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Afghanistan, back to the forefront:

The Taliban, al Qaeda and the difficult neighbor

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While the United States revise their troop withdrawal plans from Afghanistan, the future of the country remains precarious. Violence still flourishes on the ground, the Afghan government seems unstable in contrast with the Taliban movement which looks stronger than ever, and, at the same time, al Qaeda tries to rebuild its presence in the region by opening the way for young Islamic extremists to join. In the meantime, thousands of Afghan refugees leave their country and enter Europe, while others, living in Pakistan, are being forced to return to their homeland.

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With the chaos in the area of the Middle East and North Africa, the ongoing armed conflicts taking place in Israel-Palestine, Yemen and Syria and the rise of jihadist extremism dominating the headlines, the country of Afghanistan seems to have gotten lost in the shuffle. However, the latest developments such as President Obama's reversal to slow down his troop withdrawal plan and the recent confirmation by the Taliban of their leader's death, Mullah Omar, in 2013, brought back to the forefront the case of Afghanistan.

It's been fourteen years since the United States invaded Afghanistan, almost one month after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The 'war on terror' was heralded as an act of retribution, aiming firstly to dismantle al Qaeda and secondly to remove the Taliban from power. President Obama, whose re-election campaign was built on the promise "to end the war in Afghanistan in 2014", stated on October 13, 2015 that U.S troops will remain in Afghanistan at their current levels (almost at 10.000 troops), slowing once again the scheduled withdrawal.¹

As Obama stated, his decision to maintain troop levels resulted from endless discussions with President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan – who specifically asked the USA to sustain its commitment beyond 2016² – and with security advisers and international partners. Another important reason that motivated Obama to change his mind is said to be the brief but unexpected seizure of the city of Kunduz by the Taliban in late September,³ which not only cost the lives of many Afghan troops but mainly proved, on the one hand, the Afghan forces' inability to protect their territory by themselves, and on the other hand, the Taliban's persistent strength. Obama seems to worry about the inability of the Afghan Government to defend itself but most importantly about preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist haven populated by Islamic extremists, able to once again attack the US.

It is a fact that the Afghan state is threatened, and that the government exists in a state of political and constitutional crisis, in which Ghani is gradually losing his popularity. Due to the 50/50 shared power agreement and cabinet seats, every decision, agreement or proposal the government makes can disturb the balance of power resulting in strenuous unanimous parliamentary votes (i.e the failure to nominate a full cabinet and appoint a defense Minister) and in political instability. Many politicians in Afghanistan, including former President Karzai, are now opposed to Ghani's policies. Karzai, for instance, launched an 'attack' against Ghani regarding the memorandum of understanding signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan in May of 2015; an 'attack' that found fertile ground in Afghani's public opinion, which saw this memorandum as a deal against the national interests of the country. Karzai is trying to position himself – since the governance is in a deadlock – as the best alternative to a government that as of yet has not delivered,⁴ while other politicians such as Anwar–Ul–Haq Ahadi and Omar Daudzai are going so far as to call for his resignation, proving that Ghani – in contrast with Karzai – lacks political support.

This political instability in conjunction with the broken economy and the high levels of corruption further weakens the state of Afghanistan and undermines the government's effectiveness regarding the struggle against the Taliban. At the same time that the Afghan government attempts to get a handle on internal challenges, the Taliban movement is gaining strength.

Fourteen years after the US invasion and the start of its military presence within the country, Afghanistan is still a country variously affected by the Taliban's violent actions, making the point that Western forces failed to defeat them. President Ghani attempted to restart the negotiations with the Taliban in an effort to end a conflict that seems to intensify rather than wither away, but incidents such as the confirmation of Mullah Omar's death froze this effort. In addition, the Taliban are unwilling to stop the insurgency as long as the US troops remain in Afghanistan and military-security treaties "with the invaders" are in force,⁵ complicating every effort for peace talks to flourish. During 2014, the Taliban increased the number of their operations in many different districts, with the takeover of Kunduz being their greatest success. This unexpected victory underlined Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation and inability to defend its territory, and highlighted, at the same time, the possibility of a Taliban-led insurgency that could radically change the political situation of Afghanistan. For Mullah Mansour, the new

Taliban leader, the capture of Kunduz was a successful military, strategic and at the same time political move aiming, firstly to keep the Taliban united, and, secondly to strengthen the Taliban presence in the wealthiest part of the country, the North.

Mansour, the Taliban leader, faces resistance within, since many Taliban leaders do not accept his leadership; some of them accuse him of keeping the death of the former leader a secret and for ruling in his name, as well as for riding roughshod over the process to elect a successor, while some commanders, who accuse Pakistani circles for imposing him, prefer for the son of Mullah Omar to assume leadership.⁶ The Mansour leadership seems to widen the gap within the Taliban and creates questions on whether this internal opposition could prevent him from starting peace talks with President Ghani.

Pakistan could play a decisive role in bringing Taliban to the negotiating table due to their influence over them. For a long time, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been both playing the “blame game” with the most recent incident being Ghani's accusations at Pakistan for backing the Taliban during their attacks on Kabul on August, 2015. Ghani, from the beginning of his presidency, made several attempts at approaching Pakistan and, despite criticism, he could make the case for some progress if the Kabul attacks had not taken place. Undoubtedly, the talks between the two neighbors face several challenges such as the considerable pressure of the Afghani political spectrum on Ghani to change his stance on Pakistan, the latter country's stance over the Taliban and Mansour's dilemma to start the negotiations or not.

Nonetheless, the Taliban are not the only militant player in the area; al Qaeda tries to rebuild its presence in Afghanistan while the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group has also started to operate in the area.⁷ Experts indicate that IS's “factual weight and importance is currently significantly lower in comparison to the public perception”⁸ and that “their territorial control is so far limited to a couple of districts in Nangarhar Province”.⁹ However, more and more individuals support IS and despite the fact that there is no institutional linkage with the Islamic State, many militants groups operate by giving IS the credit, wishing to associate themselves with the group. As the Afghan government uncovered, several militant groups use IS symbols or support IS in 25 of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan;¹⁰ a fact of great importance that should be given careful consideration. This increasing IS presence, especially in the areas close to the Tajikistan and the Turkmenistan borders, have even alarmed Russia, which, as Russian Deputy Defense Minister stated, is now ready to help regional organizations to cope with any destabilization arising from Afghanistan.¹¹

As for al Qaeda, Mansour's publicly welcoming of the allegiance of al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahir¹² and the fact that it took fourteen years for the US forces to target one of its largest training camps, could prove its importance within the Taliban insurgency. Al Qaeda, as Michael Kugelman from the Woodrow Wilson Center said, “has still a deep bench of militant allies including fighters who are in the Afghani and Pakistani Taliban”¹³ and even if it has weakened over the last years, it continues to evolve and to recruit especially now that the Taliban presence in the region is strong while the US' is weak. However, if al Qaeda has evolved to something else or if it is just waiting for US total troop withdrawal in order to take a more active role, it remains to be seen in the near future.

More than a decade after the US invasion, Afghanistan is closer than ever to become once again a haven populated by extremists. 2015 has been the bloodiest year for Afghanistan since the invasion of 2001. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Report in the first four months of 2015, 655 people lost their lives and 1155 were injured.¹⁴ It is also worth mentioning that casualty rates regarding the Afghani soldiers were up from the previous year, peaking at 70%;¹⁵ a reality that not only proves the inability of the Afghan forces to fight the Taliban and other anti-government elements, but also a fact that raises questions regarding their sustainability capacity.

The country's security situation being on a rapid decline in conjunction with the fiscal crisis, has urged thousands of Afghans to leave their country and seek a better life. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) around 80.000 people applied for asylum in Germany

alone in the first half of 2015.¹⁶ Although Afghans constitute the third biggest group after the Syrian and the Iraqi one, they could become the second if the situation in Afghanistan is not stabilized. Furthermore, while many countries accept hundreds of Afghan refugees every day, one country forces many of them to go back to Afghanistan. That country is Pakistan. However, worth mentioning is the different stance Europe has regarding the Afghan refugees; Europe sees them mostly as migrants that should not be granted asylum with the justification that Afghanistan is not universally unsafe. As German officials noted for instance, Germany “has had troops in Afghanistan for 14 years and has poured more than 2 billion euros into civilian projects {...} efforts that fulfill Germany’s commitment to care for those in need”.¹⁷ This European approach undoubtedly underlines the necessity for Afghanistan to attract once again the world’s attention, since such an approach places a new obstacle to the security and the safety of the Afghan people.

Regarding Pakistan, there are about 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees according to UNHCR – a leftover population which fled the wars of the 80s & the 90s from Afghanistan. Pakistan nowadays refuses to host them, and, as a result, refugees are being pressured to leave the country.¹⁸ In recent months relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as aforementioned, have worsened, since President Ghani publicly accused Pakistan for the rising violence by its backing of the Taliban, and as the identity cards of the 1.5 million Afghan refugees located in Pakistan are expiring, Afghanistan will have to face a flow of returning refugees if the two countries are unable to reach an agreement. Besides, as Pakistani Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan stated “cards will not be extended and all refugees will be repatriated”.¹⁹

A possible Afghani refugee repatriation will destabilize further the country of Kabul; a country that struggles with increased violence and political, social as well as economic instability. President Obama's decision to maintain 10.000 troops seems to be for the moment a step towards the right direction, since this foreign military presence could help the Afghan forces respond effectively to any new violence, demonstrating, at the same time, confidence in Ashraf Ghani's government. However, without smart policies and reforms able to balance the fragile -both politically and economically- situation of the country, no amount of military forces can constitute the solution.

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