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## **Afghanistan: Situation Assessment, March 2011**

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In his capacity as commander of the American forces in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus testifies before the Senate Armed Forces Committee every few months. The purpose of his testimony is to provide the American legislature with an official update regarding the situation in Afghanistan, review major processes and trends, and present what is needed to fulfill the mission.

In his recent testimony in mid-March, Petraeus focused on three main components of America's strategy in the region: (1) the military effort to conquer land and damage the country's terrorist infrastructures; (2) the civilian effort to accelerate construction of the state's infrastructures, severely damaged by the ongoing fighting, so as to allow for normalization in as many areas of the country as possible; (3) the training of Afghani security forces and their increased involvement in routine operations and security.

From the military standpoint, there were many successes in 2010 and early 2011, as the Taliban offensive, which started in 2005, was arrested throughout Afghanistan; in some places there was even a reverse trend of coalition forces gaining territory. These successes may be attributed to the increase of 30,000 soldiers to the American force following President Obama's decision of December 2009, carried out in the summer of 2010. However, Petraeus stressed that these successes are fragile and reversible, especially in light of the Taliban's expected traditional spring offensive.

The military successes are enabling accelerated investment in infrastructures and the return to an acceptable routine for many Afghanis, such as orderly functioning of the markets and an increased sense of personal security among the population. The improved sense of security in the cities reflects the construction of local administration and security apparatuses, a critical effort not just for the Afghanis but also for the Obama administration seeking to withdraw American troops in 2014. Still, there is much criticism regarding the scope of resources allocated to the civilian effort, very small compared to what is allotted the military effort, as part of the American combined "hold and build" strategy.

The process of constructing the Afghani security organs is proceeding at an impressive pace. They now include 260,000 personnel, are expected to reach 305,000 by this fall, and 400,000 at the end of the process, in 2013. According to Petraeus, the local forces are already playing an active operational role, both in military activity, under the mentoring of coalition forces, and in policing some 70 provinces.

Thanks to the progress in Afghani force construction, Petraeus recommended starting the transfer of responsibility for the local security forces in some regions of the country. He also made recommendations as to how to realize President Obama's plan for withdrawing forces as early as July 2011, leading up to full transfer of security responsibility to the Afghanis in 2014. The order of battle at the coalition's disposal has grown significantly by more than 87,000 soldiers since early 2009, partly as a result of the end of active American fighting in Iraq, and today stands at 140,000 foreign soldiers (of these 100,000 are American).

In his testimony, Petraeus stressed the great importance of continuing the effort to improve the interface with the local population; improve the infrastructures; minimize collateral damage and harm to innocent bystanders (a 20 percent drop in the number of uninvolved people killed in 2010 compared to 2009); and invest in infrastructures. He also noted the importance of reconciliation with the Taliban.

From a military perspective, it seems that President Obama's decision to reinforce the American order of battle in Afghanistan has proven itself and has helped, at least for now, to allow a military offensive by coalition forces against the Taliban and its affiliates, and allow the advancement of the American initiative for reconciliation talks with the Taliban, with the latter in a weakened state. The fragility of the successes noted by Petraeus is evidence of the American understanding that a window of opportunity has opened for advancing talks with the Taliban in order to reintegrate them into the political field and reduce the amount of violence in the country, a prerequisite to completing the American strategy for stabilizing the region and completing the military withdrawal in 2014. Because the Taliban is not a monolithic group and contains rivalries and different factions, it may be difficult to attain an end to the violence even if an agreement to that effect should be reached with the official Taliban representatives. The fact that the members of the old guard, the leaders of the Shura of Kwata, are willing to sit at the negotiating table with Karzai with American backing is liable to result in different groups – young, militant Taliban leaders or radical tribal groups with local interests, such as the Khakani network – trying to derail the reconciliation talks.

According to Petraeus, despite the recent disagreements with Karzai and his criticism of the United States, the Afghani president is still a relevant partner. It is unclear whether this opinion bespeaks the lack of alternatives or an appreciation for Karzai's ability to help fulfill the American mission. It was only recently that Karzai publicly called for the

United States to rein in its military activities in Afghanistan, demanded freedom of action for his administration in managing and prioritizing infrastructure projects, and rejected American claims about corruption in his government. These claims are apparently supported by Afghani public opinion, which views Karzai's government as corrupt, lacking independence, and having only a limited ability to rule effectively. Karzai's enemies in the Taliban perceive him as an American puppet and are reserved in their willingness to enter into discussions with him without American guarantees to promote the talks.

The region's dynamics are critical to the efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, especially the coalition's sphere of maneuvering in the tribal buffer zone, a major source for smuggling arms and operatives, and the tense relations with the Pakistani government. This relationship became even more strained following the drone attacks and the Davis incident, in which Pakistani civilians were killed by fire from a member of the American security forces in Lahore. At the same time, internal processes in Pakistan, including a string of assassinations of moderate politicians and a wave of terrorist attacks throughout the country, are limiting the room for maneuvering by the leadership, which is harshly criticized internally for collaborating with the Americans.

In the background, the neighboring countries, especially India and Iran but also Russia, China, and Uzbekistan, are stepping up their involvement, making stabilization efforts in Afghanistan all the more difficult. A prime example is India's support for strengthening Iran's standing in the region as an alternative to its sworn enemy, Pakistan, which enjoys extensive trade relations with Afghanistan.

Thus it appears that 2011 will be an important test of the Afghani campaign, when the military fighting combines with concrete developments on the political field. Perhaps the result will be a dialogue that allows the reconstruction of Afghanistan and an historic compromise with the Taliban, or at least peaceful coexistence and a viable *modus vivendi*.

