Afghanistan once more under Taliban rule

The departure of United States (US) and NATO troops from Afghanistan marks the end of a 20-year military campaign that was launched in 2001 to eliminate the Taliban’s ability to provide sanctuary to international terrorists, especially al-Qaeda, and stabilise the country with the help of a democratically elected government. However, as the last US soldier boarded a US military plane on 31 August 2021, terrorists were firing rockets at Kabul airport, members of the democratically elected government, including the president, had either fled abroad or were in hiding, and the Taliban were back in control over most of Afghanistan. The Taliban have yet to announce the nature and the full composition of their new government. In the meantime, the humanitarian situation in the country is increasingly desperate. The country relies extensively on foreign aid, most of which is currently suspended, while foreign assets have been frozen.

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 intra-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. Intra-Afghan peace talks started in Doha in September 2020, but early hopes that these historic talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government would stabilise the country proved elusive. Instead, following the April 2021 announcement that the US would withdraw its forces from the country by September, the Taliban launched an offensive against the Afghan government. Minimal levels of resistance from government security forces allowed the Taliban to re-establish control over most of the country in the record time of four months. On 15 August 2021, as the Taliban entered Kabul ‘virtually unopposed’, the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani fled abroad.

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 the remaining 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. On 31 August 2021, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan was completed. This brings to a close a 20-year military presence that is estimated to have cost the US more than US$2 trillion. For its part, NATO began withdrawing its Resolute Support Mission (RSM) on 1 May 2021. As recently as August 2020, the mission had around 10 000 personnel deployed in Afghanistan, from 36 NATO member states and partner countries. 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 in August 2003. At its height, ISAF had

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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 financial support to the Afghan security forces until 2024. However, following the Taliban takeover of the country, NATO has suspended all support to the Afghan authorities.

The security situation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been plagued by decades of violence; since 2010, the Global Peace Index has ranked Afghanistan consistently amongst the three least peaceful nations in the world. The 2020 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 significantly raised levels of violence, as each side tried to gain leverage through the use of force. In the last quarter of 2020, civilian casualties increased by 45% compared to the same period in 2019. Some of the worst attacks in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) in recent years, killing across mosques, public squares and even hospitals, were attributed to adversaries of the Taliban, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a regional affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh). The group has claimed responsibility for the attacks outside Kabul airport on 26 August 2021 that killed an estimated 200 persons, including 13 US soldiers, and for a rocket attack targeting Kabul airport four days later. There are fears that the security situation could deteriorate further and that Afghanistan could once more become a safe haven for terrorists plotting attacks against the West. The Taliban released 5,000 ‘highest value’ Taliban, al-Qaeda and Islamic State fighters that US and NATO forces had captured and interred at the former American base at Bagram. Resistance against the Taliban is concentrated in the Panjshir valley north of Kabul. Ahmad Masoud, the son of a famous Tajik tribal leader who fought the Taliban in the 1990s and was killed by al-Qaeda in 2001, has refused to surrender to the Taliban and is threatening to mount a rebellion. He has been joined by the ethnic Tajik former vice-president Amrullah Saleh.

The economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan

In 2020, violence in Afghanistan is estimated to have cost the country around 40% of its gross domestic product (GDP), measured in terms of expenditure and economic effect related to ‘containing, preventing and dealing with the consequences of violence’. The economy mainly depends on aid; 90% of the population lives below a poverty line of US$2 a day. With foreign countries and institutions largely withholding aid and monetary reserves following the Taliban victory, the country is facing economic collapse. The Covid-19 crisis has already impacted the economy heavily and real GDP is estimated to have contracted by around 1.9% in 2020. Food prices soared with the onset of the pandemic and have only recently levelled off. 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 significant rise in the numbers being displaced. An additional 2.5 million Afghan refugees are registered in Iran and Pakistan. According to the World Food Programme, a combination of conflict, drought and the coronavirus pandemic means that up to 14 million Afghans may face starvation. Beyond the immediate humanitarian crisis, the Afghan economy’s reliance on the illegal drug trade is of great concern to the West, as well as other countries including Russia and China.

The Taliban have called for foreign aid to help end impoverished communities’ reliance on opium cultivation.

Since 2002, the EU has provided more than €4 billion in development aid to Afghanistan, making the country the biggest recipient of EU aid in the world. At the 2020 Afghanistan Conference held in Geneva, the EU promised another €1.2 billion in financial aid to Afghanistan for the 2021-2025 period. However, at the time, EU support was made conditional upon an inclusive, Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process. Development cooperation has now been suspended. In light of the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the country, the European Commission announced that it would allocate more than €200 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan for 2021, more than tripling original aid amounts for this year. The EU has made it clear that cooperation with any future Afghan government will be conditioned on a peaceful and inclusive settlement and respect for the fundamental rights of all Afghans, including women, youth and persons belonging to minorities, as well as respect for Afghanistan’s international obligations, commitment to the fight against corruption and preventing the use of Afghanistan’s territory by terrorist organisations. On 10 June 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Afghanistan, expressing concern about the consequences of the troop withdrawal. It also called for the adoption of a comprehensive strategy for future EU cooperation with Afghanistan.

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