

AFGHANISTAN: STATUS ON PEACE, POLITICS, AND RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION

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Summary

The political and military situation in Afghanistan remains fragile, and major transformations will likely take place within the coming months. The U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha, the potential for a sudden U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the upcoming presidential election in Afghanistan, the controversial expansion of President Ghani's tenure/mandate and political opposition to this, and a continued weakening of the Afghan National Army (ANA) are the most evident examples of developments that will likely alter Afghanistan's political landscape in the near future.

Introduction

This brief provides a short overview of Afghanistan's current political and security situation as well as the Resolute Support Mission's (RSM) efforts to train and develop the ANA. The brief is based on conversations and interviews with different experts and political

Recommendations:

- Continued military engagement in capacity building of the ANA and encouragement of negotiations and dialog between the Taliban and the Afghan Government as well as between the Government and the political elite in Kabul. However, such encouragement must strike an extremely delicate balance between supporting the peace process while avoiding destabilizing the Government.
- Increased support for initiatives on all levels that seek to identify intra-Afghan paths toward stabilization.
- Upscale efforts at regional levels through an identification of regional red lines in order to bridge various interests: Especially Pakistani and Iranian security interests need to be identified, and increased cooperation on stabilization between these two countries and Afghanistan will be vital for sustainability of any future process/settlement.



stakeholders in Kabul as well as Danish officers within the RSM in the period April 30-May 2, 2019. The brief is aimed at policy makers, the diplomatic community in Kabul, the Danish Defence, as well as researchers and analysts with a special interest in the topic.

Political tension in Kabul

The overall situation in Afghanistan continues to be fragile at best with a number of complex political developments in the short term. As President Ghani's tenure/mandate expired on May 22, he is facing a period where every decision made is likely to be contested by any opposition. His government has been sidelined in the present peace talks between the U.S. government represented by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, on the one hand, and the Taliban, on the other. To make matters worse, President Ghani is running out of political allies, the only exception being the somewhat unholy alliance with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – unholy because of the considerable political differences between President Ghani and Hekmatyar.

Former President Hamid Karzai has been very active politically, throwing his support to President Ghani's main opponent, former National Security Advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar. Karzai, in his own right and aspiration to gain political power, has continued to undermine Ghani's political agenda, exemplified by his boycott and call for postponement of the recent 'Consultative Peace Loya Jirga' held in Kabul between April 29 and May 3, 2019.

The Consultative Peace Loya Jirga was perceived by observers as President Ghani's attempt to establish a mandate for extending his presidency by a period of six months, as the presidential election has been postponed until September 2019. Whether he has or will succeed in legitimizing this extension and establish such a narrative is not yet clear, but he may succeed in convincing the international community and the young population in Kabul of the necessity of extending his mandate.

Furthermore, the support for Ghani may be quite strong outside the main population centers, as he has successfully created a positive image as the only 'clean' (uncorrupt) Afghan candidate among the elite in Kabul. The cost of doing so has been political isolation, aggravated by his continued introduction of young Afghans into positions in the Government and state apparatus at the expense of the existing political elites and warlords. Furthermore, a strong ethnic bias toward Pashtuns in relation to new appointments has also been counterproductive with regard to cooperation with especially the Tadjik elite in Kabul.

The security situation in Afghanistan has gradually worsened with more than half of the country out of government control with the Taliban as the main insurgency force. The Taliban's position is getting stronger by the day, which will most likely exacerbate in the current fighting season where provincial capitals risk falling to the Taliban for the first time since 2001. Incidentally, the RSM has discontinued the publication of data revealing which provinces are under government and insurgent control, respectively, arguing rather dubiously that this data was not useful to decision makers.

The present security situation is also affected by an increase in crime – especially robbery, assassinations, and abductions on the outskirts of the bigger cities – which typically implies a decrease in support for and trust in the present government and the democratic system in general. This of course provides opportunities for the Taliban. On the one hand, they can utilize the law and order vacuum to generate financial support, while on the other hand claiming to be the upholders of law and order in the areas they control – a narrative the movement has successfully applied historically.

Doha talks

On May 9, 2019, the sixth U.S.-Taliban meeting was concluded in Doha, Qatar, without any significant progress. Both sides have announced 'slow progress' without however going into detail on what this entails. The central dispute continues to be the order of events: The U.S. wants the Taliban to declare a ceasefire and

initiate dialogue with the Afghan Government prior to withdrawal, whereas the Taliban wants the U.S. to initiate a withdrawal from Afghanistan as a prelude to/precondition for a ceasefire and intra-Afghan talks.

In February 2019 both sides agreed on a 'framework for an agreement' in which the Taliban commits to preventing jihadist terrorist organizations from operating on Afghan soil in exchange for a U.S. military withdrawal. Unresolved questions include the role of the present Afghan Government as well as the premises for future intra-Afghan talks. U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad appears to be under pressure from Washington to deliver results in the short term, which may prove to have an effect on how firm the U.S. position will be on including the Afghan Government prior to a decision of withdrawal.

Taliban

The Taliban continues to refuse dialogue with the Afghan Government, as they perceive President Ghani to be an illegitimate leader. Individuals within the Afghan Government are also apprehensive to enter into such dialogue as they consider the Taliban to be terrorists. The central problem, however, seems to be the total lack of trust between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. While the parties may agree to meet unofficially, it is very unlikely that the Taliban would want to negotiate or even meet with the Afghan Government as long as it is led by president Ghani.

While the Doha negotiations may have caused optimism with regard to a permanent ceasefire, the negotiations do not necessarily entail a de-escalation of violence. On the contrary. On May 8 the Taliban launched an attack against an American NGO in Kabul, and recently the country has seen a general increase in attacks initiated by the insurgents as explained below. The motivation behind the attack on May 8 remains somewhat unclear, as it was the first attack in more than five years directly aimed at civilians. This could likely indicate either diverging interest and priorities within the movement or a sudden change of the movement's perception of legitimate targets.

Regional states

Pakistan has played a somewhat positive role with regard to the Doha negotiations. Late last year, Pakistan released Mullah Baradar, one of the co-founders of the Taliban. He is now leading the talks with the U.S. Doha on behalf of the movement. In April 2019, amid talks/negotiations, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan suggested the formation of an interim government in Afghanistan, which received harsh criticism from the Afghan Government and the U.S. negotiation team. Consequently, Pakistan withdrew from the talks, stressing that they continue to support the process. This clearly underlines the incredibly tense relationship between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the fragile state of relations will undoubtedly have to improve if a political solution is to materialize.

In contrast to Pakistan, Iran has historically taken a more reclined approach to Afghanistan. Lately, however, there have been reports of increased contact between the Taliban and Iran, with the former opening offices in Iran. Iran is likely hedging its bets in Afghanistan, opening avenues of dialogue with multiple players/parties. Furthermore, the recent increased tension between Iran and the U.S. may spill over into Afghanistan where insurgents and groups backed by Iran may target U.S. and other Western interests in Afghanistan as a part of this increased tension.

Both neighboring countries play a crucial role in attaining stability in Afghanistan. In the present situation it seems that both countries perceive the current Afghan Government as weak and with a fast expiration date, and their actions on security in Afghanistan mirror this.

Status of the Resolute Support Mission and sustainability of the Afghan National Army

The key challenge to the sustainability of ANA fighting efforts and ability to enforce sovereignty in Afghanistan is the high attrition rates among its troops caused by high casualty rates as well as large numbers of deserters.

Consequently, it is very unlikely that the ANA will be able to fight the insurgents efficiently in the longer run. According to SIGAR,¹ the monthly attrition rate in the first quarter of 2019 amounted to 2.2% of a combined ANA/Afghan Air Force of 190,423 soldiers. The ANA lost approximately 13,099 more soldiers compared to the first quarter of 2017. The attrition rate does not include the influx of new soldiers and is thus a benchmark for the actual loss of personnel.² The high attrition rate should be seen in light of the already significant manpower shortage. Currently, the difference between authorized and actual troop numbers is 36,951, which constitutes a shortage of 16.3%. These numbers paint a bleak picture of the sustainability of the ANA.

Meanwhile, the number of enemy-initiated attacks and ANA casualties were on the rise in the first quarter of 2019.³ The ANA suffers from mobility shortfalls and a lack of 'staying power' in captured territory in terms of soldiers to secure the area.⁴ This has worsened the ANA's ability to conduct successful offensive operations, and the army has assumed a largely defensive posture in and around government strongholds. The ANA's ability to effectively fight insurgents is doubtful in the long term. Insufficient training and overemphasis on quantity only worsen this conclusion.

Quantity over quality

Most likely due to the high attrition rate, the force development and deployment process currently focuses on producing more recruits and officers quickly to fill the ranks of the ANA. This short-term strategy is arguably an expression of political positioning amid the ongoing peace talks, but it has consequences for recruits on the ground. For example, there is a total lack of follow-up training once a soldier or officer graduates from basic military education. In other words, newly graduated soldiers and officers may be expected to assume combat roles for which they are not qualified.

The Resolute Support Mission (RSM)

Following this troubling conclusion, a critical reflection on the RSM coalition is in order. Several disruptive organizational changes in the Army Institutional Advisory Team (AIAT), the existence of two separate officer academies, the prevalence of 'coalition politics,' the anticipation of a drawdown of Western military forces, and a general focus on the short term are just a few examples of factors within the coalition that hinder effective support to the ANA.

- 1) Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction.
- 2) The SIGAR report notes uncertainty with the reported numbers, which therefore function as approximations.
- 3) *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 1st Quarter 2019*, pp. 72–77.
- 4) *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 1st Quarter 2019*, p. 71.

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