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Afghanistan is drifting into an uncertain future

After the NATO withdrawal, the Taliban are creating facts on the ground — and are seeking international support for a future return to power

Since the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, which is now practically complete, the Taliban have taken a good 200 of the country's approximately 400 districts in recent weeks. So far, they have been able to hold most of them. Government soldiers seemed to be fighting a losing battle in remote districts and were forced to give up as supplies failed to arrive.

In early July, more than 1,000 Afghan soldiers fled across the border into Tajikistan. These were devastating images for the government of President Ashraf Ghani. Weeks after the Biden administration announced the withdrawal, the government still seems to be in a state of shock and has little to offer apart from appeals to hold out. 'We had expected peace, not war' – that's how National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib tried to explain the army's dramatic territorial losses in early July.

The Taliban's military strategy aimed at pre-empting the government's comprehensive mobilisation of the former 'Northern Alliance' through rapid successes in the North, and tried to neutralise the border area to Central Asia, a potential retreat and supply area for Tajik and Uzbek anti-Taliban militias. Government officials and influential politicians announced a 'national mobilisation' only after the Taliban offensive had begun. And although the militias are increasing in number and strength and have played a role in holding ground, they have not yet succeeded in turning the tide.

In a second step, the Taliban captured some of the most important border crossings to Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states. Also because of pressure from their own economies, Iran and Pakistan were forced to reopen the border crossings, which had initially been closed in view of the fighting, within a short period of time.

The Taliban's 'charm' offensive

For the Afghan government, the loss of the border crossings led to a dramatic collapse of the already scarce state revenues. In July alone, Kabul lost more than USD 33 million – a symbolic win and an additional source of income for the Taliban. Since the beginning of August, the Taliban took over control of six out of 34 provincial capitals, particularly in the North. In other cases, the Taliban continue to face stiff resistance and attacks come at enormous cost. However, the supply situation in urban centres remaining under government control could soon come to a head, especially with the high influx of internally displaced persons.

Within Afghanistan, nearly 300,000 people have been displaced since January – more than 3.5 million Afghans are now considered internally displaced.

In addition to their military advances, the Taliban are also going on a diplomatic 'charm' offensive. Their message is that a return to power after the US withdrawal is not a question of if, but only of when. Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen uses the media platforms offered to the group by the US television station CNN or even the Turkish state broadcaster TRT to campaign for an end to isolation. In an interview with Deutschlandfunk, he even called for a 'Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Afghanistan'. In recent weeks, Taliban delegations have travelled to Moscow, Tehran, Beijing and the Turkmen capital Ashgabat to emphasise their commitment to the joint fight against international terrorism as well as to border security and economic cooperation.

Within the Afghan borders, the picture looks entirely different. Dramatic figures from the United Nations contradict the narrative that the Taliban were able to conquer territories virtually without a fight: More than 2,300 civilians were killed or wounded in May and June alone. Afghanistan is also plagued by a severe drought as well as a particularly harsh third wave of Covid-19, which is putting a further strain on the health system. Human rights defenders and journalists report worrying accounts of mass arrests, executions of prisoners of war and civilians, corporal punishment, and the destruction of critical infrastructure.

The plight of Afghan refugees

Within Afghanistan, nearly 300,000 people have been displaced since January – more than 3.5 million Afghans are now considered internally displaced. Within the last four years, their number has doubled. They

suffer from poverty and the changing lines of conflicts. According to the International Organisation for Migration, the number of Afghans who left Afghanistan by land in June and July amounts to between 20,000 and 30,000 people per week. If the violence and desperation continue unabated, their number could rise to 1.5 million people in the course of the year.

As in the past decades, most Afghans seek refuge in Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian countries. But their political and economic capacity to absorb them seems to be already exhausted. On 13 July, Pakistan's National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf announced that Pakistan could not take in any more refugees. Refugee camps were to be set up on the Afghan side of the now well-secured border.

More than 600,000 Afghans have recently returned from Iran, possibly under coercion. Although the Iranian and Turkish security authorities have already arrested hundreds of Afghans or are trying to forcibly prevent them from entering or travelling further, more than 1,000 Afghans are currently crossing the Iranian-Turkish border every day.

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Both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Austrian counterpart Sebastian Kurz have emphasised that they have little interest in comprehensive resettlement schemes for Afghan refugees from Turkey or other transit countries to Europe. Instead, they want to improve ‘conditions on the ground’. But it’s entirely unclear which levers they could use considering the current dynamics.

Afghanistan's uncertain future

Much of what has been built up over the past decades, also with Western help, is now at stake. Schools, roads, and electricity plants are in danger of being destroyed in the fighting or cannot continue to operate. Representatives of civil society, human rights activists, and media workers are under pressure from all sides. Many are fleeing to the (still) safe capital or even abroad. The future of the international airport, which has been secured by Turkey since 2014 as part of NATO’s Resolute Mission, remains uncertain. Ankara has held out the prospect of a continuation of Turkish involvement beyond the end of the NATO mission. However, the Taliban see this as a ‘breach of the promise to withdrawal’ and threaten to attack soldiers who stay behind.

The deterioration of the security situation, restrictions on air travel, the

capture of further border crossings by the Taliban, and the ongoing reduction of international (embassy) staff could make it increasingly difficult for international aid organisations to gain access and continue their development cooperation. Many organisations are concerned about the safety of their staff – as recently as 30 July, clashes reached the gates of the United Nations compound during fighting around the western provincial capital of Herat.

At the last donor conference in November 2020, the German government pledged to continue to support the government in Kabul financially. It reiterated its commitment after Biden announced the withdrawal. The German government also intends to continue its diplomatic support for the peace process in Doha.

The developments in past weeks have shown how difficult it will be to keep these promises and return to an active Afghanistan policy that goes beyond supporting local forces, protecting critical infrastructure in Kabul, and dealing with the new refugee crisis.



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