US and NATO leave Afghanistan: What next?

Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, United States (US) counterterrorism efforts began to focus on Afghanistan. The Taliban, which controlled most of Afghanistan in 2001, hosted al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. During a 20-year military campaign, the US and its allies sought to eliminate the Taliban's ability to provide sanctuary to international terrorists and stabilise the country with the help of a democratically elected government. The peace agreement the US signed with the Taliban in 2020 paved the way for the withdrawal of US and NATO troops. Shortly after taking office, US President Joe Biden announced in April 2021 that all US troops would leave Afghanistan by 11 September 2021. All allied troops will also leave the country by that deadline. In recent months, the Taliban have re-established control over half of the districts in the country, raising concerns about the future of Afghanistan once foreign troops leave.

The political situation in Afghanistan

Following the end of Taliban rule in 2001, a United Nations (UN)-led process led to the establishment of a presidential system, in which the president is both head of state and leader of the government. The last presidential elections took place in September 2019. In February 2020, the incumbent, Ashraf Ghani, was declared the victor in a disputed result. However, the central government is relatively weak. Afghanistan has been plagued by decades of violence; since 2010, the Global Peace Index has ranked Afghanistan consistently among the world's three least peaceful nations; and for the past four years, it has been the least peaceful country. The US-Taliban Peace Agreement initially led to a decrease in violence affecting civilians, with civilian casualties in the first nine months of 2020 reaching the lowest number since 2012. However, the start of intra-Afghan peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in September 2020 has significantly raised levels of violence, as each side tries to gain leverage through force. In the last quarter of 2020, civilian casualties increased by 45% compared with the same period in 2019. The Taliban are now capturing territory rapidly across all parts of Afghanistan; government security forces are reported to be abandoning posts and even fleeing to neighbouring countries.

The US-Taliban Peace Agreement

In February 2020, the US signed a peace agreement with the Taliban. The essence of the agreement was the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan within 14 months of the agreement. In return, the Taliban committed to put in place guarantees and enforcement mechanisms to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any group or individual – including al-Qaeda – against the security of the US and its allies. Both sides also agreed to release combat and political prisoners. The US also committed to start diplomatic engagement with other members of the UN Security Council and Afghanistan to remove members of the Taliban from the UN sanctions list. The bilateral agreement, concluded without the Afghan government, also envisaged the launch of inter-Afghan talks, with the view to reaching a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. For its part, the Afghan government committed to these talks by way of a joint declaration with the US.

US and NATO troops – Presence and withdrawal

In 2011, US troops in Afghanistan peaked at around 100 000. At the end of 2018, then US President Donald Trump announced that US troops in Afghanistan, then numbering 14 000, would start to leave the country. On 13 April 2021, President Biden confirmed that all troops would leave by 11 September 2021. By 6 July 2021, more than 90% of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan had been completed. This
brings to a close a 20-year military presence that is estimated to have cost the US more than US$2 trillion. Nevertheless, the US has pledged to continue to support the ‘training, equipping, advising and sustaining of Afghan security forces’. For its part, NATO began withdrawing its Resolute Support Mission (RSM) on 1 May 2021, a process estimated to take a few months. As recently as August 2020, the mission had around 10 000 personnel from 36 NATO member states and partner countries deployed in Afghanistan. The RSM had been established at the invitation of the Afghan government to help the Afghan security forces and institutions develop the capacity to defend the country. It superseded the earlier NATO-led UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which was deployed to Afghanistan in August 2003. At its height, ISAF had more than 130 000 troops from 50 NATO and partner countries. NATO committed at its 2021 summit to continue ‘to stand with Afghanistan, its people, and its institutions’, and to continue to provide the Afghan security forces with financial support until 2024.

Intra-Afghan talks amid Taliban advances
Following completion of the prisoner exchange agreed under the US-Taliban Peace Agreement, the first intra-Afghan peace talks took place in Doha in September 2020. The Taliban had long refused to hold direct, exclusive talks with the Afghan government, which they consider illegitimate. The aim was to agree on the modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and a political roadmap for Afghanistan. However, early hopes that these historic talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which have since effectively stalled, would stabilise the country have been dashed. Since the April 2021 announcement that the US would withdraw its forces by September, the Taliban have launched an offensive against the Afghan government and have more than doubled the number of districts they control. UN diplomats assume that the Taliban are positioning themselves to try and take control of provincial capitals once foreign forces are fully withdrawn. A June 2021 US intelligence assessment suggests that the Afghan government could fall within six months of the US military leaving.

The economic situation in Afghanistan
Violence in Afghanistan is estimated to have cost the country around 40 % of its GDP in 2020, measured in terms of expenditure and economic effects relating to ‘containing, preventing and dealing with the consequences of violence’. Afghanistan’s economy mainly depends on aid: 90 % of the population lives below a poverty line of US$2 a day. The Covid-19 crisis has impacted on the economy heavily and real GDP is estimated to have contracted by around 1.9 % in 2020. Food prices began to soar with the onset of the pandemic and have only recently levelled off, owing to a better harvest. Out of a population of around 38 million, an estimated 4 million Afghans are internally displaced, including 1 million due to natural disasters, including climate-change related disasters such as extreme drought and flash floods. Escalating conflict over the past year has resulted in a further rise in the numbers being displaced. Moreover, the country ranks among the top 10 most vulnerable to climate change across the globe.

Since 2002, the EU has provided Afghanistan with more than €4 billion in development aid, making the country the biggest recipient of EU aid in the world. At the 2020 Afghanistan Conference held in Geneva, the EU promised Afghanistan another €1.2 billion in financial aid for the 2021-2025 period. However, EU support is conditional upon an inclusive, Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process that builds on the political and social achievements of the last 19 years. In line with UN Security Council Resolution 2513, adopted in March 2020, the EU does not recognise or support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a euphemism for Taliban rule. On 10 June 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Afghanistan, expressing concern about the consequences of the troop withdrawal, and calling for an end to the violence and the resumption of peace talks. Parliament also called for the adoption of a comprehensive strategy for future EU cooperation with Afghanistan.