



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

## DEFENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE (DSC)

# AFGHANISTAN: THE NEXUS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY

### Special Report

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. Increased violence in Afghanistan, driven by a resurgent Taliban and other insurgent forces, is forcing international attention back to the country. Tactical and strategic gains by the Taliban coupled with persistent institutional corruption continue to drive the attrition of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and have altered the balance of forces on the ground. In the face of this worsening situation for the Afghan government and its forces, NATO Allies and their international partners are stepping up their efforts.

2. Allies agreed at the Brussels meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government on 25 May 2017 not only to continue NATO's *Resolute Support Mission* (RSM) in Afghanistan, but to increase financial and personnel contributions as well. Allied efforts in Afghanistan over the next few years will be critical to turning around the increasingly tenuous security situation on the ground.

3. In August 2017, the Trump administration announced the United States would let 'conditions on the ground' guide its efforts to assist the ANDSF as well as the United States' parallel counterterrorism mission in the country. To help achieve its goals, the United States is effecting a mini-surge of its forces and resources dedicated to Afghanistan. The Trump administration has made it clear participation in Afghanistan is a part of its interpretation of burden sharing in the Alliance – it expects its Allies to contribute more to NATO efforts to achieve the broader mission in Afghanistan; a stable country that will never again become a wellspring for international terrorism.

4. New rules of engagement are allowing international forces to work more closely with the ANDSF to help build a more effective fighting force in operations. In addition, international pressures seem to be bringing a much-needed government focus on rooting out corruption in the nation's security institutions. Further, the Trump administration has eased restrictions on war fighters in the battlefield and, as a result, US-led airstrikes doubled in 2017.

5. The United States is also increasing pressure on regional states to play a key role in future peace and security in Afghanistan. Attention is being paid to Pakistan's insufficient efforts to deny the Afghan Taliban and other designated international terrorist groups the freedom to operate in regions bordering Afghanistan.

6. This special report will provide a thorough overview of the evolution of the security situation in Afghanistan, from the state of the insurgency to the status of the ANDSF. A focus of this report, however, will be the complex regional variables at play in the fight for the future of Afghanistan. It will conclude with steps forward for the consideration of NATO member state parliamentarians.

## II. TRUMP ADMINISTRATION / US POLICY

7. After months of consultations, US President Donald Trump announced a new 'Afghanistan and South Asia policy' in a speech to troops at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia on 21 August 2017. Departing from his predecessor's policy, which included a gradual military drawback from Afghanistan, Mr Trump reaffirmed a continued US commitment to the NATO-led *Train, Advise and Assist* (TAA) and US counterterrorism missions. Among other things, the new US strategy provides for the deployment of several thousand additional troops, relaxed rules of engagement for US forces and increased pressure on neighbouring states to contribute to the stabilisation of Afghanistan. Moreover, discarding the Obama administration's calendar-driven withdrawal or sunset clause, it specifies any future military withdrawal will be conditions-based (The White House, 2017). Beyond these broad strategic revisions, the president's speech outlined few details. For instance, the metrics to assess the conditions mentioned in the revised sunset clause remained undefined.

8. While the new strategy downgrades the importance of political engagement with Afghan governance issues, it clearly strengthens the US commitment to military efforts in Afghanistan. More

specifically, it proceeds on the assumption the Taliban can be forced into negotiating a political settlement by subduing them on the battlefield (IISS, 2017). To achieve this goal, President Trump asked NATO Allies and partner countries involved in Afghanistan to follow the United States' lead in increasing troops and funding, thereby also linking the mission in Afghanistan to the burden sharing debate<sup>1</sup>.

9. The Trump administration's broader regional policy is changing quite significantly as well. The administration is now putting significant pressure on regional actors critical to the broader security outcomes in the region as well as the specific battlefield conditions inside of Afghanistan. This broader regional approach is a key element to what will ultimately determine the contours of the Trump administration's approach to Afghanistan; the challenges of regional variables in Afghanistan are highlighted in detail later in this report.

### III. RSM UPDATE

10. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO Allies and partners agreed to extend the *Resolute Support Mission* beyond 2016, continue funding for the ANDSF until the end of 2020 and strengthen political and practical support for Afghan government institutions. These commitments were formally announced in the Warsaw Summit Declaration on Afghanistan and reaffirmed at the May 2017 meeting of NATO leaders in Brussels.

11. RSM's objectives have remained the same: to prevent Afghanistan's retreat into a sanctuary for terrorist forces capable of exporting violence and instability, as well as to provide the conditions and support for Afghanistan to sustain its own security, governance and development.

12. To achieve these goals, RSM will continue to train, advise and assist the ANDSF, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Ministry of Interior (MoI) with a new focus on more tactical-level TAA. Operating through regional and functional commands in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar and Laghman, NATO and partner forces work closely with a range of different ANDSF elements, including the police, air force, special operations and conventional ground forces (Resolute Support, 2018a). In an effort to replicate the success of US Special Forces' training for the Afghan Special Security Forces, the new US Afghanistan and South Asia policy provides for more US and Allied advisors to spread down to the battalion and brigade levels of Afghan conventional forces. Previously, save a few exceptions, conventional forces were only advised at the corps level (US Lead IG, 2017).

13. Moreover, RSM forces continue to make use of some combat enablers to address the ANDSF's capability shortcomings. These include intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, artillery systems, aerial fires and logistical support such as medical evacuation (US DoD, 2017). Importantly, the modification of the US forces' rules of engagement under the new Afghanistan and South Asia policy removed some caveats limiting US fires and air support in close proximity with hostile fighters (Wasserbly, 2017). As a result, US Forces operating in Operation *Freedom's Sentinel* (OFS) and the *Resolute Support Mission* increased their air operations significantly. In 2017, for example, they conducted 1,248 sorties with at least one weapon released – compared to 615 in 2016.

14. The Trump administration's revised Afghanistan and South Asia policy has translated into a significant increase of RSM force levels. Since the announcement of the new strategy last August, the United States has deployed 3,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, of which 2,400 are assigned to NATO's RSM (SIGAR, July 2018). Another 1,000 members of the newly created US Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB) are planned to be deployed starting from February 2018.

<sup>1</sup> This year's DSCTC report [\[170 DSCTC 18 E rev. 1 fin\]](#) investigates the burden sharing debate in the Alliance today as its central theme.

Specifically trained for combat advising, the SFAB will train, advise and assist the conventional ANDSF at the battalion level (SIGAR, January 2018; Wellman, 2018).

15. President Trump's call on NATO Allies and partners to follow suit has had its effect as well. Following the most recent meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in November 2017, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the size of NATO's mission in Afghanistan would increase from about 13,000 to approximately 16,000 personnel. Apart from the United States, another 27 RSM-troop-contributing nations also pledged to raise troop numbers (NATO, 2017). The German Defence Minister, for example, announced plans to increase the size of the German forces in Afghanistan from 980 to 1,300 personnel (Sprenger, 2018). NATO's newest member, Montenegro, has also pledged to increase troops by about 50% (Tomovic, 2018). To date, all contributing nations have pledged to increase either materiel and/or personnel support efforts to RSM.

16. Taking the already deployed reinforcements into account, RSM currently consists of 16,229 troops from 39 contributing nations (26 NATO Allies and 13 operation partners). With 8,475 troops the United States remains by far the largest force contributor. In addition to the NATO-led RSM, US troops are conducting counterterrorism and air operations as part of USFOR-A's Operation *Freedom's Sentinel*, amounting to a current total of approximately 14,000 US military personnel in Afghanistan (US DoD, 2017). Despite welcoming the recent troop reinforcements, US and NATO officials stated they continue to fall below international commitments and warned contingent shortcomings might endanger both the successful completion of the mission and effective force protection<sup>2</sup>.

#### IV. THE ANDSF AND THE INSURGENCY

##### A. THE ANDSF

17. With the start of NATO's RSM in 2015, the Afghan security forces have taken sole responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan. As the ANDSF are now about to enter their fourth fighting season since they took the lead against the Taliban-led insurgency, NATO officials are optimistic about their development. In November 2017, RSM Commander General John W. Nicholson stated the momentum has shifted in the ANSDF's favour – a clear difference the “stalemate” between government and insurgent forces he spoke of just seven months before (Nicholson, 2017a, 2017b). Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Curtis Scaparrotti echoed General Nicholson's perception during a more recent visit to Kabul in February 2018 and said he is certain “the Taliban cannot win on the battlefield” (Resolute Support, 2018b).

18. In early 2017, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani began implementing his four-year strategy to reform the ANDSF, now commonly referred to as the ‘ANSDF Road Map’. The plan aims to: 1) strengthen fighting capabilities, particularly in the special operations and air forces; 2) improve leadership capacity; 3) increase the unity of effort and command between MoD and MoI; and 4) reduce corruption across all Afghan security forces. The goal of these efforts is to bring 80% of the population under government control, forcing the Taliban into peace talks by 2020. The following assesses progress on President Ghani's ANSDF Road Map.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that with the completion of the SFAB's deployment, the size of US forces is expected to surpass 15,000 this year.

### ***ANDSF Road Map Progress***

19. Implementation of President Ghani's ANDSF Road Map has been slower than some expectations, but it has been producing concrete results since 2017. Following the abovementioned scheme outlined by the government in Kabul, the following significant steps have been taken. First, to increase the size and capabilities of the Afghan special operations and air forces: the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) expanded its training facilities, graduating four instead of two Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) companies each year; while the Afghan Air Force (AAF) received the first eight of 159 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, thus beginning the overhaul of the AAF's current fleet of 47 ageing Mi-17s (Hecker, 2018). Second, regarding leadership development, the MoI replaced 13 of its senior leaders, including even the Minister. In the MoD, five of the six Afghan National Army (ANA) corps commanders were removed and replaced with younger commanders, three of whom have special operations training and experience. Moreover, a standardised and comprehensive evaluation process has been imposed on all ANA commanders. Third, the Afghan Border Police (ABP) was renamed the Afghan Border Force (ABF) and transferred from the MoI to the MoD. The Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) is due to follow suit later in 2018, bringing all offensive security forces under MoD control (US DoD, 2017). The transfer of ABP and ANCOP to MoD's administration is expected to further support the MoI's efforts to engender efficient law enforcement and root out corruption (US DoD, 2018).

20. President Ghani's Road Map also outlines a plan to shift the Afghan National Police's (ANP) focus from counterinsurgency operations to traditional community policing. The Afghan National Police consists of four main branches and three sub branches and is under the authority of the Interior Ministry<sup>3</sup>. Among the main branches, the Afghan Uniform Police (AUP) constitutes the largest policing force with 99,068 authorised personnel and has a diverse range of tasks from traffic policing, to fire fighting and intelligence gathering, which make it the backbone of the ANP. The ANP's efforts to become an effective civilian-policing force, however, are hamstrung by its active participation in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations alongside the ANA. Because ANP forces are not "sufficiently trained or equipped" for COIN operations, "the near-constant prospect of combating" insurgent forces fuels the high-levels of attrition in the ranks of its personnel (US DoD, 2018). Thus, although it is too early to measure its effectiveness, President Ghani's goal of redefining the ANP's role and responsibilities to transform it into a skilled and capable police force remains vital.

21. Corruption, specifically public extortion, is also cited as another source of inefficacy greatly undermining ANP operations. Unjustified fines and taxes imposed upon the public, most commonly at checkpoints, by Afghan police officers are some examples of daily extortion. More importantly, ANP forces are also accused of accepting bribes from "criminals and insurgents in return for turning a blind eye" to their activities (UNDP, 2007). Accordingly, widespread institutional corruption within the ranks of the ANP hinders its forces from providing fair and sufficient crime fighting and civilian policing. Thus, reducing corruption across all of the Afghan security forces stands as one of the major initiatives emphasised by President Ghani's reform plan.

22. The ANDSF continue to operate below their authorised levels of 195,000 ANA and 157,000 ANP personnel (352,000 total). Although the ANDSF's total size has been more or less stable over the past year, as expressed above, both the ANA and the ANP suffer from high levels of attrition. Desertion accounts for about 70% of all personnel losses, with poor leadership being the most cited underlying driver (US DoD, 2017). Beyond numbers, the high turnover rate of 25-30% per year also prevents the ANDSF from developing a more experienced force. Specifically, recurrent lengthy deployments, the expectation of participating in near constant combat operations, as well as challenging living conditions contribute to the issues of reenlistment in the ranks of the ANP and ANA (US DoD, 2018). Upon RSM recommendation, the ANA has established a bonus scheme for

<sup>3</sup> The four main branches of the ANP are the Afghan Uniform Police, the Afghan Personnel and Pay System, the Afghan Border Police and the Afghan Anti-Crime Police; the three sub branches are the Afghan Local Police, the Afghan Public Protection Force and the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan.

personnel who serve the full duration of their enlistment (US Lead IG, 2017). It is, however, too early to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. In addition to the multilaterally funded ANDSF, the 30,000-strong Afghan Local Police (ALP) is supported by the United States and overseen by the MoI (US DoD, 2017).

23. The Afghan government and USFOR-A are currently reviewing plans to establish a new force under the MoD, called the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF). This force, which will consist of 7,500 ANA officers and 28,500 locally recruited personnel, is meant to prevent insurgents from regaining ground in government-controlled areas. Pilot programmes in selected provinces are planned to start in 2018, with a possible second round in 2019 (US DoD, 2018). If the ANATF model proves to be successful, it will allow the ANA to free up resources for offensive operations in the short term and to transition into a smaller and more affordable force in the long term (US DoD, 2017). Observers have raised concerns the proposed force will merely serve to train and equip private militias that will be most interested in advancing their own agendas. While the ANATF would bring militia forces under MoD control, this concern is not unjustified. Previous projects involving locally recruited forces, most notably the ALP, have had a mixed track record, providing security in some areas and committing human rights abuses against the local population in others (US Lead IG, 2018).

24. ANDSF casualty rates remained similar to the previous reporting year with fire and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and, to a lesser extent, mine strikes as the main causes (US DoD, 2017). In addition, insider attacks within the ANDSF ('green on green attacks') and on RSM forces ('green on blue attacks'), though declining, continued to be a concern as they adversely affect force morale and foster mistrust between Afghan and international forces. To address the danger of insider attacks, the MoD adopted a new policy in September 2017, which provides for improved force protection procedures for ANDSF and RSM personnel, such as enhanced screening mechanisms. A similar policy is planned for the MoI. To support the MoD and MoI in this endeavour, RSM has created an Insider Threat Advisor (ITA) position (SIGAR, January 2018).

## **B. THE TALIBAN**

25. As the Taliban failed to achieve their operational goal of capturing a provincial capital in 2017, they started to shift their focus to districts over the course of the past year. The group was able to take temporary control of some district centres through infiltration techniques rather than frontal assaults. However, the ANDSF, often with international forces' air support, proved to be effective in recapturing lost territory relatively quickly (IHS Jane's, 2017; US DoD, 2017). Although the Taliban have been pushed out of most urban centres, they were able to increase territorial control in rural areas slightly, where the government lacks effective representation. According to the latest RSM estimates based on data from October 2017, the Taliban hold about 14% of the country's 407 districts, while the government is in control of approximately 56% of them (Burns and Baldor, 2018). The remaining 30% are contested. In terms of population control, RSM assessed insurgents control about 10% and the government approximately 60% of the population, with the remainder being contested (US DoD, 2017).

26. The failure to capture urban centres even at the district level has led the Taliban to shift to increasingly guerrilla-style warfare against ANDSF bases, checkpoints and convoys across the country, as well as to high-profile attacks against civilians in Kabul and other major cities. From 17-19 October 2017, for instance, the Taliban launched a series of attacks in the provinces of Paktia, Ghazni and Kandahar, killing over 100 people, mostly police and military personnel (ICG, 2017b). These incidents demonstrate the Taliban's increasing focus on attacking ANDSF facilities, allowing the group to steal military equipment and weakening morale within the Afghan forces (UN, 2017). In January 2018, the Taliban claimed responsibility for two high-profile attacks in Kabul. On 21 January, a raid on the Intercontinental Hotel killed 22 people, most of whom were foreigners. A week later, a bomb hidden in an ambulance detonated in one of the capital's most protected areas, close to government buildings and embassies, killing over 100 people (ICG, January 2018). Most recently,

on 10 September, the Taliban carried out four attacks in northern Afghanistan killing at least 57 Afghan police officers (Rahim and Abed, 2018). The four attacks were the latest in a series of targeted attacks by the Taliban against Afghan security forces.

27. The pace of violence against security officials picked up after a three-day ceasefire was observed among the Taliban, the Afghan government, and international forces in the region during the Eid al-Fitr (ICG, July 2018). Although the violence dropped significantly during the temporary ceasefire, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-K) was the only exception and carried out an attack that killed at least 26 people. However, the adherence showed to the temporary truce by both Taliban and Afghan forces signified a “strong domestic constituency for peace” as President Ghani offered “unconditional talks” with Taliban (ICG, July 2018). Moreover, US officials and Taliban are reportedly preparing to hold potential peace talks, with the exchange of prisoners being a key starting point (Ahmad, 2018). The reports of potential peace talks were strengthened after US diplomats and Taliban representatives met in Doha in July where they laid the groundwork for future negotiations (Popaizai and Wilkinson, 2018).

28. Integration between the Taliban and the Haqqani network has further progressed, causing some observers to call the distinction between the two groups obsolete (US DoD, 2017). Infighting between the Taliban’s leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, and the head of the Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, has reportedly been settled with the help of Pakistani mediation. Nevertheless, the rift allowed Haqqani to consolidate his influence within the *Quetta Shura*, the Taliban’s leadership council (IHS Jane’s, 2017). Observers have noted these developments with concern, as the Haqqani network has historically been less committed to limiting civilian casualties (US DoD, 2017). Moreover, on 4 September 2018, the Taliban officially confirmed the death of Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the Haqqani network. Although Jalaluddin Haqqani’s death is not expected to affect the operations of the Haqqani network, it marks a significant symbolic loss for the militant group.

### C. DAESH IN AFGHANISTAN – ISIL-K

29. The territorial hold of ISIL-K continues to decline due to US counterterrorism operations, ANDSF operations and fighting with the Taliban (US DoD, 2017). Particularly, the group’s stronghold in the south of the Nangarhar province has suffered from an intense US airstrike campaign. By the end of 2017, ISIL-K’s territorial control had diminished to three districts in the province – down from nine in late 2015. Elements of the group, however, appear to have relocated to other parts of the country, most notably to Kunar and Jowzjan provinces (US Lead IG, 2018; Nicholson, 2017b).

30. Despite territorial losses, the group proved to be resilient in its ability to conduct high-profile attacks. In an effort to stir sectarian conflict, ISIL-K has focused on attacking Afghanistan’s Shi’a community. On 28 December 2017, the group claimed responsibility for killing at least 41 and wounding 84 people in a suicide attack at a Shi’a cultural centre in Kabul (SIGAR, January 2018). ISIL-K was also partly responsible for the spike of attacks against civilian and military targets in Kabul in January 2018. It claimed the attack on Save the Children’s Kabul office on 24 January, which killed at least three people, as well as the raid on a military academy on 29 January, which killed 11 ANDSF personnel (ICG, January 2018). Most recently, on 6 September 2018, ISIL-K conducted twin bomb attacks in Kabul’s predominantly Shia Qala-e-Nazer neighbourhood, killing 20 people.

31. USFOR-A and ANDSF operations as well as attrition are taking their toll on ISIL-K’s base of available fighters. The group is trying to compensate for its heavy personnel losses by recruiting disaffected members from other insurgent groups in the region, most notably former Taliban and *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) members (US DoD, 2017). So far, however, increased pressure on ISIL-affiliated fighters in Syria and Iraq has not swelled the ranks of the organisation’s Afghan branch (Nicholson, 2017b). According to RSM statements in December 2017, the total number of ISIL-K members throughout Afghanistan amounts to about 1,000 people (Bunch, 2017).



32. ISIL-K continues to have difficulties gaining local support and funding. The group's ideology does not resonate with the larger civilian population and competition over illegal revenue sources continues to bring the group into conflict with the Taliban and other insurgent groups (US DoD, 2017). The competition over members and resources between the Taliban and ISIL-K is also fuelled by recent reports of possible peace talks between the United States and the Taliban. While ideologically the Taliban's local agenda continues to clash with ISIL-K's goal of establishing a global caliphate, on the battlefield the Taliban prove to be stronger, as more than 150 ISIL-K fighters were recently forced to surrender to Afghan security officials after being defeated by the Taliban in Jowzjan in August 2018 (Sahak, 2018). Thus, ISIL-K finds it hard to emerge as a major force in the face of the Taliban's enduring regional presence.

#### **D. OTHER INSURGENT GROUPS**

33. Limiting the threat emanating from al-Qaeda remains a priority for US counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan. The group maintains a limited but resilient presence in eastern, north-eastern and, to a lesser extent, southeastern Afghanistan. Moreover, its regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent, was able to settle in the southern and southeastern parts of the country as well as in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's current focus is ensuring its survival and sponsoring local armed groups rather than going on the offensive (Giustozzi, 2018; US DoD, 2017). Other violent extremist organisations, most notably the Taliban, continue to provide al-Qaeda members with safe haven and support, which USFOR-A assesses as "probably the greatest obstacle to eliminating their presence in Afghanistan" (US Lead IG, 2018). However, there is no evidence to suggest coordination between the groups at the strategic level (US DoD, 2017).

#### **V. STATUS OF THE CIVILIAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**

34. The general security situation for Afghan citizens remains precarious. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported 10,453 conflict-related civilian casualties in 2017, which included 3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured. For the first half of 2018, UNAMA documented 1,692 deaths – the highest number of civilian casualties at mid-year for "any comparable time over the last ten years" (UNAMA, 15 July 2018). Although the overall numbers remain high, the year-on-year casualty count is decreasing for the first time since 2012 (UNAMA, February 2018). In addition to the persistently high number of casualties, the conflict has also caused the displacement of over 445,000 civilians in 2017 (UNOCHA, 2018). This brings the number of internally displaced people in Afghanistan to 2 million, with another 2.6 million refugees living outside the country (Amnesty International, 2018).

35. According to UNAMA's latest report, the number of casualties attributed to combined IEDs has surpassed those caused by ground engagements in 2017. The mission voiced concern about the surge of sectarian-motivated attacks against places of worship and religious leaders, including ISIL-K's growing focus on attacking the Afghan Shi'a community. In the summer of 2018 alone, ISIL-K claimed two attacks on the Shi'a community. In June, suicide bombers targeted a gathering of Afghan religious scholars, killing at least 12 and injuring 17 (Mashal and Sukhanyar, 2018). Meanwhile, in August two suicide bombers attacked Shi'a worshippers in the Paktia province, injuring 81 and killing 25 (Al Jazeera, 2018).

36. Of all conflict-related casualties in 2017, UNAMA attributed nearly two thirds to anti-government elements and one fifth to pro-government forces, with the remainder being caused by unattributed cross-fire during ground combat, explosive remnants of war and shelling from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

37. There has been substantial debate on the human costs associated with growing airstrikes by international and Afghan forces. In fact, UNAMA's 2017 figures present the largest year-on-year casualty count caused by aerial fire since records began in 2009. Putting these numbers into

perspective, however, the mission states the increase in civilian deaths and injured is relatively low compared to the significant rise of aerial operations over the course of the past year, resulting in an overall reduced harm ratio. Commenting on the discussion, Major General James B. Hecker, Commander of NATO's Air Command in Afghanistan, said RSM's training for Afghan pilots includes developing the necessary hard skills but also "a mindset that prevents civilian casualties to the greatest extent possible" (Hecker, 2018).

## VI. GOVERNANCE

### A. ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL REFORM

38. In addition to the challenges directly associated with security and security sector reform, the Afghan state continues to face mounting political challenges. In this context, General Nicholson has stressed the importance of holding credible and timely elections to increase government legitimacy and social pressure on the Taliban (Nicholson, 2017b). The implementation of electoral reforms in preparation for the parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October 2018 and the presidential elections due to take place in April 2019 is progressing relatively slowly. Both political and technical issues, including challenges associated with voter registration, security concerns and political disputes, have stalled progress on electoral preparations.

39. At the heart of the new electoral law passed in November 2016 is the commitment to link voters to specific polling centres in order to reduce ballot-box stuffing, which was the most common form of fraud during the 2014 presidential elections (SIGAR, January 2018). Ambitious plans to introduce a biometric voter registration and verification system have been discarded, as the procurement process for biometric machines proved unfeasible in the short term. New plans require citizens to present their *tazkera*, the Afghan National Identification Card, directly at one of the polling centres to obtain a paper-based voter registration certificate (SIGAR, January 2018; Yawar Adili, 2017b). However, about 10 million Afghans adults do not possess identification documents, most notably women, refugee returnees and internally displaced persons (Darnolf, 2018; NRC, 2016). Observers have stated that the Afghan Central Civil Registration Authority (ACCRA), which is in charge of issuing civil documentation, lacks both the institutional capacity and the appropriate funding to issue *tazkeras* to all eligible voters prior to voter registration (Darnolf, 2018).

40. Along with the passing of the new electoral law, the government appointed new members to the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) in November 2016. Lately, the IEC and the ECC, now the two main bodies in charge of administering and overseeing the elections, have come under criticism by political parties and civil society institutions. Specific allegations include the lack of progress, internal division and poor leadership (UN, 2017). On 15 November 2017, President Ghani removed the IEC's chairman, Najibullah Ahmadzai, from office after five of the commission's seven members had accused him of incompetence. The president's decision came after a coalition of opposition groups and protest movements demanded the dismissal of all commissioners. With six of ten IEC Secretariat positions unfilled and electoral preparations increasingly turning into a battlefield between different political factions, observers have raised serious doubt about whether the IEC and the ECC have the capacity to manage the electoral process properly (Yawar Adili, 2017a).

41. In August 2018 the ECC announced that 35 candidates, 12 of which are current members of Parliament, will be barred from running in the 20 October 2018 elections due to their connections to armed groups (RFE/RL, August 2018). Whilst the announcement has been praised by some foreign diplomats who claim it will help ensure fair and legitimate elections, domestically it was met with criticism and debates over whether the ECC is truly independent and whether the process of barring candidates was fair and just. This has increased political tensions in Afghanistan, adding to pre-existing security concerns as elections approach. Concerns remain that the dissatisfaction of

those barred from elections and their supporters will spark violence, which could either further delay the elections or at least disrupt them.

42. Ensuring voter security remains a challenge as well. In 2017-2018, the IEC reviewed the location of polling centres throughout the country to assess voter accessibility for the first time (UN, 2017). Out of the approximately 7,300 polling centres, the IEC assessed 1,707 centres across 32 districts as being subject to high security threats (Shaheed, 2018a). In support of safe and fair elections in Afghanistan, in July 2018 UNAMA decided to allocate an additional USD 57 million to the elections budget (UNAMA, 25 July 2018). The US Department of Defense (DoD) stated the United States and NATO Allies are not planning to support election security with significant force levels (US DoD, 2017). However, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has offered (limited) NATO assistance for the parliamentary elections in October 2018 amid fears of security issues hampering the election process (RFE/RL, April 2018).

43. The slow pace of electoral preparations – parliamentary elections were initially scheduled for 2015 – puts the legitimacy of Afghanistan’s legislative bodies at risk and causes internal turmoil; particularly because successful local and parliamentary elections are a pre-requisite for long-awaited constitutional amendments. For example, the implementation of the 2014 executive power sharing agreement between the president and the chief executive officer of the national unity government (NUG) will require constitutional amendment; only a *loya jirga*<sup>4</sup>, however, can enact constitutional amendments, and they in turn depend on successful district council elections for their constituency. At the time of writing, the challenge of maintaining local elections coupled with the ongoing power struggle between the president, the legislature, and critics of the national unity government like Mr Karzai have led to political paralysis.

## B. EFFORTS TO STEM CORRUPTION

44. Among Afghanistan’s greatest challenges is deeply entrenched public-sector corruption, which threatens to undermine the efficiency and legitimacy of the Afghan government and its security institutions. Although the NUG made combatting corruption a priority when its members took office in 2014, there has been little progress since then. Afghanistan continues to rank near the bottom, as 177<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2018). Moreover, 83.7% of all respondents in the Asia Foundation’s latest survey of the Afghan people said corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan as a whole (The Asia Foundation, 2017). Putting these rankings into perspective, Integrity Watch Afghanistan’s (IWA) 2016 National Corruption Survey states that USD 3 billion (almost a sixth of Afghanistan’s GDP that year) was paid in bribes in 2015, an almost 50% increase from 2014 (Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2016).

45. At the 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, the NUG committed to draft a comprehensive anticorruption strategy encompassing all government branches. About a year later, on 28 September 2017, the ‘National Strategy for Combatting Corruption’ was officially approved by the High Council on Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption. The National Strategy, however, puts anticorruption activities under the authority of the Attorney General’s Office, while the previous draft anticorruption law provided for the establishment of an independent commission (SIGAR, January 2018). In the absence of an agreement on oversight, progress on the anticorruption law has been stalled. Further, the National Strategy has also been criticised as falling short of international standards and best practices, missing aligned goals and benchmarks as well as not calling for the establishment of a permanent and fully independent anticorruption organisation (SIGAR, January 2018).

46. RSM is specifically involved in efforts to stem corruption in Afghanistan’s security sector. It has, for instance, established a Counter-Corruption Advisor Group (CCAG) to support the MoI and

<sup>4</sup> A *Loya Jirga* is a traditional grand tribal assembly of elders to which district councils send delegates, and which has a legislative function in the country.

MoD in identifying and targeting corruption networks within their own ranks and to coordinate anti-corruption efforts among Afghan security institutions, RSM and international partners (US DoD, 2017). Moreover, the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) and the Afghan Ministry of Finance signed a Memorandum of Understanding in August 2017, allowing the CSTC-A to audit the execution of the United States' on-budget assistance to Afghan security forces and institutions. The CSTC-A has also supported the Ministry of Finance in developing the new 'Afghan Personnel and Pay System'. Currently under implementation, the new system registers every ANDSF member biometrically, thereby reducing the risk of paying unaccounted for (or 'ghost') soldiers (Nicholson, 2017b; SIGAR, January 2018). CSTC-A advisors also work with the Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC) and its principal investigative arm, the Major Crimes Task Force (MCTF). Established by President Ghani in 2016, the ACJC brings together investigators, prosecutors and judges to cover high-level corruption cases, meaning those involving losses of more than AFN 5 million or allegations against senior public officials (Resolute Support, 2017; SIGAR, January 2018). However, while the ACJC represents some progress in the Afghan anticorruption efforts, there are worries that it "lack[s] the capacity, resources, or security [it] need[s] to perform [its] function" (SIGAR, July 2018).

### ***The Opium-Corruption Nexus***

47. One of the key feeders into Afghanistan's corruption issues, opium trade, provides equally complex challenges to local and regional security. More than 75 per cent of the world's opium comes from Afghanistan (see Annex A) and the value of the opium trade has been estimated to over half (53 per cent) of the nation's licit GDP (UNODC, 2018a). During the course of the war in Afghanistan, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen opium cultivation and trade spike to unprecedented levels. Even during President Ghani's rule – praised for being harsher on warlords than his predecessor Hamid Karzai's administration – cultivation and production have increased. From 2016 to 2017 opium production increased by 87 per cent to reach 9,000 tons (UNODC, 2018a).

48. The increase in opium production has both global and local implications: fuelling regional instability and insurgency sustaining terrorist groups through illicit funds, but also making communities dependent on the income from opium poppy cultivation. The result is rampant corruption at all levels. The large volume of poppy cultivation makes Afghanistan the key provider of opium to not only its immediate neighbours in South Asia but also Europe, via Central Asian and Middle Eastern routes, most of Africa and even the United States (Meyer, 2018). The Taliban's links to narcotics go back to the 1990s, and more concretely following the wake of the 2001 US invasion when, having moved to Pakistan, the Taliban solidified its links to the Quetta alliance, a loose confederation of three tribal clans in control of most of the regional narcotics trade. Displaying their cross-organisational co-operation capabilities, the insurgent Taliban and the drug kingpins agreed to exchange funding provided by illicit trade for security provided by the Taliban and their affiliates. As a result, the Taliban has had between USD 100 and USD 350 million available as funding for its insurgency each year (Meyer, 2018).

49. With the support of the international community, predominantly the United States, the Afghan government has taken various measures to combat the narcotics trade in Afghanistan. However, these have yielded limited results – despite significant opium production in Afghanistan, most drug seizures happen outside the country (notably in the Middle East and Eastern Europe). The Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN), established in 2005 and tasked with the "coordination, evaluation and implementation of the Counter Narcotics law and the National Drugs Control Strategy (NDCS)", has received USD 27.7 million from the US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) for capacity building purposes since 2008.

50. A key role the Ministry has recently played is implementing the new penal law on counter narcotics, in effect since February 2018. Stricter than the previous law, the new penal law favours prison terms over fines and has criminalised public officials' behaviour that may jeopardise official investigations. While the United States continues to train Afghan authorities on implementing of the

law, results are encouraging as over five hundred cases were adjudicated using the new law between 1 April and 7 June 2018 (SIGAR, July 2018). Meanwhile, within the ANDSF, the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) and specialised units within it – especially the Sensitive Investigation (SIU) and National Interdiction Units (NIU) – conduct key counter narcotics operations. As of July 2018, the CNPA has 2,596 authorised personnel located in all 34 provinces. As of 2016, NATO has played a role in training counter narcotics officers via its Partnership for Counter Narcotics Training with the UNODC to tackle drug trafficking in South and Central Asia.

51. Complementing these operations is the INL’s Counter-Narcotics Community Engagement (CNCE) programme established in 2013. Targeting local communities and farmers, the programme funds initiatives “aimed at discouraging poppy cultivation, preventing drug use, and encouraging licit crops” (SIGAR, July 2018). Similarly, the Boost Alternative Development Intervention through Licit Livelihoods (BADILL) programme, implemented by the UNODC, endeavours to diversify licit livelihoods for small-scale local farmers and remove incentives for illicit poppy cultivation. Observers note, however, this initiative has had very limited long-term results in dissuading farmers from opium production (SIGAR, July 2018). As political tensions, the ongoing insurgency, rampant corruption, and illicit trade continue to reinforce one another in Afghanistan, the key in resolving these issues will lie in the cohesion of the national unity government and the success of its negotiations with the Taliban. The more tolerant stance of President Ghani towards the Taliban and his increasingly pro-peace settlement rhetoric spell out a commitment to political stabilisation that is a positive signal for creating the conditions for a lasting peace (Ghani, 2018).

## **VII. INCREASING FOCUS ON THE REGIONAL DIMENSION**

52. It is clear achieving peace and stability requires a political settlement between the national unity government and the Taliban. Less straightforward and thus often neglected when discussing Afghanistan’s prospect for peace is the regional dimension of this endeavour. The announcement of the gradual withdrawal of NATO troops in 2011, however, has caused Afghanistan’s neighbours to move from the margins to the centre of attention again.

### **A. PAKISTAN**

53. The most crucial neighbour for achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan is Pakistan. Besides Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan is one of only three countries that formally recognised the Taliban regime as Afghanistan’s legitimate government between 1996 and 2001. Although then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf officially cut ties with the Taliban within days of the 9/11 attacks, less conspicuous support channels remain. To date, the Afghan Taliban and the affiliated Haqqani network continue to enjoy safe haven on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line, allowing these groups critical sanctuary to avoid ANDSF and coalition-supported military operations and giving them the space necessary to plan, resource and launch attacks (US DoD, 2017).

54. There is considerable evidence Pakistan’s military and especially its Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate (ISI), actively support Taliban activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The targeting and subsequent assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 drew global attention to the Pakistani military’s complicity with various armed groups and the freedom of action these groups’ leaderships enjoy in the Pakistani area of operation. More recently, Ahkter Muhammad Mansour, then leader of the Taliban, was killed in a US drone strike in Pakistan in 2016. He was found without any weapons or guards (Gall, 2017). For such a high-profile terrorist group leader to operate so freely in the region suggests at the very least tacit, if not overt, support from the government in Pakistan. In addition, the track record of arrests or disappearances of Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan who make overtures to the government in Kabul or their international partners without the direct consent of the Pakistani government only further highlights the degree to which political and military leaders in Islamabad maintain key influence over terrorist groups (ICG, 2017a).

55. Pakistan's willingness to cooperate and crackdown on Taliban sanctuaries is balanced with a parallel desire by both political and military leaders to maintain armed group proxies active in the region in order to curb India's potential influence in Afghanistan.

56. Since British India was divided into what is now known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India in 1947, the two countries have fought each other in four full-scale wars and 43 smaller conflicts (Mitton, 2014). Central to the ongoing dispute is the Kashmir region, which both states claim belongs to their respective territory. Marked by this history of bitter rivalry, the Pakistani military sees Afghanistan as providing critical strategic depth *vis-à-vis* India. In the minds of Pakistani leaders, sustaining strong political influence in Afghanistan can prevent potential encirclement by their long-term rival and, in the instance another war breaks out, provide the government in Islamabad with a reliable ally on its rear flank (Dalrymple, 2013).

57. The 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan sought to remove the Taliban from power due to their support and harbouring of al-Qaeda. The US intervention was a critical juncture for Pakistan's role in the region – not only did it lose its agent in Kabul, it also started to decline in importance in relation to the international community's efforts to bring peace and stability to the region. This was due to its lack of initiative in denying safe haven to the remnants of the defeated Afghan Taliban as they fled across the border from US forces. The issue of Taliban and other armed groups asylum in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas soon became a key dividing point for international forces on the ground, as well as for the political effort to foster a stable government in Kabul in order to develop a new Afghan state. US-NATO combined efforts knocked the Pashtun out of key positions in Kabul, ushering in a new era where the Tajik-influenced government led by Hamid Karzai<sup>5</sup> had close ties to India (Mitton, 2014). Hence, in Pakistan's view, backing insurgents was its only realistic instrument to maintain influence in the region.

58. When Ashraf Ghani took office as president of the NUG in 2014, he initially made considerable efforts to improve relations and security cooperation with Pakistan. There were several reciprocal visits to Kabul and Islamabad in late 2014 and early 2015, during which Afghan and Pakistani officials tried to find ways to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table. Initially, officials on both sides expressed beliefs that formal talks were near (Yusuf and Smith, 2015). President Ghani even agreed to send a small number of Afghan troops to be trained at the Military Academy in Abbottabad in early 2015, after former President Karzai had repeatedly rebuffed Pakistani offers to assist in the training of the ANDSF. Shortly afterwards, in April of the same year, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its Afghan counterpart, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), signed a Memorandum of Understanding aiming to enhance intelligence cooperation (Katzman and Thomas, 2017).

59. Meaningful action against Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, however, failed to materialise and recent high-profile attacks jarred *rapprochement* efforts, eventually causing Afghan-Pakistani relations to deteriorate again. In the past two years, President Ghani has repeatedly called on Islamabad to take decisive action against Afghan extremists launching attacks from Pakistan. At the first meeting of the "Kabul Process" in June 2017, for example, Mr Ghani even accused the Pakistani government of waging "an undeclared war of aggression" against Afghanistan (Dawn, 2017). Pakistan denies supporting the Taliban and other extremist groups, arguing it is being made the scapegoat for other countries' failings in the protracted and gridlocked conflict. Privately, however, civilian government officials say it is the military and particularly the ISI that are standing in the way of concrete measures aiming to clamp down on insurgent groups (Abi-Habib, 2018).

60. These more recent events unfold against the background of a long-standing border dispute between the two countries. Afghanistan refuses to recognise the Durand Line as its international border with Pakistan, arguing it divides Pashtun territory. The border was drawn under British colonial rule in 1893 and has regained attention in 1947, when Pakistan declared its independence and refused Afghanistan's demands to grant Pashtun tribes living on the Pakistani side of the border

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Karzai served as interim leader of Afghanistan from 2001-2004 and officially as President from 2004-2014.

the right to self-determination (Katzman and Thomas, 2017; Rahi, 2014). Recently, Pakistan has started to build a fence along the Durand Line, with plans to cover 2,400 km by the end of 2018 (SIGAR, January 2018). While Islamabad argues the fence is necessary to regulate cross-border movements and prevent militant incursions, Kabul has voiced strong opposition to the unilateral undertaking and insists on renegotiating the border (Dilawar and Haider, 2017). Despite heightened tensions in the bilateral relationship, military-to-military border cooperation at the tactical level remains largely intact (US DoD, 2017).

61. Many observers were apprehensive about the election of Imran Khan as Pakistan's new Prime Minister in July 2018 due to worries about his policy on Afghanistan. Mr Khan had previously stated the Taliban insurgency is "justified" (Boone, 2012), which raised concerns about Pakistan being a spoiler in the Afghan peace talks (Schmitt, 2018). Prime Minister Khan, however, has thus far been supportive of peace negotiations with the Taliban, having said: "[i]f there is peace in Afghanistan, there will be peace in Pakistan" (Coll, 2018). Given his Pashtun background, Mr Khan could in fact increase ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan should this become a foreign policy priority for his government (McKirdy, 2018).

### ***The Trump Administration Changes the Course of US-Pakistan Policy***

62. While US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama prioritised ensuring Pakistan's overall stability to keep the country's numerous militant groups in check and its fast-growing stockpile of nuclear weapons out of the wrong hands, the Trump administration has decided to take a hard line with Pakistan. While presenting the new US South Asia strategy in August 2017, President Donald Trump stated his administration could no longer ignore the sanctuary provided to the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan. As a result, in January 2018, the US government decided to suspend all Coalition Support Fund and Military Financing aid for Pakistan – security assistance worth approximately USD 2 billion – until the Pakistani leadership substantiates its commitment to crackdown on Taliban sanctuaries (Bokhari et al., 2018; Nawaz, 2018). Ahead of his visit to Islamabad in September 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the United States would cancel USD 300 million of aid to Pakistan "due to a lack of decisive actions in support of the South Asia strategy" (Barker, 2018).

63. Moreover, the Trump administration successfully lobbied the member states of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) into putting Pakistan back on the 'grey list' of countries not doing enough to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. This grey listing is likely to discourage banks and other financial institutions from engaging with the Pakistani government, complicating the country's efforts to meet its growing financial needs (Abi-Habib, 2018; Masood, 2018).

64. The changing course of US-Pakistan policy under President Trump has sparked substantial debate in the US foreign policy community. Some security experts argue a hardline approach gives the United States increased leverage by limiting Pakistan's capabilities. For example, the reduction in aid stalls military modernisation efforts and could be a long-term setback if no other country can fill the substantial gap left by the loss of US aid (BBC News, 2018).

65. At the same time, however, some observers question whether the strategy of increasing pressure on Pakistan will achieve the desired results, arguing it might actually prove to be counterproductive. Pakistan was on the FATF's grey list from 2012 to 2015 and US military aid to the country was already cut by about 60% from 2010 to 2017 – neither of these measures had any apparent impact on Pakistan's behaviour (Felbab-Brown, 2018; Masood, 2018). While there have been few signs of such measures impacting Pakistan's behaviour toward terrorist groups, the United States has benefited from its ability to use Pakistani roads and airspace to deliver supplies into Afghanistan and Pakistani military bases to launch drone strikes (Aleem, 2018). Some experts, including a former US ambassador to Pakistan, fear these benefits could end if aid is cut off in a highly public manner. Pakistan could obstruct or complicate US operations, as it did in 2011 when it shut down NATO supply routes into Afghanistan after the United States attacked a Pakistani guard

post, or it could pursue closer ties with rivals such as China and Russia (BBC News, 2011; Olson, 2018). Increasing pressure on Pakistan also risks reinforcing the military's perception that it needs Afghan insurgents to compensate for insecurities *vis-à-vis* India, particularly because the Trump administration's South Asia policy also calls for a growing Indian role in Afghanistan (Felbab-Brown, 2018).

## **B. INDIA**

66. Much like its principal rival, India's involvement in Afghanistan is informed by concerns over violent extremism and the potential influence of Pakistan. India strongly opposed the Taliban government, as it viewed Kabul's harbouring of al-Qaeda as a major threat to its security. From New Delhi's perspective, links between al-Qaeda and violent separatist groups in Pakistan directly connected extremism in Afghanistan to instability in the disputed Kashmir region and south east Asia more generally (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). Even after the Taliban's ouster, some of these groups have continued to prove their potency with major terrorist attacks in India and against Indian targets in Afghanistan. Most notable in this regard are the 2008 and 2011 Mumbai attacks, but also the 2008 and 2009 attacks against the Indian embassy and the 2010 attack against an Indian guesthouse in Kabul (Dalrymple, 2013). Eager to prevent any violent extremist groups from regaining power in Kabul, New Delhi supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in 2001 with both military advisors and equipment, and it has made considerable efforts to re-establish and solidify bilateral relations since then.

67. India has become one of Afghanistan's largest and most reliable regional partners in terms of trade and development assistance (US DoD, 2017). Since the Taliban's ouster in 2001, New Delhi has funded major civil development and infrastructure projects such as the new parliament building in Kabul and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam in Herat Province, completed in December 2015 and June 2016 respectively. India's development assistance to Afghanistan amounts to projects worth USD 2 billion in total and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged an additional USD 1 billion for Afghanistan's development in 2016 (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). Meanwhile, the overall volume of trade in goods amounted to USD 383 million in 2016 (SIGAR, January 2018). While India is becoming increasingly involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction and economic development, the Indian government has been careful to stress the civilian character of these investments.

68. Most recently, India has committed to invest USD 85 million in the development of the Chabahar seaport in south eastern Iran (Dawn, 2018). As Pakistan continues to block the land transit of goods from Afghanistan to India and vice versa, the project aims to facilitate trade between India, Iran and Afghanistan while bypassing Pakistan. Launched with a series of trilateral transit agreements in May 2016, the project has progressed relatively slowly as the first consignment of wheat was shipped from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar only in October 2017 (Panda, 2017). On 17 February 2018, Prime Minister Modi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani finalised agreements on the management of Chabahar, giving operational control of the port to the Indian government for the following 18 months (Dawn, 2018). In addition to sea access, Afghanistan and India have also established a direct airfreight corridor, which was inaugurated with the first cargo flights between New Delhi and Kabul in June 2017 (MEA India, 2017a).

### ***India as Security Partner to Afghanistan***

69. The nature of Indian-Afghan relations changed and intensified again in 2011, when the two countries signed a "Strategic Partnership" giving India a formal role in Afghan security for the first time. Importantly, the partnership agreement provided for India to train and equip ANDSF personnel (MFA Afghanistan, 2011). Since then, about 130 members of the Afghan security forces have attended officer-training programmes at Indian military institutions every year (US DoD, 2017). Furthermore, India has begun to supply the ANDSF with combat equipment, thus departing from its previous policy of providing Afghanistan with support equipment only. Most notably, India has donated four Mil Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF) to replace their grounded



Mi-35s. As the donated helicopters have also experienced serviceability issues, however, the Indian government announced in 2018 that it would purchase four refurbished Mi-24 helicopters from Belarus for Afghanistan (Gady, 2018).

70. Recent developments suggest India's involvement in Afghan security is likely to increase even further. As a way of coordinating and reviewing the implementation of the strategic partnership at the ministerial level, the agreement established a "Partnership Council" with regular meetings headed by the Foreign Ministers of both countries. The council met for the second time in September 2017, where both sides agreed to strengthen security cooperation and extend India's assistance to the ANDSF. Notably, the council also explicitly called for the end of state-sponsored sanctuaries for terrorist groups attacking Afghanistan (MEA India, 2017b).

71. This does not mean, however, there are no limits to the role India is willing to play in Afghanistan. As part of the new US South Asia policy, President Trump called on New Delhi to contribute more to international efforts aiming to foster peace and stability in Afghanistan. In September 2017, a month after President Trump's address, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharam met with her US counterpart James Mattis in New Delhi. During the meeting, Mrs Sitharam made it clear India is not going to send troops to Afghanistan but is prepared to increase development assistance and training for ANDSF personnel (Deutsche Welle, 2017). India's restraint in this regard is likely to be first and foremost informed by New Delhi's fears of potential retaliation attacks by Pakistan-backed insurgent groups in India or against Indian targets in Afghanistan.

### C. CHINA

72. Beijing's expanding regional investment projects, coupled with concerns that instability and violent extremism in Afghanistan might threaten China's domestic security, drive the country's involvement in Afghanistan. First, despite a relatively small, shared border (92 km), Afghanistan's mountainous and sparsely populated Wakhan corridor connects to China's Muslim-majority Xinjiang province, where Uygur separatist groups seek to establish an independent East Turkestan. China is concerned about the surge of violence in recent years and suspects some of these groups take advantage of instability in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to train and plan terrorist attacks in Xinjiang and other parts of China (Huasheng, 2016; Umarov, 2017).

73. Second, Afghanistan's wealth in minerals such as copper, iron and gold, estimated to be worth USD 1 trillion, has attracted major Chinese investments (Barnes, 2017). In 2008, for instance, the state-owned China Metallurgical Group signed contracts to develop Afghanistan's Mes Aynak field, the country's largest copper deposit. Like many other Chinese projects in Afghanistan, however, security-related incidents such as attacks at the site and kidnappings of Chinese specialists have stalled the field's full development (Umarov, 2017).

74. Third, and most importantly, Afghanistan's geographic location in the heart of Central and South Asia means peace and stability in Afghanistan are crucial for the viability and effectiveness of China's massive "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative. Launched in 2013, OBOR is the centrepiece of Beijing's current foreign policy. It aims to connect China to Central and Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa through a network of railways and highways (the land-based "Silk Road Economic Belt") as well as maritime routes (the sea-based "Maritime Silk Road"). The increase in Chinese investment and engagement in Central Asia through OBOR suggests China could play a significant role in increasing the regional links between Afghanistan and their Central Asian neighbours.

75. In 2016, Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi signed a Memorandum of Understanding on enhancing cooperation within the OBOR framework, giving Afghanistan a formal place in China's ambitious infrastructure project (Kumar, 2017). Since then, a new rail route was opened, linking China to Afghanistan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Wu, 2016). Beijing has also signalled Afghanistan could become part of the China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC), a series of infrastructure projects currently under construction which aims to connect China to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan (SIGAR, January 2018).

76. These economic and strategic interests as well as the significant cutback of international forces and partners in Afghanistan after the departure of ISAF have driven Beijing from its traditional place at the sidelines of the Afghan war towards greater involvement in Afghan security issues. The 2012 “Joint Declaration between the People’s Republic of China and the Islamic State of Afghanistan on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership” marked the beginning of strengthened security cooperation between the two countries. Two years later, as a way of accelerating the implementation of the agreement, Beijing appointed the first Chinese Special Envoy for Afghan Affairs. Moreover, since the NUG took office in 2014, Kabul and Beijing have signed four Memoranda of Understanding on defence and security cooperation and hosted an unprecedented number of reciprocal visits by high-level diplomatic, security and military officials (Umarov, 2017). In 2016, Afghan security forces received their first batch of Chinese military aid, reportedly containing military vehicles, logistical equipment, ammunition and weapons (Dominguez, 2016). Most recently, there have been reports of joint counterterrorism patrols made up of Afghan and Chinese troops operating in the Wakhan corridor along the countries’ shared border (Katzman and Thomas, 2017). While Chinese military assistance and Sino-Afghan security cooperation are still marginal compared to other international actors, they have certainly increased in recent years. In August 2018, reports emerged indicating the Chinese government is planning to open a military base in Afghanistan to host troops undertaking counterterrorism training in neighbouring Xinjiang (Farmer, 2018). However, these claims have thus far been denied (Reuters, August 2018).

77. In addition to growing bilateral efforts, China has launched or participated in a number of regional initiatives aiming to promote the Afghan peace process. Most notably, China is part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Contact Group and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. While all of these regional forums convene regularly, no significant progress towards a peace settlement has been achieved since negotiations with the Taliban broke down in 2015 (UN, 2017). China is nevertheless considered to be in a relatively good position to foster cooperation and mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as it has friendly relations with both governments. With close ties to the Pakistani military and at least some informal links to the Quetta *Shura*, the Taliban’s leadership council, Kabul hopes Beijing will use its relations to bring the Taliban back to the negotiation table (Huasheng, 2016; Jackson and Abbas, 2018).

#### **D. IRAN**

78. Iran’s involvement in Afghanistan is mainly driven by its desire to contain US and ISIL-K influence in Afghanistan. Iran’s foremost concern is the increase in ISIL-K attacks against the Afghan Shi’a community. Second, Tehran seeks to limit US military presence in the close vicinity of its border, which the United States may be able to use as a staging ground to pressure or attack Iran (Katzman, 2018).

79. These concerns have led the Shiite-ruled Tehran to expand its ties with the hard-line Sunni Taliban and to support their fighters with money, training and equipment. Thus, the very group Iran vehemently opposed in the 1990s and nearly went to war with in 1998 has now become a useful proxy force to advance Iranian interests in the region (Gall, 2017).

80. Yet, Iranian-Afghan relations are more complex, as both sides recognise – at a meeting in Kabul with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Arghchi, Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah said “joint cooperation between the two countries of Iran and Afghanistan on fighting terrorism is necessary and the rise of shared threats makes these kinds of cooperation more necessary” (ICG, 27 September 2018). Iran is Afghanistan’s second largest trading partner after Pakistan as well as the most significant exporter of goods to Afghanistan – the total trade between the two coming to USD 1.46 billion in 2016 (UN, 2016). Iran’s commitment to economic cooperation is most evident in the Chabahar Port project with India, under which Iran is due to hand over control

of the port to India in exchange for trade routes from landlocked Afghanistan to be able to bypass Pakistan. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's commitment to cooperation with Iran is evident in its request for exemption from Iran-related sanctions.

81. Moreover, there is also evidence Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has been recruiting Afghan refugees to join pro-government militias in Syria since at least 2013. According to Human Rights Watch, potential recruits do not always join voluntarily but are often detained and given the choice between deportation to Afghanistan and fighting in Syria (HRW, 2016, 2017). While they do not pose an immediate risk to Afghan security, their eventual return from Syria might swell the ranks of Afghan insurgent groups with battle-hardened and trained fighters. During a visit to Tehran UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi recently stated Iran is in grave need of further support in order to be able to house, support and educate the large Afghan refugee population (of almost a million civilians) it is currently host to (Lomax, 2018).

### **VIII. CONCLUSIONS FOR NATO MEMBER STATE PARLIAMENTARIANS**

82. It is clear NATO Allies view sustaining their mission in Afghanistan as being of vital importance. NATO Allies and their international partners have a clear goal with their mission in Afghanistan – to ensure Afghanistan will never again become an ungoverned space from which terrorist groups can operate and launch attacks. Achieving this goal has involved almost 17 years of significant investment in personnel and resources – some people have paid the ultimate price to help Afghanistan achieve the peace and stability that have eluded it for the last four decades at least.

83. Military assistance to the ANDSF and financial and diplomatic assistance to the government in Kabul have changed the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in significant ways: the ANDSF are leading the fight against the insurgent forces seeking to undermine the government; access to health care, education and other economic opportunities has expanded greatly since the end of Taliban rule in 2001; a parliamentary democracy, though advancing slowly, is taking hold and working to guarantee rights for all Afghan citizens. Advances in rights for women and girls in the country have perhaps come the farthest of all.

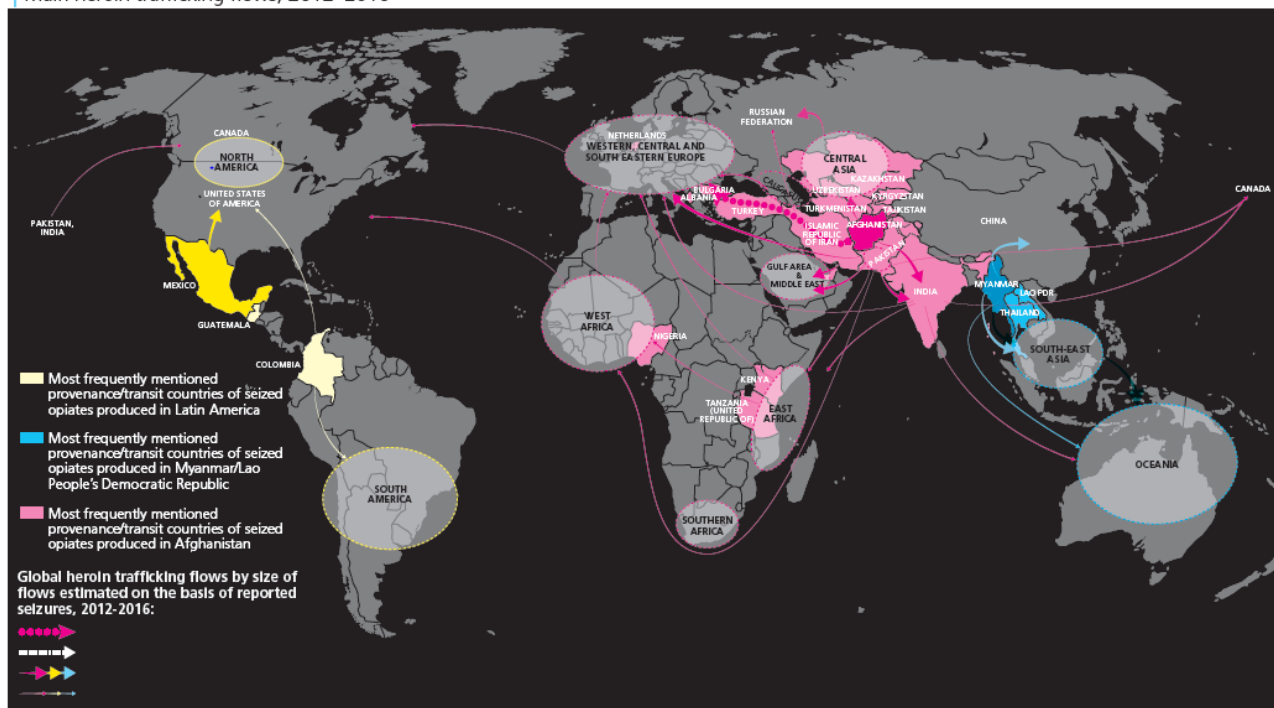
84. While none of these achievements should be discounted, much work remains to be done. This report underscores many areas where sustained attention, resources and political will need to be focused to effect the change necessary: from continued security sector reform investment to increased attention to anticorruption measures. The parliamentary elections scheduled for the fall of 2018 will be a key focus for the government, its international backers and the insurgent fighters seeking to block the installation of a legitimate democracy in the country.

85. This report gives extra attention to the regional dimension of the security challenges in Afghanistan due to its importance for achieving lasting peace. Pakistan's ability to deny the use of its territory as safe haven by the myriad groups fighting in Afghanistan will be crucial. Clearly, international pressure is increasing on Pakistan to take new steps to rectify what all military and policy experts believe to be a key problem for the future of the war in Afghanistan. The complexity of the Pakistan-India dynamic should not be overlooked, however, when examining policies and actions to deal with the Afghanistan-Pakistan border dilemma.

86. As the Trump administration stated correctly in its iteration of its new policy toward Afghanistan – the solution to Afghanistan will require investment from all the elements of US power, not just the military. An obvious conclusion from such a statement is that, ultimately, lasting peace in Afghanistan will be the result of an Afghan-owned and implemented political solution. While the continued strengthening of the ANDSF and the correction of key security sectors may continue apace and change the balance of forces on the battlefield, it is clear a political compromise with the Taliban must be achieved.

## ANNEX: GLOBAL HEROIN TRAFFICKING FLOWS 2012-2016

Main heroin trafficking flows, 2012–2016



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2018.

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