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Afghanistan is on the brink

Violence is on the rise again in Afghanistan. Amid inevitable troop withdrawals, the question of dialogue with the Taliban shifts from 'if' to 'how'

Read this article in German.

When the Doha talks were launched in September, the Afghan people's hopes for an end of war and violence were high. So far, many have been disappointed as the negotiations have not done much to improve the security situation. The Taliban continue to reject any ceasefire before the talks' conclusion, and the ongoing troop withdrawals have only encouraged them to step up the military pressure. In the first four weeks after talks began, the Taliban carried out attacks in 24 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces on both security forces and civilians. In October, the United Nations counted more incidents in a month than at any time since 2007.

The increasingly confusing conflict situation is also afflicting Kabul, the capital city, as brutal and complex attacks, including those claimed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, have occurred regularly in recent months. Civilian targets included a Sikh shrine, a maternity clinic, Kabul University and other educational institutions. In 2020, at least 10 Afghan journalists lost their lives and reports of attacks and assassination attempts on officials, representatives of civil society, clerics, and opposition figures, many of them by unknown gunmen and assailants, surface almost daily.

Some observers compare the situation with the civil war in the 1990s; others point out that the lines between political violence and organised crime are becoming increasingly blurred. And while the government is keen to present itself as the guarantor of the progress Afghanistan made since 2001, these developments undermine its legitimacy and weaken much-needed cohesion among critical constituents of the Republic. It appears that, for Kabul's international partners, to prevent a total collapse of political order, there is hence no alternative to maintaining support for the Doha process.

Including the Taliban: Not 'if', but 'how'?

After years of heated discussions, the understanding that the Taliban's exclusion from the Bonn negotiations on Afghanistan's future in 2001 was a principal defect of the intervention and subsequent state-building efforts, is widely acknowledged. Although 85 per cent of participants in the 2019 Asia Foundation Survey on Afghanistan expressed no empathy for the Taliban's resort to violence, more than half of them supported their inclusion into the government. A similar pragmatism can be observed amid critical regional players. Moscow, Beijing, and Teheran have publicly opened their ears and doors to the Taliban. Even in New Delhi, the previous taboo on direct communication channels is openly questioned.

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Even though the Taliban have not yet managed to rid themselves of international sanctions, meetings with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and high-level EU, UN and NATO representatives signal entrenched normalisation and active exchange instead of isolation and cold-shoulders. To advance the political process, US officials repeatedly risked alienating President Ashraf Ghani's government to get the Taliban to de facto recognise Kabul as a negotiating partner.

Critics of this dynamic argue that the Taliban's political recognition might be tantamount to selling out hopes for democracy and equal rights in Afghanistan for the sake of a graveyard peace. Even without invoking the many setbacks on making them a permanent reality of Afghans in the past decades, the uncomfortable truth is that democracy and equality will remain out of reach also in the future if Afghanistan continues to be forced to spend ten times as much as other low-income countries on national security. Continuing war prevents real progress in virtually every area of social and state development. At the same time, it is also true that external recognition, especially when tangible support is attached to it, represents real political power in a state so dependent on international aid. Therefore, it will be of utmost importance how Afghanistan's international partners will use this leverage when shaping their relations with the group.

A withdrawal in the making

Amid the current domestic climate in most contributing states and realities on the ground, military measures to pressure the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire or even into a credible commitment to democracy and equal rights are obviously exhausted. After the February 2019 Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the US, then-secretary of defence Mark Esper had hinted that withdrawal might be reconsidered, if conditions weren't met. Accelerated troop reductions repeatedly undermined the credibility of such assurances. The US Congress has taken action to slow down further withdrawals in its National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2021. However, many lawmakers see the need to act to ensure enhanced transatlantic cooperation and to prevent a rerun of what happened in Iraq in 2014, where terrorist organisations exploited a breakdown of state structures to harm US-interests.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan itself is hardly called into question, especially not by the President-elect and his incoming administration. In August 2020, Joe Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan named a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan a goal for the first 100 days of Biden's presidency. This stance is reinforced by concerns that the Taliban could consider a politically motivated delay or reinterpretation of the Doha Agreement, e.g. by maintaining a counterterrorism presence, as a breach of the deal and abandon the negotiations. Also, the much-needed support of neighbouring states such as Iran, China and Russia might falter if they got the impression that the US presence would be permanent.

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On the other hand, experts and representatives of the same regional actors caution against ignoring dynamics on the ground and sticking rigidly to the deadlines established almost a year ago. A hasty withdrawal could result in further escalation or even outright civil war. Amid all this uncertainty and Gordian knots ahead, a (cautious) extension or even further transformation of NATO's Resolute Support Mission in February 2021 should not be prematurely ruled out.

Can development carrots achieve more

than military sticks?

Notably, the US–Taliban agreement featured a shared interest in future economic cooperation after a military withdrawal. Over the past year, European officials, too, have begun to nurture hopes that the Taliban might agree to a ceasefire and even look more favourably on democracy and women's and minority rights to ensure international support after a political settlement and power-sharing agreement. In this context, even participation of Taliban representatives in the November 2020 Geneva donor conference had been discussed to familiarise them with international expectations. At the same time, a declaration by Afghanistan's largest donors clearly addressed an Afghan government whose composition could change in the next years when making, for example, the adherence to the country's international obligations a condition for ongoing support.

Could financial and development-policy incentives prevail where military force has failed? Can a transactional approach yield transformative results? Bearing in mind the consequences of further destabilisation and its effects on Afghanistan's fragile neighbourhood, would the EU take a clear stance if a return of the Taliban to power was accompanied by the systematic human rights violations? And if the Taliban would prove unwilling to compromise, how to mitigate the risk that the Afghan people would eventually pay the price of aid cuts, isolation or even the exodus of international organisations? In turn, what promises and assurances can be given to the conflict parties amid uncertainty about the future of international engagement?

While remaining committed to the fragile but indispensable Doha process, Europe needs to develop and formulate a new strategy for its stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan that addresses these questions. Europe's foreign and security-policy interests will remain closely linked to the country's future, even when the military mission comes to an end. To coherently support the process of intra-Afghan deliberations on how to achieve a peaceful future beyond 2021, European partners should use coordinating mechanisms like the recently initiated EU Strategic Compass, regional platforms shaped in Afghanistan's neighborhood in the past years and transatlantic initiatives likely to be revived after 20 January.

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