

AFGHANISTAN

Withdrawal of American troops: timetable revised

FACTS

➤ On October 15, surrounded by the Vice President, the Defense secretary, and the head of the army, President Obama announced, solemnly, from the White House, the revision of the timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan (9,800 men, alongside 3,000 NATO soldiers) that are still deployed in this endless crisis prone arena, the longest being the military endeavor by the mighty America.

➤ Until then, the Democrat administration was going to withdraw the troops training/advising/assisting their Afghan counterparts on a quicker schedule; on January 1, 2015, just one thousand soldiers (notably in charge of defending American interests) should be on Afghan soil, a modest hundredth of the maximum military footprint (100,000 soldiers) in Afghanistan.

➤ From now on, Washington assigns its army to a more substantial post-2017 presence despite the withdrawal figures above: 5,500 soldiers will stay on to support the Afghan forces.

➤ It is a common sense adjustment following the recent capture of Kunduz (in the north) by the Taliban and the limits displayed by the Afghan forces, incapable of confronting an insurrection that is more active and determined on their own.

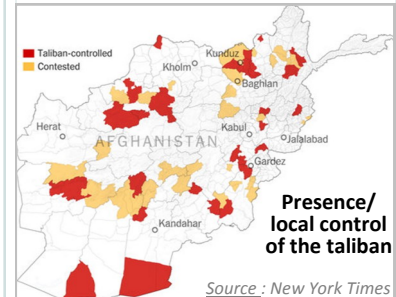
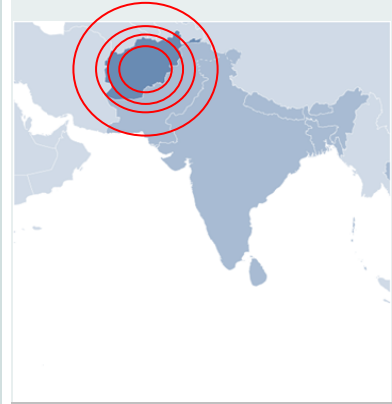
ANALYSIS

■ Occurring in late September with a disconcerting ease, the taking of Kunduz (one of the largest northern city) by the Taliban who were less numerous but otherwise more determined than the Afghan forces assisted to the defense made the American executive to follow the advice of his generals and to decide to slow the schedule of the withdrawal of US troops that are still present and fighting alongside the Afghan government (but authority and credit reduced, hardly a year after the election of President Ghani) and armed forces (whose duty returns to defending the nation on January 1, 2015) overwhelmed by the challenge.

■ A decision imposed by the reality on the ground; since the fall of the Emirate Islamic Taliban in 2001 and the international military intervention in support of Kabul, the Taliban has never been in such a favorable position (see map on the right). Incapable since the departure of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF; NATO) to take on this Taliban Islamic-terrorist insurrection challenge alone, the Afghan army cannot rely just a lapse of fighting during the winter (and a truce until spring) to reverse the trend and regain the initiative.

■ Worried and realistic, even withdrawing, the allied nations observe the trend developing; should they idly sit by?

An event
Its decoding
An analysis
Prospects



AFGHANISTAN : references

Territory : 652,000 km²

Capital : Kabul (4.6 million)

Neighboring countries : China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan

Population : 32.5 million

Ethnic groups : Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens

Religion : Islam (Sunni)

Languages : Dari, Pashto

Regime : Islamic Republic

Head of state : Ashraf Ghani

Average annual income : 550 euros

QUOTE

'While America's combat mission in Afghanistan may be over, our commitment to Afghanistan and its people endures. I will not allow Afghanistan to be used as safe haven for terrorists to attack our nation again (...). We have a serious partner at the head of the Afghan government who is asking for our help.', President **Barack Obama**, *New York Times* October 15 2015.

FORCES PRESENT

NATO troops in Afghanistan: 13,000 including 9,800 US soldiers
 Afghan army: 195,000 men
 Afghan police: 150,000 men
 Taliban: between 30,000-60,000

RECENT EVENTS

- 15/10: President Obama revises timetable for the withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan
- 15/10: Taliban for a (conditional) re-starting of peace talks
- 14/10: Taliban withdraw from Kunduz (Afghanistan's 5th largest city)

DECLARATIONS & REACTIONS

"To bring the conflict to an end, we are ready to take part in serious negotiations with all concerned parties (...) The occupation (foreign presence) should end in all forms, an Islamic government should be installed by a consensus of all Afghans and the foreign interference in Afghan affairs should come to an end", declaration by spokesperson for Afghan Taliban, quoted from the *Dawn* newspaper (Pakistan) from October 16, 2015.

"We are for peace and security in Afghanistan as this is also in the vital interests of Pakistan. We support the inter-Afghan dialogue, which goes without saying", Q. Khalilullah, spokesperson for the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Dawn* from October 16, 2015.



The Author

Olivier Guillard is a fellow at the Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS ; Paris), fellow at CERIAS (UQAM ; Montréal), Information director at Crisis 24 (Paris ; Washington).

CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES

Certainly, as a former Nobel peace prize winner (2009) at the end of his (second term) mandate, the 44th president of the United States should review the constraint of the degrading events (Afghanistan as in Iraq) and see a cardinal principle of his political engagement: ending military engagements initiated under the mandates of Republicans, bringing back soldiers before leaving the White House.

Except for extenuating circumstances, this win will hardly be gained, neither in Iraq (where the Obama administration has left several thousand soldiers to fight IS) nor Afghanistan.

Not that the posterity or the current American leader couldn't recover. On the contrary, he would be less defensible (for the result and image of the incumbent president) and terribly harmful (for the Afghan population) to stand firm on this « electoral » promise, while the general situation degrades dangerously, from Baghdad to Kabul, and the only local resources (political, economic, security) are far from sufficient, to say the least.

The announcement of the simple slowing down of this withdrawal of the American military from Afghanistan—welcomed by Afghan President Ghani, even more inclined than his predecessor to take advantage of the support of the American and NATO troops on Afghan soil—does not of course mean the end of the agony for the 32 million Afghans, nor the beginning of the end of the Taliban insurrection, even less the end of the conflict.

If, in operational terms, the American armed forces will eventually

have more than five times more soldiers in early 2017 (returning to four strongholds: Bagram, Kandahar, Jalalabad) than initially predicted for the various assigned missions (training, advising, counter-insurrection)—a significant reinforcement—this new development can not reverse the trend of the moment or bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.

As it stands, it is interpreted more for its political value as a message of support from the "ally" to the Afghan central power, fragile and contested.

A testimony that one can not help but read as the conscious observation, from Washington, of an unfinished and not-well-thought-out short-term strategy, insufficient and doomed by nature, notwithstanding the efforts (65\$ billion since 2001 by the American taxpayer for the rebuilding of the Afghan army) and the sacrifices (3,506 NATO victims).

A heavy burden that, of course, cannot only rest of the shoulders of the prodigal America.

PRESPECTIVE

Demonstrations of Taliban power, vague peace dialogues, disappointment in Afghan forces against the enemy, fail and contested central power, subpar moral of the population, weariness of allied nations, ambiguity of the Pakistanis, these are difficult times in Afghanistan.

A worrying configuration to which the outside world finds itself again, in one way or another, associated with in the short-term.

Paris, October 19, 2015