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Military Dimension of the New U.S. and NATO Afghanistan Strategy

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According to the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan, winter will not stop intensified operations against the Taliban. With the increased U.S. and NATO troop level, Afghan forces will switch from defensive to offensive activities. Only stronger military pressure and other forms of influence taken together might impel the Taliban to negotiate with the government in Kabul. The political effects of the new strategy should be expected only in a longer-term perspective.

The strategy announced on 21 August by President Donald Trump assumes that the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan will be augmented based on security conditions there, and not on artificial timeframes for their withdrawal. It also foresees changes in the rules of engagement for U.S. troops supporting the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). These decisions were politically and militarily supported in November 2017 by NATO, which also plans to augment its presence in Afghanistan.

Situation in Afghanistan. Despite the huge reduction of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan since 2014, the country is still one of the most important fronts in the fight against international terrorism. Since 2015, the territory controlled by Taliban in Afghanistan expanded from 28% to 43% of the country. However, all attempts to capture one of the 34 provincial capitals failed, though the Taliban continued terrorist attacks in various cities and staged a series of autumn raids on government checkpoints and ANDSF bases to shock and reduce morale among those troops. The worsening security situation also allowed more freedom of movement for groups tied to Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS).

The ANDSF, which in 2017 had 331,000 soldiers and police (21,000 fewer than the level planned by NATO), were unable to push the Taliban into a defensive posture and focused on keeping control of the country's main administrative centres. During the first four months of 2017, the ANDSF lost around 7,000 troops, killed or wounded. Desertions and infiltration by the Taliban continued to persist within the ANDSF. With NATO support, it was possible to make up for the losses, but military operations were hampered by gaps in management, logistics, equipment, and incompetence among some officers and NCOs. U.S. forces cooperated with a high-intensity air campaign against narcotics labs that comprise the financial lifeblood of the Taliban. The most effective American operations came against IS, which itself remained in conflict with the Taliban, losing many leaders and foot soldiers, and beset by internal divisions led to a military retreat in Afghanistan.

U.S. and NATO Strategy Assumptions. Two separate but synchronised military operations are ongoing in Afghanistan: Resolute Support Mission (RSM) is an advisory operation to the ANDSF and conducted through NATO while Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) is focused on cooperation between the U.S. and Afghan special forces against terrorists. The common goal of the U.S. and NATO missions to Afghanistan is to limit the freedom of operation of Al Qaeda (which has at least a few hundred members in the country), the Afghan IS affiliate (around 1,000 members), and the insurgency of the Taliban (around 35,000 militants), which are all trying to overthrow the government in Kabul. Strengthening U.S. forces in both missions in

Afghanistan, as well as support from NATO, should permit these forces to incrementally regain the military initiative and many areas controlled by the Taliban. The new American strategy should end the deadlock in Afghanistan and assist the ANDSF in its shift from defensive to offensive operations. It is worth remembering that President Barack Obama's decision to withdraw combat forces at the end of 2014 created strong pressure on the Afghan government to make needed reforms but at the same time incentivized the Taliban to continue their insurgency and reject any dialogue with the government in Kabul. The new approach by the U.S. is a clear signal that it and its allies are not ready to withdraw from Afghanistan until its internal situation is stable. The consolidation of the U.S. and NATO presence in that country is also a message to Pakistan, long suspected of assistance to some Taliban factions to project its influence into Afghanistan.¹

To increase the combat potential of the ANDSF, the U.S. also decided to change the rules of engagement for its troops in Afghanistan. Since 2014, NATO-RSM advisors have been present on the five main military bases and assisted the corps headquarters in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Laghman, and Herat. With the latest change in tactics, the American advisors can now support lower-level ANDSF units (brigade and battalion) and participate in patrols and combat operations. The change also includes more flexible rules for air and special forces strikes on the Taliban. However, similar changes in the tasks and rules of engagement within RSM should not be expected for advisors from other NATO countries. The changes on the American side are supplemented by the "ANDSF Road Map to 2020", accepted by Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani. According to the plan, the ANDSF should finish the reorganisation of its units and training system by the end of 2017, and then in 2018 double the number of army and police special units, and by 2020 regain control over areas inhabited by a majority of the population.

Forces and Means. The U.S. increased its troops in Afghanistan by 2,000 in spring 2017, even before the announcement of the new strategy. After President Trump's acceptance of the conclusions of a strategic review, the U.S. presence in both Afghan missions was increased by another 3,000 troops to 15,000 (similar to the number of civilian advisors there). The American contribution to NATO-RSM was increased to around 9,000 (from 6,800 in May 2017). But even after the decision by NATO in November 2017 approving changes to the rules of engagement within RSM, the future is unclear concerning the contributions from the European allies and 13 NATO partners, which until recently had maintained parity with American troops levels at 6,500 military advisors.

Obviously of essential importance remains the contributions from NATO members and partners of material assistance to Afghanistan. In relation to the ANDSF, its Afghanistan National Army Trust Fund is not endangered. The fund, in which contributions are split equally into three parts, is supported by the U.S. and Canada, the European allies, and NATO partners. Given the shifting priorities, more funds will be needed for logistics and equipment for the ANDSF. Apart from the need to double the number of ANDSF special forces, currently at 25,000, the costs of the enlarged Afghanistan Air Forces have risen (currently 120 aircraft and helicopters, 7,000 personnel). Adequate training, equipment and weaponry are mandatory for the success of planned offensives to 2020.

Conclusion. The new U.S. strategy and support from NATO is a strong signal that the Western countries will stay in Afghanistan for a long time. The consolidation of the international presence and shift by ANDSF to an offensive posture may persuade the Taliban that they cannot achieve their political goals with military force, leaving the only option to influence the country their participation in the political process. Although the changes in the U.S. troop level and rules of engagement are limited and mainly tactical in nature, they are key to strengthening ANDSF morale and combat capabilities, obviously weakened since 2014. Strengthening the ANDSF also will be important for security ahead of and during the planned Afghan parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018 and 2019, respectively. At the same time, the additional U.S. and NATO support does not remove the responsibility of Afghans for their own security. With more flexible rules on air close support of ANDSF units, it will be possible to strike the Taliban during the winter season, when they traditionally are not engaged in combat. These operations could negatively affect morale among the Taliban. However, the higher probability of collateral damage under the new rules could give the Taliban propaganda material and help it with recruitment. Changes to the military dimension in Afghanistan also must be synchronised with greater pressure on Pakistan, not only by the U.S but by the whole of NATO and other members of the international coalition in Afghanistan. Once in synch, the political effects of this strategy may be clearly seen in a few years.

¹ For more, see: P. Kugiel, "U.S. Strategy on Afghanistan and South Asia: Pakistan's Key Role," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 119 (1059), 1 December 2017.