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Summary

Situation on the ground

Levels of violence in Afghanistan are rising; 2017 could be a record year for [civilian casualties](#). The Taliban have been gaining momentum, while the Afghan government only controls about half of the national territory.

In March 2017 the Taliban captured Sangin in Helmand, scene of many British military casualties a decade ago.

ISIS/Daesh [has a branch](#) in Afghanistan, announced in 2015, calling itself the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State. Many ISIS-affiliated fighters are disaffected former Taliban and have clashed on several occasions with their former comrades. Al-Qaeda retains a presence in the country. Corruption and crime make the situation even more complicated.

The humanitarian situation [remains dire](#), with nine million people in need of assistance. Thousands have been forced to leave their homes; Pakistan [has been accused](#) of a deliberate campaign to force the 600,000 Afghan refugees out of the country and meanwhile, UN agencies are struggling to raise enough money to help all those who need it, while the approaching winter will exacerbate the problems.

At the most [recent conference](#) on support for the Afghan Government, held in Brussels in December 2016, pledges were higher than expected, however. In the last three years (2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17), DFID's bilateral allocation in Afghanistan was £178m per year.

Afghan politics

The 2014 election was inconclusive, with both sides claiming victory. Subsequent peace talks led to the formation of a Government of National Unity, led by President Ashraf Ghani, who won the second round to the election, and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who came second and disputed the result.

The two have never agreed on the distribution of power between them, and the dissent, partly based on ethnic differences, [permeates the Government](#) and the Afghan National Defence Forces. The two leaders tend to favour Afghans who identify with the Pashtun tradition (Ghani) and the Tajik tradition (Abdullah) respectively, leaving other ethnicities, particularly the Shia Hazara and the Uzbeks, increasingly marginalised.

Corruption remains rife in the country, hampering efforts to improve governance and security.

Economy

Afghanistan's economy remains plagued by the persistent violence and insecurity. Years of conflict have left the country very poor and dependent on foreign aid and security spending; the business climate is not conducive to private investment. Natural mineral resources give some hope for future growth, as does the young and growing

population, but at present the economy struggles to provide enough jobs for young people entering the jobs market and refugees returning to the country. The IMF [predicts gradual improvement](#) in GDP growth over the next few years, and the fact that it has joined the World Trade Organisation may boost trade and Afghanistan's integration into the regional and world economies. Infrastructure projects, supported by neighbouring countries like Iran, may add to growth in the future.

Insecurity and poor governance – [corruption](#) and a weak legal environment – need to be improved before Afghanistan can realise the potential that its natural resources offer.

US policy

There is something of a contradiction in the US President's remarks about foreign policy, on the one hand wanting to spend less and on the other wanting to score decisive victories against terrorists. This may have been behind the difficulties in formulating the Administration's policy. After a long delay, the President [announced his new policy](#) in August 2017, saying "We are not nation-building again, we're killing terrorists."

There would be probably between 3,000 and 5,000 more troops to join the 8,000 there already, focusing on special forces. The policy also prioritised building on the relationship with India and being tougher on perceived Pakistani sponsorship of the Taliban. After military success, the Administration envisages negotiations with elements of the Taliban.

Reaction to the policy was not particularly positive, looking, as it did to many commentators, like a compromise between those in the Administration who want to pull out and those who fear that would mean a blow to US prestige in the region and the possible re-establishment of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan.

UK participation

The UK intends to add 85 personnel to the 500 UK military personnel already there. The Government has [explicitly ruled out](#) sending any more in response to the US demand for more support from NATO allies.

Realignments?

As the US and NATO have wound down their presence in Afghanistan, neighbouring countries such as Iran, Russia, Pakistan and India have been recalibrating their policies to maximise their influence over the eventual Government of Afghanistan.

Russia and Iran, formerly opposed to the Taliban, have reportedly been [supporting](#) the group, nominally in its fight against ISIS. But Russian weapons have also been used by the Taliban against the Afghan Government.

Partly on the back of their apparently successful collaboration in Syria, Iran and Russia are also keen to work against US interests, according to analysts.

Elements in Pakistan [continue to provide covert](#) support for the Afghan Taliban and related groups; Donald Trump's strategy speech promised a tougher line against that support. Many observers think that that increased US pressure on Pakistan is unlikely to be very successful. Pakistan will continue to see a friendly government in Kabul as essential to reducing Pakistan's vulnerability to a potentially hostile India.

India, meanwhile pursued the opposite course – trying to support the Afghan Government with large amounts of aid and investment in projects such as the Salma Dam.

China is increasingly involved in Afghanistan, partly because of the 'one belt one road' policy to secure land trade routes from China to Europe. For several reasons the Chinese have a strong interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan, with which it shares a short border. [Analysts argue](#) that it does not want to replace the US as Afghanistan's security guarantor; China's links with Pakistan might influence Chinese policy towards Afghanistan, however.

Peace negotiations

There has still been no substantial progress towards a political settlement. The US has accepted for some time that a deal with at least some elements of the Taliban would be necessary, and the Trump strategy provides for that. Disagreements between interested countries – the US and Russia; Pakistan and India, for example – have hampered peace efforts. The US did not participate in Russian-sponsored talks in April 2017

1. Worsening violence

In March 2017 the Taliban captured Sangin, scene of over 100 British army deaths a decade ago. In April the worst single Taliban attack since 2001 killed 140 Afghan soldiers in Balkh province; the defence minister and the army chief of staff resigned the next day. The Taliban subsequently announced the start of their spring offensive. The Afghan branch of ISIS also mounted attacks against both the Taliban and pro-government forces.

In June 2017 the worst bomb attack in Kabul since 2001 killed 90 and injured some 450 people in the capital's diplomatic quarter. Since 2009, more than 25,000 Afghan civilians have been killed.

Meanwhile, splits in the government continued to threaten its effectiveness; the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces only control slightly over half of Afghan territory and are taking heavy casualties: during the 12 months to November 2016 6,785 Afghan soldiers and policemen were killed and 11,777 wounded.¹

Afghanistan civilian deaths and injuries



Source: [UNAMA](#)

A huge bomb dropped in April 2017 by US forces on an alleged ISIS base suggested, like Trump's cruise missile action in Syria, that the Trump Administration may intend to intervene more decisively.

Nevertheless, there has been uncertainty about the continuing commitment to the Western intervention in Afghanistan, particularly about continued financial support for the ANSF. This has led to more intense jockeying by neighbouring countries to promote their perceived interests.

¹ ['In Afghanistan, Donald Trump has bowed to the advice of his generals'](#), *Economist*, 26 August 2017

ISIS/Daesh has a branch in Afghanistan: Islamic State Khorasan. The Khorasan branch, announced in January 2015, is the first ISIS 'province' outside the Arab world.

ISIS Khorasan
branch

It is composed of splinter groups expelled from the Taliban and has a growing presence in the eastern province of Nangarhar. The Taliban attacked ISIS in Afghanistan when the latter demanded a pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader al-Baghdadi from all Taliban fighters. ISIS in Afghanistan continues to differentiate itself from the Taliban, attacking the older formation ideologically and militarily. 'Khorasan' is an important feature in radical Islamist end-time prophecies and, as such, has particular propaganda value as an ISIS 'province'. The arrival of ISIS on the scene has been accompanied by an intensification of the conflict between radical *jihadi* groups throughout South and Central Asia.²

Al-Qaeda also retains a presence in the country, despite the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011. In 2016 two large Al-Qaeda camps were discovered in Kandahar province, in the south. In 2017 a senior Pakistani Al-Qaeda leader was killed in Paktika province by a US air strike. Although there is disagreement in the Taliban leadership about the wisdom of allying with Al-Qaeda, reports suggest that the link has grown stronger in recent years.³

Meanwhile, criminality and corruption are widespread in the country, The Taliban, although it is involved in narcotics and other criminal activities,⁴ presents itself as a force for order and against corruption, earning it political capital.

With a tense and unpredictable international environment feeding into increased violence, many worry that the suffering of Afghans could get worse.

² Dawood Azami, The Islamic State in South and Central Asia, *Survival*, vol. 58 no. 4 | August–September 2016 | pp. 131–158

³ '[Afghanistan's terrorist resurgence: Al Qaeda, ISIS, and beyond](#)', *Long War Journal*, 27 April 2017

⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, [Afghanistan affectations](#), Brookings Institution, April 2017

2. Humanitarian situation

The result of mounting conflict and crime is measured in internal displacement as well as deaths and injuries: millions have been forced from their homes into Iran and Pakistan, or internally in Afghanistan. Partly because of difficult relations between Kabul and Islamabad, Pakistan has been moving some of these Afghans back into Afghanistan – something Human Rights Watch described as the world's largest unlawful forced return of refugees in recent years.⁵

A total of nine million are in need of humanitarian assistance, rates of infant mortality remain among the highest in the world and 1.6 million are severely food insecure.⁶

2.1 Refugees

Thousands of refugees have been forced to return to Afghanistan in recent months.

Pakistan, has already forced hundreds of thousands back over the border, many of them to change from refugees to internally displaced persons. Iran, which hosts about a million Afghan refugees, has started trying to remove them, although at the same time Iran is recruiting Afghan Hazara refugees, who are Shia and suffered at the hands of the Sunni Taliban, to fight in Syria.⁷

At the same time, more Afghans are fleeing from their homes to other parts of the country. About a million were recorded as internally displaced persons in 2015 by the UNHCR.⁸

Four and a half million people live in conflict-affected districts with extremely limited access to health care – attacks on health facilities are commonplace.⁹ Rates of infant and maternal mortality are among the highest in the world.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) said in May 2017 that the rising insurgency and increased insecurity are exacerbating existing needs and creating new ones,¹⁰ particularly in Helmand province, where the Taliban took control of Sangin. The heightened tensions between the Pakistani and Afghan Governments was increasing the demand for aid (see below), while communications difficulties made delivery more complicated.

UNOCHA had requested \$550 million for its humanitarian programme and had received \$92 million in May 2017. The response plan aimed to reach 5.7 people and had so far reached 1.3 million.

⁵ [For Afghan Refugees, There's No Going Back](#), Human Rights Watch, 13 April 2017

⁶ [2017 Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview](#), UNOCHA, 31 December 2016

⁷ Ahmed Rashid, '[Viewpoint: Why Afghan refugees are facing a humanitarian catastrophe](#)', *BBC News online*, 12 October 2016

⁸ UNHCR, [Afghanistan Factsheet August 2015](#)

⁹ World Health Organisation, [Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2017](#)

¹⁰ UNOCHA [Afghanistan: 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan - First Quarter Report \(January - March 2017\), updated 18 May](#), Overview

As the weather gets worse, humanitarian access to needy people will get more difficult, as their needs for shelter and food increase.

2.2 Aid

In October 2016 participants in an EU-hosted donor conference in Brussels pledged \$15.2 billion in development aid for Afghanistan, up to 2020. That amounted to nearly \$4 billion per year and was above expectations, maintaining the level of international support set in Tokyo in 2012. Almost half was pledged by the EU and EU member states.¹¹ The Afghan Government presented to the conference two plans for improving governance.¹²

In April 2017 the Department for International Development answered a Parliamentary Question on UK aid to Afghanistan:

Jonathan Lord: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, how much funding her Department has allocated in aid to Afghanistan in each of the last three years; and on what that funding has been spent.

Rory Stewart: For the last three years (2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17) DFID's bilateral allocation in Afghanistan was £178m per year, in line with the then UK Prime Minister's pledge at the Tokyo Conference in 2012. This has been invested in economic development, meeting humanitarian needs, building the capacity of the Afghan Government, and delivering services such as health and education.¹³

¹¹ ['Brussels Conference on Afghanistan: main results'](#), European Council press release 5 October 2016

¹² [Afghanistan national peace and development framework \(ANPDF\), 2017 to 2021; Self-reliance through mutual accountability framework](#)

¹³ [HC Written question – 71947](#), 27 April 2017

3. Afghan politics

A Brookings Institution commentator summed up the difficulties in Afghan politics as follows:

As Afghan politicians continue to engage in scheming, crisis-generation, and brinkmanship to milk concessions from the government and political opponents, the government's legitimacy and political bases have weakened substantially.¹⁴

National Unity Government

The first, inconclusive, round of the 2014 Afghan Presidential election was held on 5 April, with former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah taking the lead with 45%, against Ashraf Ghani, a former finance minister, receiving 31%.

The second round run-off between the top two candidates was held on 14 June. The order reversed. Although a result was not announced until September, following widespread claims of fraud, and an audit by the United Nations, Ghani was finally pronounced the winner in September 2014, taking 56% of the vote.

A European Union monitoring team that had been deployed at the request of the Afghan Government found in its report that the Afghan Independent Election Commission had been unable to monitor the election process effectively in the second round and that "large scale fraud had been committed."¹⁵

It is quite plausible that the Pashtun majority may have united around 'their' candidate, Ashraf Ghani, once other Pashtun candidates such as Zalmai Rassoul, Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf and Gul Agha Sherzai were eliminated in the second round, giving Ghani a majority.

Nevertheless, allegations of fraud did not go away and Afghanistan has not really recovered from the 2014 election. The bitterly-contested and inconclusive poll was followed by a 'National Unity Government', with Ashraf Ghani becoming President and Abdullah Abdullah taking the newly-created role of Chief Executive Officer.

The National Unity Government does not live up to its name. It is wracked by internal disagreement and ineffective leadership, and the partisanship has permeated public institutions, including the security forces. Corruption remains the driving force for many of these problems, as the two factions battle over posts (including, particularly, in the Afghan National Police) that offer opportunities for it.

The power-sharing deal to end the impasse after the election, brokered by the US, was perhaps necessarily vague. As argued in a paper for the International Crisis Group, however, this has led to permanent conflict between the two and their respective allies:

¹⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, '[The fatal flaw in President Trump's approach to the war in Afghanistan?](#)', Brookings Institution, 29 August 2017

¹⁵ EU Election Assessment Team, '[Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Presidential Election 5 April and 14 June 2014, Final report](#)', undated

Abdullah believes the agreement gave him an equal share in government; Ghani and his advisers insist that ultimate power, as defined in the constitution, resides in the presidency.¹⁶

The two leaders battle for power, choosing political appointments from their allied ethnic groups: Abdullah from the Tajiks and Ghani from the Pashtuns. (Abdullah is of mixed Pashtun/Tajik descent, which, to many Afghans, makes him a Tajik.) Hazaras and Uzbeks, and other minority ethnic groups, are increasingly marginalised.

The executive branch also has difficult relations with the legislature and this has made reforms of the electoral system difficult, although they are needed, as shown by the controversies over the 2014 poll, which Abdullah insists was fraudulent.

Tribal, ethnic and regional divisions

There are 14 different ethnicities in Afghanistan and they tend to see their interests as competing rather than mutual. To an extent, the main divide is between the Taliban, largely Pashtun, and the smaller ethnicities, which support the Government in Kabul,¹⁷ even though the most powerful official in Afghanistan, the President, is a Pashtun.

Outside influences have backed different groups depending on their perceived interests, and this has exacerbated the divisions; powerful figures tend to be aligned with their own ethnicity and promote people to positions of authority from their own tribes or families.¹⁸

The position of these powerful figures is crucial to the National Unity Government. Afghanistan has always had powerful regional figures, sometimes described as 'warlords', with whom the central authority must negotiate. Atta Muhammad Noor, now the Governor of Balkh province, is one such figure. Described as having "huge wealth",¹⁹ he is a Tajik and originally supported Abdullah; both are linked to the Mujahideen group and political party Jamiat e-Islami, of which Atta is now the party leader. When Ghani was the President elect, Atta said that he would not accept him. In 2016, however, Ghani was in discussions with Atta, and in February 2017 Ghani appointed him Governor of Balkh province.

Discussing the rapprochement between the two former foes, an Afghan political commentator said "Politics is not standard in Afghanistan; it is based on giving and receiving".²⁰

Hamid Karzai, the former president and main opposition figure (a Pashtun), has been pressing for new elections, something both the President and the Chief Executive Officer are resisting.

Corruption

Other necessary reforms to tackle poor governance, particularly corruption in the police force, have been delayed by government

"Politics is not standard in Afghanistan; it is based on giving and receiving"

¹⁶ [Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government](#), International Crisis Group, 10 April 2017

¹⁷ Bruce Riedel, '[The three wars in Afghanistan](#)', Brookings Institution, 30 August 2017

¹⁸ '[The roots of Afghanistan's tribal tensions](#)', *The Economist*, 31 August 2017

¹⁹ '[Attaboy](#)', *Economist*, 6 April 2016

²⁰ '[Ghani-Noor's Close Ties Met With Mixed Reaction](#)', *Tolo News*, 29 November 2016

paralysis. In March 2016 the High Council on Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption was created and a special corruption court, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre (ACJC) was formed. So far, though, the court has made slow progress with the cases that have been referred to it. Afghanistan has, nevertheless, improved its ranking slightly in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.²¹

²¹ Transparency International [Corruption Perceptions Index 2016](#)

4. Economic profile

Afghanistan is a very poor country whose economy is dependent on foreign aid and whose economic conditions and prospects are linked heavily with the security situation. Modest growth in the past few years is forecast to improve slightly in the near term, although given the country's expanding population will remain weak. Long-term, the abundance of natural resources provide some scope for optimism but the poor business environment and ongoing security concerns dampen the outlook.

4.1 Background

Afghanistan's turbulent history of wars and instability – in recent times especially notable from the Soviet invasion in 1979 to the Taliban's fall from power in late 2001 – ruined the country's economic development. The lack of a functioning state and formal economy during much of this period left Afghanistan an extremely poor country, and facilitated the blossoming of the illicit and informal economy.²²

Following the US-led operation that deposed the Taliban from power after the September 11 attacks, large amounts of foreign aid were provided by the international community. This provided a boost to the economy, with annual average GDP growth of 9% in the decade to 2012.²³

4.2 Recent developments and short-term outlook

The end of the NATO mission and the transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan government in late 2014, led to lower levels of foreign aid, increased political instability and a worsening security situation.²⁴ Economic growth was very weak in the build-up to and the aftermath of the 2014 transition. GDP increased by 1.3% in 2014 and just 0.8% in 2015 (which was also affected by weak agricultural production).²⁵

In 2016, GDP growth is estimated to have accelerated slightly to 2.0% due to improved agricultural output. A further modest improvement to 3.0% growth in 2017 is forecast by the IMF, although they note that this is still weak given the country's young and expanding population – partly due to a large number of returning Afghan refugees – and the subsequent need for job creation.²⁶

²² Ghiasy, Richard. [Economy \(Afghanistan\)](#), in Europa World online. London, Routledge. House of Commons. Retrieved 12 September 2017

²³ IMF, [World Economic Outlook database](#), April 2017

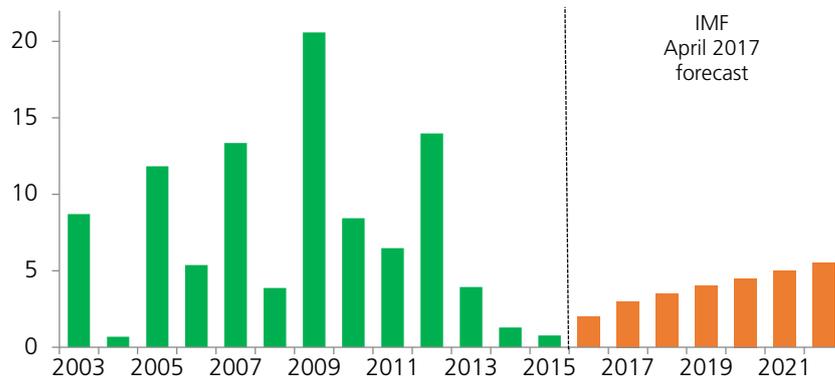
²⁴ "The war in Afghanistan: Help needed", The Economist, 6 October 2016

²⁵ Asian Development Bank, [Asian Development Outlook 2017 – profile of Afghanistan](#), April 2017, pp178-181

²⁶ IMF, [Islamic Republic of Afghanistan : First Review Under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request for Modification of Performance Criteria-Press Release and Staff Report](#) , 5 June 2017

Afghanistan - GDP growth since 2003

Annual % change in real GDP (IMF data)



Security concerns continued to plague business confidence and the amount of private investment, although a number of public infrastructure projects have been agreed or implemented, such as the Salma Dam (together with India) and Chabahar port in Iran which will be linked by road and rail to Afghanistan.²⁷ These, and other projects, could help to provide the foundations for future development of the economy.

Afghanistan joined the World Trade Organisation in July 2016, twelve years after first applying for membership.²⁸ It is hoped that this will boost trade and integration with the regional and world economy. At present, Afghanistan runs a huge trade deficit, with exports of \$1.3 billion compared with imports of \$9.5 billion.²⁹

In April 2017, the IMF forecasts GDP growth to accelerate from 3.0% in 2017 to 3.5% in 2018 and up by further increments of 0.5%-points up to 5.5% in 2022.³⁰ However, this forecast is predicated on improving security and political stability, successful implementation of economic reforms, as well as continued receipt of foreign aid. The persistent difficult security situation could well constrain growth over this period.

²⁷ Shoaib Ahmad Rahim, "[Can Afghanistan's Economy Rebound in 2017?](#)", The Diplomat, 25 January 2017

²⁸ WTO news items, [Afghanistan to become 164th WTO member on 29 July 2016](#), 29 June 2016

²⁹ World Bank, [World Development Indicators Databank](#)

³⁰ IMF, [Afghanistan – staff report](#) (June 2017), op. cit., page 11

Economic statistics and forecasts: Afghanistan

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
						<i>IMF forecasts (April 2017)*</i>			
GDP									
<i>% growth</i>	14.0	3.9	1.3	0.8	2.0	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5
GDP per capita									
\$ (PPP basis, nominal)	1,875	1,933	1,947	1,937	1,919	1,833	1,936	2,054	2,186
Inflation									
<i>%, annual average</i>	6.4	7.4	4.7	-1.5	4.4	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.0
Current account balance									
<i>% of GDP</i>	5.3	8.5	2.2	2.9	7.1	4.5	2.3	1.8	1.1
Government budget balance									
<i>% of GDP</i>	0.2	-0.6	-1.7	-1.4	0.1	0.6	0.2	0.1	-0.3
Population									
<i>millions</i>	29.8	30.6	31.3	32.0	33.4	36.8	36.9	36.9	37.0

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2017

* This is the "baseline scenario"; the IMF states that "Given the inherent uncertainties going forward, [IMF] staff relies on scenarios rather than projections to quantify the outlook "

4.3 Long-term prospects

In addition to the security issues, the business environment is further hampered by widespread corruption plus weak regulatory and legal frameworks.³¹ The World Bank places Afghanistan 183rd out of 189 countries for ease of doing business.³² Reforms are currently being pursued but the challenges remain large and numerous.

Foreign aid will likely remain a critically important source of funds for the government for some time to come. Official grants funded 63% of government expenditure in 2016.³³ Domestic revenue collection, though, has shown signs of progress, with receipts in 2016 exceeding the target set in the ongoing IMF assistance programme (which provides loans and technical support to Afghanistan up to mid-2019).³⁴

Afghanistan possess abundant natural resources which remain mostly untapped.³⁵ These include agricultural crops, coal, copper, lithium, gold, gemstones, rare minerals, as well as natural gas and oil fields.³⁶ The path to successfully extract these natural endowments – and to have the associated infrastructure in place – may be long but does provide an opportunity for the economy and living standards over the long-term.

³¹ UK Department for International Trade, [Oversees Business Risk – Afghanistan](#), 24 May 2017

³² World Bank, [Doing Business 2017 - Afghanistan](#)

³³ Asian Development Bank, [Asian Development Outlook 2017 – profile of Afghanistan](#), April 2017, p179

³⁴ IMF, [Afghanistan – staff report](#) (June 2017), op. cit., page 41

³⁵ UK Department for International Trade, [Oversees Business Risk – Afghanistan](#), 24 May 2017

³⁶ Ghiasy, Richard. [Economy \(Afghanistan\)](#), in Europa World online. London, Routledge. House of Commons. Retrieved 12 September 2017

5. Trump Administration

The dilemmas facing the present US Administration are similar to those that confronted the Bush and Obama governments. The Afghan Government remains weak and dependent on Western financial and military support, and arguments that the war is unwinnable are often convincing. Terrorist groups remain a threat, and that would get worse if the Afghan government were to fall. It may remain the Trump Administration's policy to work more closely with Russia, and that may mean a reluctance to confront Russia in Afghanistan.

But for the US to back off in Afghanistan, pulling out any significant troop presence, could embolden Russia to seek to try to roll back Western influence in other areas.

One thing is markedly different from the situation under President Obama, however. Russia and Iran are working more actively against US interests in Afghanistan, complicating any efforts to establish a stable government.

The US combat mission in Afghanistan ended in December 2014, after the widely-criticised decision of the Obama Administration to set a public deadline for the withdrawal of most US troops,³⁷ against the wishes of the US military leadership on the ground. At the end of June 2017, James Mattis, US Defence Secretary, said that the US and its allies may have withdrawn from Afghanistan too soon, as NATO defence ministers meeting in Brussels discussed strengthening the training mission.

On 14 June President Trump directed the Department of Defense to set troop levels in Afghanistan, apparently abandoning the ability to make this most politically sensitive of decisions. Reports suggest, however, that President Trump has repeatedly blocked Pentagon plans to send more troops.

Some observers argue that delays in formulating a new Afghan strategy were a result of fundamental contradictions in the President's approach to Afghanistan, indeed in his "America first" vision, which involved "a desire to simultaneously do more and less in the world,"³⁸ according to one analysis. In Afghanistan, Donald Trump wants decisive military victories, but does not want to commit large extra resources or be bogged down in seemingly endless campaigns. Decisive military victory in Afghanistan is notoriously difficult to come by, however.

Long-term commitment?

In August, Senator John McCain released his own Afghanistan strategy because, he said, the White House had failed to do so. The plan involved sending more US military advisers to the Afghan Army, at the battalion level, allowing more direct engagement, strengthening the US

³⁷ Paul D. Miller, '[Obama's Failed Legacy in Afghanistan](#)', *The American Interest*, 15 February 2016

³⁸ '[With U.S. general under fire, Afghans fear being abandoned by Trump](#)', *Washington Post*, 6 August 2017

counter-terrorism operation and reinforcing Afghan air capabilities.³⁹ The strategy also called for a longer-term commitment for the US military to stay in Afghanistan.

Several commentators have argued in favour of an open-ended commitment at this stage: for Seth G Jones of the Rand Corporation, this could not only prevent the Afghan government from falling, it could also keep neighbouring states from jockeying for influence too aggressively:

A small but durable U.S. military presence would have an additional benefit: it would likely dampen security competition between nuclear-armed regional powers, which would almost certainly intensify with a U.S. departure.⁴⁰

Private sector involvement?

In August 2017 there were reports that the founder of Blackwater, the private contractor that was hired to protect US diplomats in Iraq, had submitted a plan to provide some 5,000 private military personnel and fewer than 100 military aircraft to replace the NATO advisory mission to the Afghan army. The 2,000-strong US counter-terrorism force would continue to operate.⁴¹ (In January 2017 there were already 26,000 contractors working for the Department of Defense in Afghanistan.)⁴²

The plan would mean big cost savings for the US. On the other hand, the Blackwater operation in Iraq ended with several employees on trial over the deaths of 17 Iraqis,⁴³ an event which contributed to the Iraqi Government's refusal to allow US troops to stay in the country beyond 2011. Now that Steve Bannon has been ousted as the Trump chief strategist, the chances of the private contractors plan becoming reality have probably diminished.

New strategy published

On 21 August President Trump made the long-awaited speech announcing a new strategy.

In a speech at a military base, President Trump outlined ways in which the strategy would change:

- The strategy would not be time-limited, but would depend on conditions on the ground
- All instruments of US power, diplomatic, economic and military, would be integrated towards a positive outcome
- A political settlement involving some elements of the Taliban might be possible "after an effective military effort."
- "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists"

³⁹ ['John McCain announces his own strategy for Afghanistan'](#), *CNN*, 10 August 2017

⁴⁰ ['How Trump Should Manage Afghanistan'](#), Rand Corporation, 21 March 2017

⁴¹ ['Erik Prince offers private military force in Afghanistan'](#), *Financial Times*, 7 August 2017

⁴² [Afghanistan Index](#), Brookings Institution, 25 May 2017, p7

⁴³ ['Blackwater considered itself above the law, US state department was warned'](#), *Guardian*, 30 June 2014

- And Trump said: “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond”
- Further develop the US-India strategic partnership
- Lift the restrictions that the previous administration imposed “that prevented the Secretary of Defense and our commanders in the field from fully and swiftly waging battle against the enemy.”⁴⁴

While President Trump ruled out talking about troop numbers, officials suggested that the White House was thinking of sending between 3,000 and 5,000 extra troops to Afghanistan and allowing them to ‘embed’ with Afghan troops closer to combat.⁴⁵ They would be added to the 8,000 presently stationed there and reports suggest that as well as boosting the number of trainers with Afghan troops, the reinforcement would focus on special forces and air power.

While Trump promised to “crush” Al-Qaeda and “obliterate” ISIS in Afghanistan, his objective for the Taliban was only to prevent them taking over Afghanistan.

Reaction to the new strategy

UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said that the US commitment to remain in Afghanistan was “very welcome.” He said: We have to stay the course in Afghanistan to help build up its fragile democracy and reduce the terrorist threat to the West.”⁴⁶

Several commentators have argued, however, that the decisions amount to a compromise between the Trump Administration’s desire to do less in Afghanistan and the objective of decisive victories over terrorists – a compromise that is not likely to fulfil either objective.

Theo Farrell of City, University of London said:

None of this will make much difference. The U.S. was unable to defeat the Taliban when it had 10 times more troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. has limited leverage over Pakistan. And Afghan corruption has been supercharged by over a decade of Western aid inflows and is not easily reversed.⁴⁷

A leader in the *Financial Times* said:

Mr Trump calls his strategy “principled realism”. But it is neither realistic — exhortations do not win wars — nor principled. A few thousand extra troops — the figure of 4,000 has been bandied around — and harsh rhetoric about Pakistan will change little on the ground. Worse, an appeal for India to get more involved pours fuel on the very rivalry between South Asia’s nuclear neighbours which has encouraged Islamabad’s duplicitousness in

⁴⁴ [‘Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia’](#), White House, 21 August 2017

⁴⁵ [‘Trump has made Afghanistan decision after ‘rigorous’ review: Matthis’](#), *Reuters*, 20 August 2017

⁴⁶ [‘UK Government welcomes Donald Trump ‘stay and fight’ pledge for Afghanistan’](#), *Politics Home*, 22 August 2017

⁴⁷ [‘More troops won’t end the unwinnable war in Afghanistan’](#), *Vice News*, 21 August 2017

the past. Mr Trump may also find that poking Pakistan in the eye can only push it closer to Beijing.⁴⁸

A commentator for the Brookings Institution regretted the 'no more nation-building' undertaking in President Trump's speech:

...the Trump administration's announced approach to Afghanistan is not a strategy for victory. The United States must start explicitly insisting on better governance and political processes in the Afghan government.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ ['Trump has bowed to the generals on Afghanistan'](#), *Financial Times*, 22 August 2017

⁴⁹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, ['The fatal flaw in President Trump's approach to the war in Afghanistan?'](#), Brookings Institution, 29 August 2017

6. UK military contribution

More UK personnel on the way

The UK committed some time ago to adding an 85 personnel to the 500 troops already deployed in Afghanistan for the mission *Resolute Support*. The increase comes amid reports of deteriorating security and calls from US commanders for more soldiers to break the 'stalemate'.

NATO defence ministers agreed on 29 June 2017 to increase the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan. Their mission is to train, assist and support Afghan security forces. It is not a combat mission - the NATO-led combat operation ended in December 2014. Currently over 13,500 troops from 39 countries support NATO's *Resolute Support* mission.⁵⁰

Despite the earlier NATO decision, Donald Trump made clear in his strategy announcement in August 2017 that he expected other NATO members to increase further their commitment to Afghanistan:

We will ask our NATO allies and global partners to support our new strategy with additional troop and funding increases in line with our own. We are confident they will. Since taking office, I have made clear that our allies and partners must contribute much more money to our collective defense, and they have done so.⁵¹

In September 2017, the Government was asked directly how it intended to respond to the call for more support from NATO allies from the Trump Administration. Earl Howe said that the government did not plan to send any more troops than the 85 already announced:

Like the US, the UK has a long-term commitment to Afghanistan. Supporting the Afghan Government and the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANSDF) through the NATO Resolute Support train, advise and assist mission helps to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorists and keeps space open for a politically negotiated solution to the conflict.

The UK currently has 500 troops deployed in Afghanistan and routinely assesses its force levels in theatre. At the NATO Defence Ministerial (29 June 2017) the UK announced that it is increasing its commitment to Afghanistan, with around 85 additional troops to support NATO's mission in the country. These additional troops will extend our support to the development of the Afghan Army, Police and Air Force, and will provide additional mentors for ANSDF training and development. The announcement of the US South Asia strategy has not altered the UK's commitment and support to Afghanistan.⁵²

Financial support to ANSF

The UK contributes £70 million per year to support the Afghan National Defence and Security Force. This fulfilled the commitment made by the

⁵⁰ For more on the UK deployment, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Troops in Afghanistan](#), July 2017

⁵¹ ['Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia'](#), White House, 21 August 2017

⁵² [Written question - HL1392](#), 13 September 2017

UK Government at the NATO Warsaw Summit 2016.⁵³ The money is channelled through the United Nations Development Programme's Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan and comes from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). It is being spent largely on the Afghan National Police and the Ministry of the Interior.⁵⁴

⁵³ For more information on the summit see the Commons Briefing Paper [NATO Warsaw Summit 2016: a primer](#), July 2016

⁵⁴ [Written statement - HCWS607](#), 24 April 2017

7. Regional realignments

As the US and NATO have wound down their presence in the country, neighbouring countries have been taking a stronger interest in



Map copyright: MoD

Afghanistan, with Iran and Russia supporting the Taliban against ISIS and getting to make things difficult for the US and its allies into the bargain.

7.1 Russia

Russia has worked with Iran and against the US in Syria, in an intervention in the conflict there that seems to have achieved its objective of preventing the fall of the Syrian Government and raising Russia's profile on the international scene.

In April 2017, the US commander of troops in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, said that the military was getting reports of Russia sending weapons and other supplies to the Taliban:

We continue to get reports of this assistance. We support anyone who wants to help us advance the reconciliation process, but anyone who arms belligerents who perpetuate attacks like the one we saw two days ago in Mazar-e Sharif is not the best way forward to a peaceful reconciliation.⁵⁵

According to reports, Russia is sending materiel, including heavy machine guns, to the Taliban, purportedly to help them fight ISIS. The weapons have turned up in the southwest provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, however, where the main fight is between the Taliban and the Government, well away from the ISIS presence.⁵⁶

According to one commentator, Afghanistan is set to be the next major theatre for the unfolding Cold War II drama.⁵⁷

7.2 Iran

Iran's traditional approach was to oppose the radical Sunni Taliban and, along the way, to attempt to protect the Shiite Hazara minority of central Afghanistan, who suffered extreme maltreatment at the hands of the Taliban.

The discovery that Iran had been supporting the Taliban came as something of a surprise, but has been explained as an attempt to move into the vacuum left by the drawdown of US forces.

Iran has a long border with Afghanistan and has an interest in its stability – Iranians are some of the biggest consumers of Afghan-produced narcotics but, like Pakistan, it also has an interest in having a friendly government in Kabul. If Kabul is aligned with the US, as it is at present seen in the region, then Iran does not want it to be strong. Iran is also very keen for US troops to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Iran is also bitterly opposed to ISIS, which launched an attack on the Iranian Parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum in June 2017.

These objectives have led to support for elements of the Taliban, according to reports, particularly in the western areas close to the Iranian border. The Governor of Farah province said: "The regional politics have changed. The strongest Taliban here are Iranian Taliban."⁵⁸

The Iranian Government denies supporting the Taliban and emphasizes its development aid to the country.

7.3 Pakistan and India

The bitter rivalry between India and Pakistan shapes their approach to Afghanistan; there are growing fears of a major escalation over Kashmir, where there has been a dramatic upsurge in violence in recent months.⁵⁹ The fact that both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons

⁵⁵ ['Russia is sending weapons to Taliban, top U.S. general confirms'](#), *Washington Post*, 24 April 2017

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ ['The New Cold War Politics in Afghanistan'](#), *The Diplomat*, 10 April 2017

⁵⁸ ['In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In'](#), *New York Times*, 5 August 2017

⁵⁹ See the Commons Briefing Paper [Kashmir: February 2017 update](#)

and have regular crises in their relations only increases the tension over Afghanistan.

Pakistan has not stopped its support for its proxies,⁶⁰ largely the Afghan Taliban, and has declined to facilitate peace talks between the Taliban and the Kabul government. Islamabad, meanwhile, says Afghanistan has not cracked down on militants conducting attacks from Afghanistan against Pakistan's rebellious tribal areas.

India is supporting the Kabul government with a \$1 billion aid package and military helicopter sales. A former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan said Pakistan's alleged support for the Afghan Taliban made a military solution impossible: "Even if you ramp up the numbers, unless you drain the swamp, it won't change. The swamp is in Pakistan." The Trump speech mentioned US/India cooperation in Afghanistan as a positive factor.

In a sign of deteriorating relations between Kabul and Islamabad, Pakistan forced 550,000 Afghan refugees to return to their home country in 2016. In early 2017, the main border crossings were closed after a major attack on a Sufi shrine in southern Pakistan, claimed by Pakistani Taliban militants allegedly based in eastern Afghanistan.

Clashes between Afghans and Pakistanis at the border surged in May 2017, with Pakistan claiming to have killed more than 50 Afghan soldiers.⁶¹

The sharpness of President Trump's words about Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban caused consternation in Islamabad. But as Pakistan is in a state of political flux at the moment since the dismissal for corruption of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the end of July 2017, and since the civilian authorities have very little say over Pakistan's Afghan policy,⁶² it is not clear how the Trump speech will change things, if at all. Analysts have warned that increased US pressure on Pakistan could simply push Islamabad further into China's orbit.⁶³

7.4 China

China is increasingly involved in Afghanistan. Chinese diplomats have been visiting Kabul more often, and President Ghani's first overseas visit was to China. In 2017, the Chinese foreign minister visited Kabul and then Islamabad, in a bid to reduce tensions between the neighbours and find a way to fight against the terrorism which plagues both countries.

The 'one belt one road' policy is a mainstay of China's economic vision for the future and the road will pass near to Afghanistan, branches may pass through the country. This gives China a big interest in Afghan stability, but also in Pakistani stability, where China has invested a great

⁶⁰ [Afghanistan: Growing Challenges](#), International Crisis Group, 30 April 2017

⁶¹ ['Worst border clashes in years: Are Afghanistan and Pakistan at war?'](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 7 May 2017

⁶² Bruce Riedel, [The three wars in Afghanistan](#), Brookings Institution, 30 August 2017

⁶³ ['With Chinese Support, Pakistan Can Ignore Trump on Afghanistan'](#), *Bloomberg*, 23 August 2017

deal. The China-Pakistan alliance is strong and commentators worry about the influence that Pakistan might have over Chinese Afghan policy.

The relationship between 'one belt one road' and Russia's economic project, the Eurasian Economic Union, is delicate, since they seek to increase Chinese and Russian influence, respectively, in Central Asia and are, to an extent, competitors. China has consulted Russia over the development of one belt one road, and tries to avoid clashes between the two powers. One belt one road could, in the end, lead to a more hostile relationship between Russia and China in Afghanistan, however.

Another factor that concerns China is stability in its restive Xinjiang region, traditionally home to the Muslim Uighurs, which shares a short border with Afghanistan. Beijing seeks to suppress any separatist or nationalist tendencies in Xinjiang, specifically the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and has traditionally been hostile to the Taliban, which, as a radical Islamic group, might encourage it. Radicalism in the whole Central Asian region is worrying to the Chinese authorities, particularly given the growing Chinese dependency on Central Asian gas, and Afghanistan is probably the biggest destabilising factor.

Another Afghan source of Chinese instability is drugs. Afghanistan is one of the largest sources of narcotics trafficked to China.

China duly supported the government of Hamid Karzai, giving aid and investing in the Afghan economy. In 2012, China assented to Afghanistan becoming an observer at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the economic and security organisation led by China and Russia that incorporates the Central Asian states.

Despite increased interest in developing relations, one analyst says that China does not want to replace the US or bring Afghanistan into its exclusive sphere of interest, being happy to cooperate with other countries, including the US, to encourage stability.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Zhao Huasheng '[Afghanistan and China's new neighbourhood diplomacy](#)', Chatham House, July 2016

8. Political settlement?

A comprehensive military victory in Afghanistan has always been elusive and there is little reason to think that one is imminent. That being the case, attention turns to political negotiations with the Taliban.

The level of commitment of the Trump Administration to political negotiations is unclear, however. On 14 April 2017, Russia hosted talks on Afghanistan, with Chinese, Iranian, Indian, Pakistani and Central Asian representatives. The US was invited but declined to attend. A State Department spokesman said:

I think just to end it, we just felt that these talks - it was unclear to us what the purpose was. It seemed to be a unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region that we felt wasn't constructive at this time.

Announcing the new US strategy, President Trump said that it might be possible to negotiate with elements of the Taliban, after military successes against them.

The Quadrilateral Consultation Group, which included Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the US, has been dormant since the US drone attack that killed Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor in May 2016. As mentioned above, Russia has taken an interest in promoting peace negotiations with its invitations bringing Pakistan, China, Iran, India and, lately, Afghanistan together in Moscow in April 2017. The US and the Afghan Taliban declined the invitation, despite reports of Russian military support to the Taliban.

The former US Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Laurel Miller, who led US efforts to find a political solution, stood down in June 2017 and was not replaced. The responsibilities of the post were given to the South and Central Asia bureau at the State Department. No permanent Assistant Secretary had been appointed to head the bureau in August 2017.⁶⁵

In an article for the *New York Times*, Miller said that the Taliban were willing to talk to the US government, although they were reluctant to negotiate with the Afghan Government, which they saw as a puppet regime. The former official said that the Afghan Government was also willing to talk to the Taliban, although it did not want to undermine its legitimacy.⁶⁶

China, too, has expressed an interest in pushing for a political settlement. In 2015, the Chinese foreign minister said: "For a long time, Afghanistan has suffered the upheaval, poverty, and the chaos of war. It is time for this phase to end."⁶⁷ In 2015, China reportedly received representatives of the Taliban, suggesting that the balance between

⁶⁵ US State Department, [Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs](#)

⁶⁶ Laurel Miller, '[A Peace 'Surge' to End War in Afghanistan](#)', *New York Times*, 23 July 2017

⁶⁷ Zhao Huasheng '[Afghanistan and China's new neighbourhood diplomacy](#)', Chatham House, July 2016

hostility to the Taliban's Islamism and the search for a negotiated settlement was changing.

The authors of a RUSI paper argued in January that the Taliban is divided, particularly since Hibatullah was appointed the new Emir, and some sections are demoralised with the war. Dissatisfaction with the leadership is high and the Mansour network, based in Helmand and which claims to be backed by Russia and Iran, is on the rise. The authors say that these factors suggest that large elements of the Taliban could be ready for peace negotiations.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, [Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War](#), RUSI briefing paper, January 2017

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