

Global Security Briefing – JUNE 2015

AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE WESTERN WITHDRAWAL

Paul Rogers

Summary

This briefing has as its focus the security situation in Afghanistan close to a year since the election of Ashraf Ghani as President, with Abdullah Abdullah subsequently appointed Chief Executive, and as US-led foreign forces withdraw down to barely 13,000 troops from a peak of over 130,000 four years ago. It discusses the prospects for progress, the problems most evident and the possible role of Islamic State (IS), while placing most emphasis on the Taliban and whether they will have a role in future Afghan governance.

The Ghani Administration and the Coalition Drawdown

Last month's briefing assessed the extent to which IS was looking to operate beyond Iraq and Syria, whether this be in the form of existing groups pledging allegiance or IS itself directly exporting its paramilitary and organisational abilities. One focus was on Afghanistan where there had been reports of IS personnel directly aiding Taliban militias in their assault on the northern city of Kunduz. This raised questions about the widespread assumption that IS's essentially internationalist orientation would in due course bring it into conflict with the far more nationalist and ethnically focused Taliban. Events since then suggest that the Ghani government and some of its international partners may be responding with overtures to the Taliban in anticipation of a growing IS challenge.

Political progress since the Ghani-Abdullah power-sharing agreement of September 2014 has been slow and laboured. The Lower House of the Afghan Parliament finally approved sixteen ministerial candidates in April after many months of negotiations, but the Defence portfolio was not filled. There has also been controversy over the possible decision to postpone parliamentary elections for a year to allow for electoral reform. President Ghani has engaged in vigorous international diplomacy since taking office last year and, while the relative stability of his administration has been welcomed by coalition partners, the security situation within the country remains deeply problematic.

After Barack Obama won the 2008 US Presidential Election he eventually agreed to a surge of some 30,000 additional US troops in 2010, taking the US total to over 100,000, with more than 30,000 troops deployed by other countries, mainly NATO member states. The surge was

not intended to put the troops in a position to defeat the Taliban and other armed opposition groups, but to negotiate withdrawal from a position of strength to ensure that the Taliban and others would have minimal roles in the country's future.

In practice, the surge had little impact in limiting Taliban capabilities and after his re-election in 2012 Obama determined to withdraw the great majority of troops by the end of 2014, with other coalition members following suit. All that would be left would be training and support missions and, though not officially acknowledged, forces capable of mounting drone attacks and Special Forces raids. The intention of this ongoing presence was twofold: firstly, to ensure that the Afghan National Army (ANA) was strong enough to ensure security, even in the unstable Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south that were traditional Taliban strongholds; secondly, to have the capability to respond to any return of al-Qaida paramilitaries with an international agenda.

The 2015 “Fighting Season”

The common use of the term “fighting season” in Afghanistan refers to the impact of climate on unconventional warfare and runs primarily from May through to late October, starting with the end of the opium poppy harvesting season and running through to the onset of winter weather. This does not imply that the rest of the year is calm, least of all in urban areas, but the intensity of conflict is normally far higher in this period. The 2015 season so far has been marked by increased violence, including the substantial fighting between the Taliban and government forces around the city of Kunduz in the north, not a part of the country in which the Taliban is traditionally strong.

In Helmand Province, where ANA forces now seek to control the province without US or UK involvement, there are reliable reports that casualties are 50 percent higher than last year and ANA units have given up conducting counter-insurgency patrols while Taliban militias have extended their network of roadblocks. Similar problems have been experienced in other parts of Afghanistan and one of the results is that the government has had to rely on up to 30,000 men from so-called “militia forces” known as Afghan Local Police (ALP) – essentially local guns-for-hire. The ALP have acquired a very poor reputation, with accusations of fraud, theft, rape, looting, drug trafficking and torture, so much so that there are some reports that Taliban entry into towns under ALP occupation has actually been welcomed by local people.

Islamic State in Afghanistan

The deterioration in security, now extending well beyond the regions of traditional Taliban influence such as Helmand and Kandahar, is most likely the main reason why the United States and its NATO partners are reviewing their commitment to the country, although this is

no doubt compounded by the indications that IS paramilitaries do have an interest in establishing a long-term presence in the country. The precise details of IS involvement in the fighting around Kunduz in May (see last months' briefing) is not clear but since then there have been clashes between IS and Taliban paramilitaries elsewhere in the country and US military sources confirmed at the end of the month that IS was recruiting supporters within the country, most likely in opposition to the Taliban.

The US' original intention was to draw down forces from 9,800 to a very few thousand concerned with training, support and protection of the US Embassy in Kabul and other civil locations. Other NATO states were planning similar moves from their lower base of around 3,400 troops in total. This would have given a combined total NATO presence of perhaps 3,000 compared with 13,200 in total at present, though this would not include private military contractors who could well have many thousands of personnel operating in low profile roles.

This whole process is now subject to review with unconfirmed reports at the end of May that it was proposed to establish a long-term presence in or near Kabul. This would most likely outlast President Obama's second term, even though his stated intention remains to withdraw all combat forces by the end of that period. Much will depend on whether IS paramilitaries continue to increase their presence in the country, but this will also put substantial pressure on the Taliban, as it finds itself in competition with an external force which is more radical, brutal and, as some would see it, more effective.

Prospect of Negotiations

It would be reasonable to summarise the security situation in Afghanistan as deteriorating, despite the welcome that Western states have given to the more technocratic President Ghani. From that perspective, there would appear to be little point in Taliban elements being prepared even to consider negotiations for a future role in governance, yet there are signs of a change in attitude, possibly down to the unexpected pressure being exerted by IS elements. There have been two specific recent examples in addition to informal talks which have been reported over several years, often facilitated by Gulf States.

In late May, a Tehran-based news agency with close links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps reported that there had been a significant visit from a high-level Taliban group to hold discussions with Iranian security and military officials. This was not the first such visit and appears to indicate a softening in relations between Iran and the Taliban. It follows two decades of animosity if not outright opposition, which reached its original peak with the murder of nine Iranian diplomats by the Taliban, an attack which took Iran close to war in 1998.

The rapprochement may be partly because Iran sees the Taliban having a role in Afghan governance and seeking influence if that should happen, coupled with the recognition that the Taliban may end up fighting IS elements, which Iran also considers its enemy. On the Taliban side it is likely to be predicated primarily on making friends with a powerful and stable neighbouring country which, in addition, has considerable day-to-day influence in western Afghanistan where the Taliban are weak.

The second example may turn out to be even more significant. It was reported in early June that the Norwegian Government had facilitated a meeting between influential Taliban officials and a delegation of women parliamentarians from Kabul. This is part of a long-term Norwegian initiative to increase dialogue, but may be the most significant so far given the nature of the Afghan delegation. Taliban sources confirmed the meeting while denying any official status. This denial is standard practice for meetings taking place at what is an early stage in such a process.

Conclusion

It has to be accepted that the degree of insecurity in Afghanistan is the worst it has been for several years; it is requiring the Afghan government to rely on militias of thoroughly dubious reputation, and is also leading NATO military planners to reconsider their rate of withdrawal. One of the main concerns is the risk of IS substantially increasing its influence in the country, especially among younger Taliban supporters disenchanted with the rate of progress of the movement, including the absence from public view for well over a decade of the leader, Mullah Omar.

If, though, it is the case that this is also putting elements of the Taliban leadership under pressure, then this may be one of the main motivations for increasing the level of diplomatic interchange, whether formal or informal, with the Norwegian and Iranian meetings being recent examples. That may give some hope for greater stability, but meanwhile the “fighting season” continues with considerable loss of life.

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