

Security Challenges for Afghanistan: Is the International Security Governance Failing or Succeeding in Afghanistan?

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Abstract

The end of 2014 marked the conclusion of the United States' longest war came to an end, at least in the sense of its role as a direct combatant. The military intervention in 2001, continued as a NATO mission, sought to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat terrorist and insurgent groups in Afghanistan. The international community withdrew most of their troops and left only 13,500 non-combatant soldiers under the new NATO mission. Named the Resolute Support Mission, the mission is designed to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces. However, the number of troops and their non-combatant role could pose difficulties in terms of Afghanistan's security. An increase in the number of troops and a shift back into a combatant role might be needed in the near future.

Obviously, it would be very optimistic to assume that the Afghan National Security Forces could overcome the terrorist threat on their own, given that this was impossible even with almost 150,000 NATO troops present in the country. With the Afghan forces fully responsible for security issues, 2014 became the bloodiest year since 2001. Moreover, the Islamic State (in Iraq and the Levant) moved beyond the Middle East and became active and operational in Afghan soil during this time. They began to carry out attacks in the country, which led the Islamic State and the Taliban to declare jihad against one another. Afghanistan's current security situation has implications beyond its national borders; it is also a regional security threat affecting Central Asian, South Asian and Middle Eastern countries as well as a global one. The situation now requires a common strategy from the international coalitions constituted to counter the Taliban and Islamic State, in order to fight these groups in the wider region.

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Security Challenges for the New Afghan Administration

When Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as Afghan president on 28 September 2014, he was confronted with a long to-do list, comprised of many issues, from security to stability, corruption to the economy, and local government reform to a new constitution-making process. In order to realize all these objectives, new ministers needed to be appointed. The new national unity government was to be formed by the President Ashraf Ghani and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah.

President Ashraf Ghani had made a quick start by signing the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States and the Status of Forces Agreement (SoFA) with NATO within the first 24 hours of his presidency. These agreements also formed the foundation of the Resolute Support Mission, the new NATO mission in Afghanistan for the post-2014 era. Shortly afterwards, he oversaw the opening of the Kabul Bank case, which had been one of the largest corruption operations in Afghanistan. But despite these positive developments, when it came to forming the new government, Ghani could not fulfil the promises he made during the oath-taking ceremony - he was unable announce the names of the ministerial candidates within the first 45 days of his presidency.²

It is understandable that establishing a strong cabinet in a highly factionalized and unstable country like Afghanistan would be time-consuming. However, in the post-2014 era, the Afghan people can no longer tolerate such breaches of faith, despite having become accustomed to such delays in the past. The key reason for the low public confidence in the governments during the civil war and Taliban era was the inability of the administration to deliver basic services to the public, not to mention security.

It has been seen many times in the last 35 years in Afghanistan that the leadership of politics and administration would not accept any vacancy since the security situation in the country could easily deteriorate due to power vacuum. President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah, who began leading the country more than seven months

² 'Afghanistan's Team of Rivals', *AlJazeera America*, Available at: <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2015/02/afghanistan-rivals> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

ago, failed to secure the approval for all the ministers of the national unity government by the end of April 2015. The only ministerial post that has not yet been approved is the Ministry of Defence.³ One of the most important institutions in terms of shaping Afghanistan's future is the National Security Forces (ANSF) with its 352,000⁴ personnel. As a result of the withdrawal of the NATO combat forces with the end of the ISAF mission by the end of 2014, security related matters across all provinces were left to the Afghan security forces. At this juncture, it is seriously problematic that not one candidate has been able to obtain the necessary vote of confidence to become the next Defence Minister. This also raises questions about the capabilities of the ANSF in the post-2014 era.

NATO's new mission to train the ANSF is aimed at ensuring that it has the capacity to protect the Afghan people. However, before talking about the capacity of the ANSF, it must first be noted that its annual operational budget is \$5.1 billion.⁵ The Afghan economy cannot afford this without help from the international community. The funding of the ANSF is not a short-term issue since the recovery of the Afghan economy is not expected until the end of the Transformation Decade in 2024. If everything goes well in terms of economy and security over the next ten years, then it might be possible to talk about a self-sufficient Afghan economy. Until then, the international community will have to continue to provide financial support.

Capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces

The Afghan National Police

A Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) was recently signed between the Head of the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan, EUPOL Afghanistan, Pia Stjernvall, and the Afghan Minister of Interior, Mr. Noor-ul Haq Ulumi. The MoC is a reaffirmation of the European Union's on-going support for and collaboration with

³ 'Afghan Lawmakers Approve 16 Cabinet Members; Only Defense Post Unfilled,' *RFE/RL*, Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan-government/26965209.html> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

⁴ 'NATO and Afghanistan', *NATO Official Website*, Available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm? (Accessed: 1 May 2015).

⁵ Gady, F. (2015) 'Can the Afghan Army Prevail on the Battlefield?', *The Diplomat*, Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/can-the-afghan-army-prevail-on-the-battlefield/> (Accessed: 7 May 2015).

Afghanistan.⁶ The Memorandum extended EUPOL's mission in Afghanistan for another two years. EUPOL will continue to work closely with Ministry of Interior of Afghanistan to develop "a civilian police service that will serve the needs of the people, that makes people feel safe and protected, that will be professional, accountable and effective, with strong links to the judiciary, and can be the foundation for a lasting peace", said Stjernvall during the joint press conference.⁷

Following the withdrawal of the NATO and US combat troops of forces by the end of 2014, the Afghan National Police (ANP) now has much heavier burden on its shoulders apart from the one on the Afghan National Army (ANA). EUPOL has been providing training to the ANP since 2009 to boost its operational capacity. The continuation of this training in the post-2014 era is very important in forming a professional Afghan police force, given that the ANP will have to deal with threats from the Taliban and other insurgent militant groups in the near future.

However, there remain issues that need to be resolved within Afghan police forces, and this cannot be achieved without the help of the international community. According to a report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Afghan security forces, particularly the police forces, face a major challenge in the form of illiteracy.⁸ The report states that almost 60,000 police officers are illiterate. The Deputy Minister of Interior for Administrative Affairs Kiramuddin Yawar has confirmed this figure, while also emphasizing the on-going efforts to teach police officers to read and write.⁹

This widespread illiteracy is due to a number of factors. The first one the significant increase in the number of police in the Afghan national forces over the last five years due to the growing fight against terrorism. This rapid growth led to an overall decline in the quality of officers. With resources increasingly stretched, training was

⁶ 'EUPOL and Afghan Ministry of Interior sign Memorandum of Cooperation', *European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan Official Website*, Available at: <http://www.eupol-afg.eu/node/579> (Accessed: 25 April 2015).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hussainkhail, F. (2015) '60,000 Afghan Police Are Illiterate', *TOLO News*, Available at: <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19181-60000-afghan-police-are-illiterate> (Accessed: 24 April 2015).

⁹ *Ibid.*

inadequate. Most of the new recruits simply wanted to `earn a living for their family, and they were neither willing nor qualified to fight against Taliban militants in a combat zone`¹⁰. Through increased support from missions as EUPOL, Afghan police officers should receive proper training before they become fully active in operations.

The second issue is the allegations of police corruption. A recent UN-backed investigation revealed that some Ministry of Interior officials have been disregarding the corruption complaints against the police, and that only 9 of the 2000 complaints were directed to legal bodies for further investigation.¹¹ The Afghan authorities are under serious pressure from the international community, particularly the US, to address corruption. The Ghani administration has taken a strong stance on this issue from the outset, and seems determined to continue to tackle corruption. The assistance of international organizations, like the UN, could usefully be sought when required.

The Afghan National Army

Afghanistan`s security is largely dependent on the Afghan National Army (ANA). As of 20 November 2014, the number of the ANA personnel - including the Afghan Air Forces - was 169,203, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction`s (SIGAR).¹² This marks the lowest number of ANA forces since August 2011. In his report, the Special Inspector General also notes that as of 31 December 2014, the US had “obligated \$34.8 billion and disbursed \$33.7 billion of Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) to build, train, equip, and sustain the ANA.”¹³

According to a US Department of Defence report, despite making remarkable progress in recent years, the ANA still faces two major challenges: “sustainment and the development of the more complex enabling capabilities.”¹⁴ Logistics and retention continue to be a key problem. Most of the ANA taskforces are only able to sustain

¹⁰ Doğan, S. (2013) `International Aid to Afghanistan and Its Importance in the Post-2014 Era`, *Caucasus International*, Special Issue: Afghanistan`s Security in 2014: Domestic, Regional and International Dimensions, 3(3), pp. 71-81.

¹¹ Hussainkhail, *Afghan Police Are Illiterate*.

¹² `Supplement to SIGAR`s January 2015 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress`, *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)*, February 2015.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ `Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan`, *US Department of Defense*, April 2014, pp. 35-43.

themselves at the tactical level for a short time, and the absence of “trained maintenance technicians and a logistics system” has a negative impact on capacity.¹⁵ The ANA is also constrained by its air capabilities. The Afghan Air Force is a relatively new institution, meaning that the ANSF is forced to rely upon the Resolute Support Mission in the areas of “close air support, casualty evacuation, logistics, C-IED, and ISR.”¹⁶ In addition to these various challenges, military casualties are another significant problem for the ANA, in addition to the high attrition rate, despite the ANA’s efforts to recruit new personnel.

The Afghan National Security Forces suffered record casualties in the first fifteen weeks of 2015. Since they began combat operations against Taliban without the support of US and NATO troops on the ground, i.e. from the end of December 2014, the ANSF has encountered serious difficulties. Afghan officials stated that the number of Afghan security forces killed or injured had increased by 70%, reaching an average of 330 a week in the first fifteen weeks of this year, when compared to the same period in 2014.¹⁷ Following the international coalition’s mission shift at the end of 2014 - from combat to advising and assisting – Afghan security forces have found themselves more vulnerable to attacks by the Taliban. In this context, the continuation of US air support under the Resolute Support Mission would significantly help the Afghan National Army to conduct more effective operations against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

The Bloodiest Year: 2014

2014 marked the bloodiest year of the thirteen-year war in Afghanistan. While 3,500 NATO coalition forces soldiers were killed in the previous thirteen years, more than five thousand Afghan security forces lost their lives in 2014 alone. The number of the civilian casualties gradually increased throughout 2014, and reaching more than three thousand. Suicide attacks and bombings have increased in many central residential districts, especially in the capital city Kabul.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Michaels, J. (2015) ‘Afghan security forces suffer record casualties’, *USA Today*, Available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/05/03/afghan-security-forces-suffer-record-casualties/26828193/> (Accessed: 4 May 2015).

UNAMA has been recording civilian casualties in Afghanistan since 2009, and the annual figure peaked in 2014. According to UNAMA reports, the number of Afghan civilian casualties in 2014 was 10,548 (3,699 deaths and 6,849 injured).¹⁸ Compared to 2013, civilian deaths saw a 25 per cent increase, while civilian injuries increased by 21 per cent. During the six years that the UNAMA has been recording civilian casualties in Afghanistan, it has documented 47,745 civilian casualties, of which 17,774 were fatal, with 29,971 injured (Table 1).

Table 1.

Civilian Deaths and Injuries from 2009 to 2014			
Year	Deaths	Injuries	Total
2009	2412	3556	5968
2010	2792	4368	7160
2011	3133	4709	7842
2012	2769	4821	7590
2013	2969	5668	8637
2014	3699	6849	10548
Total	17,774	29,971	47745

Source: UNAMA 2014 Afghanistan Annual Report

A New Security Threat: The Islamic State in Afghanistan

NATO's combat mission formally ended in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, following which Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) took over full responsibility for national security. Taliban officials considered the end of NATO's combat mission a "victory".¹⁹ Around 13,500 NATO, mainly American, troops remain in Afghanistan under the new NATO mission, the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). The aim of RSM is to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces. However, US President Barack Obama has authorized the continuation of limited air and ground

¹⁸ 'Afghanistan Annual Report 2014: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict', *The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)*, Kabul, Afghanistan: February 2015.

¹⁹ 'Taliban claims victory in Afghan War as NATO ends combat mission', *Russia Today*, 29 December 2014, Available at: <http://rt.com/news/218435-taliban-victory-afghanistan-nato/> (Accessed: 17 April 2015).

operations.²⁰ Thus, US troops may conduct counterterrorism operations when military interference is inevitable, thereby going beyond the advisory and training role of the new NATO mission.²¹

In the last week of 2014, it was reported that hundreds of Taliban militants laid down their weapons and surrendered to first Vice President Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum in the northern Jawzjan province.²² The Afghan authorities welcomed this move, and Vice President Dostum declared his hope that this move would lead to nationwide peace and stability. Dostum also called on other Taliban militants to join the on-going peace process,²³ but no concrete settlement has yet been achieved.

Despite the on-going efforts towards the peace process, levels of insurgency are gradually increasing. For the Taliban, the recent developments, in particular the NATO withdrawal, seem to represent an opportunity to gain ground. Several American security experts suggested increasing the number of troops due to remain in Afghanistan at the start of this year. Even President Ashraf Ghani has expressed concerns about the possible arrival of the Islamic State (IS, formerly known as ISIS or ISIL) fighters in Afghanistan, suggesting that the US should re-examine the current troop withdrawal timeline.²⁴ While no one wants another Iraq, the seriousness of President Ghani's concern was not been fully appreciated by Resolute Support Mission (RSM) Commander Gen. John Campbell, who said: "This is not Iraq. I don't see ISIL coming into Afghanistan like they did into Iraq. The Afghan Security Forces would not allow that."²⁵ Unfortunately, Gen. Campbell could not be more mistaken about ISIL.

²⁰ Lerman, D., Najafizada, E. and Alwan, A. (2014) 'Hagel Leaves Successor with Two Wars Obama Pledged to End', *Bloomberg Business*, Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-12-05/hagel-leaves-successor-with-two-wars-obama-had-pledged-to-end> (Accessed: 20 April 2015).

²¹ Doğan, S. (2015) 'Presence of ISIL in Afghanistan and Central Asia', *Today's Zaman*, Available at: http://www.todayszaman.com/op-ed_presence-of-isil-in-afghanistan-and-central-asia_371125.html (Accessed: 20 April 2015).

²² '200 Taliban militants surrender to Gen. Dostum in Jawzjan', *Khaama Press*, 29 December 2014, Available at: <http://www.khaama.com/200-taliban-militants-surrender-to-gen-dostum-in-jawzjan-8892> (Accessed: 20 April 2015).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Chumley, C. (2015) 'Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan president: Obama should 're-examine' withdrawal', *The Washington Times*, Available at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/5/ashraf-ghani-afghanistan-president-obama-should-re/> (Accessed: 22 April 2015).

²⁵ Logan, L. (2015) 'Ending America's Longest War', *CBS News*, Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-war-60-minutes-lara-logan/> (Accessed: 22 April 2015).

As a matter of fact, there were several reasons to take precautions, contrary to Campbell's belief. In early September 2014, a faction of Hezb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar said they were considering joining the ISIL militants.²⁶ Some factions of the Pakistani Taliban have pledged allegiance to ISIL's self-proclaimed caliphate in October 2014.²⁷ In January 2015, a senior Afghan army general told Al Jazeera that ISIL has been active in Afghanistan, and a source from the Ministry of the Interior confirmed ISIL's existence in Afghanistan.²⁸ There are also reports from different provinces in Afghanistan of ISIL recruitment and training activity.

Conflict between Islamic State and the Taliban on Afghan Soil

Islamic State has been trying to expand its area of control over the past year, after having rapidly gained dominance of an area as big as the United Kingdom. Beyond the Middle East region, South Asia and Central Asia seem the most convenient locations for ISIL militants. It has been already accepted by the Afghan authorities that ISIL has been present in Afghanistan for some time.

In its attempt to recruit more militants in the region over the last few months, ISIL has gradually become active and operational in the region. It has been training militants in Afghanistan and providing arms for some time, and recently they carried out a suicide bomb attack to a bank branch in Jalalabad, Nangarhar, which killed at least 35 and wounded more than a 100 people.²⁹ This is the first major ISIL attack in Afghanistan. When ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated, "It was an evil act. We condemn/deny involvement in it."³⁰

²⁶ 'Islamic State claims Pakistan and Afghanistan for its "caliphate"', *The Telegraph*, 5 September 2014, Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/11075390/Islamic-State-claims-Pakistan-and-Afghanistan-for-its-caliphate.html?mobile=basic> (Accessed: 24 April 2015).

²⁷ Nelson, D. and Yusufzai, A. (2014) 'Pakistan Taliban pledges allegiance to ISIL', *The Telegraph*, Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/11162277/Pakistan-Taliban-pledges-allegiance-to-Isil.html> (Accessed: 24 April 2015).

²⁸ 'Officials confirm ISIL present in Afghanistan', *AlJazeera*, 18 January 2015, Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2015/01/afghan-officials-confirm-isil-presence-201511815245847478.html> (Accessed: 24 April 2015).

²⁹ Alokzay, K. and Nordland, R. (2015) 'Afghan President Blames ISIS for a Bombing', *The New York Times*, Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/world/asia/afghanistan-jalalabad-suicide-bombing-bank.html> (Accessed: 28 April 2015).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The US and NATO forces ended their combat mission at the end of 2014 and withdrew most of their troops, leaving only 13,500 behind as non-combat troops (i.e. Resolute Support Mission). Since the Afghan army and police took over responsibility for the security of the entire country, the number and impact of attacks by the Taliban has rapidly increased. At the same time, it is clear that the Taliban is not the only terrorist group seeking to take advantage of power vacuum in the country. ISIL is attempting to advance towards South Asia and Central Asia, using its economic power to increase its recruitment rate throughout the region. The salary that ISIL promises to its militants is much higher than what the Taliban can afford. In these circumstances, the region's new "emerging terrorist group" is spreading out to the Central Asian borders much faster than imagined.

ISIL's presence in Afghanistan and the declaration of the caliphate represent an uncomfortable situation for the Taliban leadership. These two terrorist groups have different motivations: the Taliban wants to rule Afghanistan with its version of religious law, whereas ISIL has declared global jihad, of which Afghanistan is only one part. The publication of the 5000-word biography of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar on their official website is one of the biggest indicators of the Taliban's discomfort with ISIL.³¹ Mullah Omar has been leading the Taliban for almost two decades; however, there have been speculations of him being dead due to the little information about his life and there are no video or audio recordings of him at all. This unexpectedly published biography of the self-proclaimed Amir al-Mu'minin, or the Commander of the Faithful, Mullah Omar, was both a message of strength to the Taliban militants and a response to the caliphate declarations by the ISIL leadership.

Even the speculation of his death has caused some militants to defect from the Taliban and join ISIL. But now since the Afghan officials confirmed the death of Mullah Omar and it was also reported that he had already been dead for more than

³¹ Bezhan, F. (2015) 'The Secret Life Of Mullah Omar Revealed', *RFE/RL*, Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-taliban-reveals-secret-life-mullah-omar/26943516.html> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

two years,³² it would be harder for Taliban leadership to restrain its militants from joining other groups in the region.

The struggle between the two terrorist groups escalated with the recent attacks, and they have officially declared jihad, or holy war, against each other.³³ The police chief of southern Helmand province, Nabi Jan Mullahkhil, stated that he had documents in which both sides announced jihad on each other.³⁴ It is known from previous declarations the groups oppose one another. The leadership of ISIL has called the then Taliban leader Mullah Omar “a fool and illiterate warlord” who does not deserve spiritual or religious credibility. Taliban militants have been ordered to never let an ISIL flag to rise in Afghanistan.³⁵

In fact, both groups have a lot in common. ISIL’s rapid gains in Iraq and Syria are reminiscent of the Taliban’s capture of southern and eastern Afghanistan in 1994. Common characteristics include their recruitment methods, military capabilities, operational similarities, mobility, and organizational loyalty. If ISIL was not aiming to advance beyond the Iraq-Syria line, these two groups would probably not come face-to-face - and yet they are about to engage in direct combat within the Afghan borders now. The death of Mullah Omar could trigger factionalism within the Taliban and it would accelerate the tension between two groups in the near future.

Conclusion

The decade of 2015 to 2024 has been declared Afghanistan’s “Transformation Decade”, envisioning the establishment of a secure Afghanistan, a self-sufficient economy, a certain level of stability, reduced unemployment, an end to institutional

³² Goldstein, J. (2015) ‘Afghan War’s Convenient Myth: A Living Mullah Omar’, *The New York Times*, 7 August, Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/world/asia/afghan-wars-convenient-myth-a-living-mullah-omar.html> (Accessed: 12 August 2015).

³³ ‘ISIS, Taliban announced Jihad against each other’, *Khaama Press*, 20 April 2015, Available at: <http://www.khaama.com/isis-taliban-announced-jihad-against-each-other-3206> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

³⁴ Spencer, R. (2015) ‘Islamic State, Taliban declare jihad against each other’, *Jihad Watch*, Available at: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2015/04/islamic-state-taliban-declare-jihad-against-each-other> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

³⁵ Kliegman, A. (2015) ‘Taliban and Islamic State Declare Jihad on Each Other’, *Center for Security Policy*, Available at: <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2015/04/23/taliban-and-islamic-state-declare-jihad-on-each-other/> (Accessed: 30 April 2015).

corruption, the coming into force of a new inclusive constitution, and a level of economic prosperity by the end of 2024. In order to achieve this dream, economic reform, controlled flow of foreign aid, creation of a transparent and accountable administration, and strengthening of local governance are required. However, all of these developments demand first and foremost the internal security of the country.

Unfortunately, the NATO combat mission has not left behind a peaceful Afghanistan. The Afghan economy relies on international aid even just to pay the salaries of the Afghan National Security Forces, whose ability to fight the Taliban and other radical armed groups is uncertain, even at 352,000 personnel. In this environment, the much needed security and stability cannot be guaranteed; the benefits of other investments and projects will be very limited in the absence of security. The formation of a national unity government is almost complete, albeit still lacking a Defence Minister - arguably the most important position. The functionality of the NUG will be decisive for the future of Afghanistan.

Considering the current security situation within the borders, in particular the fight between Taliban and the ISIL, the troops that serve under the Resolute Support Mission of NATO might need to extend their current mandate, which is to train, advise and assist the ANSF, and become combatants again. It is unlikely that the ISIL militants in Afghanistan will be able to maintain their presence for much longer and continue to advance in the absence of economic and military support from the headquarters in the Middle East. However, if they continue to receive such support, they at least have the same potential as the Taliban to cause trouble for the Afghan government and neighbouring countries. A potential Taliban-ISIL conflict in this region will result in a much greater problem than many are currently predicting. While the notion of mutual destruction might seem superficially appealing, it will be the civilians and the Afghan government who bear the brunt of the damage.

In the wider region, Russia and China are among the countries most concerned about the increasing influence of the Taliban and the ISIL in Afghanistan. During a meeting with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Russian President Vladimir Putin recently stated that, "The Taliban is active and it controls a significant part of Afghanistan's territory, many border crossing points. But what is even more

disturbing is that the so-called Islamic State is getting increasingly active in Afghanistan, consolidating its position there. I believe we are already seeing the Islamic State's presence in 25 out of the 34 provinces."³⁶ The presence of ISIL in Afghanistan is not only an issue for the Afghan government but also for the countries in the wider region. Taking advantage of the current power vacuum, ISIL's ultimate goal is to secure a safe haven in the country. In order to do that, they are continuing to engage with regional insurgent and terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Putin's comments and concerns regarding the security and stability of Afghanistan and the region must be taken into consideration by NATO officials; the situation is a common challenge for Afghanistan, Russia and NATO countries.

On the other side, China is currently dealing with its own radical groups who are said to have ties with the ISIL. A volatile Afghanistan will pose a threat to China for security and economic reasons. Chinese deputy Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping recently said, "due to the spill over effect of the Islamic State terrorist activities, Afghanistan now faces a grim security situation."³⁷ With the United States gradually moving away from Afghanistan, China has recognized that its involvement in the Afghan peacekeeping activities is increasingly important. A possible cooperation of the ISIL and the Chinese separatist groups in the western region of Xinjiang would create an enormous problem for neighbouring countries and NATO.

From this perspective, it seems likely that there will come a point where the global struggle against the ISIL in the Middle East and against the Taliban in Afghanistan will have to be assessed as two sides of the same big problem. The military interventions of the international coalitions in both regions have not been as effective as expected. ISIL's possible expansion in the region will certainly create more conflicts than ever before, since they will fight both states and non-state actors, i.e. other insurgent militant groups. Considering that even with the help of the NATO and US troops, which numbered around 150,000 at the peak of the intervention, the Afghan security forces were not able to defeat the Taliban militants. Therefore, it is

³⁶ 'Meeting with Hamid Karzai', *President of Russia – The Kremlin Moscow*, 24 June 2015, Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49760> (Accessed: 14 July 2015).

³⁷ Osman, B. (2015) 'Why China is alarmed about IS presence in Afghanistan', *Deutsche Welle*, Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/why-china-is-alarmed-about-is-presence-in-afghanistan/a-18570097> (Accessed: 14 July 2015).

highly unlikely that without significant external support, the ANSF will succeed overcoming the terrorist threat. The situation has become more complex with the presence of ISIL in Afghanistan. The international community should not neglect Afghanistan while focusing on the ISIL problem in the Middle East. This is a shared problem of both regions and needs to be dealt with via a common strategy.

As recently expressed by many regional and global leaders, ISIL's advancement in Afghanistan needs to be tackled immediately. This development demonstrates that the international security governance is not succeeding, particularly in the Middle East, and even more particularly in Iraq, Syria, and South Asia, notably. Hence, the failure of the international community to prevent ISIL's regional advance in the region has increased the threat levels, and the current situation needs to be addressed by Afghanistan and international coalitions standing shoulder-to-shoulder.