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THE FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN AFTER TWO DECADES OF NATO MILITARY PRESENCE

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Summary

The long-delayed military withdrawal from Afghanistan by NATO troops is leaving the country in a state with an uncertain future. As the conflict continues and an intra-Afghan peace agreement has yet to be reached, withdrawal does not mean the end. Now, NATO member states must ensure Afghanistan and the wellbeing of its people continues to be a priority.

Key points

- Despite gradual improvements in democracy and women's rights, there is a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.
- It is a war-stricken impoverished country with neighbors closing its doors to refugees.
- International actors should have a role in rebuilding the country and supporting peace.

History and Background

This year, the US and its allied troops in NATO are withdrawing from the two-decade-long conflict in Afghanistan. This withdrawal does not mean that the conflict is over or has been resolved; far from it. Following an agreement between the Taliban and the US, peace in Afghanistan between the Afghan government and the Taliban is yet to be determined, which has thus far been an arduous challenge. Meanwhile, the people are struggling in a war-torn country, with neighbors rejecting, or even abusing, refugees. It is imperative that the international community continues to pay attention to the state, which at the moment has an uncertain future.

To understand the context and implications of the current military withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is imperative first to have a grasp of the roots of the conflict. The origins can be found in the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to support a Marxist-Leninist military coup (Witte, 2020). The foreign invasion led to an emergence of Jihadists labeled as Mujahideen. They participated in guerilla warfare in hopes of expelling the communist government, acting with the support of multiple foreign governments, including the United States (“Why is there a war in Afghanistan? The short, medium and long story”, 2020). By 1989 there was no longer a Soviet presence to protect the communist government, and the Mujahideen swiftly took over (Witte, 2020).

From this point on, a deep division began to grow within the Mujahideen as they fought for power. From this power vacuum, the Taliban emerged, and in 1996 took control of Kabul (Witte, 2020). It is crucial to understand the original goals of this group, which are largely still relevant today. The Taliban was birthed with hopes of correcting the issues in the country and building a government under Islamic Sharia law, internationally recognized while resisting non-Muslim interference (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2011, p. 3). These goals differ from those of Al Qaeda, another important actor in the conflict. Al Qaeda, which similarly grew from the times of the Soviet invasion, had international goals. It claimed to fight for the Muslim world, targeting countries they saw opposing this, particularly the US (Byman, 2015). By 2001, with Al Qaeda's aid, the Taliban controlled all but 10 % of the country (Witte, 2020).

9/11 attacks and the following war

By 1999, both the Taliban and Al Qaeda were distinguished as terrorist groups through a resolution by the UN Security Council. They both became of significant concern following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 (“The U.S. War in Afghanistan”, 2021). From here on, President Bush’s War on Terror began drawing in allies from across the world. After the Taliban refused to hand over Al Qaeda leaders without proof of relations to the terrorist attack, the US and the UK began a joint air campaign on Taliban targets in October. Their goal was to destroy the Al Qaeda framework and remove the Taliban from power (Witte, 2020). A few months later, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established and led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It was meant to assist the internationally recognized new interim Afghan government (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2011, p. 7).

The early years focused on defeating the Taliban, initially quite successfully, followed by support to rebuild the country politically and security-wise (Witte, 2020). Soon after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the number of troops in Afghanistan increased and aimed to firmly sweep the country of the Taliban. The plan had success; however, it was not sustainable (“Why is there a war in Afghanistan?”, 2020). By 2010, NATO members signed to relinquish security responsibilities to

Afghan forces by 2014, and President Obama made plans to withdraw troops by 2016. However, after a decision by President Trump, this was indefinitely pushed back (“The U.S. War in Afghanistan”, 2021).

Bilateral US/Taliban agreement and withdrawal

End to military intervention in Afghanistan was once again a possibility in sight after the successful signing of bilateral agreements between the Taliban and the United States on February 29th 2020 (Thomas, 2020, p. 2.). In exchange for withdrawal, the deal guarantees that the Taliban will do all in their power to prevent Afghanistan from being used by terrorist groups (such as Al Qaeda) and those working against the US and its allies (“Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan”, 2020). It provides a 14-month timeline for withdrawal by coalition forces, supports an intra-Afghan political agreement and a “permanent and comprehensive ceasefire” (“Joint Declaration”, 2020). It also mentions that the US will continue to support institutions that promote democratic norms and help the country socioeconomically.

Unfortunately, there have already been road bumps in the execution of this agreement. President Biden stipulated that the agreement, which President Trump negotiated, would be difficult to realistically and responsibly meet, pushing back the withdrawal to September 11th, 2021 (Schmitt, 2021). The Taliban immediately took issue with this breach, threatening future problems and cancelling peace talks with the Afghan government meant to occur in Turkey (George, 2021). Since this schism in April, peace talks have resumed in Doha, although progress is at a standstill (“High-stakes talks between Afghan gov’t, Taliban as fighting rages”, 2021). The momentous agreement signed last February is only between the Taliban and the US. The government of Afghanistan was not involved. However, future peace in the country is entirely contingent upon the fact that the Taliban and the Afghan government can successfully negotiate a settlement. If not, a full withdrawal will mean a decrease in security forces supporting the Afghan government and a chance for the Taliban to retake control.

As a further issue, reports by the US Department of Defense (2021) assert that the Taliban is still working closely with Al Qaeda, and that several members of the organization are even part of the Taliban organization and leadership. It concludes that there is a low chance for the Taliban to act in opposition to Al Qaeda, as the agreement states it would. Not only is this a breach of the deal, but it also highlights an acute shortcoming of the negotiation. What would occur if the Taliban did not act per the agreement, and how would this be monitored in the future? Currently, there are no known repercussions for any deviant acts, which may make them less inclined to follow the rules of the agreement.

Current situation and potential withdrawal impacts

Civilian

Human rights are a critical concern for Afghanistan, as expected in a country deeply entrenched in a long and complex conflict. The total number of civilian deaths in the country since 2001 is unknown; however, from January to September 2020 alone, over 2,000 died, and that number has been increasing since the fighting intensified (“Afghanistan 2020”, 2021). The majority of these deaths resulted from the actions of the Taliban, but Afghan security was nonetheless responsible for 25 %

("Afghanistan 2020", 2021). Countless others have been wounded. An issue that has affected a great number of individuals is displacement and the search for external refuge. In 2020 alone, over 4 million people were displaced. With neighboring countries possessing limited resources to accommodate refugees and an impoverished population in Afghanistan, as over half live below the poverty line, people are left with few options for a better future ("Poverty Data: Afghanistan", 2021).

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations. Children are recruited to join the conflict from both sides, and women still face fewer employment opportunities and low education rates ("Afghanistan 2020", 2021). Although women's rights greatly increased since the fall of the Taliban regime, where women were not even allowed to leave their house without a male, this improvement applies predominantly to women in urban areas. Women in rural or Taliban-controlled areas of the country still face disproportional hardships (Allen & Felbab-Brown, 2020). As withdrawal looms and conflict intensifies, the risk of total Taliban control becomes an increasingly possible reality. The economic situation is already dire and worsens along with the war. The future of women's rights is also contingent on an intra-Afghan agreement. If the Taliban were to take control of the country once again, women's rights would decline after years of already slow improvement.

Security forces

A large part of the United States and coalition forces' action in Afghanistan has been about training, supporting, and heavily investing in the Afghan security forces (Gibbons-Neff, Rahim & Chivers, 2021). About 60% of the 144 billion dollars the US has dedicated to aid in Afghanistan has gone towards security (Thomas, 2020). The Afghan security forces is numbered at around 300,000 soldiers, which is almost certainly larger than the number of Taliban fighters (Schroden, 2021).

Nonetheless, the concern is prevalent that the Afghan forces will not be able to hold out against the Taliban without on-the-ground support from the US military. Despite the presence of US and NATO militaries, the Taliban still controlled certain parts of the country. Nonetheless, US security officials assert Afghan security is equipped to protect cities should the Taliban advance (Gibbons-Neff, Rahim & Chivers, 2021). President Biden's administration has announced that 3.3 billion dollars of US funding are directed towards Afghan security forces ("FACT SHEET: Continued U.S. Support for a Peaceful, Stable Afghanistan", 2021). This support is crucial as the Taliban continues to fund their ventures producing opium, which is estimated to earn them upwards of 1.5 billion dollars a year ("Why is there a war in Afghanistan?", 2020).

Political

Since 2004, a new constitution has been established in the country. It recognizes certain human and political rights, such as freedom of religion and expression, creating the democratic framework for the state (Thomas, 2020). The current president is Ashraf Ghani. However, recent election results were contested and inconclusive, resulting in a US-brokered agreement that the runner up, Abdullah Abdullah, would become the country's chief executive (Blanc, 2020). Such issues show the fragility of the democratic institutions and represent the country's reliance on external aid. To achieve successful talks with the Taliban, the government must nonetheless stand united. An alternative is that the Taliban continues seizing territory and eventually takes Kabul, which would be catastrophic for democracy in the country. The current constitution tying together the fragile structure would likely be ripped away along with political and social rights.

Role of the US and the international community post-withdrawal

Even as US and NATO troops withdraw from Afghanistan, the international community must remain engaged and watchful of the situation in the country. As mentioned, the US has already pledged money to aid security forces and governance. NATO has also kept diplomatic personnel in the country, promised funding to help the International Airport, and continue training the Afghan security forces (NATO, 2021). This training is essential, as the Afghan security forces need to be organized and capable of keeping the Taliban at bay.

Beyond the military perspective, there needs to be a focus on the humanitarian crisis in the country. As Biden has stated, "We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build, and it's the right and the responsibility of Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country" (Shear, Sanger, & Gibbons-Neff, 2021). While it is crucial for states to support intra-Afghan dialogue and prevent further destabilization from external actors, it must not play a role beyond this. Nonetheless, the international community should support the people after inflicting a war on them. With neighboring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, having limited resources and possible ulterior motives for taking in refugees, NATO members must step in. Those who helped NATO forces should especially be protected from the Taliban, and offered refuge. Multiple EU countries have already agreed to this, and more should follow (Ebrahimi, 2021). As well as offering refuge, providing humanitarian aid to the country is crucial, as poverty, violence, and covid threaten the country. According to a press statement by the US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken (2021), the US has committed an additional 266 million dollars for humanitarian aid. The EU has promised 57 million euros, according to the European Commission (2021). The promised aid is for 2021, but Afghanistan will likely continue to need assistance well after. After playing such a significant role in the country for decades, withdrawal should not mean future abandonment.

Post withdrawal: peace or war?

The best possible outcome for the country would be for the Taliban and the Afghan government to reach a power-sharing or peace agreement. As mentioned, since the US-Taliban deal, peace talks have begun in Doha, Qatar. Although there has been little progress thus far, both sides have now agreed to speed up the process in the face of growing conflict ("Afghan rivals agree to meet again after inconclusive Doha talks", 2021). Previously they were at a standstill. The Afghan government wanted a ceasefire before there could be an agreement. The Taliban wanted firmer implementation of their Islamic law ("High-stakes talks between Afghan gov't, Taliban as fighting rages", 2021). Ideally, the two sides will be able to create an agreement that will at least minimize the violence in the country.

Two other less ideal potential futures are a total civil war breaking out or even a complete Taliban takeover. The latter outcome appears increasingly likely as the Taliban controls half of the country's district centers, doubling the previous amount in four weeks. US generals are now saying that a Taliban takeover is very much possible (Hennigan, 2021). This potential reality would be similar to when the Soviets left Afghanistan in the late 1980s, and the Mujahedeen saw the opportunity to take over. It would mean a detrimental 30-year step back for the country and its people.

Recommendations

- The US must decide on clear repercussions for what is to occur if the Taliban does not uphold their side of the signed agreement while having mechanisms in place for how they or potentially NATO will monitor this.
- Particularly now that Afghanistan's neighboring countries, Pakistan and Iran, are rejecting Afghan refugees, all international parties involved in the conflict, such as the US and many EU countries, should help accommodate this influx of displaced people. Particularly, those who helped in the effort against the Taliban should be assisted to escape persecution from the Taliban.
- Humanitarian assistance should be the priority for now and years into the future, as the people are left in a difficult state from an economic and security standpoint.
- Countries that donate to support the governance of Afghanistan should pay more attention to potential corruption and consider appropriate sanctions when funds are being misused.
- As NATO withdraws, the country must not be forgotten. Neither by forces that fought in Afghanistan nor the media. The Taliban must not feel they can act free of the watchful eye of international reporting and condemnation of states.
- External actors should not intervene in intra-Afghan negotiations; however, EU states and the US should continue to support these talks while working diplomatically to ensure other actors are not acting as a destabilizing force on the road to a peace agreement.

Conclusion

While the current situation in Afghanistan is bleak, it is important to acknowledge what has been achieved. Afghanistan is no longer the same as when the Taliban took Kabul in 1996. Democratic institutions are being built, and people, particularly women, have more civil rights. This progress may be fragile, but it is nonetheless significant. The military withdrawal after 20 years of NATO participation means Afghanistan is being left to continue state-building on its own. Regardless, both the US and the EU have committed to continue helping the country, which is crucial to ensuring the Afghan government and their security forces maintain some leverage over the Taliban. This leverage is especially important as the two groups have yet to reach a peace deal, ceasefire, or power-sharing agreement of any kind, which would greatly benefit the stability and security of the country.

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