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AFGHANISTAN AND THE UNITED STATES**

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**THE STRATEGIC AGREEMENT BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND THE
UNITED STATES**

Abstract:

The strategic agreement between Afghanistan and the United States will make it possible for a contingent of Americans and other NATO nations consultants, technicians and instructors to remain in the country after 2014. The security situation in the country, the need to prevent a new civil war or the return of the Taliban to the government as well as the economic future of the country make this agreement imperative . Moreover the agreement establishes a reasonable and pragmatic solution that would probably provide a proper end to the Afghan conflict.

Keywords:

Strategic agreement, Afghanistan, U.S., NATO countries.

A NECESSARY AGREEMENT

On Monday, April 23, the United States Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, announced that they had finally reached the long-awaited strategic military agreement with Afghanistan, which he described as a 'significant step' between both countries. This agreement, which is the result of long, complex negotiations, goes beyond the purely military aspect and is essential to ensure some stability, or maybe even the mere survival of the Kabul government after 2014. The alternatives to a lack of agreement and the total withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan were discouraging for the Afghan government: a prospect of a rapid deterioration of security, a setback of the progress obtained throughout more than 10 years of foreign presence in the country and even a new civil war, as many Afghans still fear.

This possibility, which certainly was the worst of all, took root in the Afghan opinion after the initial announcement of the total withdrawal of the foreign troops in December 2014, causing an Afghan brain drain and capital flight to foreign countries. The fear of a replay of what had happened after the withdrawal of the Russian military forces is not groundless because, in spite of the considerable progress since early 2002, which in some areas, such as education, was outstanding, Afghanistan still faces many problems and the improvement in these areas has not been so remarkable as to consider that these problems have been eradicated.

The fear of the United States and the international community as a whole of another civil war is certainly the reason behind the change in the American decision from a total withdrawal of the troops, previously announced by President Obama, to a downsizing of the troops to reach the strategic agreement which establishes the terms of the continuation of the U.S. troops' presence in Afghanistan.

Apart from the aspects directly linked to security, the aforementioned agreement must be decisive in the second aspect that concerns Afghanistan's future the most: Afghanistan economic viability. Indeed, in spite of being a really positive symptom of Afghan assumption of responsibility in terms of security, the dramatic reduction in the troops which is taking place, and which will continue to decrease until the entry into force of the agreement in late 2014, means severe damage to the weak Afghan economy.

Although estimated figures vary, up to 90 % of the Afghan economy is considered to be linked somehow to the presence of foreign troops and donations from abroad. Although there is no doubt that international aid to Afghanistan must continue necessarily for a long time, for decades in fact, there is the fear that the withdrawal of the troops may cause the total collapse of the economy, as many people speculate.

In that sense, confirming the prolonged American presence in the country under another formula is, to a large extent, a guarantee of the continuation of the American involvement in Afghanistan. This represents a much longer term than the imminent end of 2014 to diversify the economy, explore other activity areas, start up the exploitation of resources and, in short, move towards the creation of a sustainable Afghan state in the economic field.

Afghanistan would have fallen otherwise in the hands of regional powers interested in economic affairs and mainly in Afghan natural resources. This increment, especially of Indian presence and Chinese interest, mainly in potential resources to be discovered and exploited in Afghanistan, is very positive and represents the most viable option for the development of the Afghan economy, although keeping west companies as a counterweight is desirable in order to maintain the balance of influences in the Afghan government.

A third aspect highlights the necessity of the agreement reached. The extension of the American assistance to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is going to make more difficult the consolidation of one possible course for Afghanistan to follow in case of total U.S. absence. The importance of fighting drug production is well-known, as well as the importance of drug production in the local economy and the ongoing conversion of poppy sowing and harvesting to an increasing production of refined heroine. That is why it is obvious that this is a severe, long-lasting problem. The permanence of the American forces will strengthen ANSF capacity to fight drugs in the long term, reducing the possibilities for Afghanistan to become a narcostate with the serious implications for security that this entails, both regionally and globally.

Finally a fourth argument reinforces, possibly even more so, the necessity of the American presence in Afghanistan: the capabilities and aptitudes of the ANSF. These forces are now absorbed in the transition process to take exclusive responsibilities in terms of security and the advantage of the benefits of NATO training mission of troops (NTM-A). In spite of the evident progress seen from 2010, these forces still present problems which are difficult to solve, at least in the short term. Under a considerable attrition, especially the police (ANP), the forces do not have good equipment and train frequently, taking into account the complex landscape in many areas of the country in terms of security.

Furthermore, desertion is alarmingly high, with soldiers constantly absconding from the ranks, new soldiers constantly being recruited and the recovery of not a few of those who ran AWOL. This process seems unending and makes it much more difficult to create stable, fully professional and efficient forces as a whole. To this we must add the well-known episodes of police brutality and the corruption of some chiefs, along with the serious doubts about ANSF capacity to maintain sufficient operating standards of the thousands of vehicles,

electronic and communication equipments, as well as the 44 airplanes and helicopters which the Afghan forces have been receiving in the last few months to complete their equipment. President Karzai has admitted that the Afghan technicians cannot maintain such complex systems on their own without foreign assistance.

The spectacular attacks suffered during the last few months in Kabul, with such sensitive targets as embassies or even the ISAF Headquarters in the capital, apart from seeking a strong media impact, highlight to a large extent the incapacity of the ANSF to effectively protect at least these vital installations. In short, this fact, along with the others set out above, clearly shows that both the army and the police have a long way to go in order to reach the stability and efficiency to fully ensure the security in Afghanistan.

Although there may be more, the arguments that have been shown above are more than enough to feel pleased about having finally reached an agreement between both countries. This agreement is necessary, if not essential, to ensure the maintenance and consolidation of what has been reached in this complex country and to make its involution towards landscapes prior to the foreign intervention from October 2001 difficult.

1. THE TERMS

The office of President Karzai and the American Embassy in Kabul have declared that there has been a document signing ceremony between the American Ambassador, Ryan Crocker, and the Afghan national security advisor, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, as a previous step to the solemn approval of the agreement between the presidents of both nations.

Finding the terms of common acceptance in the agreement has not been easy; that is why the preparation of a definitive draft, as it was called, has been a month-long decision (a year and a half according to other sources). Apparently the option chosen to give visibility and relevance to the agreement was the signing by President Obama and President Karzai immediately before the beginning of the NATO Summit which will take place in Chicago on May 20. But the surprise visit of President Obama to Afghanistan this week has allowed the solemn signing of both presidents, an action by which the aforementioned document enjoys fully official status. More than anything else, the visit of President Obama on the date of the first anniversary of the operation that ended with Bin Laden's life has a clear electoral purpose.

Now that we know the main points included in this agreement, one of the most significant ones is the period of validity: 10 years from the end of the year 2014, that is, until the start of the year 2015. In the words of Panetta it can be deduced that this date is not considered definitive. He has reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to keep a lasting

presence in Afghanistan until the government and Afghan security forces can fully guarantee the security themselves. These words seem to announce a constant review of the situation, with a possible North American presence more or less long according to the circumstances and, above all, the situation of the security in the country. Nevertheless, the North American presence will stop being based on strong troops of combat contingent to approach more closely the other parameters known in other circumstances and scenes, becoming support elements for an allied nation, based on the instruction and the training, the logistics and the technical advice. But the recognition of the continuation of the missions specifically against Al-Qaeda members has to be highlighted.

Another point to highlight is the absence of specific North American bases in the Afghan territory. That's why the troops of the United States are placed in Afghan bases, normally next to the troops that will be advised or instructed.

Finally, a very positive element is that there is not a contingent established in the agreement. Consequently, it is necessary to be flexible enough to establish it in accordance with the circumstances and the development of the long process of the Afghan postwar. Not in vain, the document is going to be presented at the imminent NATO summit, as from this moment the North American attempt to involve its organisation allies will probably start, with the aim of sharing responsibilities and also the costs of the extended support to the Afghan government. It is not going to be an easy task, with many participant nations being tired of such a long and expensive presence in the Asiatic country and completely immersed in the current economic crisis. In the words of Secretary Panetta, "the suspicious debate that will continue beyond Chicago", suggest a harsh negotiation, in this case inter-allied. At least, it is to be hoped that from the summit, if they do not give specific figures, they will give preliminary agreements about who is going to participate and in which magnitude range, extending the presence of the troops beyond 2014.

In any case, and despite the difficulties, no matter whether its origin is deeply-rooted or current, the agreement itself is a success. It is enough to compare it with the recent case of Iraq, where a similar attempt, that will allow the presence of a permanent North American contingent in that country, aimed at advising Iraqi security forces instruction tasks, was not approved by many social sectors, which made the president al Maliki deny the immunity for the contingent members under Iraqi law, ending once and for all the chance of agreement and causing the exit of the country of the North American troops.

2. THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE AGREEMENT AND OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION

There have been many disagreements between both administrations during the last

negotiation of the strategic agreement process. At the end, there were two obstacles that have nearly blocked the process. The first one has been the Afghan demand, made by the president Karzai himself, of the end of the night raids of the North American forces to search and arrest insurgents. The extremely serious incident in which a North American sergeant, that murdered 17 civilians, some of them children, in Belandi, near Kandahar, leaving his base at night, has been key on this Afghan firm stand. Finally, the operations could continue, but they will not be anymore North American or leaded by North Americans. They will have to take into account necessarily with Afghan troops to operate in this kind of actions.

The second, if possible even more serious, given the idiosyncrasy of the Afghan people, was the most known episode of the burning of Koran books by North American forces in charge of prisoners in the Base at Bagram. This episode, which really shook the foundations of the cooperation between both nations and the coexistence of the North American troops with the Afghan people, reinforced the Afghan demand to control the prisoners, especially those from the aforementioned Bagram.

Finally, only the overcoming of both disagreement points permitted the possibility of reaching a definitive agreement. The celebration of a Loya Jirga, called by the president Karzai, that ended the pressing need to reach a strategic agreement with the United States in the long-term, supporting the president this way in a hard decision. This difficulty is due to both internal and external factors. The two neighbouring countries that have so much influence in big zones of the country, Pakistan and Iran, are against the permanence of the foreign troops in Afghanistan, not for the same reasons. A similar opposition of the big regional powers, mainly China, to this presence, is not difficult to suppose. Taking into account that a considerable part of the economic future of the country depends on the investments of these countries into Afghanistan, it is easy to understand the pressures that the government of Karzai has suffered.

Nevertheless, the biggest difficulties are internal ones. As we have seen so many times, during the last decade, the coexistence of the troops, government employees and foreign aid workers with the Afghan people has always been difficult. The members of a deeply conservative society, with moral and ethic principles that from a western point of view are incomprehensible, the deep Afghan religiosity, which has completely different parameters from that of the members of the international force, not only as a result of the difference of confession but above all because of the role of the religion in the lifestyle model of one and another, and the offences to their beliefs immediately provoke a total rejection and even retaliatory actions.

In this manner, the very isolated, and statistically almost despicable, incidents related to the

desecration of corpses and, especially, with the disrespect for the Koran, sometime burned and even thrown into a toilet, are still in the memory of the Afghan people. These incidents put up a wall between them and the international presence that, taking into account the Afghan traditions have to continue over time. The government employees and the military that are being instructed or that will be instructed in the future are not exempted from this rejection and enmity in any way, which is why the security of the small number of people that finally remain in Afghanistan will be one of the cornerstones of a mission that seems to be full of difficulties. Consequently, a previous in-depth training of the advisors and the managers posted there, in connection with the totems and taboos of the people, is going to be indispensable. In this case, this training will be favoured by the number, unknown to date, but certainly much lower than the contingent of other years. It is going to be an excellent and indispensable implementation of the comprehensive approach - or whatever it should be called - this centuries-old concept of all displaced and established forces in foreign territories -and, of course, it will be vital to the acceptance and the success of the mission that the behavior of the last few years is never repeated. On the other hand, the desired lack of combat actions by the advisors and managers remaining will most likely be positive, mainly by trying not to cause in this way the sadly famous collateral damages which, above all linked to air attacks, have been figuring excessively in many phases of the fight against the insurgent forces.

The signing of the agreement allows us to turn the page of the recent misunderstandings, staged by the severe declarations by the Afghan parliamentarians in connection to the “arbitrary” actions of the foreign troops and of the “loss of patience” of the Afghans. Moreover, those same parliamentarians are aware of the fact that keeping the American presence, in spite of the difficulties to come, is probably the guarantee of the survival of the political system to which they belong and, mainly, from which they profit. The extension of the mission, within the terms that would be finally agreed, will be, consequently and in the worst case scenario, a necessary evil for the survival and stabilization of the country, even as it is accepted by the main political opponents to Karzai, while it is contemplated by other sectors of the population as a new opportunity to improvement and progress for the country.

3. CONCLUSIONS

It is considered essential that the strategic agreement between Afghanistan and The United States, which will enable the continuity in the country of a contingent, mainly of American consultants, technical experts and instructors in the Asian country continue for at least 10 years after 2014.

In addition to the previous ones, the important mission is maintaining the fight against Al Qaeda to within the Afghan territory, where the American forces will keep on participating.

The security situation in the country, the need to prevent another civil war or the return of the Taliban to the government, the economic future of the latter, the ANSF capacities and attitudes, which are still in its early stages, and the relevance of continuing and increasing the effective combating against drug production and trafficking have succeeded in overcoming, for the interest of both sides, the serious difficulties encountered between the two administrations, who have finally reached a clearly inalienable agreement.

Signed this same week by both presidents, it will be presented in the following NATO summit which will take place in Chicago, where The United States will probably try, together with the new strategic priorities signed by President Obama on January 5, to commit its allies to share burdens and responsibilities in this new stage that will be the situation in Afghanistan after 2014. It is true that the existence of a strategic agreement is useful for clearly framing the functions and consideration of the foreign troops in the country, making the decision of the different Western governments easier, knowing a level playing field that will be probably extended to the whole national contingents that remain deployed there.

It is also going to be a significant support to the development of the difficult Afghan national process of reconciliation, reactivating the options of political negotiation, as they are going to send a clear message to the political enemies of the government, mainly the Taliban, and also the regional powers, with Pakistan emerging, that the Western nations with The United States at the head are not going to abandon the Afghan people to the interests of the different groups. Therefore, the mistake made, at the time, by President Obama when he confirmed prematurely the total withdrawal of the troops no later than December 31, 2014, has finally been amended, establishing a situation whereby pragmatism and reason have together wrought a solution to the Afghan conflict.

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