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The keys to the taliban revival in  
Afghanistan

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## The keys to the taliban revival in Afghanistan

### Abstract:

The withdrawal of most international troops from Afghanistan has brought along the resurgence of the Taliban, which has weakened the government even more. The presence of ISIL in the country has been a disrupting force, although the role that it plays in the conflict is still not clear. The announcement of the death of Mullah Omar has buried any possibility of reconciliation between the Taliban and the government—at least for the moment— while prompting a fragmentation within the group that security forces have been unable to profit from.

### Keywords:

*Afghanistan, Taliban, Ashraf Ghani, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, Islamic State, Pakistan.*

**\*NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

## Introduction

The withdrawal of NATO troops has not brought along more stability for Afghanistan. The escalation of Taliban's offensives during 2015 has forced Barack Obama to increase the number of troops stationed at the country, although these were only supposed to 'assist and advise' local forces, and thus were banned from taking part in any military operation. Nonetheless, they have carried out airstrikes and have provided support in some key battles<sup>1</sup>. Signs of instability in Afghanistan have prompted this extension of troops.

The weakening of Afghan military forces became apparent during the Taliban assault on Kunduz in September 2015. Apart from this district, the Taliban have managed to take over more districts in other provinces, especially Helmand, which is key to guaranteeing mobility to the north.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the intensification of violence has taken a special toll on the capital, Kabul. The attack to the Spanish embassy in December or the suicide attacks on the Parliament June are just some examples of the Taliban revival.

At the moment, the districts controlled by the Taliban are primarily located in Helmand and Kandahar, followed by Kunduz, Farah, Logar, Badakhjstan and Paktika among others<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the 40 districts that they already control, another 40 are heavily contested between the Taliban and Afghan security forces or between the Taliban and Islamic State (ISIL), albeit significantly less in the latter due to the limited presence of ISIL in the country.

Besides, the extent to which ISIL has entered the country is still a widely debated issue. Although the first reaction of several analysts was to designate ISIL's presence in the country as mere propaganda, the group has managed to establish a presence—more or less stable—during this year in some regions of the country, especially Nangarhar. ISIL's militant composition in Afghanistan—the so-called Khorasan— is yet to be determined, although it seems that it is made up by both ex Taliban who have split from the central command and militants sent directly from Syria and Iraq, according to general Campbell<sup>4</sup>. The territorial

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<sup>1</sup> JOLLY, David, "U.S. to Send More Troops to Aid Afghan Forces Pressed by Taliban", New York Times, 9 February 2016, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/world/asia/us-troops-helmand-province-afghanistan.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/world/asia/us-troops-helmand-province-afghanistan.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> POPALZAI, Masood, "Taliban forces take control of Sangin in Afghanistan's Helmand province", BBC, 22 December 2015, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/21/middleeast/afghanistan-taliban-control-helmand>

<sup>3</sup> ROGGIO, Bill, "Taliban overruns district in southern Afghanistan", The Long War Journal, 9 December 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/taliban-overruns-district-in-southern-afghanistan.php>

<sup>4</sup> CRAIG, Tom, "The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan is leaving, but the troops are staying", Washington Post, 13 February 2016, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/top-us-commander-in-afghanistan-is-leaving-but-the-troops-are-staying/2016/02/13/790224e4-d271-11e5-90d3-34c2c42653ac\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/top-us-commander-in-afghanistan-is-leaving-but-the-troops-are-staying/2016/02/13/790224e4-d271-11e5-90d3-34c2c42653ac_story.html)

struggle between the Taliban and ISIL clearly shows that the former are not willing to ally themselves with the ‘foreign enemy’, and much less give in to them.

This paper attempts to offer some of the keys that define the current situation in Afghanistan. In the end, being able to identify these variables is necessary in order to develop future outlooks and scenarios, taking into account the most prominent trends within the Afghan conflict, which is further escalating.

## Taliban Insurgency and Terrorism in Afghanistan

### Taliban: from Mullah Omar to Mullah Mansour

Violence has escalated as a result of the Taliban’s resurgence, which has nothing but increased since international troops withdrew from Afghanistan. The factors that can explain this revival are mainly: i) a power vacuum after the drawdown of NATO, ii) the inability of the government to properly face security challenges, iii) the poor readiness of Afghan security forces and, especially after the death of Mullah Omar, iv) the Taliban’s need to ‘demonstrate’ force in order to bring the insurgency together. Military offensives and the desire to obtain power through force have been a constant in Taliban rhetoric, along with national sovereignty, sacred jihad and the authority of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban<sup>5</sup>. These issues have never changed, even during the attempt to launch peace talks.

Despite recurring attacks, the situation appeared contained as of July 2015 because of the apparent will of both sides to start peace talks, which were partly facilitated by Pakistan and Qatar. However, the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar little after the second meeting was a turning point that buried any possibility of further negotiations. Mullah Omar’s death had two major ramifications. On the one hand, the revelation that Mullah Omar had been dead for two years meant that peace talks—which were extremely criticised by the younger faction of the movement—were never actually approved by the supreme leader of the Taliban. The decision to cover its death can be explained, if we draw a parallel with the figure of the *Cid Campeador*<sup>6</sup>, because of the critical influence that the so-called Amir ul- Momineen had in keeping the insurgency together. On the other hand, the announcement of his death meant that, in order to avoid the foreseeable disunity within the group, a new leader had to be elected as soon as possible. Once that position had been filled, and assuming that higher ranks would immediately approve, the rest of the members of the movement would be compelled to swear allegiance or *bayat* if they wish not to be

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<sup>5</sup> SEMPLE, Michael, “Rhetoric, ideology, and organizational structure of the Taliban movement”, *United States Institute of Peace*, nº102, december 2014, p.8, available at: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW102-Rhetoric-Ideology-and-Organizational-Structure-of-the-Taliban-Movement.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *El Cid Campeador* was a military leader in medieval Spain around the s. XI. He is considered a hero because of how he brought together the Castillian army against invaders.

perceived as traitors to the group.<sup>7</sup> Despite the theory, reality shows that matching the degree of legitimacy and acceptance of Mullah Omar is no easy task<sup>8</sup>.

Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, second to Mullah Omar and close to the Pakistani intelligence, according to some sources<sup>9</sup>, was elected leader. Once the designation became effective; Mansour announced that peace talks were to be indefinitely suspended because they were only the enemy's propaganda. Yet the truth is that the change in leadership opens new doors for the Taliban movement that were unconceivable before. The voluntary confinement of Mullah Omar was a major bone of contention among the group, since the leader seemed to be losing importance at the expense of more charismatic leaders, such as Al Baghdadi. Perhaps this was a factor behind the Taliban decision to republish Omar's biography in April 2015, so that his spiritual legacy was highlighted. Mansour's appointment also has the potential of giving the movement new momentum. During the assault on Kunduz, Mansour claimed success in numerous occasions, which can be understood as a means to ensure his legitimacy.

One of the first candidates to fill the void was the son of Mullah Omar, who was denied the position because of his youth. In the end, he ended up publicly supporting Mansour. Later, a more significant breakaway faction led by Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund surged, claiming that Mansour had been elected illegitimately. This split has resulted in several disputes among the Taliban, especially in the province of Zabul. Internal divisions within the Taliban are shown in the table below.<sup>10</sup>

<b>OPPOSITION TO MANSOUR</b>		
<u>Factions</u>	<u>Important figures</u>	<u>Rationale</u>
Armed opposition	Mohammad Rasool Mansour Dadullah	Rasool was declared Emir. They criticise Mansour because of his closeness to Pakistan. They support ISIL but only outside of Afghanistan.
Rahbari shura (not armed)	Mullah Abdul Razaq Mullah Hassan Rahmani	They criticise Mansour's appointment and support Omar's son, Yaqub. They seem divided between Mansour and Rasool.

<sup>7</sup> BBC Global News Podcast, "New Taliban Leader Calls for Unity", 1 August 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02ylhdk>

<sup>8</sup> AZAMI, Dawood, "The Afghan Taliban enter uncharted territory", BBC, 30 July 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-33725841>

<sup>9</sup> KHAN, M Ilyas, "Profile: Taliban Leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour" BBC, 30 September 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-34405035>

<sup>10</sup> Tabla basada en información recogida de : OSMAN, Borhan, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the post-Omar Taleban", *Afghan Analyst Network*, 24 November 2015, available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/toward-fragmentation-mapping-the-post-omar-taleban/>

Ex Tora Bora	Anwar ul-Haq Mujahed	Local group within the Taliban. Its leader claims to have been barred by Mansour. Some members have joined ISIL.
Political office	Tayyeb Agha	Some members that worked in Qatar resigned after learning that Omar's death had been covered up.
Others	Qayum Zaker	Candidate to replace Mullah Omar; he opposed to Mansour's appointment. He gives tacit approval to the group's leadership, but favours internal divisions.

### ISIL in Afghanistan: evaluation of threat

Despite the progress made this year, the main issue within the Taliban continues to be the generation gap between the younger members of the movement, who want to pursue jihad and commit attacks, and the higher levels, who instigated peace talks in the first place. In fact, these young members or the more bellicose factions of the movements have been the ones to feel compelled by ISIL's narrative.

ISIL's entrance in the country became official with an attack that took place in May 2015 in Jalalabad, which seems to have been carried out by supporters of Al Baghdadi's group. As expected, the Taliban have not welcomed the presence of a foreign group that has another type of jihad in mind, which does not mean that the Taliban do not approve of ISIL's actions outside Afghanistan, as they did with Paris attacks.<sup>11</sup> Mansour has declared that ISIL only contributes to dividing jihad and that all combatants should fight under Taliban's name in Afghanistan<sup>12</sup>. Even Rasool has pointed out that ISIL is not welcomed in Afghanistan<sup>13</sup>. Disputes between both groups have taken a toll especially on Nangarhar, where ISIL has a more stable presence<sup>14</sup>.

For instance, Kunduz saw the arrival of some ISIL militants who took advantage of the existing chaos to increase their influence, following the brutal attack by the Taliban and their

<sup>11</sup> ROGGIO, Bill, "The Taliban approves of Paris suicide assault", The Long War Journal, 19 November de 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/the-taliban-approves-of-paris-suicide-assault.php>

<sup>12</sup> ROGGIO, Bill, "Taliban chastise Islamic State for dividing jihadist ranks in Afghanistan and beyond", Long War Journal, 16 June 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/taliban-chastise-islamic-state-for-dividing-jihadist-ranks-in-afghanistan-and-beyond.php>

<sup>13</sup> RFERL, "Afghan Taliban Splinter Group's New Chief Backs Islamic State 'Brothers' -- But Only Abroad", 15 de February 2016, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-taliban-faction-rasul-is-al-qaeda-islamic-state/27352225.html>

<sup>14</sup> SAIFULLAH, Masood, "Nangarhar: Gateway to Afghanistan for 'Islamic State'", DW, 30 December 2015, available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/nangarhar-gateway-to-afghanistan-for-islamic-state/a-18952201>

subsequent expulsion from the region. In Nangarhar, ISIL even established a radio station that has been a recent target of US airstrikes. However, the capability of carrying out attacks now and then should not be confused with being in actual control of the districts.

The game changer that ISIL has introduced in the country is that it has been able to attract some members of the Taliban who have joined ISIL's ranks. Although defections are not an unknown phenomenon for the Taliban, who have never been a monolithic entity<sup>15</sup>, it does not seem that they would give in to a foreign leader, particularly after so many years of war. Thus, there are no clear indicators that ISIL will be able to alter the balance of power to its advantage. Albeit the presence of foreign militants can contribute to enlarging the division among the Taliban, Ahmed Rashid<sup>16</sup> points out that both the characteristics of the Afghan conflict and the fact that the Taliban are focused on a local rather than global jihad make it very difficult to ISIL to succeed.

### Al Qaeda: on the verge of exclusion

Lastly, ISIL's presence in the country has turned all eyes to Al Qaeda, whose influence in Afghanistan is somewhat limited. In spite of some recent US reports claiming that Al Qaeda still has active training camps in Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>, the struggle for global terrorism against ISIL and the estrangement from the Taliban have almost contributed to its disappearance in the Afghan field. Nevertheless, al Zawahiri has declared in various occasions his willingness to level out differences with ISIL for the sake of creating a common project of global jihad, which should be focused on achieving the most important goals in the fight against infidels. This union is notwithstanding unfeasible in Afghanistan, since Al Qaeda has legitimised the Taliban movement, which is perceived as an ally—although with nuances. In 2014, al Zawahiri swore allegiance or *bayat* to Mullah Omar, which was a matter of embarrassment for the group when the death of the Afghan leader went public<sup>18</sup>. This is only an indicator of the distancing between both organisations, which could be summed up in the global versus local scope respectively.

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<sup>15</sup> CHRISTIA, Fotini y SEMPLE, Michael, "Flipping the Taliban", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2009-07-01/flipping-taliban>

<sup>16</sup> RASHID, Ahmed, "The Afghan battlefield has become more complicated" *Al Jazeera*, 1 November 2015, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/11/afghan-battlefield-complicated-151101081133323.html>

<sup>17</sup> JOSCELYN, Tomas, "Al Qaeda's Kandahar training camp 'probably the largest' in Afghan War", *The Long War Journal*, 31 October 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/al-qaedas-kandahar-training-camp-probably-the-largest-in-afghan-war.php>

<sup>18</sup> The Soufan Group, "Zawahiri's Mullah Omar Problem", *The Soufan Group*, 5 August 2015, available at: <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-zawahiris-mullah-omar-problem/>

## Weak Governance as an element of instability

The second element that prompts instability is the government. The new government lead by Ashraf Ghani has been unable to live up to the expectations that the population had upon it. Moreover, the incapability of the government to appoint all cabinet posts is another sign of a weak project without a clear vision<sup>19</sup>. Rifts between Ashraf Ghani, Pashtun, and his Tajik Prime Minister Abdullah Abdullah represent the historical estrangement of Pashtuns from the rest of the population, which can actually lead to the ethnic fragmentation of the country. Ethnic multiplicity has always been an issue in Afghanistan, and while on one hand it fosters harmonisation for the sake of a shared history and nationality, it also allows for the creation of spheres of influence with similar ethnicities outside the borders<sup>20</sup>. This complexity shall not be ignored when it comes to analysing the challenges that Afghanistan faces.

Regarding foreign policy, Ghani's attempt to approach Pakistan should be highlighted as one of the most significant milestones of his term as President. From the very beginning Ghani assured that a good relation with Pakistan was vital to guaranteeing peace in the region and even acknowledged its neighbour's stand in the conflict with India. This closeness has resulted in a tighter military cooperation, which may have even transferred into the ground in the form of joint operations, specifically in the east of Afghanistan. Islamabad and Kabul categorically deny that this is such case<sup>21</sup>. Besides, Pakistan has been the axis on which peace talks have taken place.

Nonetheless, the relation has eventually become strained, particularly after the Kabul attacks in August. Ghani publicly claimed that war was coming from Pakistani territory because they allowed the existence of Taliban sanctuaries.<sup>22</sup> The announcement of a new round of peace negotiations might be a starting point to consolidate the relation between both neighbours, although these talks do not include any faction of the Taliban.

As regards the economy, forecasts do not seem very optimistic. Afghanistan's economy is based almost entirely on external aid, which has decreased since the withdrawal of most

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<sup>19</sup> MIAKHEL, Shahmahmood, "In Afghanistan, No Leadership Means No Elections", *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2016, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/29/in-afghanistan-no-leadership-means-no-elections/>

<sup>20</sup> SIDDIQUE, Abubakar, "Afghanistan's ethnic divides", *CIDOB*, January 2012, available at: [http://www.observatori.org/paises/pais\\_87/documentos/ABUBAKAR\\_SIDDIQUE.pdf](http://www.observatori.org/paises/pais_87/documentos/ABUBAKAR_SIDDIQUE.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> FAIZI, Aimad, "Has India lost Afghanistan to Pakistan?", *Al Jazeera*, 16 April 2015, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/04/india-lost-afghanistan-pakistan-150426051958020.html>

<sup>22</sup> GRAHAM-HARRISON, Emma, "Afghan president in last-ditch attempt to repair ties with Pakistan", *The Guardian*, 13 August 2015, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/13/afghan-president-ashraf-ghani-pakistan-islamabad>

international troops from the country<sup>23</sup>. The government has been incapable of facing the longest-lasting problem of the country: cultivation and sales of opium. Although this year marks the first time that opium crops have declined in Afghanistan<sup>24</sup>, the insurgency still benefits from drug profits. The Taliban offer economic incentives to those who supply poppy, so that those who do not have an alternative livelihood are forced to accept this situation<sup>25</sup>.

Apart from the ongoing insurgency, the country has several legal loopholes that worsen the life standards of the population. The lack of infrastructures is an unresolved problem that is even more pressing for the population than the insurgency. For instance, there is not an effective system for water management implemented in the country. Not only is water needed for crops, but also general quality of water has deteriorated due to the lack of collaboration between the neighbours when it comes to creating dams and canals<sup>26</sup>.

On the other hand, several reports show that Afghanistan holds one of the largest unexplored reserves of rare minerals<sup>27</sup>. However, before carrying out such a task, several issues need to be resolved first: the government needs to strengthen itself and deal with the never-ending problem of corruption while drugs and terrorism have to be significantly reduced. Even though Ghani's government should start looking for alternative routes in order to diversify the economy and create a sustainable source of income, the current framework hampers the government from dealing with less urgent issues in the short term, albeit these will become urgent in the future. This strategy answers to the fear that Afghanistan could face the so-called 'resource curse' and thus instability would increase. Poorly managed mineral richness in some countries has resulted in corruption and impoverishment of the majority of the population, which has been unable to benefit from the profits of selling natural resources. Currently, this appears to be the path that Afghanistan is following, since international investment in the country has not resulted in the country becoming sustainable regarding management and exploitation of resources.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> MALIKYAR, Helena, "Afghanistan: It's the economy, stupid", Al Jazeera, 6 September 2015, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/09/afghanistan-economy-stupid-150906095654455.html>

<sup>24</sup> UN News Centre, "After six years on the rise, Afghan opium crop cultivation declines – UN survey", UN, 14 October 2015, available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52261#.VruhGuk1dEQ>

<sup>25</sup> DOMÍNGUEZ, Gabriel, "How the Taliban get their money", DW, 21 January 2016, available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/how-the-taliban-get-their-money/a-18995315>

<sup>26</sup> IWPR, "Afghan Rivers Need Better Management", 12 January 2016, available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghan-rivers-need-better-management>

<sup>27</sup> New York Times, "Afghan Minerals, another failure", The New York Times, 26 May 2015, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/opinion/afghan-minerals-another-failure.html>

<sup>28</sup> New York Times, op.cit.



On balance, the government is in a downward spiral in which the weaker it is the more resilient the insurgency becomes. Afghanistan is not capable of facing the Taliban insurgency on its own. Given that peace talks have come to a standstill from which they are not likely to revive despite the Islamabad meetings, the only remaining option is resume military activities, something for which Afghan security forces are not adequately trained. The support of the international community is increasingly needed, especially regarding the economy.

## REGIONAL ACTORS OR COLLATERAL DAMAGE

### Pakistan's double game

When it comes to determining who is prompting instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan is right behind the Taliban and the government. Historically, Pakistan has played a dual role in Afghanistan with the goal of shielding itself against India and preventing Afghanistan from becoming an ally of its biggest enemy. Therefore, the Pakistani intelligence (ISI) allegedly needs to have influence over the Taliban movement in order to disrupt the country.

Mansour's appointment as the leader of the Taliban has been received with scepticism by some factions within the group for believing that he is closely working with Pakistani intelligence<sup>29</sup>. However, ISI's importance in the Taliban dynamics should not be overstated, since for the moment the Taliban are unwilling to re-establish peace talks. It seems that Pakistan is now looking for an easy way out, partly because of the potential impact of ISIL in Pakistan. Perhaps that is why it has facilitated a new meeting in Islamabad in February 2016, in which the Afghan government, the US, Pakistan and China will take part of.

### Iran and Afghanistan: a strained relationship

Iran-Afghanistan relations are fraught with fallouts and contradictions. On the one hand, the Taliban have tried to gauge the Iranian government in order to further themselves from Pakistani influence and have more freedom of mobility, which might have been triggered by ISIL's threat in the country<sup>30</sup>. It is not the first time that both parts get in contact, since Iran has supposedly sold arms to the Taliban in various occasions<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, recent reports put the focus on Iran's latest strategy of recruiting hundreds of Afghans to fight in

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<sup>29</sup> KHAN, M Ilyas, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> AZAMY, Hekmatullah y SIDIQUE, Abubakar, "Taliban reach out to Iran", *The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 3, 12, 12 June 2015, available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=44029&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=862880f0ecd36d335911710ccc23117d#.VrunJOK1dEQ](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44029&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=862880f0ecd36d335911710ccc23117d#.VrunJOK1dEQ)

<sup>31</sup> KUGELMAN, Michael, "The Iran factor in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 10 July 2014, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/10/the-iran-factor-in-afghanistan/>

the pro-Assad block in Syria<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, both disagree over water management, to the extent that Iran won't allow for the creation of a new dam to pass over more water to Afghanistan<sup>33</sup>.

Besides, Iran has cooperated with the US at some points during the war on terror, partly motivated by the fear of a strong Sunni Taliban government in the border<sup>34</sup>. Currently, the absence of Iran in peace talks signifies its lack of interest in facilitating stability in the neighbouring country, even if instability is not directly instigated by the Shiite regime. Depending on how the threat evolves, especially concerning ISIL, a more implicated Iran in the dynamics of the region can be expected.

### China's role as a mediator

China is going through a very unexpected evolution in terms of foreign policy. While in the past it refused to interfere in the internal affairs of other states, now it is starting to take advantage of the so-called 'soft-power' in some regions in which it is concerned about its own security. China's involvement in Afghanistan is driven by the Uighur issue, which ISIL might try to encourage. Even though China has never disapproved of a Taliban government—provided that it was stable—, it now seems to want to intercede on behalf of China's own interests: that Afghan instability fails to affect China<sup>35</sup>. Ghani's government has tried to compel China to act as a mediator so that it would bring Pakistan to the negotiation table and it would deny the Taliban carte blanche.

At the moment, China plays a pivotal role in fostering peace talks, even if at first glance it is less constrained than the rest of the participants. Its participation in these negotiations is welcomed for the sway it holds over Pakistan.

### Conclusion: Towards fifty years of a never-ending war

Afghanistan is currently facing one of the worst escalations of violence in recent years. Since the USSR invaded the country in 1979, an extended period of peace has been unachievable. The two main elements that have provoked the current instability are: i) the way the Taliban

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<sup>32</sup> MOSLIH, Hashmatallah, "Iran 'foreign legion' leans on Afghan Shia in Syria war", Al Jazeera, 22 January 2016, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/iran-foreign-legion-leans-afghan-shia-syria-war-160122130355206.html>

<sup>33</sup> MASHAL, Mujib, "What Iran and Pakistan Want from the Afghans: Water", Time, 2 December 2012, available at: <http://world.time.com/2012/12/02/what-iran-and-pakistan-want-from-the-afghans-water/>

<sup>34</sup> KUGELMAN, Michael. Op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> WEITZ, Richard, "China and Afghanistan after the Nato withdrawal", *The Jamestown foundation*, November 2015, available at: [http://jamestown.org/uploads/tx\\_jamquickstore/China\\_and\\_Afghanistan\\_After\\_the\\_NATO\\_Withdrawal.pdf](http://jamestown.org/uploads/tx_jamquickstore/China_and_Afghanistan_After_the_NATO_Withdrawal.pdf)

have profited from the power vacuum left by NATO troops when they withdrew from the country and ii) the progressive weakening of the government as a result of the lack of support and resources. ISIL has affected the behaviour of all of these actors due more to the threat that it poses than to its actual capability of carrying out a proper insurgency in Afghanistan such as in Syria and Iraq. In spite of divisions within the Taliban, which has been driven by Mullah Omar's death, the Taliban are still controlling the insurgency in Afghanistan.

The main concern now is that Afghanistan ends up being overshadowed by the events in the Middle East and Africa that are apparently more 'urgent' for the international community: Syria, Iraq and Libya. After the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the first months have seen a significant advance of the Taliban, who are now in control of more districts that they were in 2001. Barack Obama has committed more troops to the battle, which however does not signal that the US is willing to sacrifice more lives.

Starting with the government, the apparent failure to reconstruct the country points at the unsuccessful peacebuilding strategies that have been implemented, which were mainly based on a misunderstanding of the Afghan ethnic diversity —and the disagreements that this diversity implies— and also on the failure to realise the importance of establishing a dialogue with local powers. In order to succeed against an insurgency, the priority should always be winning the hearts and minds. Without the support of the population, especially the Pashtun tribes that give their tacit acceptance to the Taliban, winning the war becomes impossible. Indeed, it is time to reflect again on the Afghan conflict, just like it has been several times since the decision to pursue bin Laden to Afghanistan. The goal here should also be to draw lessons from an unsuccessful intervention, which has been a result of both the lack of comprehension of the country's situation and the failure of counterinsurgency strategies implemented.

It is worth noting that Afghanistan has been historically marked by invasions, from the Mongol army, the British and the Soviets to the current intervention. Although there is a common belief that any future solution should come from Afghans only, a significant percentage of the population accepts and values the presence for foreign troops in order to bring about an end to the conflict, which still seems too far off.

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