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Significant security and political  
evolutions in Afghanistan: January-June 2016

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## Policy Paper no. 22 (August 2016)

### Significant security and political evolutions in Afghanistan: January-June 2016

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#### 1. Executive summary:

This text is briefly exploring<sup>2</sup> some of the most important *media* reports (and a few academic texts) dealing with *significant national defense, national and regional (provincial) security and political evolutions in Afghanistan*, along the first six months in 2016 (January-June). *Several areas / problems have been explored, and we think they are really important for better understanding both ongoing evolutions in Afghanistan, and some future perspectives in the region as well.* The main topics taken into account are: 1. significant evolutions of the Taliban movement (chapter 3); 2. the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ of the Islamic State (ISIL) presence in Afghanistan (chapter 4); 3. several episodes vividly illustrating some important features of insurgent activities in Afghanistan (chapter 5); 4. important insurgent attacks in or near Kabul, openly and deliberately challenging the Western-backed regime in the most heavily defended city in the country (chapter 6); 5. some remarks on the peace process in Afghanistan, plus the role and aims of several great powers more or less directly involved in Afghanistan (chapter 7); 6. some very brief comments on NATO presence in Afghanistan (chapter 8); and 7. some very brief final remarks, mainly recommending the legitimate authorities in AfPak to (re)gain the initiative when dealing with insurgents and insurgencies (chapter 9).

Another text – most probably a *policy brief* – to be soon delivered will take into account data on Afghanistan offered by several *U.S. official reports* (one of them made public by the U.S. Department of Defense in June 2016, and two published by SIGAR – the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction). For a better ‘stereoscopic’

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<sup>2</sup> Along almost 29.5 conventional pages, including all footnotes (50 of them) and the final bibliography (29 titles).

image of unfolding evolutions in Afghanistan, these two texts are to be read together (mixing, this way, vivid and significant details available in *many serious and interesting media reports* with more sophisticated and complex data offered by *some extensive and clearly reliable official reports*).

## **2. Brief introduction: what kind of a country are we speaking about**

According to a specialist belonging to the academic environment, at this very moment, after several year of really massive foreign intervention (large NATO-led military mission, plus massive transfer of know-how, plus massive effort to identify and mobilize financial resources enabling the new Afghan institutions start operating) of the largest part of the Western world, “Afghanistan is... badly plagued by awfully high levels of corruption, which in turn undermines the legitimacy of its government. The Afghan state in its present shape may not survive if its internal and external supporters do not address the problem of pervasive corruption and chronic insecurity. And the country has yet to recover from the prolonged political uncertainty and crisis generated by the highly controversial 2014 presidential election, with the delicate power-sharing arrangement between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah continues to be contested by the two men and their networks”<sup>3</sup>. This is the general context we are speaking about: *a country confronted with a lot of domestic problems, relying a lot on foreign help, and with moderately (to put it mildly) effective institutions*.

## **3. Some significant evolutions of the Taliban movement**

*Most open sources are openly reporting Taliban insurgency is, in both military and political terms, one of the most severe challenges the central and provincial Afghan authorities are confronted with.*

A text published by *BBC* in *early January 2016* was openly stating “the Afghan government and its US and NATO allies have been fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan

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<sup>3</sup> Vinay Kaura, “Afghan Peace Talks: Road to Nowhere”, *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2016, at the internet address <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/afghan-peace-talks-road-to-nowhere/>.

for the past 14 years. But, despite the killing of thousands of militants, the insurgent group has retaken big chunks of the country”. The same open source briefly analyzed “three main reasons for this” obvious and clearly dangerous “resurgence”. The first of them is “the end, in 2014, of the US and NATO combat mission and the withdrawal of most foreign forces from Afghanistan”, which has significantly “reduced the risk the Taliban faced of being bombed and raided”. *Decreasing numbers of combat NATO forces in Afghanistan have, as far as we understand, also generated some really important ‘windows of opportunity’ for the Taliban*, who were able to quite easily “overrun military bases, district centres and security check-points in different parts of Afghanistan” (on many such occasions, freedom of initiative / of movement belonged to the Taliban forces, while governmental forces were able only to react); and as a direct result of these local military victories, the Taliban “have seized more weapons and have been using them in their fight against Afghan government forces. They have also captured dozens of Humvees and police vehicles, which they now drive in areas under their control”. A second source of the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan is the very success of a massive Pakistani military operation launched “in the North Waziristan tribal area in June 2014”; this military operation called Zarb-e-Arb “dislodged thousands of mainly Uzbek, Arab and Pakistani militants, who flooded into Afghanistan and swelled the Taliban’s ranks”. And a third source of the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan is a set of weaknesses and problems Afghan state institutions are confronted with. For example, “although the Afghan security forces have fought well against the insurgents over the past year, they lack certain capabilities and equipment especially air power and reconnaissance”; and, more than this, “the political infighting in the central government in Kabul and the apparent weakness in governance at different levels is also exploited by the Taliban”<sup>4</sup>. A few months later, in mid-June 2016, a detailed report published by *Military Times* was exposing some other “flaws in the Afghan military - weak leadership, lack of professionalism, complacency and corruption”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Dawood Azami (BBC World Service), “Why are the Taliban resurgent in Afghanistan?”, *BBC*, January 5, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35169478>.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne O’Donnell, “The Taliban now hold more ground in Afghanistan than at any point since 2001”, *Military Times*, June 16, 2016, text freely available at the internet address <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2016/06/16/afghanistan-nicholson-commander-pentagon-report-war/85972056/>.

*The strong and resilient Taliban insurgency with roots in different ethnic groups in Afghanistan is continuously augmented, open sources are reporting, by foreign (non-Afghan) volunteers. In early January 2016, for example, a BBC report was openly stating “the presence of several thousand foreign fighters has further complicated the situation. Afghan government officials said in June 2015 there were more than 7,000 foreign militants in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been bolstered by militants from the Middle East, Central Asian countries and Pakistan”*<sup>6</sup>.

In February 2016, the *main political and strategic goals of the Taliban movement* in Afghanistan were listed, with some details, by a local academic with serious previous political and administrative experience: “Pakistan’s Taliban strategy is to transform the group into a political and military entity with total control over a number of Afghan provinces, similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This would mean a de facto partition of Afghanistan”; the author also added “Washington and Beijing seem to be comfortable with such an arrangement, as long as their core geostrategic and geo-economic interests are safeguarded”<sup>7</sup>.

*In mid-February 2016, open sources were reporting at least on some occasions, Taliban forces are using exceptional mobilization methods, forcing even children to become fighters. On that occasion, for example, Human Rights Watch was reporting “child soldiers recruited by the Taliban were used in the battle to overrun the northern city of Kunduz last year”. The New York Times is also reporting, dealing with that very situation, the Human Rights Watch “researchers found that the insurgents used Islamic religious schools in the area ‘to provide military training to children between the ages of 13 and 17, many of whom have been deployed in combat’, also adding “Human Rights Watch said the Taliban begin indoctrinating children from as early as 6 years old”. The newspaper emphasized “under international law, military recruits must be at least 18, and training or employing soldiers younger than 15 is considered a war crime”*<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Dawood Azami (BBC World Service), “Why are the Taliban resurgent in Afghanistan?”, *BBC*, January 5, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35169478>.

<sup>7</sup> Davood Moradian, “Afghan peace process: Desperation versus strength”, *Al Jazeera*, February 22, 2016, text accessed at the internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/afghan-peace-process-desperation-strength-160215113838413.html>.

<sup>8</sup> David Jolly, “Taliban Used Child Soldiers in Kunduz Battle, Rights Group Says”, *The New York Times*, February 17, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/world/asia/taliban-used-child-soldiers-in-kunduz-battle-rights-group->

Also in *February 2016*, some media reports were openly speaking about large areas in the Northern part of the country in which Taliban influence was obvious: almost one week before the end of the month, *Reuters* was reporting about a difficult situation “in the far north of the country, where the Taliban controls many areas outside the main towns”<sup>9</sup>.

On April 6, 2016, *Reuters* was reporting Taliban forces were strongly attacking governmental police and military units and positions in *Baghlan* province. The same source was also speaking about *some significant Taliban tactical successes*: “Taliban forces had captured two government outposts in clashes overnight in the area north of Kabul, not far from the provincial capital of Pul-e-Khumri, said police” sources<sup>10</sup>.

Almost two months later, at the *end of May, 2016*, the Afghan Taliban movement ‘elected’ (or appointed) its new leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, “after a U.S. drone strike killed Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour”; at that very moment it was already clear the new Taliban chief is going to “follow the militant policies espoused by founder Mullah Omar, who was killed in Pakistan in 2013”. A detailed *CNN* report was reporting “the Taliban has made strong battlefield gains against government forces in recent months, driving back Afghan troops from key positions and launching a string of bombings in Kabul” and, in such a situation, “the new Afghan Taliban leader has told commanders and the group’s supreme leadership council that there will be no peace talks with the Afghan government, a source in the group reached through an intermediary said”. The source we are speaking about “described two secret meetings of the Shura (or supreme leadership) council of the Taliban’s self-declared Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that were held..., saying that at the first meeting the members initially favored Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of Haqqani terror network, long aligned with the Taliban and al Qaeda, to be the Taliban’s new leader”<sup>11</sup>.

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[says.html?action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-electricity-idUSKCN0VW0V5).

<sup>9</sup> Mirwais Harooni (reporting), James Mackenzie (writing), Richard Borsuk (editing), “Power restored to Afghan capital Kabul after weeks of blackout”, *Reuters*, February 23, 2016, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-electricity-idUSKCN0VW0V5>.

<sup>10</sup> Zakaria Nasery, Josh Smith (writing) and Robert Birsal (editing), “Fighting erupts near power lines to Afghan capital: officials”, *Reuters*, April 6, 2016, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-fighting-idUSKCN0X30TJ>.

<sup>11</sup> Euan McKirdy, “New Taliban leader vows: No peace talks; 'terror on enemies' will continue”, *CNN*, May 26, 2016, at the internet address <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/26/middleeast/taliban-leader-peace-talks/>.

In *mid-June 2016*, a report published by *Military Times* was openly reporting on “a time of Taliban resurgence, with the group gaining ground in the southern provinces of the Taliban heartland”, also adding “the Taliban’s warm-weather offensive has shown the insurgents to be bolder and better organized, holding more territory now than at any time since 2001, when their regime was overthrown by the U.S.-led invasion, according to recent U.N. estimates”<sup>12</sup>.

#### **4. Some important ups and downs of the Islamic State (ISIL) in Afghanistan:**

*The Taliban movement is not at all the only radical Islamist group operating in Afghanistan. Starting with the opening stages of 2015, the so-called Islamic State (or ISIL / ISIS) started operating in Afghanistan as well: open sources are reporting, with details, there is a continuous competition (on most occasions a very violent one) between the Taliban and the ISIL forces, for both political-religious legitimacy and resources. Both movements are aiming, in the end, the complete control of the entire country, and a rigid Islamist regime.*

On *January 13, 2016*, *Washington Post* was reporting ISIL forces in Afghanistan attacked a Pakistani consulate in the eastern part of the country: “The Islamic State claimed it carried out an attack on a Pakistani consulate in Afghanistan... that killed seven Afghan security personnel. No casualties were reported among those inside the consulate in the eastern city of Jalalabad, near the border with Pakistan, officials said”<sup>13</sup>. The open source we are using here also said “the attack showed a level of orchestration previously not seen from the Islamic State in Afghanistan, raising concerns that the group's ability to carry out complex operations is increasing. Afghan officials have

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<sup>12</sup> Lynne O'Donnell, “The Taliban now hold more ground in Afghanistan than at any point since 2001”, in *Military Times*, June 16, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2016/06/16/afghanistan-nicholson-commander-pentagon-report-war/85972056/>.

<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Miller, “Islamic State claims attack on Pakistani consulate in Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, January 13, 2016, at the internet address [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islamic-state-claims-attack-on-pakistani-consulate-in-afghanistan/2016/01/13/d54c9e87-72f1-44d5-af20-680485fb9b85\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islamic-state-claims-attack-on-pakistani-consulate-in-afghanistan/2016/01/13/d54c9e87-72f1-44d5-af20-680485fb9b85_story.html).

acknowledged that the group, which recently launched its own radio station in Nangahar, is growing stronger”<sup>14</sup>

On *January 19, 2016*, *The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* was reporting, “the White House has given the Pentagon legal authority to target Islamic State in Afghanistan, the first such authorization for military action against the extremist group outside Iraq and Syria, senior administration officials said, in a sign of how the fight has broadened”; the text added “the move came in response to a request in December [2015] by Defense Secretary Ash Carter for broader authority to expand the fight against Islamic State in the country as the group’s strength grows there, stretching the legal mandate of American forces to include offensive action”<sup>15</sup>.

A few days later, on *January 26, 2016*, a *RAND* analyst (Rebecca Zimmerman, an “associate policy analyst at the RAND Corporation and an expert on Afghanistan”) declared: “There is definitely an Islamic State presence, whereas I think at one point we thought the Islamic State was something that didn't really exist there, but it threatened to exist. Or where we saw it, it was something that maybe the Afghans were sort of ratcheting up the perception of the threat, in order to keep people engaged and interested in the issue. I think now nobody can really say it's not a problem. It is a real problem. There is an Islamic State presence in Afghanistan. Now they call it ISKP: Islamic State in Khorasan Province”. On the same occasion, Zimmerman also said “I think we would be crazy not to consider the possibility that there will be an increase of what for this conflict would be considered "foreign fighter" involvement. That is sort of the Islamic State model: They infuse some of these conflicts with international money and international expertise. I would not be surprised if we started to hear about that”<sup>16</sup>

In *early April 2016*, *Foreign Policy* has published a text stating “initial reports of the Islamic State’s expansion in Afghanistan emerged in early 2015. And on Jan. 26, 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an Islamic State spokesman, announced the establishment of the self-styled caliphate’s Khorasan province, the ancient name for a

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Clears Path to Target Islamic State in Afghanistan”, *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-clears-path-to-target-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-1453251754>.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Williams, “ISIS is getting stronger in Afghanistan: how it happened and why it matters”, *Vox.com*, January 26, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/26/10816576/isis-in-afghanistan>.



region encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other nearby areas”; the same text is also reporting “Facing the entrenched Taliban, the Islamic State’s attempts to infiltrate Afghan provinces such as Farah, Helmand, and Zabul were short-lived. But with time, the Islamic State established a foothold in Nangarhar, which borders Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). With this success, U.S. forces classified the self-declared Islamic State’s Khorasan Province group as ‘operationally emergent’ in October 2015”<sup>17</sup>.

In *May 2016*, the Washington-based *MEI (Middle East Institute*, a research structure founded in 1946) has published a quite large text, directly dealing with the evolution of the Islamic State forces and structures in Afghanistan. The authors are listing several “key points”: a. “the first signs of the Islamic State in Afghanistan appeared in 2014, but after initial gains their capabilities and territorial claims have waned significantly”; b. as far as we know, “IS [Islamic State] Khorasan [Khorasan Province is the official Islamic State administrative unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan] was formed by former T.T.P. [Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan)] members who had little connection to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and its fighters are comprised both of Taliban defectors and foreign fighters; c. “through lack of respect for Afghan history and its policy of extreme brutality, IS Khorasan is seen as an outside force in Afghanistan”; d. “IS Khorasan is struggling to stay relevant as they continually suffer losses dealt by Afghan government and international forces, and the Taliban”; and e. “U.S. military pressure is complicating the Islamic State’s attempts to expand into Afghanistan, and is eroding its capabilities”<sup>18</sup>.

In *late June 2016*, a text published by the U.K.-based *The Telegraph* was reporting “dozens of people have been killed in clashes between Islamic State militants and Afghan forces as the extremist movement renewed efforts to seize parts of eastern Afghanistan”. The text also said “fighters pledging allegiance to the movement, also known as Daesh, attacked police checkpoints in the Kot area of Nangarhar province”.

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<sup>17</sup> Franz J. Marty, “On the Trail of the Islamic State in Afghanistan”, in *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2016, At the internet address <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/05/afghanistan-islamic-state-taliban/>.

<sup>18</sup> Lauren McNally, Alex Amiral, Marvin Weinbaum (supervision and guidance), Antoun Issa (supervision and guidance), “The Islamic State in Afghanistan Examining its Threat to Stability (MEI Policy Focus 2016-11)”, *Middle East Institute Policy Focus Series*, May 2016, at the internet address [http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12\\_McNallyAmiral\\_ISISAfghan\\_web.pdf](http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12_McNallyAmiral_ISISAfghan_web.pdf), p. i.

The author underlined the fact that the attack took place “just three months after the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, said the militant movement had been wiped out in Afghanistan”, also adding “the US military estimates between 1,000 and 3,000 Isil fighters are in Afghanistan, mostly comprised of disaffected Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, as well as Uzbek Islamists and locals”. The text was also stating “so far this year, between 60 and 80 American air raids have targeted ISIL in Afghanistan, including those by drones and strike aircraft”, and “ISIL’s leadership is now believed to have left Nangarhar and moved northwards into the neighbouring Kunar province. That could be the next target if the group has the strength to expand”<sup>19</sup>.

## **5. Important basic features of the insurgent actions of all sorts: some brief episodes**

*The logic of insurgency is, broadly speaking, extensively covered by several notorious works in the field of military studies and political science<sup>20</sup>. The current situation in Afghanistan is a vivid illustration of some perennial rules: insurgents do have, in many occasions, greater flexibility than that of governmental forces; they concentrate the available resources against ‘high value’ targets; and some political goals can be easily identified many times, even in small – are relatively small – tactically significant episodes.*

Some episodes presented, with some details, by open sources are clearly indicating different insurgent groups are deliberately trying to reach *combat goals with major and direct political significance*: for example, they are trying to harm as much as possible the already limited effectiveness of the governance capabilities of the legitimate authorities at central or local level. In *January 2016*, for example, Taliban attacks in Baghlan province “destroyed power lines in the area..., causing nearly a month of power cuts in the capital and adding to concern over Taliban gains in various places since most

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Farmer, defence correspondent, “Dozens killed as Islamic State pushes for territory in Afghanistan”, *The Telegraph*, June 26, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/26/dozens-killed-as-islamic-state-pushes-for-territory-in-afghanist/>.

<sup>20</sup> For a better understanding of the political and military trends we are usually designating the concept of insurgency see, for example, Carl von Clausewitz, *Despre război*, Editura militară, București, 1982, pp. 477-482, and – up to a certain point – John Shy, and Thomas W. Collier, “Revolutionary War”, in Peter Paret (editor), *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, pp. 815-862.

foreign troops withdrew in late 2014”<sup>21</sup>. The governmental forces reacted only later on, trying to limit the Taliban successes and push the insurgents back..

*Several open sources are openly stating insurgent activities are strongly eroding security and stability at provincial and national level, and also the public trust vitally important state institutions and authorities can rely on.* One of the results of powerful Taliban attacks in Baghlan province in both January and April, for example, is depicted by *Reuters* – which is extensively quoting local residents – in overtly dramatic terms: “Taliban insurgents still freely operate in the area, schools are closed, and people are afraid to leave their homes”<sup>22</sup>.

*Vital infrastructure is deliberately attacked in quite many occasions, and this type of insurgent action is one with several goals and / or consequences: governmental authorities have to mobilize and use resources to repair the more or less severe damages; governmental military (army and police) forces get immobilized, at least for a while, in defensive missions aimed at protecting technical teams involved in repairing damaged infrastructure; credibility of state institutions is eroded; collapse of access to minimal living standards is clearly irritating – and, possibly, politically alienating – smaller or larger local communities.* One of the strongest examples illustrating these complementary goals and / or consequences is the attack, in January, against power lines in Baghlan province. On that occasion, “after the January attacks on the grid bringing electricity from central Asia, it took security forces weeks to secure the area and get technicians in to make repairs”<sup>23</sup>. *Public mood in Kabul, as a direct consequence of the insurgent attacks against power lines, was predictably sour: “For weeks, residents in Kabul without access to expensive private generators have endured winter cold and darkness with only patchy electricity supplies, fuelling public anger and putting growing pressure on the U.S.-backed government”*<sup>24</sup>, *Reuters* was reporting on February 23.

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<sup>21</sup> Zakaria Nasery, Josh Smith (writing) and Robert Birsel (editing), “Fighting erupts near power lines to Afghan capital: officials”, *Reuters*, April 6, 2016, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-fighting-idUSKCN0X30TJ>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> Mirwais Harooni (reporting), James Mackenzie (writing), Richard Borsuk (editing), “Power restored to Afghan capital Kabul after weeks of blackout”, *Reuters*, February 23, 2016, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-electricity-idUSKCN0VW0V5>.

## **6. Insurgent attacks in or against Kabul: major political aims to be reached by means of using very limited resources**

Open sources are reporting, with a lot of details, on important insurgent attacks in or near Kabul; these attacks quite clearly *are openly and deliberately challenging the Western-backed regime in the most heavily defended city in the country and are aimed at becoming potent propaganda tools* ('we are able to attack them in the very core areas of Kabul').

At least on some occasions, insurgents in Afghanistan tend to use, against Kabul, what we could call 'indirect approach' – that of *deliberately and massively damaging segments of vital infrastructure vital for the capital city*. In mid-February, for example, *The New York Times* was reporting "on January 27, 2016, the lines that carry much of Kabul's electricity south from Uzbekistan were cut in Baghlan Province, in an area marked by savage fighting between Afghan troops and insurgents. Attacks since then have also knocked out lines from Tajikistan, cutting the capital's power supply by about 80 percent". The same text said *the economic consequences of these attacks have been grim*, many private enterprises being forced, for a while, to abandon newer machines using electric power; and, at least in some cases, "their output fell by half"<sup>25</sup>

In April 2016, "64 people were killed in a Taliban attack on a security services facility in Kabul, the deadliest such bombing since 2011"<sup>26</sup>. That attack took place on April 19, and *The New York Times* was reporting on that occasion the huge truck bomb (Sediq Sediqqi, a spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry, said it has been a truck full of "probably hundreds of kilograms of explosives", and according to local witnesses "the explosion was so strong that it rattled windows across the city, including those at the presidential palace"), "beyond the all-too-familiar carnage - at least 30 dead and more than 300 wounded - it also sent a message: the Taliban can attack the capital at will, and

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<sup>25</sup> David Jolly, "Afghanistan's Crippled Power Grid Exposes Vulnerability of Besieged Capital", *The New York Times*, February 17, 2016, text available at the internet address <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/world/asia/afghanistan-hardship-taliban-bombings.html?action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

<sup>26</sup> Hamid Shalizi, "Taliban suicide bombers kill 27 in attack on Afghan police cadets", *Reuters*, June 30, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSKCN0ZG0UY>.

they have no intention of engaging in peace talks despite reports of internal rifts”<sup>27</sup>. The same text was also openly stating “the location of the bombing, near the compound of an elite force that provides protection to senior Afghan officials, also demonstrated how vulnerable the government remains”<sup>28</sup>.

In *May 2016*, one month after the really deadly attacks in April, *The New York Times* was reporting exceptional measures have been implemented by authorities in Kabul, who hoped the pace and magnitude of terrorist strike might be strongly diminished: “after bombings in Kabul these days, new concrete blast walls go up, taller than the ones before. Streets leading to V.I.P. homes are blocked to traffic. To drive in certain neighborhoods is to delve into a frustrating game of maze navigation, with surprise barricades popping up overnight”, the reporter was writing, also adding some of the consequences were not at all the expected ones. For example, commercial activity in some Kabul areas has been seriously disturbed, with the significant exception of enterprises which are manufacturing “T-shaped walls”, many of them 11 to 20 feet high, used “to repel the force of larger explosions and to block the sightlines of any Taliban snipers”<sup>29</sup>.

On *June 20, 2016*, “14 people died in an attack on a bus carrying Nepali security guards working for the Canadian embassy in Kabul”<sup>30</sup>. Dealing with that attack, *Al Jazeera* was reporting one day later, on June 21, the Nepali security guards “were killed after a suicide bomber hit a minibus in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, along the main road to the eastern city of Jalalabad, police said”; police forces said “the attacker was on foot”. Less than three hours later, the same open source was reporting, “another attack in eastern Kabul targeting a politician killed at least one, injured the MP and wounded five others”, and the Taliban claimed both attacks. Local sources quoting Afghan security officials said on that occasion “most of the time, the target they [the Taliban] take shows

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<sup>27</sup> Mujib Mashal, and Ahmad Shakib, “Taliban Send Message With Deadly Kabul Attack as Fighting Season Begins”, *New York Times*, April 19, 2016, text available at the internet address [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/world/asia/kabul-explosion-afghanistan.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/world/asia/kabul-explosion-afghanistan.html?_r=0).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> Mujib Mashal, “Attacks in Kabul Keep Wall Builders Busy, Turning City Into Labyrinth”, *The New York Times*, May 16, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/17/world/asia/kabul-attacks-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Hamid Shalizi, “Taliban suicide bombers kill 27 in attack on Afghan police cadets”, *Reuters*, June 30, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSKCN0ZG0UY>.

they have good intelligence and capability”, also adding “they [the Taliban] want to show they can attack any target they want”<sup>31</sup>.

And at the *end of June 2016*, almost one week ahead of the NATO Summit in Warsaw, the Taliban “killed at least 27 people and wounded around 40 in an attack on buses carrying newly graduated cadets on the western outskirts of Kabul”, *Reuters* was reporting on June 30, 2016. According to various sources – including a statement made by the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid – two suicide bombers have been directly involved in the attack: “the first attack targeted a bus carrying police cadets and instructors. Then, as rescuers and emergency services arrived, a second bomber rammed his car, packed with explosives, into their vehicles, killing dozens”. Immediately after the attack, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani “ordered an inquiry into how the Taliban could mount an apparently carefully planned operation, despite pledges of a security clampdown in Kabul following recent attacks”<sup>32</sup>. In all these attacks the same logic occurs: the insurgents do have (and are boldly and effectively using) freedom of action / movement, and the governmental forces are only reacting, *after* the attacks.

## **7. Peace process in Afghanistan: significant moments and trends**

*It is aimed at reaching a stable agreement, involving national authorities in Kabul and various insurgent groups which are traditionally rejecting, because of very different reasons, the rule of the current central government, broadly backed by Western powers. On most occasions, state institutions in Kabul do have the initiative in this field. Religious reasons, and also a more mundane topic – that we are usually calling power, including privileged access to all available resources – are continuously generating tensions which make practically all peace attempts fail almost completely. The situation is even more complicated by the basic fact that, more or less openly, other regional and non-regional actors are involved (motivated by their own interests and geo-strategic perceptions) in both negotiations, and in some attempts trying to accelerate or to block*

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<sup>31</sup> \*\*\*, “Afghanistan: 14 Nepali security guards killed in Kabul”, *Al Jazeera*, June 21, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/kabul-bombing-afghanistan-160620032001485.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Hamid Shalizi, “Taliban suicide bombers kill 27 in attack on Afghan police cadets”, *Reuters*, June 30, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-idUSKCN0ZG0UY>.

*the peace process*. Among these non-Afghan political actors involved in the peace process in Afghanistan, Pakistan is one of the very prominent ones.

On *January 18, 2016*, media sources were reporting *very senior Afghan officials* had declared representatives Taliban will be invited to join peace negotiations: “On behalf of the government and the people of Afghanistan, I am inviting the Taliban to join the peace process and let us solve all differences through negotiations’, Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani said in his opening remarks”, *Dunya News TV* was reporting, also adding “Taliban members who reject the talks and push for war would be isolated, Rabbani warned in his address”. On the same occasion, the open source we are quoting here from was stating officials from Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States “emphasized the immediate need for direct talks between representatives of the government of Afghanistan and representatives from Taliban groups in a peace process that aims to preserve Afghanistan’s unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity”, and the most senior Pakistani foreign affairs official present at the meeting in Kabul said “the primary objective of the reconciliation process is to create conditions to bring the Taliban groups to the negotiation table and offer them incentives that can persuade them to move away from using violence”. In that context, *Dunya News* was also stating “senior Taliban source from Mansour’s faction told *AFP* that Pakistan had been in touch with Taliban leaders, but the group was waiting to see whether their rivals from Rasool’s faction were also likely to attend future talks”. That Taliban source also have said “as far as I know, the Taliban leadership is willing to attend any such meeting in future but we will also see which other Afghan group or a Taliban splinter group will be invited for these proposed peace talks”<sup>33</sup>. *If this peace of information is accurate, it is to be regarded as a proof that at least some of the Taliban leaders were, at that very moment, ready to attend some peace talks* (some other talks had had been organized in 2015 as well, “but collapsed after the group belatedly confirmed their leader Mullah Omar was dead”<sup>34</sup>). Such an interpretation might be seriously taken into account, mainly because – and quite many voices emphasized this element – “the presence of the US and China provided extra

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<sup>33</sup> \*\*\*, “Quadrilateral meeting: Afghanistan invites Taliban to join peace process”, *Dunya News TV*, January 18, 2016, at the internet address <http://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/318266-Quadrilateral-meeting-Afghanistan-invites-Taliban>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

weight” to such talks, being potentially able to even “overcome mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad”<sup>35</sup>.

A few days later, on *January 24, 2016*, *Voice of America* was releasing a brief analysis openly stating “Afghanistan’s Taliban has restated certain preconditions prior to ceasing hostilities, and has stopped short of formally rejecting a U.S.-backed four-nation process aimed at promoting Afghan peace”, also adding “the Islamist insurgency presented these views through its chief peace negotiator, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, at an unofficial two-day dialogue of Afghan stakeholders that concluded Sunday [January 24] in Doha, the capital of Qatar”<sup>36</sup>. The same open source was also reporting “Taliban sources said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in a written message to the conference, accepted the Taliban as a political opposition and said his government was ready to hold direct peace talks”. Previously, open sources say, “the Afghan president was demanding China, the U.S. and Pakistan put pressure on the Taliban to bring them to the negotiating table, said the Taliban sources”<sup>37</sup>. *While serious and credible open sources were presenting legitimate Afghan authorities as being flexible enough (and clearly more flexible than before), Taliban leaders seemed to be on very demanding mood*: “Taliban chief negotiator Stanekzai, head of the Taliban’s political office in Doha, told the meeting his group wanted complete withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign troops and establishment of an ‘independent Islamic system’ in the country before it considered rejoining peace talks for ending the 15-year war”, *Voice of America* was reporting, also adding Stanekzai “went on to demand official recognition for the Taliban’s Qatar office, release of its prisoners, removal of U.N. travel and financial restrictions on Taliban leaders, and an end to what he said was ‘poisonous propaganda’ against the insurgent group”<sup>38</sup>.

On the same day – January 24, 2016 – the notoriously well informed *The New York Times* was reporting “anxious Chinese leaders find themselves under pressure to take a more active role in the long-stalled peace process, according to scholars and

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Taliban Skeptical of Four-way Afghan Peace Process”, *Voice of America*, January 24, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-skeptical-of-four-way-afghan-peace-process/3160382.html>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.



current and former diplomats”. The open source we are quoting here from was also saying Du Youkang, who worked in Islamabad, Pakistan as a diplomat and is the director of the South Asia Studies Center at Fudan University in Shanghai declared, speaking about the situation in Afghanistan: “Bombings have never stopped, even in the capital. Afghanistan shares a border with China, so in this case China must get involved to promote the talks and to secure the stability in the region”. *The New York Times* was also listing some reasons pushing China to be more actively involved in the peace process in Afghanistan: “One reason for China’s engagement is that a stable Afghanistan could become a critical transportation hub and market for Chinese goods, and, eventually, another investment opportunity for President Xi Jinping’s grand economic plans for Central Asia”, also adding: “Yet security concerns loom alongside the economic motive. China has become increasingly worried about the insurgent violence in its western frontier region of Xinjiang, and officials say that the Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking, mostly Sunni Muslim ethnic group, might be falling under the influence of radical elements from outside China, motivating some of them to carry out attacks in Xinjiang”<sup>39</sup>

In *February 2016*, on the occasion of a meeting (the fourth, to be accurate) of the so-called *Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)*, major differences between the ways various significant political actors evaluated the ongoing situation in Afghanistan – and the prospects of any peace process – became very visible. According to a text published by a seasoned and very serious analyst (Davood Moradian, who is the director-general of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies and former chief of programs in President Hamid Karzai’s office and chief policy adviser to Afghanistan’s ministry of foreign affairs) on the webpage of a serious press agency with obvious expertise in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia, “at this stage, Beijing sees the Afghan conflict as a typical civil war, a position that is closer to some United States pundits and British diplomats who describe the Afghan conflict as tribal warfare among the unruly Afghans”. The same open source was also reporting “meanwhile, Pakistan blames the conflict on the Pashtuns’ exclusion from power, a grievance fuelled by India. The Afghan government

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Wong, and David Jolly, “China Considers Larger Role in Afghanistan Peace Process”, *The New York Times*, January 24, 2016, text available at the internet address [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/world/asia/china-considers-larger-role-in-afghanistan-peace-process.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/world/asia/china-considers-larger-role-in-afghanistan-peace-process.html?_r=0).

characterizes it essentially as a war imposed by Pakistan, whereby poor, illiterate and rural Taliban are being manipulated by Islamabad”<sup>40</sup>.

The structure called the *Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)*, “comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the U.S., has taken a much-needed initiative to pacify the conflict-ridden country. The QCG mechanism, set up on the margins of the Heart of Asia Conference on Afghanistan held in Islamabad in December 2015, became operational in January 2016 when it met officially for the first time. And just before the fourth round of QCG discussions in February, Pakistan’s army chief traveled to Doha to persuade all Taliban factions and groups to return to the negotiating table. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that any substantial breakthrough in peace negotiations remains as remote as ever. It is worth asking why the performance of QCG has been so disappointing”, a text published by the usually well informed *The Diplomat* was stating in early April<sup>41</sup>. The author of the study we are quoting here from – Vinay Kaura, assistant professor in the department of International Affairs and Security Studies, and Coordinator at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India – is also openly stating “Sartaz Aziz, adviser to the Pakistani prime minister on foreign affairs, acknowledged Pakistan’s sway over the Taliban, when he recently said that ‘we have some influence on them because their leadership is in Pakistan, and they get some medical facilities, their families are here. So we can use those levers to pressure them to say, come to the table’”, also adding “this suggests that it is fundamentally impossible to achieve peace in Afghanistan without Pakistan’s willing support and involvement”<sup>42</sup>.

In late May 2016, reliable open sources were reporting “on May 21, 2016, for the first time ever, a supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban was killed by a direct airstrike by U.S. forces. This was hailed as a remarkable achievement for the American and Afghan governments”, also adding the Taliban leader we are speaking about, “Mullah Akhtar Mansour, was killed along with his driver in the Balochistan province of Pakistan while

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<sup>40</sup> Davood Moradian, “Afghan peace process: Desperation versus strength”, *Al Jazeera*, February 22, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/afghan-peace-process-desperation-strength-160215113838413.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Vinay Kaura, “Afghan Peace Talks: Road to Nowhere”, *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2016, at the internet address <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/afghan-peace-talks-road-to-nowhere/>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

he was driving back from a visit to Iran. This marked a significant change in the modus operandi of the United States, because in recent years U.S. drones had restricted their airstrikes to targeting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) only in Afghanistan”. The open source we are using here was also stating, on the same occasion, “most Afghans would hail the death of the Taliban leader as an achievement. However most Afghans also know very well that killing the Taliban leader is not likely to bring any progress in the war or the peace negotiations with the Taliban. Once the Taliban leader is dead, the militant group would likely announce an even more hard-line successor. That is precisely what happened after the death of Mullah Muhammad Omar. Upon his death, Mansour was appointed, having garnered a reputation for being even more of a hardliner than Mullah Omar”<sup>43</sup>. *Some of the evolutions along the next months confirmed, up to a certain point, this very pessimistic point of view concerning the peace process in Afghanistan.*

## **8. Some brief comments on NATO and Afghanistan**

An official NATO presentation (last updated on June 14, 2016, but clearly written at a much earlier date), is stating “NATO commanded the United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from August 2003 to December 2014. Its mission was to enable the Afghan authorities to provide effective security across the country and ensure that it would never again be a safe haven for terrorists. ISAF helped build the capacity of the Afghan national security forces”, also adding that “as these forces grew stronger, they gradually took responsibility for security across the country before the completion of ISAF’s mission”. The same text is also stating “a new NATO-led mission (called *Resolute Support*) to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces and institutions was launched in January 2015. NATO Allies and partners are also helping to sustain Afghan security forces and institutions financially, as part of a broader international commitment to Afghanistan. The NATO-Afghanistan

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<sup>43</sup> Sayer Daudzai, “Why Pakistan Is the Biggest Beneficiary of Mullah Mansour's Death”, *The Diplomat*, June 9, 2016, at the internet address <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/why-pakistan-is-the-biggest-beneficiary-of-mullah-mansours-death/>

Enduring Partnership provides a framework for wider political dialogue and practical cooperation”<sup>44</sup>.

On *March 15, 2016*, on the occasion of an official visit of NATO Secretary General to Kabul, several ideas important for at least three major topics of debate (a. a better understanding of mainly defense and security issues in Afghanistan – and in the surrounding region; b. a better understanding of NATO’s commitment to challenging ‘out of area’ issues and problems; c. a better understanding of both the common denominator of NATO and Afghan evaluations of the security issues in Afghanistan, and the differences sometimes separating NATO top leaders and senior Afghan officials) have been clearly presented by both NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai<sup>45</sup>. First of all, NATO Secretary General openly expressed the idea of “NATO’s continuing support to Afghanistan”. Then, he clearly stated “2015 was... a difficult and tough year for the Afghan forces”, but “they are stepping up air operations, including with new aircraft”.

An official NATO presentation is openly stating “in *May 2016*, NATO foreign ministers agreed that RSM’s presence will be sustained beyond 2016. Allied leaders are expected to take a final decision in this regard by the time of the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July”<sup>46</sup>.

We also know, from an official NATO presentation made public in *mid-June 2016*, that “within and alongside RSM, NATO and Afghanistan will enhance their Enduring Partnership of political dialogue and practical cooperation. Following the end of RSM, NATO is expected to maintain a civilian-led presence in Afghanistan to continue to help Afghan security institutions to become self-sufficient”, and also that “NATO and its partners are already committed to providing financial support to sustain

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<sup>44</sup> \*\*\*, “NATO and Afghanistan”, *NATO official webpage*, text last updated on June 14, 2016, at the internet address [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm)

<sup>45</sup> For all these three topics, and for the fragments cited later on, along the entire paragraph, see \*\*\*, “Joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai”, March 15, 2016, text freely available at the internet address [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_129199.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_129199.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>46</sup> \*\*\*, “Highlights”, in “NATO and Afghanistan”, *NATO official webpage*, text last updated on June 14, 2016, at the internet address [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm)

the Afghan forces until the end of 2017 and are currently working to ensure support until the end of 2020”<sup>47</sup>.

Also in mid-June, *Military Times* was openly stating “the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan received a major incentive this month when President Obama decided to expand America’s involvement with more airstrikes against insurgents, giving the U.S. military wider latitude to support Afghan forces, both in the air and on the ground”<sup>48</sup>. The same report also offered some data about the combat strength of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan: “along with the 9,800 Americans there are also 3,000 troops from other NATO countries... in the Resolute Support mission to train and assist Afghan forces. He (the new U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, Army General John W. Nicholson) also heads a related counterterrorism mission, Freedom’s Sentinel, with close to 3,000 U.S. soldiers engaged against the Taliban, al-Qaida and the Islamic State group”: the same report also said “the 9,800 remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan are scheduled to drop to 5,500 by the end of this year, but the pace of that decline has yet to be decided. One factor in determining future troop levels is the extent to which NATO allies are willing to remain involved in training and advising the Afghans”<sup>49</sup>.

## **9. Some brief final remarks: what is to be done to improve the security situation in the region**

The text we have specially delivered here for a *large* audience (and *not* at all only for experts in the field of international relations, diplomatic studies and strategic studies) is based on an *important amount of media reports*. For any of the roughly two dozen texts in the bibliography, at least other 20 or 30 have been read.

One of the most striking features which can *easily* be detected in *very* many of the media reports dealing with the ongoing evolutions in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) is *the definite feeling central and local (provincial) authorities are badly lacking, in many*

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<sup>47</sup> \*\*\* “Highlights”, in “NATO and Afghanistan”, *NATO official webpage*, text last updated on June 14, 2016, at the internet address [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm)

<sup>48</sup> Lynne O’Donnell, “The Taliban now hold more ground in Afghanistan than at any point since 2001”, in *Military Times*, June 16, 2016, at the internet address <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2016/06/16/afghanistan-nicholson-commander-pentagon-report-war/85972056/>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*

occasions, the initiative (the only notable exception is the peace process, here most initiatives are belonging to Afghan state institutions). These authorities are, on most occasions presented in – and by – media reports simply *reactive* entities. The initiative – at least in military and / or security-related terms<sup>50</sup> – seems to be almost completely to actors openly challenging the Afghan governmental authorities, and the will of the Pakistani government (at least in some provinces, those where the Taliban movement is more or less freely operating). As far as we can understand, this is *a major problem in the AfPak*.

*This very feature can be easily detected mainly when we are speaking about the general security context in Afghanistan and in quite many provinces in Pakistan: the forces (the Taliban movement, and more recently the Islamic State) openly challenging the legitimate authorities are planning some moves and implementing (more or less successfully) their plans, and Afghan and / or Pakistani authorities (plus large shares of the society in both countries) are reacting later on. Such a pattern is visible, for example, in many media reports on Taliban offensive actions. The Taliban forces are those which are attacking (almost freely selecting both their targets, and the exact moment of the attack) and the ANDSF are only reacting to such attacks (reinforcing threatened positions, or on some occasions staging more or less successful counterattacks).*

Such patterns – *if* our observation is accurate, and we strongly do *not* have significant doubts, simply because *media reports usually do not lie* – cannot lead, in any way, to stabilizing and pacifying the region. *One of the most important ingredients Afghanistan and Pakistan do badly need is (re)gaining the initiative in coping with insurgents and insurgencies.* If such a change is not going to occur, the situation in the region is going to be a *difficult one, in the very long run.*

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<sup>50</sup> The initiative, based on what we are usually calling *freedom of movement / freedom of action*, is one of the most important ‘ingredients’ of any sound military strategy. For the logic and significance of freedom of action see, for example, F. Foch, *Principiile războiului. Conducerea războiului*, Ed. Militară, București, 1975, pp. 34, 90, general A. Beaufre, *Introducere în strategie. Strategia acțiunii*, Ed. Militară, București, 1974, pp. 18-19 și 20-23.

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