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AFGHAN VARIABLES. A PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS: 2013-2014 POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

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Executive summary:

*Compared to a ‘new civil war’ scenario, consequential to a dissolution process of the Afghan State and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – with consequent advantages for the Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) –, 2012 events in Afghanistan suggesting a 2013-2014 scenario characterized by: an increase of the state of conflict at local level; political and social instability and ANSF unpreparedness – partially counterbalanced by the NATO effort and support – which will maintain Afghanistan in a condition of **unstable ‘dynamic stalemate’** in the medium term.*

2013-2014 will be characterized by the executive phase of the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement which will guarantee the new formula of the U.S. military presence on the Afghan soil based on the medium-long term concession of strategic military bases.

The United States and the NATO, renouncing a real Afghan stabilization, will proceed with the transition phase with a significant assistance and support to the ANSF, at the moment unable to guarantee an effective control of the country.

The Taliban – formally and substantially undefeated – are military able, but incapable to defeat NATO-ISAF and ANSF troops on the battlefield. Therefore, the Taliban will try to limit significantly the ANSF operational potentiality (and consequentially the transition effectiveness) through the ‘trust-undermining’ process between NATO-ISAF advisors/trainers and mentored ANSF individuals. A direct effect of this process is the increasing phenomenon of the ‘green on blue attacks’ (or ‘insider-attacks’, Afghan

soldiers who attack their advisors and mentors), contributing to a further acceleration of the Afghan formal disengagement.

Internally, political and electoral processes (characterized by limited transparency and evident frauds) will be influenced by the AOGs especially in rural and peripheral areas, in particular the pashtun-dominated ones.

*Observing the current situation, we cannot exclude attempts of **political sharing-out** of Afghanistan based on the willingness to obtain access to the economical advantages deriving from the mineral and energy resources; a situation which could feed the insurgency of 'fault line conflicts', amplified by limited government administrative capabilities and high corruption level.*

A positive role will be played by regional actors, which will increase their political and economical involvement.

*In brief, in the next two years Afghanistan is going to be relatively **unstable** from the domestic political perspective and will be exposed to the risk of a reduction and scaling down of the role of its central government (advantaging local and peripheral powers), seriously **uncertain** – because not stabilized – on the security and governance' capability levels, **inadequate** for the transparency required by the International Community's economical support agreements (because of the high corruption level), **dynamic and flexible** on regional cooperation level.*

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Political priorities and security

NATO approved the strategic policy for the formal disengagement from the Afghan war by the end of 2014 (Chicago, May 2012) reducing one year in advance the conventional combat troops, in favor of 'special operations' units, drone assets and 'advisors'.

It is a 'reversal strategy' that, (implicitly admitting the impossibility of the stabilization), will transform the current mission – through an accelerated transition – from a 'combat' to a 'train-and-assist' mission and will be characterized simultaneously by talks and attempts of negotiations involving the U.S., the Taliban and the Afghan government (with Pakistan as a mediator). NATO Defence Ministers on June 2013 endorsed the detailed concept for the new NATO-led mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces after 2014; the '*Resolute Support*' operation will have a regional approach and will be based on five locations in Kabul and in the North, West, South and East: it will focus on the national institutions, such as the security ministries, and the corps levels of army and police command.

In this phase, the role of the mass media amplification and the psychological effects of the 'green on blue attacks' is essential; more than sixty attacks recorded in 2012 are the cause of the 'fatal breach' between NATO-ISAF and ANSF' soldiers (see '*Crisis of trust, and cultural incompatibility*', 2011).

The United States and the Afghan government signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) on the basis of which a long term relationship between the two sides has been established. A political result guaranteeing Afghanistan the *status* of U.S. non-NATO allied, and giving Washington the chance to maintain a military presence of about 10.000 U.S. soldiers until 2024 (in addition to the NATO presence) and the management of important strategic military bases (Strategic Bilateral Agreement). In addition, the International Community is committed to support economically the Afghan government for a period of at least four year (Tokyo, July 2012).

The Afghan government, stressed by domestic political difficulties (disagreement between the Afghan Parliament and its Government, corruption charges to Karzai, partial attempt of an 'administrative reform'), is establishing a regional talk policy.

Domestically, the 2012's violent mass demonstrations and cultural misunderstanding between the Afghan and Western soldiers, (a cause contributing to the increase of NATO soldiers' killings), show the evolution of a political and social situation which is

progressively deteriorating. Furthermore, locally the discontent is growing in correlation with high corruption episodes and events.

Finally, while the Afghan government is moving towards a negotiation with the AOGs, the Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission admitted the Taliban to the April 2014 scheduled electoral competition.

The ANSF, afflicted by structural and operational limits, are lacking in capabilities, effectiveness and cohesion and, as reported by the U.S. Special Inspector for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR), will be not able to manage and protect the military bases which will be transferred from the NATO to Afghan units by the end of 2014.

In the medium term, the ANSF will not be able to guarantee the security and the country's control autonomously, in particular in the Southern and the Eastern rural areas. As reported by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (see the report '*Afghanistan security: Long-standing challenges may affect progress and sustainment of Afghan national security forces*'), only 7 percent – 15 out of 129 – of the Army battalions and the 9 percent – 39 out of 435 – of the Police units are classified as operatively 'independent with advisors'.

The AOGs increased the pressure hitting a fundamental pillar of the 'transition process' managed by NATO: the ANSF formation process; thereby obtaining a significant impact on a strategy-media level.

'Green on blue attacks' strategy has been imposed; although not decisive on an operational level (limited damages and low number of enemy killed) this technique is psychologically destabilizing for advisors/mentors and for the public opinion. Strategically, Taliban have shown their interest in saving time so as to obtain more advantages in the negotiation process and in a possible political agreement.

Regionally, following the NATO's disengagement plan, new political and economical cooperation formulas have emerged; in particular for China which formalized with Afghanistan a 'new strategic level' (Kabul, supported by Beijing, has been admitted as observer at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). China declared to be willing to contribute the Afghan security with intelligence support, training and equipments for ANSF.

Following the Chinese access to Afghan mineral resources, the Chinese National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) obtained a 25 years oil extraction contract for the Amu Darya oilfield, in the Faryab and Sar-e Pul provinces (at a rate of 1,950 barrels/day).

Furthermore, the agreement between Pakistan, India and Afghanistan for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project is getting closer; an over seven billion U.S. dollars project from which also China will benefit.

In terms of Chinese domestic dynamics, the Xinxiang Muslim minority issue still remains partially unresolved, with the possibility of a perilous cooperation with regional Islamic movements and the Afghan AOGs. The Chinese government should have established initial contacts with the Taliban thanks to the mediation of Pakistan, strengthening at the same time the political, economical and commercial relations with Islamabad.

AFGHAN VARIABLES: A PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

A prospective analysis of the Afghan situation imposes a look at the medium term taking in consideration some strong-factors functional to the NATO disengagement.

Firstly the political and economical support of the International Community, sustained by the regional actors' large (but not total) collaboration, the civil society's role (limited to urban areas) and the political inclusion process involving the Taliban; finally, on the long-term, the access to the energetic and mineral sources with potentially positive effects – depending on adequate economical benefits' redistribution.

In contrast to these strong elements, there are weakness factors. First of all, the progressive reduction of the international involvement (even if the medium-term financial support has been guaranteed) and secondly, the socio-economical instability (unemployment and poverty), the endemic corruption of the peripheral and local public administration, and the lack of a capable and representative political and administrative leadership.

Security: on one hand, the low level and the lack of ability characterizing the ANSF and the accelerated transition, on the other hand, the AOGs' ability to penetrate the peripheral and rural societies and the governmental apparatus (indirectly supported and facilitated by the competitive attitudes of the political and local power groups).

Finally, the increasingly strong connections between AOGs, regional and international criminality and drug-lords.

The access to international funds and infrastructural development projects represent one of the opportunities available; furthermore, the potential availability of the regional states in the support of a possible negotiate process – to highlight the participation of

Pakistan to the dialogue and talk processes, as a mediator with the AOGs (divided in pragmatic and radical factions). Finally, the potentiality deriving from the availability of strategic military bases on the Afghan soil.

Potential threats – factors potentially contributing to failure: pursuance of a medium intensity permanent conflict (potential cause of a possible economical crisis partially deriving from the NATO disengagement) in addition to a lack of results on the negotiation process.

Domestic political situation: presumably characterized by a significant instability, deriving from the absence of political responses to the conflict; therefore a major role of the AOGs in the local conflict resolution processes is plausible (part of the AOGs' strategy oriented to obtaining advantages as well as the revision of the social and rights results and progresses obtained by the Afghan government).

Finally, the alternative-choices (trade-off), contributing factors to future developments. The antagonistic impulses of the regional states and the influence of the China-Pakistan's relations on the balance of power of the Afghan power-groups could aggravate the regional destabilization, on which the following will contribute:

1. the way in which the U.S. will equip the ANSF;
2. the possible use of the strategic bases against 'third parties' in regional conflict resolutions or, more simply, as a deterrent.

As regards the domestic situation, there will be direct and indirect effects consequent to:

- I. the reconciliation process (and the role of reintegrated subjects);
- II. the choices of the peripheral and rural communities on the political process;
- III. The level of the electoral frauds which will characterize the electoral processes (with particular regard to the presidential election planned for April, 2014).

On the topic of security, expected factors of influence will be the AOGs' willingness to 'take time' and the coincident ability to manage a medium intensity conflict.

Diverging impulses

A weak Afghan government, looking for a political and social stability, will try to survive through the economical support and the effort to maintain a minimal security level, not excluding talks and compromises with the AOGs possibly including 'partial revisions' of political and social results obtained to date.

AOGs will take advantage of the NATO disengagement as this translates in a significant reduction of its troops and a decrease in military pressure. A favorable condition which,

on the one hand, should facilitate the drug-trafficking activities and business and, on the other hand, this will drive the AOGs' effort towards the main targets: the ANSF members and the NATO advisors/trainers (Military and Police Advisor Teams – MAT/PAT). Finally, domestically, they will obtain the access to power, primarily locally and consequently politically. These factors together will give AOGs the ability to operate and obtain positive outcomes on media and propaganda levels, exalting the myth of 'unbeatable mujahidin'.

The regional states, assessing as positive the U.S. presence reduction in Afghanistan, will invest in activities connected with Afghan mineral and energy resources and will look for solutions and 'guarantee formulas' through apparently schizophrenic conflicts' containment efforts and simultaneous support to common interest groups (both political, economical and cultural). Political and diplomatic dynamism, nourished by competition between Afghan factions and their external supporters, will contribute to an intensification of low-level conflicts with a '**multiple civil war**' effect.

NATO, responding to the public opinion oriented to ending the expensive Afghan war, will reduce the costs of the war through a reduction of the military efforts, while the United States will maintain troops at medium-long term in accordance with the Strategic Partnership Agreement; the U.S. will move on two different levels:

Strategic-Operational level:

- Gradual but not total military disengagement (by the end of 2013);
- ANSF's training activity aimed to put the Afghan government in the condition of taking (and maintaining) the control of urban areas, in particular in the Southern areas (but not the rural and extra-urban region);
- Leading of counter-terrorism operations and drone attacks;
- Availability of strategic bases functional to domestic interventions (in support to ANSF) and external (regional) intervention.

Communicative-Media level:

- Higher emphasis on the new role of 'non-combat advisers/trainers' soldiers staying in Afghanistan (2015 Nato mission '*Resolute Support*');
- Mass media communication process direct to international public opinion, functional to redefine the concept of 'enemy':
 1. The Taliban would be progressively recognized as formal 'counterpart' and be involved in talks and political processes;
 2. The Haqqani network (Al-Qai'da linked group) would become the official

‘terrorist’, the ‘designed target’ for military operations; this solution will justify the presence in Afghanistan of over 10,000 U.S. troops beyond the 2014 timeline.

- Obtainment of a ‘perceived end’ of the Afghan war and concern.

2013-2014: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Scenario 1 – The most dangerous

Disintegration of the Afghan State and of the ANSF; this would lead the power groups and the OAGs to a new civil war phase. NATO would be facing the choice to a further intervention or to abandon Afghanistan definitely.

Scenario 2 – More probable

Enhancing of the political and economical regional states’ involvement, in particular China, Pakistan, Iran and Russia.

An increase in local conflicts can be expected. Political and social instability and ANSF unpreparedness, partially balanced by the NATO support, should maintain Afghanistan in a condition of **unstable ‘dynamic stalemate’** in the short term. Following the NATO disengagement, the AOGs’ increase of military pressure (improvised explosive devices, suicide attacks and green on blue attacks) will have an impact on military operational capabilities and troops’ morale (both foreigners and Afghans’).

The political and electoral processes will be influenced by the presence of the AOGs in rural and peripheral areas (prevalently in pashtun dominated areas), in contrast with a limited and reduced influence in urban ones.

Hypothesis of possible negotiation agreements would lead to a ‘political sharing-out’ of the country, possibly followed by an economical compromise based on the access to the economical benefits deriving from Afghan mineral and energy resources; a ‘political sharing-out’ that would facilitate **‘fault line conflicts’** boosted by the lack in governmental administrative capabilities and by an endemic corruption phenomenon.

In conclusion, this would result in a reduction of the international media attention which will place Afghanistan on a marginal position.