DEFENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE

AFGHANISTAN 2014: A CRITICAL CROSSROADS FOR NATO AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

GENERAL REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Throughout 2014 the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have become increasingly independent as the security providers for the totality of Afghanistan’s territory; as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) continues to step down, the ANSF is stepping up valiantly. The ANSF is paying a high price to get there, however, as the rump forces of the Taliban and other persist insurgent forces continue to challenge them daily causing significant casualties. Although the ANSF’s operational capacity is better than ever, insurgent activities remain a considerable challenge to state authority, the rule of law, and the security of civilian populations. To prevent insurgents from toppling the government in Kabul, and thereby add to national, regional and international stability, coalition partners must keep building ANSF capacity to make it a strong actor responsible for the country’s security.

2. On 1 January 2015, Operation Resolute Support will replace ISAF as an international force to train, advise, and assist the ANSF through the end of 2016. The stakes are high for NATO Allies and their partners in Afghanistan through the end of 2014 and beyond. Building a viable state in post-Taliban Afghanistan is part and parcel with these strategic regional and global security interests. Continuing to degrade the remaining insurgent forces in Afghanistan and maintaining a viable counter-terrorism capacity in the region is also essential. Continued progress on these fronts will not only undergird the stability of Afghanistan, but it will also contribute to stability throughout the region.

3. Security sector reform and state-building efforts in Afghanistan continue to face many of the same challenges that they have faced for the past decade: capacity deficiencies, endemic corruption, challenges of geography, ethnic and confessional differences, as well as general infrastructural weaknesses. Rampant corruption with impunity among government officials across all institutional frameworks continues to be a significant obstacle for the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) to assert itself as both credible and capable of guaranteeing an environment suitable for state-building. The failure to launch a proper peace process with the insurgency underscores the need for more political maturity in Kabul (UNSG, 2013). Such a dilemma challenges the government’s argument that it is a viable alternative to shadow governing structures offered by insurgent forces, particularly the Taliban.

4. 2014 is perhaps the most critical year in the last decade for NATO and its partner’s efforts to build a viable state and durable peace in Afghanistan. The end of ISAF will close the chapter on well over a decade of war fighting, counter-insurgency, and peace and reconstruction operations in the country by NATO and its partners. At this critical juncture NATO and its partners must consolidate their gains and turn their attention making their post-2014 Operation Resolute Support a success. International stakeholders must sustain a shared commitment to the transition processes in order not to lose the relatively substantial progress made on the ground. Long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan will continue to be hard fought, but it is the right way forward for NATO and its partners on the ground inside the country. Continued support from the international community is essential to this long strived for outcome, and, encouragingly, the newly minted government under Ashraf Ghani’s leadership has expressed the will to be a strong partner in this endeavour. As Western public opinion grows increasingly weary of continued engagement in Afghanistan, making the case for continuing the international role in Afghanistan, while challenging, remains as vital as ever.
II. SECURITY ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

A. BILATERAL SECURITY AGREEMENT AND GENERAL STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT

5. Representatives of the newly installed Afghan government and the United States signed a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) on 30 September 2014 providing the legal basis for the United States to maintain its armed forces in Afghanistan post-2014. A Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for a more broad-based international security force presence in the country was signed with NATO representatives almost immediately in its wake. The formalisation of these agreements was a precondition for the deployment of Operation Resolute Support, which will continue to train, advise, and assist the ANSF after ISAF concludes on 31 December 2014. The BSA also allows the United States to continue to conduct counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Importantly, the BSA provides the US Government “exclusive criminal and civil jurisdiction” over its military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan (US DoD, 2014).

6. The formalisation of the BSA and SOFA was significantly delayed due in large part to the persistent refusal of outgoing President Hamid Karzai to sign the documents. Negotiations to define the BSA started in November 2012: The May 2012 Strategic Partnership Agreement between Washington and Kabul to formalize relations between the two countries after the end of the ISAF mission had stipulated that a BSA should be agreed upon to allow an international security force to continue to operate in the country after 2014. By 12 October 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry and President Karzai declared that they had agreed on all major issues except a clause to grant US forces immunity from criminal prosecution by the Afghan authorities. Such a precondition is the *sine quo non* of any US military operation in a foreign country. The failure to sign a BSA was the precipitant of the total US troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2011; which has led to disastrous results in the country ever since.

7. Despite overwhelming support for a BSA by a *Loya Jirga*¹ held by Afghan leaders in 2013, and repeated warnings by the United States that failure to sign the BSA would result in a complete US withdrawal, President Karzai continued to delay ratification of the document until a number of (seemingly continuously evolving) preconditions were met. He was, for example, adamant about limiting the scope of international forces’ ability to enter private Afghan homes by force, or to conduct ‘night time raids.’ Karzai has also insisted on a commitment to a proactive defence of Afghanistan’s national security against external threats. Karzai was also adamant about the government in Kabul having authority over all detention centres in the country. By March 2014, Karzai had added that signing the BSA would be contingent on the start of a formal peace process with the Taliban (UNSG, 2014a). Towards the end of his presidency, during which relations with the United States had progressively deteriorated, Karzai decided to leave the decision to sign the BSA and SOFA to his successor, who would take office after the April 2014 elections (Smith and Lekic).

8. Discouragingly, the signing of the BSA and SOFA were further delayed by the political impasse in the wake of the 2014 presidential elections, which threw the country into political paralysis at a critical time, stalling the formation of a new government for months. As none of the candidates had won a majority in the first round of voting on 5 April, a second round of elections was required by 14 June. While both remaining candidates, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, had declared beforehand that they would sign the BSA and SOFA upon their election, persistent allegations of widespread ballot-fraud in the second round threw the entire process into turmoil. When preliminary results from the second round suggested victory for Ghani, the Abdullah

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¹ *A Loya Jirga* is a grand tribal council that has a legislative function in Afghanistan, this particular convening of the loya Jirga gathered over 2,000 tribal elders holding the highest representative authority.
campaign pulled out of the electoral process and threatened to establish a parallel government (Aziz and Harooni). A determined intervention of US Secretary of State John Kerry forestalled such an event to allow for an internationally-supervised recount.

9. Despite significant difficulties along the way, a compromise was brokered between Ghani and Abdullah in which both candidates agreed to share power, forming what was termed a ‘Unity Government’. According to the compromise, both campaigns agreed to accept the outcome of the audit, the declared winner assuming the presidency and the runner-up would be appointed Chief Executive Officer (CEO) – the CEO being a newly created position with substantial powers to appease the Abdullah camp. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) that undertook the audit, under the auspices of the United Nations, eventually declared Ghani the winner of the run-off election on 21 September 2014, without revealing the exact outcome of the count. While the IEC did confirm that extensive fraud had been detected on the part of both camps (Craig), and, despite some additional hurdles, Ghani was eventually sworn in as president on 29 September, after which he immediately appointed Abdullah as the CEO of the executive branch (Nordland and Walsh).

10. After signing both the BSA and the SOFA, President Ghani stated that the agreements were in Afghanistan’s national interests, but also preserved the country’s sovereignty. Among the provisions agreed upon, important clauses include that: foreign troops will not be allowed to raid sacred sites, including mosques; foreign contractors will be subject to strict Afghan-government regulations; and, all signed parties will have the option to pull out after two years (Walsh and Ahmed). Although the BSA includes a provision that prohibits US forces to arrest or imprison Afghan nationals, and to “maintain or operate detention facilities in Afghanistan,” it remains unclear whether this implies that the United States will be formally prohibited to continue to hold non-Afghans in custody on its military base in Bagram (Ackerman).

11. Failure to sign the BSA and SOFA would have had dreadful consequences for Afghanistan as it would not only have inhibited the deployment of the NATO-led training and advisory mission, but also would have jeopardised the financial assistance to the GIROA by the international community. Continued financial support is crucial to the existence of the GIROA. To illustrate, while total domestic revenue for 2013 accounted for about $2 billion, estimates of the costs of sustaining the ANSF alone range from $4 billion to $6 billion per year (SIGAR).

B. OPERATION RESOLUTE SUPPORT

12. At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales NATO allies and partners reaffirmed their intention to continue supporting the ANSF through a non-combat mission – Operation Resolute Support – after ISAF concludes on 31 December 2014. Operation Resolute Support is a train, advise, and assist mission to maintain a continued level of support to the ANSF through the end of 2016. Resolute Support will work to provide the necessary logistical, intelligence, and air support to the ANSF as it continues to build strength against insurgent forces. Operation Resolute Support places international forces in a non-combat role, and only the ANSF will be responsible for the security of Afghanistan. A smaller contingent of US forces will also remain in country in a parallel counterterrorism operation.

13. Initial plans call for 12,000 troops to meet the requirements of the mission. The United States will contribute the bulk of the forces, while NATO allies will provide an additional contingent of between 2,000-3,000. As President Obama announced in his recent State of the Union address, the United States will withdraw half of its forces by the end of 2015, with a view to

While Abdullah had garnered 45% of the ballots cast in the first round to Ghani’s 31%, by the second round, Ghani was able to mobilize far more of the votes cast outside of both the Abdullah and Ghani camps in his favour.
complete withdrawal by the end of 2016. U.S. military presence in Afghanistan after 2016 will be limited to a security mission based from its Embassy in Kabul.

14. Operation Resolute Support will be headquartered in Kabul with six additional operational bases throughout the country. Throughout 2015, four countries will serve as framework nations taking the organisational lead in specific geographic areas of Afghanistan: United States (east and south Afghanistan), Germany (north), Italy (west), and Turkey (Kabul). By 2016 all US and NATO troops will operate from Kabul or the US military base at Bagram (White House). As noted above, the United States will retain access to military bases in eastern Afghanistan, allowing it to sustain a platform for regional intelligence monitoring.

15. The establishment of Operation Resolute Support was contingent on the signing of a BSA between the Afghan authorities and the United States and a SOFA between Afghanistan and NATO. The refusal of President Karzai to sign these agreements, and the subsequent delays in the appointment of his successor, significantly complicated the planning process for the new mission and threatened to lead to a complete withdrawal of United States and NATO from Afghanistan. However, the ratification of the BSA and SOFA by the new Unity Government on 30 September 2014 means that Operation Resolute Support will commence, as planned, on 1 January 2015 (Rasmussen).

C. WITHDRAWAL PROGRESS

16. NATO adopted a strategic planning assessment in October 2013 in order to adapt its missions, capabilities and command structures in the country alongside the withdrawal (UNSG, 2013). As of September 2014, total International forces in Afghanistan numbered approximately 40,000, among which nearly 30,000 United States troops – a decrease of 50% compared to a year earlier (ISAF 2013; 2014). As ISAF completes its withdrawal, NATO’s troop level will further reduce to approximately 12,000 by the end of this year (of which 9,800 are from the United States). Of the 218,000 containers NATO had labelled for evacuation in March 2012, 80,000 were shipped as of January 2014 (Lagneau). The limitation of ISAF forces’ operational range due to the rising number of base closures has been mitigated somewhat by bilateral agreements with the Afghan government allowing for joint ISAF-ANSF use of Afghan bases. Remaining international bases maintain focus on high-value or high-risk areas (US DoD, 2013). As of March 2014, ISAF had completed the transfer of about 500 fully functional bases to the GIRoA (US DoD, 2014). To date, all troop-contributing nations’ withdrawal schedules are on track³ (Simeone).

17. Recent reports indicate that the United States has significantly increased its use of air strikes in advance of its withdrawal. The Boston Globe reported that in August 2014, “US combat aircraft dropped more bombs on Taliban and other militant targets...than it had in any single month in two years – and nearly triple the monthly average since January” (Bender). As the United States continues to withdraw its forces, the increased use of air strikes is likely a defensive tactic to cover its withdrawal from the more remote areas in which it still as an operational presence. The use of air strikes by ISAF forces in general has been quite controversial over the past several years, leading to significant strife with the Karzai administration; as noted above the use of air power was a contentious issue when negotiating the post-ISAF international security force presence in the country. President Ghani, however, has apparently signaled a willingness to reexamine his

³ There are, however, some relatively minor administrative hold-ups between the Afghanistan and Uzbekistan customs administrations. In addition, rising tensions with Russia over the Ukrainian crisis might jeopardise the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Russia-Ukraine road of the Northern Distribution Network, but the Pakistani road and the Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Turkey roads would still be open and allow for the continued exit of materiel. For more information see: Laurent Lagneau, “La situation en Ukraine pourrait compliquer le retrait d’Afghanistan de l’Otan,” Zone Militaire, 3 March, 2014.
predecessor's rather restrictive policy on international forces' use of air strikes (Walsh and Ahmed).

D. STATUS OF THE ANSF

18. As a consequence of the ongoing drawdown of ISAF, the ANSF have progressively taken over a larger share of the responsibilities as well as risks for Afghan security. The ANSF are on the verge of completing their force generation, approximating their authorised strength of 352,000 personnel combined for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Border Police (ABP) (US DoD, 2014). As noted in this committee’s previous report, ANSF capacity met with measured success throughout 2013 (NATO PA, 2013): the security transition reached its final stage when ISAF transferred the fifth ‘tranche’ of provincial responsibility to the ANSF; by 18 June 2013, ‘Milestone 2013’ was reached marking the transfer of territorial security responsibility from ISAF to the ANSF, at which point ISAF became a Security Force Assistance (SFA) mission working to train, advise, and assist the ANSF (US DoD, 2013). During 2014, the ANSF were responsible for almost the entirety of the security operations in Afghanistan (US DoD, 2014). The security transition allowed the ANSF to test their operational capacity, the result of which was the execution of effective joint operations against insurgent forces and strongholds (Barry). Remaining challenges notwithstanding, the ANSF continue to demonstrate that they are a relatively effective counter-insurgency force (UNSG, 2014b).

19. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) programme has been a focal point of attention in the final stages of Afghan security sector reform and force build-up. The ALP currently has over 25,000 personnel deployed over almost all provinces. Their numbers should rise to 30,000 by the end of 2014. According to the UN, a majority of communities have reported improvements in the security situation after the deployment of ALP units (UNSG, 2014b). In Helmand province, for example, the Afghan police enjoy 90% positive ratings from the local population and have now transitioned away from combat-like operations to more conventional community policing (Barry). Still, the Afghan police forces continue to suffer the highest casualty rates within the ANSF – during the 2014 ‘fighting season’ casualty rates among the police were almost twice as high as those for the army (Ahmed 2014).

20. Despite the significant progress noted above, it is clear that the ANSF continue to require the assistance of the international forces with which it has worked for well over a decade now. The ANSF continue to suffer heavy casualties, this year’s ‘fighting season’ being among the most deadly for the ANSF since 2001 (Nordland, 2014b). Capability gaps persist and include: intelligence, communications, logistics, air support, and personnel specialisation (Schroden et al.). While it is clear that continued support and assistance will allow the ANSF to evolve into a modern, capable, and specialised force, concerns about the ANSF’s ability to withstand the insurgent threat it faces after 2014 persist.

21. On 5 April 2014, Afghans took another important step toward establishing a viable democracy by going en masse to the polls to elect a new president to succeed Hamid Karzai, who had led Afghanistan since 2002. The elections turned out well over half of eligible voters, including a sizeable percentage of women voters, the ANSF was responsible for election security. The elections were remarkable by just how unremarkable they were in terms of security. The ANSF, along with the support of ISAF, were able to secure virtually all of the election centers from threat during both the first and second rounds of the election process (UNSG, 2014b), a sizeable feat and a good test of the forces’ mettle.

22. Increasing political tensions following the disputed outcome of the second round of the 2014 elections, however, raised new concerns about the ethnic cohesion of the ANSF. Ethnic and regional imbalances remain a challenge for the ANSF, particularly for the ANA, whose command structures are disproportionately filled by ethnic Tajiks from northern Afghanistan (Schroden et al.).
With preliminary results suggesting an electoral victory for Ghani, there were indications that opposition supporters may oppose a Ghani presidency with violence and try to establish a parallel government. In such an event there would be a clear risk that the ANSF could split along ethnic lines, resulting from divided loyalties within its command structures (Jones). While the formation of the National Unity Government has mitigated many of these concerns, further politicization of the Afghan security forces may still hamper their effectiveness and morale and could still fracture the ANSF in case the current political power-sharing agreement would collapse (Straziuso; Trofimov).

23. While the GIRQA will assume full responsibility over Afghan security in 2015, international aid will be crucial to sustain it. ANSF operating costs at their current authorised level of 352,000 troops is $4.1 billion per year. Independent assessments, however, indicate that following the withdrawal of ISAF the ANSF should actually be increased to at least 373,000 troops from 2015-2018, due to the scope of the security challenges that they will face in country – the estimated cost of sustaining such a larger force range from $5 billion to $6 billion per year (Schroden et al.; SIGAR). While the United States expects the GIRQA to take responsibility for a larger share of the costs of sustaining the ANSF, starting with $500 million in 2015, it is unlikely to be able to cover ANSF costs for the foreseeable future: The GIRQA collected a total of $2 billion in domestic revenue in 2013 (SIGAR). At the 2014 Summit in Wales, NATO allies agreed to support the ANSF financially at an annual rate of $5.1 billion during 2015-2017, a $1 billion increase over previous commitments (Sopko), $4.1 billion of these costs will be shouldered by the United States (White House).

E. STATUS OF THE INSURGENCY

1. Overview

24. Years of attrition, counter-insurgency innovation and build-up of the national security forces have unquestionably eroded the Afghan insurgency’s ability to challenge the GIRQA through the defeat of the ANSF. However, violence and terrorist attacks are still very much common features in 2014 Afghanistan and the insurgency’s leaders and followers continue to threaten to undermine chances for long-term peace in a unified Afghanistan state. During the first half of 2014, civilian casualties were 24% higher compared to the same period in 2013, mainly as a consequence of the increasing occurrence of ground combat between the ANSF and insurgents in civilian populated areas (UNAMA, 2014b). ANSF casualty levels from March to September 2014 were among the highest recorded in a similar timeframe since the start of the war (Nordland, 2014b). Discouragingly, the majority of intelligence estimates predict that the Taliban and other insurgent forces will become an even greater threat to the GIRQA and the ANSF between 2015 and 2018 (Schroden et al.). It is also predicted that insurgent forces will attempt to increase size and scope of their battlefield operations after 2014 as a means of gaining leverage over the GIRQA in a negotiated settlement. Such an assessment compels a review of insurgent forces’ current strength by breaking down their command and control structures, operational capabilities, as well as their channels of support and available resources. Insurgent forces’ ability to recapture territory and momentum from the ANSF will be a crucial test over the next two to three years, after which point a negotiated settlement will prevail (Schroden et al.).

25. Four principal forces lead the Afghan insurgency. The following is a brief overview.

- **The Taliban:** The leading insurgent force against ANSF and coalition forces, the Taliban’s ultimate goal is to overthrow the GIRQA and reestablish the Salafist regime that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 under Mullah Omar.
- **The Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG):** Ruled over by longtime Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, HiG gained its notoriety and powerbase during the Mujahideen

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4 Ashraf Ghani drew his principal electoral support from mainly ethnic Pashtun areas, while Abdullah Abdullah’s base of support came mainly from the ethnic Tajik and Hazara regions.
struggle against the Soviets. Though HiG has lost significant manpower and influence in the broader insurgency, it continues to operate in several provinces.

- **al-Qaeda (AQ):** AQ remains a key ally of the Afghan Taliban in the region, principally through its transnational network of experienced jihadist fighters. The operational capacity of the group, however, has been significantly diminished by effective local counter-insurgency, and global counter-terror efforts by the United States and its Allies over the past decade. Today only a few groups of approximately a dozen fighters each, scattered across the remote eastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan, are considered to be in operation in Afghanistan (US DoD, 2013).

- **The Haqqani Network:** Also a significant player from the Mujahideen struggle against the Soviets, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his network of fighters is often considered a decisive factor in the overall rise in insurgent operations in recent years, principally due their ability to provide key logistical support (men, equipment, finances, etc.) to maintain operations. The Haqqani Network’s operational efficiency stems from both its cross-border geographical reach into Pakistan, and its broad range of connections within the Pakistani Inter-Intelligence Services (ISI), al-Qaeda, various central Asian Islamist militant groups, as well as other Pakistani rebel groups. As such, the Haqqani network can be described as a “nexus player” (Laub, 2013).

## 2. Command and Strategy

26. The strategic command of the insurgency is provided by a *shura* based largely in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. This core leadership has proven highly resilient over the years, as the Taliban leader Mullah Omar remains the insurgency’s principal commander. Resilience has also been proven by the insurgency’s ability to maintain a continued pace of operations despite the elimination of important leaders. The survival and continued strength of the Haqqani network is demonstrative in this regard as four of its top-ranking leaders have been killed in the last two years (Laub 2013), and yet the group remains capable of planning and executing high-profile attacks in the Kabul area (US DoD, 2013).

27. The strategies of core insurgent leaders focus on disrupting GIRoA and ANSF authority channels, and undermining their standing among the civilian population. Both objectives intend to pave the way for a future takeover of the country. Between October 2013 and March 2014, 80% of enemy-initiated actions occurred in areas inhabited by just 39% of the population (US DoD, 2014). Unlike in previous years, insurgents groups have made serious attempts this year to capture territory, using several hundreds of insurgents at once in major ground offensives (UNSG, 2014b). In anticipation of the drawdown of foreign forces, insurgent forces will likely continue to focus on disrupting the ANSF by eliminating key individuals within its command structure; falling in line, therefore, with the insurgent’s increased targeting of ANSF and GIRoA officials over the past year (US DoD, 2013). In 2012 and 2013 there were respectively 699 and 743 successful attacks on high profile Afghan government and military targets, a significant rise from the 431 killed in 2011. In 2014, the UN recorded 211 assassinations and 30 assassination attempts between 1 June and 15 August, representing a 7.1% increase compared to the same period a year before (UNSG, 2014b). If continued, such a strategy could significantly impair Afghan security institutions’ command and control capabilities (UNAMA, 2014a). Further, persistent insider attacks continue to erode cohesion within the ANSF as well as between the ANSF and the international forces working with it. Insider attacks also interfere with ANSF and GIRoA’s efforts to deliver good governance and security to the Afghan population.

28. The insurgency’s ability to sway popular opinion will be crucial. Violence escalated further throughout 2014, causing a spike in civilian casualties. Compared to the same period in 2013,
civilians deaths and injuries increased by 24% in the first half of 2014. For the first time, ground combat caused more civilian casualties than any other insurgency tactic (39%, a 89% increase compared to the year before). Insurgent-initiated Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) detonations in public places also gained traction throughout the country in 2014 and killed or injured 7% more civilians than in 2013. Civilian casualties resulting from suicide and complex attacks, the third cause of civilian deaths and injuries decreased by 7% during the first half of 2014 (UNAMA, 2014b).

In the lead-up to the April 2014 elections, insurgents mounted several high-profile attacks against foreigners and the electoral commission within Kabul’s supposedly most secured neighbourhoods (Le Monde). In the run-up to the second round of presidential elections in June, presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah survived a double suicide-attack on his convoy (Salahuddin). All of these occurrences suggest that the insurgency is seeking to not only disrupt the ANSF’s ability to operate, but also its capacity to deliver security to the public. Still, their failure to disrupt the elections significantly demonstrates their relative weakness vis-à-vis the ANSF.

29. The general position of insurgent forces toward peace talk initiatives and the political transition in Afghanistan remains unclear. The insurgency’s central command appears divided between pragmatists, open to a political settlement, and hawkish radicals, unrelenting on taking the country over again; the lack of insurgent participation in the High Peace Council stems from this rift. This rift in leadership can be expected to deepen as ISAF withdraws and political leadership in Kabul changes. President Ghani made an initial gesture by inviting the Taliban and other remaining insurgent forces to peace talks during his inauguration on September 29; a gesture that was promptly rejected by the Taliban (Nordland and Walsh).

3. Operational Capability

30. Reliable estimates of the strength of Afghan insurgent groups in terms of manpower are not publicly available, and such an assessment is generally hard to quantify as membership can be flexible (ICG). Insurgents are locally organised in groups and teams of 5 to 20 men operating jointly or separately depending on the nature of the attack and target or relationships between field commanders. Specific skillsets such as snipers, IED specialists, or trained suicide bombers are usually recruited and vetted by the broader insurgent organizations operating across districts, but local commanders tend to be able to hold on to them as their own assets for local operations.

31. The insurgency's equipment has diversified throughout the course of the war, but still remains relatively antiquated. Although a significant amount of their weaponry are remnants from the 1980’s struggle against the Soviet army or seizures from ANSF stockpiles, smuggling routes throughout the region remain very active. Explosives are mostly homemade and derived from potassium nitrate or ammonium chlorate; both of which are common agricultural products. Though the flow of the precursors and homemade explosives required for IEDs continue to flow from Pakistan, increased pressure from Pakistani authorities and security forces has had a recent dampening effect. Indeed Pakistan has strengthened regulations on fertilizer distribution in its provinces bordering Afghanistan and Pakistani security forces have multiplied operations against insurgent assets. An example of the success of these operations was the August spectacular seizure on 20, 2013 of over 100 tons of explosives in a Quetta warehouse (US DoD, 2013). To date, there is virtually no threat of ground-air attacks by man portable anti-air devices (MANPADs), for example SA-7 missiles, by insurgent forces as such weapons need highly qualified maintenance and operative skills to be used.

6 For example, most of the fighters continue to use AK-47 assault rifles and RPK machine guns as their primary firearms. All other weapons are much rarer and only go to the most experienced fighters. The PK and the DShK “Dushka” are the most common heavy machine guns; and the SVD Dragunov is likely the only precision rifle. High-value targeting, such as troop convoys or aircraft is done with RPG-7s.
32. As with almost any insurgency, indirect, asymmetric attacks remain primary tactics of the Taliban and other insurgent forces as they are faced with superior firepower and defenses. Two particular means of attacking have become the most common; the use of IEDs and ANSF infiltration for attacks against either other ANSF or ISAF soldiers. The following describes the current trends of both tactics.

33. IED attacks are one of the principal tactics of Afghan insurgents. IED innovation has been consistent and effective as insurgents have been able to diversify both IED triggers (command wire, pressure plate, remote control, etc.) and their means of delivery. For example, Vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) can carry bigger payloads and their weight and speed makes them more difficult to stop than individual suicide bombers. The potential magnitude of a VBIED attack was demonstrated by the 14 October 2013 seizure by a partnered ISAF-ANSF unit of a truck carrying 27 tons of explosives and 68 anti-tank mines (UNSG, 2013). Suicide bomber attacks (SBIEDs) also remain one of the insurgency’s primary tactics in highly protected areas, as a single suicide bomber will have easier access to targets than armed fighter squads (Laub, 2013). Both of the above can be combined into suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDs) that can be used to breach walls and fences.

34. Insurgents also continue to demonstrate their ability to infiltrate Afghan security forces and plan “green-on-blue” (ANSF against ISAF) or “green-on-green” (ANSF against ANSF) attacks. Although insider attacks remain a challenge to both ISAF and the ANSF, their dynamics have changed. Whereas there has been a marked decrease in insider attacks against ISAF after a peak in 2012, green-on-green attacks have increased sharply (US DoD, 2013; 2014). This is likely due to a reduced ISAF presence and a shift of insurgent strategic objectives from forcing out coalition forces to undermining the ANSF and GiRoA’s ability to provide security. Notably, in August 2014 an insider attack killed United States Major General Harold J. Greene. Major General Greene was the highest-ranking ISAF casualty in Afghanistan, and the highest-ranking member of the US military to be killed in an overseas conflict since the Vietnam War. Underscoring the difficulty of preventing attacks like these, the perpetrator appeared to be an ordinary Afghan soldier rather than an insurgent (Rosenberg and Cooper).

35. Given the opportunity, insurgents will conduct direct attacks against the ANSF and coalition forces. These attacks range from opportunist ambushes and surface-to-air fire to complex attacks against ANSF, GiRoA or coalition facilities. Such complex attacks combine several elements and tactics in order to reach and breach the facility’s perimeter, and then direct fire and suicide attacks against crowds or high-value targets. Ambushes have grown ever more sophisticated over the years with the use of decoys and multiple firing positions. In a recent example of a high-profile complex suicide attack in September 2014, 19 Taliban insurgents first detonated a suicide car bomb at the entrance of the local office of the Afghan National Security Directive in Ghazni to gain access to the premises, after which they attacked the compound with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, killing 18 ANSF members (Andalib).

4. The 2014 Fighting Season

36. The ebb and flow of insurgent fighting in Afghanistan operates within a seasonal framework, with a marked increase in insurgent activity occurring between mid-spring and mid-autumn, the so-called ‘fighting season.’ There are several reasons for these annually recurring spikes in insurgent activity: not only is the weather warmer, but the end of the poppy harvesting season provides insurgent groups with additional income and fresh recruits for an increased tempo of operations; and, the summer closure of the radical Pakistani madrassas gives student incentive to cross the border to Afghanistan to join the insurgency. Insurgent activity usually reaches its low during the poppy harvest period, as manpower is diverted from the battlefield to work the fields (Blank; Speri).
37. The 2014 fighting season has been particularly intense. Taking advantage of the uncertainty surrounding the electoral crisis and the withdrawal of international troops, the Taliban conducted one of their most successful campaigns since the start of the war. According to the Afghan Ministry of Interior, the Taliban launched 700 ground offensives between March and September 2014, resulting in the deaths of 800 soldiers and 1,368 policemen – the highest casualty rate for the Afghan police ever over a similar timespan (Nordland 2014b; Rashid). As of September 2014, 18 of the 34 Afghan provinces were affected by insurgent fighting, including in the once relatively stable north (Ahmed, 2014). Unlike previous years, when insurgents primarily relied on small-scale hit-and-run attacks against international forces, large-scale ground offensives became an increasingly common insurgent tactic in 2014. Often involving several hundred combatants and prolonged fighting, insurgents have staged major assaults against district centers and ANSF strongholds in ambitious attempts to seize and hold territory. Although large ground engagements took place across Afghanistan, they have been particularly fierce in the provinces of Helmand, Faryab, Ghor, Logar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Kunduz. With limited support from US and NATO forces, and hampered by a lack of offensive air capabilities, the ANSF experienced serious difficulties neutralising these insurgent advances. However, despite suffering heavy casualties, the ANSF proved to be capable of defending against the majority of the offensives and has been able to recover lost territory (UNSG, 2014b).

5. Insurgent Financing

38. Insurgent forces receive funding from a diverse range of sources, which makes them resilient to the loss of any single source of income. Influence over the Afghan narcotics economy is a major source of income for the Taliban. According to John Sopko, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan reconstruction, "it is widely thought that every drug organisation supports or works with insurgents in Afghanistan" even if they do not participate directly in production activities. In areas under heavy insurgent influence, local shadow governors provide poppy farmers with protection and facilitate exchanges and transportation with opium and heroin manufacturers (Brown). A record 5,500 tons of opium was produced in 2013, a 49% increase from 2012, this will most likely only expand the insurgents’ financial base (Welch). Early reports indicate that opium production in Afghanistan, and therefore insurgent revenue generation, increased even further in 2014. The Taliban receives most revenue from Helmand province, which is the main opium harvesting and producing area of the country (UN). Criminal networks have proven valuable associates for the insurgency as they connect insurgent leaders controlling most of the poppy production with corrupt government officials involved in narcotics trafficking (US DoD, 2013). Taliban revenue generation differs from province to province; while some local factions are self-sufficient others rely on financial support from the central Taliban leadership to finance their activities (UN).

39. Donations are another major source of income. Donations arrive via informal halawa networks transiting Pakistan, Iran and the Gulf. These small money exchange shops transmit cash from office to office with almost no written documentation, making cash flows almost completely untraceable. The Muslim charity tax, the zakat, is also collected by local religious leaders that are often members of/or sympathetic to the insurgency and is then passed on to finance various organisations.

40. Finally, local insurgent leaders will often also extort money from various local sources with the complicity of criminal networks. These schemes range from hostage taking to threatening local businesses with violence.

6. Insurgent Recruitment

41. The insurgency recruits its fighters mostly through a network of madrassas in northern Pakistan. Lured by the prospect of free religious education, parents send their children to Pakistani madrassas each year, where they will follow a harsh indoctrination process. Radicalised teenagers
will then join training camps before returning to Afghanistan as insurgent fighters. Still, popular support for the insurgents has changed significantly in recent years, partly because of widespread knowledge of their association with the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI. Another significant factor likely fuelling local support of the Taliban and their affiliates is a desire to defy public authorities; a survey by the Asia Foundation in late 2012 found that only half the population had confidence in its government and justice system (Laub, 2014).

42. The increasing civilian death toll appears to be having a direct impact on insurgent recruitment and freedom of operation. Popular frustration in areas where insurgent attacks result in large-scale civilian death has grown so acute that local movements are emerging to fend off rebel fighters. Examples of which have been observed in the southern provinces of Herat, Ghazni, Farah, Logar and Wardak since 2012 (Gall). Although they are often limited in scope and duration, anti-insurgent movements continue to develop in an increasing number of provinces; some have proven resilient, such as the recent anti-insurgent movement in the Ghazni province.

7. External Support

43. The Afghan insurgency also benefits from external support, especially from its Pakistani counterparts. Among these Pakistani militant groups, the most distinctive force is the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Resulting from nearly three decades of cohabitation with Afghan jihadist groups and a soaring popular anger fuelled by Pakistani army incursions, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan is a key partner of the Afghan insurgency. Discouragingly, the group promises to be increasingly radical and violent in the future, as the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud via a November 2013 US drone strike resulted in the election of Mullah Fazlullah as its new leader. Fazlullah is a radical cleric known for refusing any kind of peace negotiations.

44. Foreign states have been reported to provide assistance to the insurgency, notably Pakistan. The ISI has assisted the Taliban since their emergence in 1994 (Bajoria and Kaplan) in order to gain both allies and strategic depth against India through the control of Afghanistan. The ISI also co-operated tightly with the Haqqani network in order to manage militant groups in the tribal area (Laub, 2013). For the same reasons, and for fear that the Afghan intelligence services might develop their own proxy militants in Pakistani territory, Pakistan will most likely continue its support to Afghan insurgent movements (Markey). Moreover, control of southern Afghanistan might help Pakistan alleviate sectarian tension between ethnic Pashtun, Punjabi and Baluchi tribes on its own territory.

8. Threat Assessment

45. Following this capability assessment, it is clear that the Afghan insurgency, especially its Taliban and Haqqani elements, are still a challenge to ANSF and have the potential to expand their territorial control once foreign forces draw down. Although it is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to challenge the GIRoA seriously for control over the capital, it is also unlikely that the ANSF will be able to defeat the Taliban decisively (Lekic). Many policy experts and military analysts expect that the Taliban will regain significant parts of the country once coalition forces withdraw entirely. Insurgents will continue to disrupt ANSF and GIRoA command and control networks in an attempt to undermine their public image as security providers. Pakistan will remain a strategic safe haven for force regeneration and launching ground for large-scale operations across the border. It is likely that insurgents would make large advances in 2015 in the south and east, while Kabul will likely see a rise in the size and scope of attacks. Worse, insurgent groups and their allies would most certainly continue to sympathise with international terrorist agendas. The persistence of the threat, despite the heavy impact of coalition operations since 2001, demonstrates the need for continuous commitment to Afghan security and stability.
III. INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

46. Afghan security institutions’ ability to lead and sustain the ANSF is essential if the government wishes to maintain a favourable balance of power against the insurgency. As their exposure risk and death toll are on the rise, logistics, finances and human resources must be managed so as to provide them with optimal support for their missions. Recent complications with salary payments are a serious concern, especially within the ALP, although advances have been made with the development of electronic transfers (US DoD, 2013). Numerous units also lack basic sustainment materials such as fuel and ammunitions, and support services such as resupply and medical evacuation (Katzman). The competence of ANSF management is crucial to the sustainment of their combat effort, especially as the Army has suffered 4,000-7,000 desertions per month over the past two years and might face an ever bigger desertion rate when international forces pull out (McLeary & Bennett).

47. Corruption remains a critical problem hindering the quality and effectiveness of the ANSF. Widespread popular grievances persist over GIRoA and ANSF officials’ perceived impunity (Kubis, 2014). Government and security authorities must step up their presence on the local level in order to exert more control over their forces. Indeed, the ALP has been the subject of frequent reports of corruption and abuse, especially in remote or isolated eastern provinces. Such abuse is often not investigated or prosecuted due to informal support from local powerbrokers, and a lack of will and capacity from Kabul (UNAMA, 2014b). In the higher ranks of the Ministries of Defense (MoD) and the Interior (MoI), GIRoA officials have been reported to obstruct investigations and accelerate the release of suspects (Chayes). Drug addiction is also a serious issue as 5.3% are considered habitual users, a phenomenon that also plagues ANSF and GIRoA employees. In October 2013 the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan’s main intelligence service, fired 65 opium-addicts from its ranks, shedding light on large professional shortcomings among top security institutions (Ahmed, 2013).

48. Progress towards effective local governance is still slow, however, because of hurdles such as inter-agency co-ordination, budget transfers, policy planning and dialogue between institutions on different geographic levels (US DoD, 2013). Centralised decision-making also undermines the link between national and local security officials. This rift hamstrings both the development of a sufficient pool of competent and driven managers at the local level, and the formation of a clear long-term strategic guidance (US DoD, 2013).

IV. NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE TALIBAN

49. In the face of a resilient insurgency, most analysts conclude that only a negotiated settlement will end the conflict. The Taliban have indicated that a negotiated settlement is a possibility. Mullah Omar stated on Eid el-Fitr on 8 August 2013 that the insurgency would not seek to re-establish the pre-2001 regime by force, but would rather seek to form “an inclusive government based on Islamic principles” rather than through a democratic electoral process (Cahall). However, a series of events have called into question the Taliban’s commitment to the peace process: the 20 September 2011 assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the High Peace Council set up by GIRoA in 2010 to monitor the talks; and, the collapse of the US-initiated process in Qatar in June 2013 after the Taliban delegation insisted it represented a legitimate government, and raised the flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan above their office. Displaying such symbols is an attempt to undercut the legitimacy of GIRoA and could not be tolerated by President Karzai (Katzman; Mohan).

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7 Afghanistan consistently ranks at the bottom of in Transparency International's Annual Corruption Perceptions Index; in 2013 it tied with North Korea and Somalia for last place among the 177 countries and territories included in the list.
50. The peace process is also hindered by a lack of incentive on both sides. Pakistan did not deliver on its September 2013 announcement of the release of former Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdullah Ghani Baradar, thus fuelling insurgent mistrust of government overtures (UNSG, 2013). Continued combat operations will also continue to impede the push toward negotiations. Moreover, the large number of stakeholders (local, regional, and global) in the peace effort makes co-ordinating the talks very difficult (Biddle; Katzman). Finally, it seems that as long as insurgents do not perceive the conflict to be in a definitive stalemate and continue to receive support from external actors, chances of a negotiated settlement will be small (Jones & Crane).

51. Regardless of negative steps and disincentives, several factors may drive factions within the insurgency to see opportunities in these talks. Reaching an agreement with GIROA might gain them legitimacy among a population that has grown increasingly hostile to the insurgency. Reaching a modus vivendi with the government in Kabul would also allow them to escape their Pakistani exile, where they are dependent on local allies and under the constant threat of US counterterrorism operations (Biddle). Many in the Taliban realise that they now face a large and structured security force that will enjoy NATO support for at least two more years, which will likely forestall their ability to take over the entire country. As such, many may see political participation as the path leading to the most influence over Afghanistan's political future (Smith, 2014).

V. REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

A. PAKISTAN

52. While stability in Afghanistan is a priority for Pakistan, it has persistently sought to influence Afghanistan in order to foster its own strategic goals in the region, particularly over the longstanding issue of Pashtun tribes spanning over both sides of the porous Durrand Line.8 Pakistan also needs a friendly regime in Kabul to assure strategic depth over India (NATO PA, 2012). For these reasons Islamabad has maintained an ambiguous policy of engagement of GIROA and clandestine support to insurgent groups. Although the ISI continues to support the Afghan Taliban, insurgent fighting has resulted in the emergence of an increasing number of radical and terrorist groups on Pakistani soil. Terrorist attacks causing both civilian and military casualties have risen in the Baluchistan, Khyber and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) ever since 2001 (O'Hanlon). This continuous trend of insecurity is expected to rise with the increased freedom of movement insurgents will gain from ISAF drawdown, and poses an ever-more concerning challenge to the stability of Pakistan (Topchkanov). The Pakistani military has been expanding the scope of its operations against militant groups on its territory since the beginning of 2014 (Khan, I.). These evolutions might drive Pakistan to shift its policy from seeking influence via supporting the insurgency to a more open partnership with GIROA, aimed at securing durable peace and security in Afghanistan. Afghan and Pakistani institutions have continued developing their relationship and hold multiple co-operation programmes and initiatives encompassing security, political and economic issues. These contacts are held at multiple venues including bilateral and multilateral meetings, delegation visits and dialogue sessions (UNSG, 2013).

B. CENTRAL ASIA

53. President Karzai has remained active in engaging central Asian partners, attending intergovernmental summits, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and establishing bilateral agreements on economic and security issues. There are encouraging signs that President Ghani will not only continue with these efforts, but even expand upon them. The Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan also maintains an

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8 Name of the Afghan-Pakistani border drawn in 1893 by the British colonial powers in India and the then Emir of Afghanistan, dividing the British Raj and the Russian Empire.
unabated commitment to regional security co-operation. Border co-operation is one of the main topics of these agreements such as the 30 October 2013 protocol between Russia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan to counter criminal and extremist cross-border movements. The GIRoA has also had a proactive role in fostering regional integration through the Central Asia – South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project and the future Tajikistan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan railway project (UNSG, 2013). Central Asian countries are concerned with security development in Afghanistan on two accounts. An influx of refugees from northern Afghanistan would put a strain on Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek economies and societies (Malashenko). Furthermore, increased insurgent activity in Afghanistan might allow for jihadist groups once active in Central Asian republics, now based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to cross over again. However, these groups have little combat power, and Central Asian populations are not receptive to radical Islam, thus lowering the threat (Balci). But although radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan are unlikely to challenge the authority of Central Asian State, poor border monitoring and territory surveillance capabilities allow them a relative freedom of movement, and thus make them a security liability (NATO PA, 2012).

54. Should the internal security of Afghanistan deteriorate after the drawdown of international forces, neighbouring countries might support Afghan armed group proxies in order to bolster their own strategic interests. While Pakistan holds sway over Afghan Taliban groups, India would seek to counter Pakistani influence and contain anti-Indian terrorist groups by stepping up its support to the ANSF and develop ties with anti-Taliban militias (The Economist, 2013a). Central Asian countries would engage with their own ethnic communities in Afghanistan to secure their southern borders. Iran would use its already existing network of relations with local powerbrokers and warlords to keep Taliban advances away from its border. Renewed regional interventions in Afghanistan would not only accelerate the ethnic and social breakdown of Afghanistan, but also increase tensions between regional countries as well (Jones & Crane). A possible escalation between nuclear Pakistan and India is especially concerning in this regard. Continued commitment and co-operation of regional countries for the stability of Afghanistan, through bilateral channels and multilateral venues, must be encouraged for lasting regional security (Kubis, 2013).

VI. CONCLUSION

55. Three strategic interests compel the United States and their NATO Allies and partners to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan:

1. Although the international terrorist threat from Afghanistan appears to have dwindled to a mere remnant of the core al-Qaeda leadership, removing the deterring presence of international forces in the country may allow for this threat to regain its pre-2001 operational level. Despite continued security threats throughout the country, the international community should also maintain a longstanding commitment to Kabul’s efforts to block Afghanistan from becoming a base of operations for terrorist groups (O’Hanlon).

- Should the Taliban be able to regain ground in Afghanistan and recreate a secure base of operations or even total control over Kabul, there is no reason to believe they would not renew Afghanistan’s role as a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups with compatible ideologies and objectives. In such a scenario the new Taliban state could establish itself as a logistical platform for jihadist undertakings all over the Middle East, Africa, Central and South-Eastern Asia. The spectacular rise of ISIS today and the proliferation of al-Qaeda throughout the Middle East and North Africa after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 demonstrated the jihadist groups’ ability to regenerate once capable military pressure is removed. A continued ability to conduct counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan is therefore crucial for both Unites States and NATO security policy. This eventuality calls for continued support for
maintaining forces in the region. Failure to maintain presence would not only jeopardise the progress made in Afghanistan to date, but likely also Western security policy in the entire region, as the nearest alternative forward bases would be too far to conduct kinetic strikes or special operations in Afghan or Pakistani territory (Sanger & Schmitt).

2. International forces also share interest in maintaining a strong counter-narcotics presence in a country producing the lion’s share of global opiates supply, accounting for 74% of the global market (UNDOC). The US Drug Enforcement Administration sustains strong relationships with Afghan and Pakistani counter-narcotics units and should be given the opportunity to continue working with their counterparts in the region in order to curb global drug trafficking (Beith).

3. Finally, maintaining a local presence allows the United States and its allies to monitor Pakistani and Indian nuclear weapon stockpiles. Pakistani tactical nuclear warheads are a particular concern as they could easily fall into wrong hands due to questionable command and control structures currently in place in the country. In fact, the potential unaccountability for some of its nuclear materials in 2009 drove the United States to increase intelligence resources allocated to monitoring the growing Pakistani arsenal (Sanger & Schmitt).

56. The Taliban and other insurgent groups have the regenerative capacity to remain a central player in the future of Afghanistan after ISAF’s withdrawal; they will likely even increase the tempo and reach of their operations after 2014. Existing safe havens in Pakistan will allow for the future regeneration and consolidation of insurgent military power. Unless a political solution is reached, the insurgency will most likely attempt to launch a large-scale campaign and attempt to regain control of substantial portions of the country (Schroden et al.). If international forces remain in assistance of the ANSF, it is unlikely that they will be able to precipitate the fall of the GIRQoA.

57. Insurgents, however, face distinct problems of their own. The Taliban elicits too little popular support today, and is even facing a growing popular movement against it in some provinces. Insurgents also confront a far more capable and effective ANSF than ever before. Understanding the key strengths and weaknesses of the insurgency also allow a window of opportunity for future Counterinsurgency (COIN) ops by the ANSF within the framework of Operation Resolute Support. The following are some recommendations of this Committee:

- The insurgency’s forces high generation rate, granted by its Pakistani safe haven and its effective recruitment process, should drive ANSF and its partners to avoid large-scale conventional operations that will have only short-term effects on insurgent forces and will most likely anger civilian populations affected by the fighting. Instead, they should focus on targeted operations aimed at key nodes of the insurgent network;
- The covert nature of the insurgency, hidden within the civilian population, should be met with a higher emphasis on intelligence and evenly strict rules of engagement in order to improve discrimination and avoid civilian casualties;
- The resilience of insurgent finances and logistics can be undermined with increased border and customs control, a tighter administrative pressure on money exchange shops, and a continued development of counter-narcotic campaigns;
- The limited experience and skillset of most of the insurgent force, clearly evidenced by the death of insurgent fighters in the explosion of their own IEDs on several occasions (Khan, H.) is also an opportunity for targeted operations, as removing the few insurgent experts from the battlefield will result in catastrophic loss of operational capability for insurgent groups.

Failure to maintain international commitment however will most likely usher in a relapse into widespread combat (Biddle). Despite the sub-optimal peace achieved in Afghanistan, the threat of international terrorism to NATO security has been neutralised at least in the short-term. Building on
these security gains will allow for a long-term containment of al-Qaeda and other local radical jihadist groups (Jones & Crane).

58. Continuous international engagement in Afghanistan is crucial to the perpetuation of stability and insecurity containment in the country. From a military point of view, a complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces would not only jeopardise the ANSF’s ability to thwart the insurgency, but also entice neighbouring countries into proxy policies that would foster an ethnic break-up of Afghanistan and further escalate regional tensions (Jones & Crane). Regional security, and continued denial of Afghan safe haven to international terrorist groups require steadfast attention to the goals of Operation Resolute Support. Further, expanded political co-operation, including Pakistan, would also encourage progress toward a political settlement between GiRoA and insurgent groups, which would in turn condition long-term peace and security in Afghanistan (Biddle). Efforts to curb corruption among official security institutions must also be increased: persistent corruption remains one of the main obstacles to public legitimacy and the consolidation of security gains over the insurgency.

59. Warlords seem to be quickly regaining their former political and military clout all over the country. The apparent return of warlordism might be perceived as a risk of relapse into the inter-community fighting of the 1992-94 Mujahideen regime. However, it is also an opportunity to further build up the stability of the country. Warlords can provide the ANSF with the necessary military back-up to keep the insurgency at bay in the long-term, as long as they support the state-building project emanating from Kabul. Their popularity among their own ethnic constituencies in such a heterogeneous country enables them to foster sustainable power-sharing agreements within ruling institutions. As such, engaging the warlords through governance and security assistance would encourage them to integrate in state processes and institutions, therefore strengthening the Afghan political balance (Jacinto).

60. Finally, as noted above, the recent lessons learned by the collapse of the Iraqi military in the face of ISIS’s campaign in the country since June 2014 should not be lost in the shuffle to rise to meet yet another difficult armed group challenge – the continued presence of some sort of rump international force must remain in the country to assist the state’s armed forces continue to grow their capabilities to meet both internal and external security challenges. This means not only a focus on logistical aid, training, and close-quarter advising, but also shared intelligence and persistent political efforts to shore up competent leadership throughout the organisation (and the state as well) to inspire the loyalty of the forces. When all levels of a security force feel that they are driving toward the same goal, then the institution will be able to face challenges to the security of the state. Continued attention to the ANSF today, and over the next several years, will likely be a mutually beneficial endeavour for both the Afghan people and the broader international community working to make Afghanistan a safe and strong regional state.
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