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Afghanistan: New Opportunities for Talks with the Taliban

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Since the end of the ISAF mission and new territorial gains by the Afghan Taliban, there has been a visible intensification of diplomatic efforts to convince rebels to enter into peace talks with the government in Kabul. Although the Taliban's official conditions are still unrealistic, a number of new factors suggest negotiations are possible.

Regional economic initiatives, the growing presence of the Islamic State, and the risk of a security vacuum created by a shrinking international military presence in Afghanistan, have combined to increase pressure on the main regional powers to support the peace process between the Taliban and Kabul. In January, representatives of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the U.S. were, for the first time in talks about ways to encourage the Taliban to resume negotiations. The Taliban has declared publically that the full withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is a precondition for peace. However, Pakistan is putting increasing pressure on the rebels, and China's grand plans for regional economic projects require regional stability.

The Security Environment. Since the end of the NATO-ISAF mission in 2014 and the withdrawal of 100,000-strong combat forces, the state of security in Afghanistan has clearly worsened. The Taliban has not only strengthened military and administrative control over its traditional strongholds, but has also taken over new areas, and now controls, completely or partially, about 60 of the 400 districts in Afghanistan's 34 provinces. They also attempted to take over the capitals of Faryab, Farah, and Ghazni provinces, and in September 2014 they succeeded, for a couple of days, in taking the capital of Kunduz. In addition, attacks in Kabul, directed mainly against central administration, ANSDF and diplomatic posts, have increased by 30%.

The official goals of the Taliban movement (estimated at 35,000 to 40,000 fighters) remain the same: a full withdrawal of foreign forces, change of government in Kabul, and the creation of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. But the movement is at a crossroads, partly because of the end of the ISAF mission, but mainly because there is a question mark over the successor of former leader Mullah Omar. Mullah Akhtar Mansour, a pragmatist who has never excluded the possibility of peace talks with Kabul, took his place in 2015 but his leadership is still questioned by Mullah Rasoul's radical faction. Mansour eventually won the support of Omar's clan, and of the Haqqani Network, the strongest faction, which at the same time has close ties with Pakistan's intelligence services and Al Qaeda. It seems that this support and a successful offensive in the 2015 combat season helped him to consolidate leadership over the main factions of the movement.

The new challenge for the Taliban under Mansour is the growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan. It is estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 radicals from the Taliban have already switched allegiance to the ranks of the IS regional affiliate. The Islamic State is active in the fields of propaganda and recruitment, and is trying to wrest control of core areas of the Afghan narco-business from the Taliban. In the summer of 2015, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, previously affiliated with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, stated its readiness to join the IS. The deterioration of security and the expansion of the IS in Afghanistan also encouraged Al Qaeda leaders to rebuild the organisation's presence in the region. In 2015, after a long period of apparent inactivity, new Al Qaeda terrorist training camps were detected and destroyed in Afghanistan.

The ANSDF's Potential. During the first combat season in which the ANSDF had to provide security without substantial support from foreign militaries, casualties among personnel rose by 27%. Government troops are still able to control the main urban centres, the majority of district capitals, and key lines of communication in Afghanistan. When they did lose control of some urban centres, such as Kunduz, the ANSDF were able to regain them, but with the support of U.S. troops. The main deficiencies limiting the ANSDF's independence are clearly visible in strategic and operational planning, logistical support, supplies of ammunition and fuel, and maintenance of equipment. At the same time, the ANSDF has demonstrated improved proficiency in using artillery and close-air support, as well in reconnaissance, which should steadily increase their advantage over the Taliban.

The U.S. and NATO countries have withdrawn the majority of their combat troops from Afghanistan, and are now conducting a training and advisory mission at the ministerial and corps' commands, as well as providing tactical air and special forces support. The NATO Resolute Support mission is conducted by 11,400 troops from 40 countries (25 NATO members and 15 partner nations). The majority of troops (9,800) are American, and are also engaged in a separate counter-terrorist mission called Sentinel. In October 2015, President Barack Obama announced that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan will be reduced to 5,400 by the end of 2016. This represents a change from the previous plan to reduce troop numbers to 1,000 by the same point. In December 2015, NATO also decided to extend its mission for another full year.

The Afghan Administration. The animosities between President Ashraf Ghani and chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah after the contested elections of 2014 have debilitated the leadership and hampered the required reforms. The authorities could not agree on the appointment of ministers (including the defence minister), and were unable to make the personal decisions necessary to strengthen regional administration at the provincial and district levels. Despite some efforts to curb corruption, the results were not satisfactory. This is clearly reflected in the opinion polls, in which 90% of Afghans (the highest since 2004) stated that corruption is the major problem in their daily lives. The disputes over constitutional reforms and the lack of security forced the cancellation of parliamentary and local elections at the district level, which were planned for 2015 and now are scheduled for 15 October 2016.

Against such a backdrop the authorities have been trying to create foundations for peace talks with the Taliban. In an attempt to make a breakthrough, Ghani has launched a diplomatic offensive to improve relations with Pakistan, which is accused of supporting the Afghan Taliban as a means of countering Indian influence and securing its broader interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan has traditionally been focused on fighting the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), but in mid 2014 it also launched a long overdue operation in North Waziristan, where some extremists from Afghanistan took refuge. Kabul tried to exploit this new opportunity to coordinate anti-insurgency efforts and increase pressure on the Taliban, who were brought briefly to the negotiating table in mid-2015. The talks collapsed after the revelations that the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar had been dead for two years, having apparently died in Karachi. This disclosure led to in-fighting among the Taliban and damaged already fragile relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, due to accusations that Pakistan was harbouring the Taliban leadership. The visit of the Pakistani army chief, General Raheel Sharif, to Kabul on 27 December, suggests that both sides are ready to resume cooperation.

Regional Players. With the decreasing foreign military presence in Afghanistan and the risk of a security vacuum, which could be exploited by either the Taliban or the IS, the involvement of regional players in the Afghan peace process has been growing. In January, China joined Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S. for talks on a roadmap for negotiations with the insurgents. Chinese calculations are traditionally influenced by concerns of the potential spill-over of extremism into Xinjiang. However, it is likely that the recent engagement has more to do with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which would include \$46 billion worth of investments in transport and energy infrastructure connecting Pakistan with China, and is a crucial component of China's grand "One Road, One Belt" project. India has also made new efforts to stabilise Afghanistan through better relations with Islamabad, despite repeated terrorist attacks carried out by Pakistani based extremist groups. The inauguration in December of the long-stalled TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline project, attended by representatives of India and Pakistan, may indicate that at least the civilian leaders of both countries see Afghanistan as an area of potential cooperation rather than confrontation. In recent weeks there have also been reports about increased activity by Iran and Russia, which allegedly approached the Taliban in order to establish some contacts. This could help better serve the interests of both countries in the future, which probably include countering the possible expansion of the IS.

Prospects. Afghanistan's strategic stability depends on four interconnected elements: peace with the major groups of the Taliban, improved relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the support of the international community, and broader cooperation between China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, based on common economic interests in the region. A successful Taliban offensive in the first combat season after the withdrawal of the main U.S. and NATO forces weakened the morale of the ANSDF and the civilian population, giving the Taliban the upper hand. However, Pakistan, under Chinese pressure, can try to influence the Taliban with the threat of denying them the safe haven and logistical support they enjoyed in the past. The maintained presence of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan should be an additional signal that the Taliban will not achieve their goals by force. Growing pressure from the IS should also influence Taliban calculations and encourage a negotiated solution with Kabul. Should the Taliban resume negotiations, it is likely that they will try to exploit their recent gains and demand the broadest possible autonomy for the regions under their control.