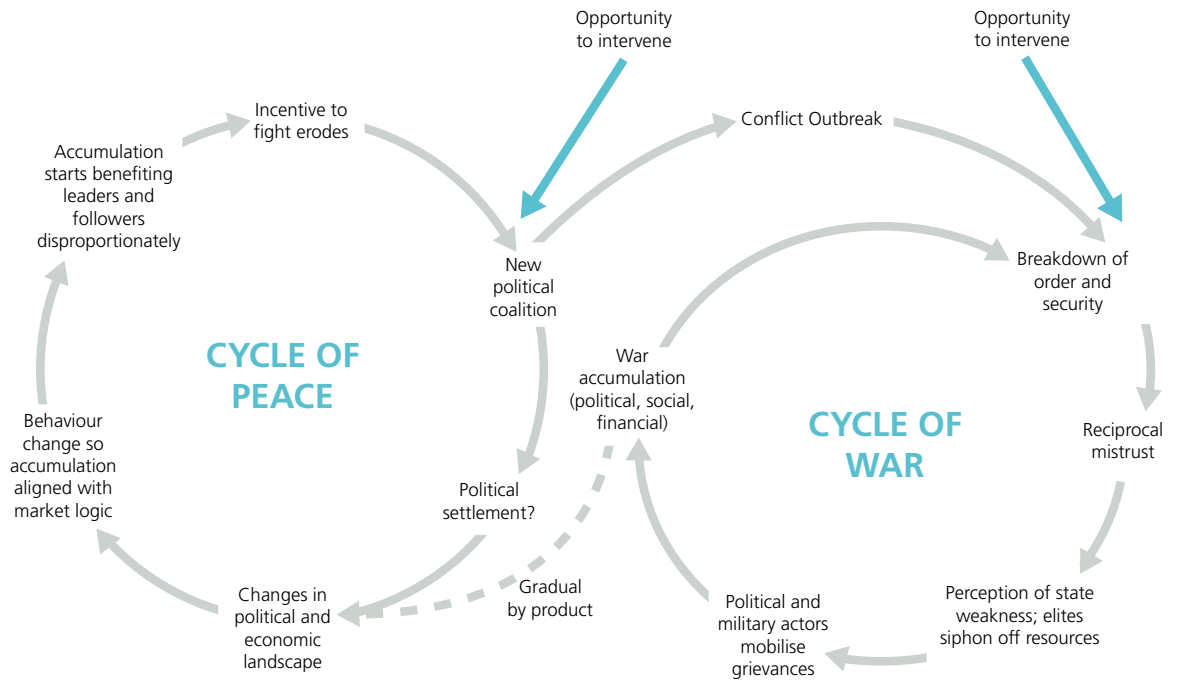
The same observers, practitioners and participants who see the unstoppable spiral towards war also bear witness to the fact that civil wars sometimes seem to reach a 'natural end'. In these cases, the trend towards a settlement becomes irresistible and armies that were fighting doggedly suddenly appear to disintegrate. Through the cycles of war and peace argument, the logic behind this can be understood. Processes of war accumulation (of financial, ideological or political capital) through coercive force gradually change the political and economic landscape, until one actor or coalition is able to impose its own settlement. It is not just a matter of one actor emerging as stronger than the others, but of a range of actors developing a shared interest in securing what they have accumulated thus far in terms of material and political gains, even if they have been fighting on opposite sides.



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The cycles of war and peace can be summarised as follows, both crucially intersecting around the processes of war accumulation, and the possibility of changing the economic and political landscape.

## THE WAR CYCLE IN PRACTICE

Three cycles of war can be identified in the recent history of Afghanistan: 1978-1980, 1993-1994 and 2002-2009 (Giustozzi 2009a). The 1980 Soviet intervention and external reactions to it created an environment of permanent conflict, overruling any internal cycle of war or potential for sustainable peace. A cycle of peace (see below) only started in 1988 with Soviet withdrawal and the reduction of external support to Afghan factions. By 1992 the short peace was disintegrating into a second war cycle, this time driven by a power struggle at the centre. The narrow interests driving the new war cycle resulted in the quick succession of a new peace cycle, which started emerging in 1994 but only gradually gained strength and final fruition in 2001. Once again, however, peace was short-lived and a new cycle of war began building up in 2002.

The patterns identified from this perspective yield important lessons about the critical points that during conflict might prompt peace, and during peace might prompt war. Crucially, external intervention can interrupt cycles of both war and peace and prompt the beginning of the opposite cycle. Thus, external intervention, in the various forms that it can take (diplomatic, financial, military), may not achieve its intended effects.

Once a war cycle takes off, intervening to stop it is very difficult. Here, two of the most commonly used interventions in Afghanistan are highlighted: financial support and large-scale military intervention. Neither has yet broken the cycle of war. However, these may be more effective if their timing and approach are planned from an understanding of the broader political economy of the cycles of war and peace.

1. Even when a government receives external financial support (usually the most readily accepted form of intervention), the cycle of war can continue. Once a state structure is shaken by civil conflict, the ability of its bureaucracy to function weakens. This is due to political and factional friction but also because uncertainty over the future political order affects the incentives of individual bureaucrats to 'serve the state'. Priorities change and available financial resources might no longer be directed to where they are needed (Giustozzi 2009b). (See Box 1).

The growing dysfunction of state bureaucracies in times of internal conflict is a key aspect of the cycle of war. It is important to understand how this generates further opposition. Trying to resolve the conflict by investing in such dysfunctional bureaucracies might therefore be a waste of resources.

2. Large-scale external intervention, as when the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan at the end of 1979, does not always prompt a transfer from a cycle of war to one of peace. Large-scale external intervention often invites counter-interventions, thereby strengthening conflict and prolonging the cycle of war rather than pacifying the country. This was the case in both the 1980s and from 2002. The current escalation in the international involvement in Afghanistan seems to point in the same direction. (See Giustozzi 2008)

De-escalation can be very difficult in the face of international politics and internal political issues but there might be no other alternative available to start a cycle of peace. The prevention of conflict in its early stages is greatly preferable. This of course rests on an effective early warning capability and on the willingness of policy makers to take such information seriously.

## THE PEACE CYCLE IN PRACTICE

A case of successful intervention in a conflict where a peace cycle was emerging is Tajikistan's civil war ([Matveeva 2009](#)). In the case of Afghanistan's recent history, such peace cycles have occurred at least twice; in 1985-92 and in 1994-2001. In the first case it was the Soviet withdrawal that allowed the cycle to accelerate. From about 1985 the cycle had been emerging. Following the diagram above, the various factions in the civil war were accumulating military power and financial wealth and most were ready for a settlement by the early 1990s. The leaders of the opposition lost support as the perceived threat receded and their proportionate wealth grew. They needed a formal deal to consolidate their power. Finally, external support was being rapidly reduced.

This peace cycle was, however, rapidly followed by the start of a new civil war. The fragile cycle of peace broke down in part due to the failure of the international community to offer effective mediation in making a settlement possible, and because of the failure of the different factions to forge a new political coalition (see [Giustozzi 2009a](#) and [Nathan 2005, 2009a, 2009b](#)). A return to violent confrontation between the factions left what remained of the Afghan state to collapse and the cycle of war rapidly advanced as ethnic group consolidation for protection purposes led to distrust and suspicion.

The second peace cycle, which started in 1994, saw the emergence of the Taliban as peace-makers. The main anti-Taliban factions were tiring after many years of fighting, and key players within their ranks had accumulated wealth and were keen to retire from war. The war-weary population also sought peace and reconstruction. As the international community was not engaged, the Taliban led the initiation of the cycle of peace, disarming the warring factions. Many warlords subscribed to the plan, hoping that they would be allowed to keep the wealth and influence accumulated during the war. The Taliban also promised warlords a role in the new order. International intervention in 2001 deprived the Taliban of the role of peacemaker and appropriated it for the American-led expeditionary force and the interim administration of Hamid Karzai. This was well-timed, though not deliberately so. Although the peace cycle was not handled very effectively by the international community (see [Rossi and Giustozzi 2006](#) for a critique of DDR efforts), the strength of the peace cycle was such that initially it endured. A peace which guaranteed the roles and interests of major power brokers seemed the best option. However, ineffective external mediation and post-war reconstruction did eventually play a role in the rapid relapse of Afghanistan into conflict (see Box 2). By the summer of 2002 the Taliban were beginning to reactivate their networks in parts of Afghanistan. International intervention failed to bring about a settlement that guaranteed the interests of the key players who had subscribed to the peace cycle. These included not just regional powerbrokers, but also many Taliban commanders who could have been satisfied with some minor concessions and guarantees of safety ([Giustozzi 2008a](#)).

At the time of writing there is much talk in Afghanistan about 'reconciliation'. Some of the components of a peace cycle seem to be in place. In particular, several protagonists of the conflict have accumulated considerable financial resources and would

### BOX 1: UNCERTAINTY BREEDS CORRUPTION

The uncertainty created by the outbreak of civil conflict creates an environment where there are no longer any agreed rules of the game. Even within the 'governing coalition' uncertainty about medium and longer term arrangements induces individuals and groups to dedicate much of their energy to accumulating reserves (for the 'rainy days') and to spend as much energy checking each other as they spend fighting the official enemy. One can see this clearly in today's Afghanistan, where corruption has reached unprecedented levels and the old partners of the original anti-Taliban coalition of 2001 are at odds. These patterns can be weaker or stronger, depending on skilful political management at the centre and in the periphery, but always tend to weaken the response of a government against an insurgency, sometimes giving it sufficient breathing space to grow into an efficient vehicle for collective action and mobilise discontent and any kind of opposition. This is often the start of the cycle of war. ([Giustozzi 2010](#))

like to secure them. Moreover, the Taliban have accumulated military power and might be close to reaching the ceiling of their power. However, on many other fronts the peace cycle seems far from ready to take off. The prospects for further gains are still very good; indeed they are better than ever with the expectation of more resources being pumped into the country over the next few years. All sides in the conflict benefit from growing expenditure: the government and its allies are the direct recipients and opportunities for siphoning off resources will be immense. But the Taliban also benefit because they tax any aid project or business activity in their areas of influence. For the moment, therefore, war is still more profitable than peace.

However, an opportunity to intervene and accelerate the peace cycle might present itself soon. Paradoxically, but not so much from the perspective of cycles of war and peace, international disengagement might provide such an opportunity. Is the international community ready to seize the chance? At present there is no international organisation positioned well enough to play an effective role as a peace broker.

### BOX 2: NEGOTIATIONS 'AT ALL COSTS' MAY SCUTTLE PEACE

Negotiations 'at all costs' are often a wasteful exercise if the conditions for a settlement are not ripe. The moral imperative to try to impose peace at all costs may clash with political realism, but perhaps more importantly can be counter-productive because bad timing can prevent a more successful intervention to promote negotiations later. Not only can a badly timed intervention damage the future credibility of external mediators, but it can also wear out political capital, making intervention more difficult to sustain later even if conditions are more conducive to success. The case of Somalia in 1993-5 is an example. On the possible negotiations with the Taliban see ([Masadykov, Giustozzi and Page 2010](#)).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Is external intervention in an ongoing conflict always appropriate? There are phases in a conflict where intervention is more likely to succeed, while intervening in the middle of a war cycle is likely to be counter-productive and certainly wasteful (Giustozzi 2009a).

1. Well-managed and timed negotiations, starting before the supremacy of ideological actors is established, could lead to a more balanced outcome. To have a good chance of success, intervention has to occur very early, when a crisis starts building up and before a war cycle kicks off. In order for this to be possible some conditions need to be in place:
  - a. Constant monitoring, to enable early warning (see **Wulf and Debiel 2009**);
  - b. Detailed knowledge and understanding;
  - c. A developed theoretical understanding of cycles of war and peace.
2. Although there is no automatic response to a military withdrawal, a reduction in the military presence of intervening forces can at least offer some incentives for indirectly intervening countries to consider negotiations or to start their own de-escalation.
3. The potential value of international organisations able to broker a deal from a position of neutrality is also underlined by the

discussion of cycles of peace and war. Such organisations must also be capable of intervening at their discretion, without being dependent on the consensus of the international community. There is space for international intervention in the political economy of most conflicts, but what is needed is a professionally staffed organisation with a genuine capacity to monitor conflicts and to time intervention effectively (Nathan 2009a; **Healy 2009**). The United Nations Department of Peace Keeping Operations and some regional organisations have been in part designed with such aims in mind, but none of them has been up to the tasks, because they respond to, their priorities are determined by, and their resources depend on, their key stakeholders, which are the national states (see Box 3). In the absence of a sufficiently autonomous and neutral international organisation, effective and timely peacemaking interventions are not likely to succeed.

4. Last but not least, the international community might have to recognise its limits and avoid intervening at any cost, at any time and anywhere. One of the lessons of Afghanistan is that a badly timed and badly planned intervention might be much worse than a delayed intervention, or even than a decision not to intervene at all.

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- All CSRC papers referenced in this brief are accessible by hyperlink or on [www.crisisstates.com/publications/publications.htm](http://www.crisisstates.com/publications/publications.htm)

## BOX 3: ROLE OF EXTERNAL PEACE MEDIATORS

The case of Afghanistan in 2002-2006 shows that even a strong peace cycle can benefit from effective external mediation and intervention; in their absence conflict may be reignited because reaching a lasting political settlement after years of war is not easy. Seizing the moment is the issue here: it is imperative to choose the right time and forms of intervention as a cycle of peace gathers strength or a cycle of war is still in an early stage. On the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of regional organisations in preventing or managing conflict see the CSRC series of papers on **Regional and Global Axes of Conflict**



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