



**INSTITUT EUROPÉEN DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES**

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### **AFGHANISTAN 2014: THE FINAL COUNTDOWN TO ARMAGEDDON OR A RAY OF HOPE?**

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## AFGHANISTAN 2014: THE FINAL COUNTDOWN TO ARMAGEDDON OR A RAY OF HOPE?

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### FOREWORD

Landlocked and mountainous, Afghanistan has been so plagued by instability and conflict for the past 35 years that its economy and infrastructure are devastated, and a fair amount of its people are refugees (around 3 million of them in Pakistan and Iran).

Its strategic position between the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent along the ancient “Silk Road” means that Afghanistan, being at the center of the so-called “Great Game”, has long been disputed with the Tzarist Russia and the British Empire struggling for influence since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the 9/11 attacks of Al-Qaeda in the US the international forces (International Security Assistance Force - ISAF) under NATO lead, sent to Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the Taliban (host of Al-Qaeda) , are due to leave by the end of 2014.

But how successful has the ISAF mission been? As for denying a “safe haven” to Al-Qaeda, the mission has almost achieved the target (there is only a limited presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan); nevertheless civilian casualties (mainly caused by the Taliban but, to a lesser degree, also by international forces) have been high. After more than a decade the Taliban are not defeated and have still the capacity to launch surprise and sometimes lethal attacks.

A further issue is the consistency and readiness of the Afghan Forces to replace the international contingent: NATO has increased the size and effectiveness of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) totaling 350,000 troops comprehensive of Army and Police, whose operational capability appears to be the best achievable in a developing country. The question is: “Will the ANSF be able to face the insurgents without NATO support?”.

There is a certainty: many Afghans are tired of raids and aerial attacks causing civilian casualties and are looking forward to ISAF pulling out of the country even if they fear the Taliban may seize again power.

In this context, the presidential election to be held next April will play a pivotal role in the definition of the future political top management and in the assessment of its reliability. On this election hangs the future of the country: only if it is going to be relatively free and fair it will produce a government acceptable to most Afghans.

The election outcome represents, therefore, for Afghanistan both the first and most urgent deadline and the “conditio sine qua non” to progress towards the definition/solution of the remaining pending/unresolved issues: the military handover, the economy, the regional balance of power, and the reconciliation with the Taliban.

## **THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

Despite attempts to radically reform the electoral system, only two new laws intended to fix some of the many flaws of the 2009 vote have been approved: the law limiting the presidential power to appoint members of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), and the law making the criteria for becoming a presidential candidate more stringent. The 2014 elections are thus likely to be again plagued by corruption and voter fraud. Being President Hamid Karzai constitutionally prevented from running for a third term, it is still unclear who is likely to succeed him. The Independent Election Commission has disqualified 16 of the 27 nominated candidates, leaving 11 on the approved candidate list. Potential frontrunners include: Abdullah Abdullah (of mixed Pashtun and Tajik ancestry, leader of the largest opposition party, 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 2009 polls), Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (Pashtun, a Columbia University-educated cultural anthropologist, former World Bank and United Nations official, 4<sup>th</sup> in the 2009 polls) as well as Hamid Karzai's older brother Qayum and the Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul. Among the remaining candidates there are also several influential warlords.

In the past 12 years Afghanistan has held four national elections (two presidential and two parliamentary elections). A poll survey conducted recently by Glevum Associates for the US State Department indicates that Afghan would vote for a candidate without a history of corruption (90%), talking with the Taliban (61%) and willing to have good relations with Pakistan (71%).

What perhaps should have been looked at, given the huge distance between the governmental and opposition parties, was to set up before the elections a neutral interim government with people in charge who are not candidates for future presidency, so that the blame does not fall on one side or the other. Unfortunately, such a possibility was discarded right from the start. The key thing is, for whoever is to become president, to appoint a cabinet and senior officials that represent Afghanistan's ethnic and cultural constituencies: over the long run stability will hinge on the ability of Afghanistan's Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara, and other constituencies to reach a political consensus.

Though Karzai cannot stand for another term as President, he will doubtless pick up a favorite among the 11 candidates standing so far. Karzai will choose the candidate who can possibly give him a role to play in the future. The most likely candidates to gain his support are his brother Qayum Karzai or his Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul. However, if the elections are rigged as they were in 2009, when a civil war was narrowly averted, future political stability is at risk.

Electoral stability rests on how the ethnic card is played. In 2009 Karzai won a slim majority with the support of his fellow Pashtuns in the south and east, where the largest amount of ballot box stuffing took place. The non-Pashtuns in the north and west refused to accept the results, claiming they had won, until US mediators intervened and the northern candidate Abdullah Abdullah stepped down from contesting a second round. That scenario could well be repeated again next April, with far more devastating results, as this time the non-Pashtuns will not back down if they think Karzai has rigged the elections. The West, having surrendered over the past two years any control over the electoral process, has no levers it can apply to the regime to make it compromise: this is why heavily rigged elections might well lead to a multidimensional civil war, with losers fighting the winners and the Taliban fighting everyone.

If at the end of April there is a legitimate government in Kabul which is more or less acceptable by the majority of people, then there is still hope, but if there is an election that is deemed to have been rigged right from the start and if the opposition candidates feel they have been cheated, they will not accept any mediation, not having the US and NATO the troops and the leverage they had in 2009.

### **THE MILITARY HANDOVER**

The Afghan security forces will be primarily responsible for ensuring that the presidential election, scheduled on 5 April is held in a safe and secure environment with NATO forces playing a backup role.

But, far and wide, media and people are asking what will happen in Afghanistan at the end of this year when the US and NATO finally leave after fighting a 12 years war on which no side can claim victory. The truth is that nobody can predict what will happen from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 on. The only wise move would probably be to identify what is going wrong and try to remedy the situation or, at least, minimize the dangers of things getting worse.

For more than a year the military transition – the handing over of security to the 350,000-strong Afghan Army and Police – is taking place so that as NATO forces step down, Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) do step up.

The military transition is anyway having a hard time due to Taliban attacks and ANSF casualties which have increased enormously in the past year, thus showing the vulnerabilities of the Afghan forces, which are 80% illiterate and have an annual desertion rate of 20%. Presently there are some 84,000 Western troops, down from 150,000 in 2012. By this spring there will be fewer than 40,000 and at the end of the year only the around 10,000 troops training force the US and NATO are supposed to leave behind, provided an agreement is reached between President Karzai and the US, still discussing over terms and conditions. In particular, President Karzai last November defied a consensus in Afghanistan's Grand Assembly in favor of the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US, and said he would not sign unless additional conditions were met, and even then, not until after the April election. Such conditions are: the US must encourage the peace process with the Taliban,

and stop US raids on Afghan houses. A second agreement, under negotiation with NATO, would have many of the same provisions as the US agreement (which envisages also the conduct of counter-terrorism operations) but would not be able to be finalized until after the US agreement is signed.

But with the clock ticking on the mission ending, NATO and US have said that both agreements must be signed very soon or they could be forced to withdraw all 84,000 soldiers (60,000 of whom are Americans), the so-called “Zero Option”. In this context, General Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said last December: “ If we were to pull out completely, it takes a certain time to get a force out of the country, and that timeline I don't think is well understood by President Karzai”.

It is worth mentioning that Afghan Army and Police losses have been very high with the Taliban capable, notwithstanding NATO presence, of conducting attacks in 30 of the country's 34 provinces. For sure, without an air force and heavy weapons, and characterized by low morale, desertion and ignorance, the Afghan Army cannot fight the Taliban as the Americans did. An additional issue for US and NATO is: who are ANSF going to be loyal to? If a reliable state structure has not been built so far, if credibility has not been restored will they be loyal to the next President or to their ethnic warlords? The Afghan Army was rebuilt three times during the Soviet domination because there was a core officer group able to do that and they were loyal to the state and the Soviets. Today there is no veritable officer corps in the army and the ethnic rivalry between its Tajik, Uzbek and Pashtun officers is a further cause of concern.

The army, unable to go on the offensive to regain lost territory, could just control the major cities and some main roads, while the countryside would progressively be conquered by the Taliban, thus having large rural areas controlled by the Taliban and smaller urban areas controlled by the regime.

The consequences of such civil war would be a humanitarian crisis with heavy casualties, internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, while international terrorist groups could operate in the gray spaces of the country. In such a dangerous context, the International Community would be unlikely to intervene again and the neighboring states would try to exploit the situation to their advantage.

## **THE ECONOMY**

Afghanistan has received tens of billions of dollars in aid over the last 12 years. Life has improved with the building of new schools and roads, improvement of social and health services, amelioration of telecommunications (20 million mobile phone subscriptions in a country of 30 million people). Despite the many shortcomings, security improvements in some parts of the country in and around Kabul combined with financial and development aid have led to better living conditions for Afghans, thus enabling a surge in school enrollment from 1 million to 7,8 million children. Moreover, progress has been made regarding the situation of women, with the 2,8 million girls getting an education and ¼ of all seats in the country's Parliament being reserved for female politicians.

But Afghanistan is still one of the poorest countries in the world with some children in rural areas still deprived of education and not having access to basic facilities and clean water. The West has failed to build an indigenous self-sustaining economy that can provide jobs for the young and revenue for the state. In the 1970s there was an almost self-sufficiency for food and a small export

of vegetables, now Afghanistan has to import vast quantities of food and agriculture is being almost ignored. This year has seen the biggest poppy crop on record, ensuring that more Afghans are dependent on income from heroin rather than wheat: a 2013 UN report found that Afghanistan is now producing 90% of the world's opium. The drug economy is funding the Taliban, is fueling official corruption and is intensifying a domestic addiction crisis in the country.

A further problem is represented by ten of thousands of Afghans serving the foreign troops who will be out of the job with no prospects. They are educated, speak English, are pro-democracy, pro-progress: these are the very Afghans who are part of the new generation risking to get out of the country if conditions there are prohibitive. Many of them will flee abroad and become illegal immigrants.

Moreover, with the US Congress and Western Parliaments tired of the Afghanistan commitment, it is unlikely that, in the event of a civil war, they will fulfill their promise to provide aid for the army, the economy and education of up to 10 billion dollars a year for the next five years.

### **THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER**

Today, a large number of states share security concerns, key interests, strategic, economic and cultural rivalries in Afghanistan. The US wants to avoid Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups. Pakistan seeks a friendly government in Kabul, thus limiting India's influence. India tries to expand its economy in Afghanistan while limiting Pakistan's influence and preventing its ability to establish in Afghanistan terrorist groups operating in Kashmir. China is mainly worried by the presence of the US and the threat of Uighur Islamic militant groups operating in Xinjiang from bases in Afghanistan. Iran wants the departure of the US and is concerned by the opium traffic. Russia wants the US departure and is worried by drug smuggling and vulnerability to extremism of Central Asia whose Republics have ethnic ties with Afghanistan.

There is the need of a diplomatic effort to get neighboring countries and important near-neighbors to agree not to interfere in Afghanistan's affairs, and not to arm and fund their favorite warlord proxy as they did in the 1990s thus exacerbating an already critical situation. Instead they should re-orientate their political competition, and use Afghanistan's strategic location to bring more cross-border trade, oil and gas pipelines and jobs to the entire region, making it a success story.

So, before the US and NATO withdrawal, concerted efforts are needed to prevent neighboring countries and other powers from interfering in that country. The need to identify a regional solution for the future of Afghanistan has prompted many initiatives so far. Among them the Istanbul Process involving Turkey, the Central Asia states, China, Iran, India and Pakistan together with international and regional organizations and individual states.

The focus is on a "Greater Central Asia" or "Heart of Asia" on the conviction that only trans-regional economic integration and cooperation will be able to provide prosperity and stability, prevent extremism and overcome disagreements between the various states. This "New Silk Road" would make Afghanistan an appropriate production site of copper, rare earth metals and other resources, as well as an infrastructure node and a transport hub between the various regions. The Istanbul Process could also push forward projects involving the regional economy, such as the TAPI pipeline (from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and then India) or the Central Asia – South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASA – 1000).



The risk of not finding a regional solution is that Afghanistan could again become the theater of proxy conflicts between external – particularly regional – powers.

## **THE ROLE OF PAKISTAN**

Pakistan is characterized by domestic turmoil, crises, and the tense relation with the US and NATO. Life is made worse for the man on the street due to the critical economic situation, lack of energy, industry collapsing, insurgency in border provinces (North West and Baluchistan), growing intolerance to Muslim Shias and minorities (Christians, Indus, Sikhs, Ismailis). Pakistan's Afghan policy is dictated by the military and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) with no meaningful input from the civilian government. For sure, a Pakistan's resource is the presence on its soil of the Afghan Taliban leadership, a card which Islamabad is yet unwilling to play so as to push top Taliban leaders to negotiate with Kabul and US and start the reconciliation process. The Afghan Taliban are also supported by Pakistani religious groups and ordinary people: an enormously large support structure willing to provide combatants to fight Americans.

After losing three wars with India, Pakistan still considers Afghanistan its strategic depth in regard to India in the event of a military confrontation which could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. This is why in the 1990s Pakistan, worried for the chaotic situation in its backyard (Afghanistan) caused by the continuous fighting among warlords after the Russian withdrawal, created the Taliban so as to “bring about peace in Afghanistan”.

Nowadays Pakistan has still security concerns due to the US military presence in Afghanistan, the Indian influence on that country, and the role of their neighbors seeking influence there. Pakistan's internal dynamics are surely to be affected by the situation in Afghanistan after 2014: if unrest continues in Afghanistan or the country is plunged into civil war, the activities of the so-called Pakistani Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates, are likely to gain in intensity with the possibility of a civil war spilling over into Pakistan. As for the difference between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban, the Afghan Taliban mainly focus on ousting the US from their country, while the Pakistani Taliban have links with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist outfits whereas Afghan Taliban do not appear to have currently such links. Most importantly, the Afghan Taliban look ready for talks, but Pakistani Taliban (at war with the Pakistani state, wanting the sharia enforcement and attacking government targets only in Pakistan) are not.

The authority of the state will thus be likely at risk not only in the border region but also in other parts of the country, particularly in Balochistan. Pakistan may also be burdened with an influx of refugees. To get out of this quagmire Pakistan needs to have a clear-cut strategy including hard and soft power measures (threat of force, dialogue, and economic initiatives), with the certainty that if there were an “Arab Spring” in Pakistan it would fall in the hands of extremism and fundamentalism, thus crushing the aspirations of its middle class and any prospect for an acceptable future. The only positive scenario for Pakistan is one where a consensus government is in power in Afghanistan and a process of reconciliation and peacebuilding begins in the war-ravaged country. This is why Pakistan has to improve its relation with Afghanistan and the US: the good news is that on 9 January 2014 Pakistan and US have agreed to review the bilateral strategic dialogue process during a meeting in Washington which will be soon co-chaired by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Pakistani Advisor on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz.

## **THE TALIBAN AND THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS**

It is becoming more and more evident the urgency for reconciliation with the Taliban so as to ensure them a political role. The Taliban are as divided as the Afghan government over whether talks will produce results. Attempts at direct talks with the US in Qatar have collapsed, but the dialogue could resume provided the future new President is sufficiently accepted and trusted by the Taliban.

President Karzai has failed to make the reconciliation process all-inclusive and bring onboard the non-Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan so as to create a united front able to negotiate a sort of power sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Currently, there is no real political process of reconciliation under way among the pro-government and the anti-government elements in Afghan society and this is a big mistake.

The Taliban look ready for talks and compromise: the “raison d'être” for their cause – jihad against foreign occupation – will end when Americans leave. Many want to stop fighting and reduce the heavy casualties they face: they are proud Afghans and want to leave their sanctuaries in Pakistan and the control exercised by the Pakistani Intelligence agencies and go back home.

In fact the Taliban realize that, notwithstanding being in charge from 1996 to 2001 in the then Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, they were unable to deliver and are destined (if again in power) to fail once more. Therefore, instead of toppling the government in Kabul, they are likely to agree to work with it.

All the neighboring states have to be eventually brought into the peace process, and Pakistan has to make room for that to happen. At present all the neighbors of Afghanistan are opposed to any overwhelming presence by Pakistan: in this context the US has to be more pro-active in creating a regional consensus about non-interference in Afghanistan: a consensus that is meaningful to Afghans as they have had enough of interference by their more powerful neighbors.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

Only reconciliation can avoid an ultimate debacle for the Afghan Army and an apocalyptic conclusion: a scenario that nobody wants – both the regime and the Taliban and neighboring states – for it entails total destruction and a potentially never-ending civil war. Only Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups who fear losing their sanctuaries would want such outcome, and they will do everything in their power to sabotage a peace deal between Kabul, the Taliban and neighboring states. Hopefully, the departure of western forces – an irritant to many – will make it more likely that the Afghan factions will sit down with one another and hammer out a deal. In addition, none of the regional powers is economically or politically strong enough to determine the outcome in Afghanistan on its own, so they need to cooperate with the consciousness that if Afghanistan is a failing state, so will be most of its neighbors.

What is needed is a genuine neutral mediator who can help all the elements in this complex equation. The UN, the EU or individual non-controversial countries such as Norway or Sweden, with international support behind them, could play such a role. The US should have sought a third-party mediation when it began its talks with the Taliban in Qatar but the divisions within the Obama administration (resulting in a split in the US administration on its Afghan policy with ambivalence in the attitude of the Department of Defense and of the State Department) prevented such a move.



Above all, ordinary Afghans will be likely to put pressure on their next government to end the war. A civilian movement both inside the country and in neighboring countries could do much to help a peace process, as only peace can persuade the West to fulfill its aid commitments to Afghanistan: nobody is going to fund an endless civil war.

There is much at stake for the Afghans and for the rest of the world, including the future of Al-Qaeda, the safety of nuclear-armed Pakistan and a deal with Iran over its nuclear program. The Afghans deserve a chance for peace and an end to the wars that began 35 years ago: but they cannot achieve this alone and need their neighbors and the West to remain committed.

A power sharing arrangement with the Taliban could be a long and winding process which should anyway envisage as the first step a kind of ceasefire (or at least a significant reduction in violence). Political talks could be conducted also behind the scenes, so that the Taliban jihad is replaced by Afghan nationalism and the Taliban are presented as patriots distancing themselves from Al Qaida. A prudent negotiation could subsequently allow for girl education, an acceptable human rights record and the establishment of better relations with minorities groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

As already pointed out, contradictory Western policies and a lack of clarity about US aims and objectives in the Region have significantly contributed to the deteriorating political and military situation in Afghanistan. Hopefully the US will not only look for just a military deal with the Taliban to ensure their withdrawal but will also consider political solutions for a peaceful future.

A substantial US military presence in Afghanistan after transition remains important for the International Community: to support the training of ANSF; to facilitate other countries' military commitment in Afghanistan; to rapidly intervene in case the security situation deteriorates; to ensure the counter-terrorism capacity in the region.

The potential of the US retaining no troops in the country, the so called "Zero Option", is being closely watched not only by Afghanistan and Pakistan but also by Russia because of its own history of intervention in the country and of the possibility for instability to spill over into the central Asia Republics. Russia witnessed Afghanistan descent into chaos and anarchy following its withdrawal in February 1989, enacting its own "Zero Option" with the successive takeover of the country by the Taliban, the increase in drug production and the spread of radical Islamic ideologies to Central Asia, particularly in Tajikistan which had to wage a civil war in the 1990s and has still to heavily rely on the political, economic and military support of Russia (a Russian motorized division is scheduled to remain in the country till 2042).

Withdrawal from Afghanistan cannot take place if the civil war is continuing. In other words, there is no chance that Afghan Forces can replace NATO and US forces to face the Taliban. What is necessary is to reduce the level of conflictuality in Afghanistan through talks between the US, Karzai and the Taliban: it is hard to envisage an Afghanistan deprived of international forces able to simultaneously cope with the Taliban and the neighboring countries (Pakistan and Iran in first place).

Notwithstanding the failure in the past three years of the meeting and contacts between the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US, efforts to launch a formal peace process must be reiterated. It

is likely that the presidential election will be messy, contested and confusing with opportunity for fraud and manipulation: it will be then up to the electoral bodies (IEC and ECC) to decide what votes to count through decisions which could be more characterized by discretionary rather than transparency criteria. Bottom line: the final outcome could be different from the real intent of the voters. The legitimacy of the election and its result will thus depend on whether the outcome is seen as relatively fair and stable: it will be the ensuing political conversation to eventually validate the election once the losing candidates concede defeat in the interest of the stability of Afghanistan (and because of their 35 year-old war syndrome/fatigue and of their consequent quest for an urgent and sought after pacification).

As the Taliban seem unlikely to be able to recapture the whole of Afghanistan their primary objective will hopefully be to participate in the governance of the country, which is a viable option provided that they have a purely national agenda without any tie with Al-Qaeda.

What the International Community has to avoid is that Afghanistan plunge into anarchy and become a safe haven for terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking with lethal consequences for mankind: the Western world, in particular, has to ensure its commitment and support in order not to nullify the huge human and financial resources so far devoted in the recovery process of the country. This is the only way to prevent a likely final countdown to Armageddon, to light a ray of hope and to try to make Afghanistan' future a success story.