

AFGHANISTAN, A COUNTRY ON THE BRINK

Over the last ten years, the mantra of experts and scholars highlighted the uncertain future of Afghanistan. The situation on the ground shows an ambiguous mix of instability and tentative signs of progress. To this very day, any future scenario bears the mark of uncertainty. The dynamics of the last two years, after the massive international withdrawal due to the end of the NATO-ISAF mission, are bound to recur not just in the next months but also in the next few years.

First of all, over the last two years, the Taliban—still fearsomely active—failed to advance towards their strategic aim of winning back Kabul. Their time seemed to have finally come after ISAF's withdrawal, but the two spring offensives in 2015 and 2016, although bloody, had almost no effect on the region's military balance. Granted, security in Afghanistan has been deteriorating over time, and the double siege of Kunduz and its temporary conquer by the Taliban (as the first provincial capital to fall in their hands) cast a harsh light on the future. However, Taliban are still far from establishing a truly cohesive and unitary parallel government for the country, and they are still unable to subvert the fragile political regime set up by the international community.

Two additional processes, unfavorable to the Taliban, come into play. First, Pakistani support dropped over time, partly because the Taliban's Pakistani branch (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) came to represent a threat to Pakistan's domestic stability, and partly because, as already happened with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the Nineties, the less the Taliban appear to grant stability and certainty, the less they are seen as a winning bet. Second, the Islamic State is challenging the Taliban in Khorasan. At the moment, the Islamic State was not that successful and did not establish itself firmly in Afghanistan (or maybe just in the Nangarhar Province and possibly in Kunar). It has too many enemies—al-Qaida, the Taliban, Afghan's security forces, and US troops—and military pressures on Mosul and Syria do not allow the Islamic State to further engage in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, ease of recruiting and the rate of desertion by Taliban fighters that joined the Islamic State suggest a growing disaffection among the militants. A disaffection due both to an appeasing stance, favoring peace negotiations with Kabul, and to limited military achievements.

But time is not on the Taliban's side. For many years, during the international intervention, time has been an asset for their insurgency campaign: their most precious strategic resource was to resist the massive international deployment, the occupying troops, and the US as long as possible, until the foreigners' withdrawal. They came out victorious from this war of attrition, surviving to the world's most powerful armies. Now that the international deployment has reduced markedly, becoming almost imperceptible, for the first time in years the Taliban are bound to win. "Not losing" is not enough anymore. And if they do not start winning quickly they stand to lose the public support they still enjoy today, their recruiting power, and credibility in their promise of regaining control of the whole country. In other words, everything they gained by driving away the foreigners from Afghanistan is about to expire. For the first time ever, time may be on the side of Kabul's government.

However, the governing coalition stands on a fragile agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and his Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. The government, established under US pressure, is the outcome of a compromise between the two "winners" of the 2014 presidential election. The agreement was necessary to keep the country, and its two opposing factions, together: the Pashtuns and the others. The government has neither failed altogether (despite internal fights for official appointments, frequent deadlocks due to cross vetoes, and the risk that political conflict leads to armed violence), nor made decisive steps towards Afghanistan's pacification and political normalization. It is highly likely that the unstable agreement between Ghani and Abdullah will just be an interlude. It is unlikely that it will act as a step towards a wider political and institutional compromise, able to bring political stability to the country.

Afghanistan's economic situation, however, is more worrying. The military disengagement, which resulted in the withdrawal of 120.000 troops in just a few years, and the declining commitment by international donors in financially supporting Afghanistan, resulted in a worrying economic recession. Since 2012, GDP growth, which in the ten years after the 2001 US intervention averaged 9-10 per cent, dropped drastically to 1.3-1.5 per cent. Massive international deployment, with more than 800 military bases and a significant presence of civilians administering development aid (whose viability and operations were partly linked to ISAF's presence) fostered growth until 2012/13, but won't be able to do so in the future. Despite international efforts, Afghanistan's economy is unable to sustain itself. It is still missing mechanisms and tools to self-propel growth. On the opposite, it is still too dependent on external aid, which is likely to shrink in the near future. It is no surprise that the illegal economy, linked to opium trafficking, has grown. As a reaction to the economic crisis, opium cultivation has become the most profitable alternative for many farmers. In turn, growth in opium trafficking supports the Taliban who, on the one hand, safeguard property rights and, on the other hand, draw massive revenues that finance military campaigns and recruitment.

Political, economic and security dynamics are naturally intertwined. The economic crisis weakens the government, especially considering that President Ghani explicitly tied his electoral campaign and his political rise to a commitment to create jobs and foster economic growth. In turn, the government's political fragility weakens its capacity to fight the Taliban. The outcome of these intertwined dynamics is still highly uncertain. One can only assume that, in the short term, Afghanistan will continue to be a country on edge, whose deep-rooted instability cannot, at least for now, upset the hardly earned achievements of 15 years of international intervention.

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