

‘In together, out together’

If the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, what will the NATO framework nations do?

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Since the withdrawal of NATO combat troops in 2014, the security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating. At the same time, a widespread war-weariness has been growing across the parliaments of the Troop-Contributing Nations (TCNs), after almost 20 years of military presence. The president of the United States (US), Donald Trump, has expressed, more clearly than before, the wish to withdraw his country’s troops.

In combination with the US wish to withdraw, the outcome of the ongoing peace talks between the US and the Taliban will affect the future of NATO’s military engagement in Afghanistan. The TCNs remain committed to Afghanistan not only because of the NATO coalition, but because of their own bilateral political interests.

This brief¹ outlines the different positions and interests of the framework TCNs (henceforth TCNs) and leading nations within the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) – the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Italy, and Turkey – in the wake of the ongoing peace talks. It analyses what their positions would be in the event of a US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND

RSM is a NATO mission that was launched in January 2015, following the end of a previous NATO-led combat mission, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The RSM’s mandate is to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). According to official NATO sources, RSM is currently made up of around 17,000 personnel, from 39 NATO allies and partners. It has a regional layout, consisting of four regional Train Advise and Assist Commands (TAAC). The Kabul command is led by Turkey; the northern command, where the Swedish contingency is based, is led by Germany; the western command is led by Italy;

¹ This study is based on interviews with official representatives from NATO and its member states and the EU, in Brussels; at the US State Department and the Pentagon, in Washington D.C; and, with scholars at research institutes and think tanks in the US. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2019.

and the southern and eastern commands are led by the US. The US holds the position as mission commander, while the UK holds the position as deputy. In addition to contributing approximately half of the RSM’s personnel and mission-critical enablers, such as close air support and medical evacuation, the US also has a separate counter-terrorism combat mission in Afghanistan: Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS). The presence that NATO coalition partners and allies have in Afghanistan depends on US military capability and infrastructure; a US troop withdrawal will severely affect the possibilities for other nations to remain in Afghanistan.

The current peace talks between the US and the Taliban began in 2018, in Doha, Qatar. The parties have agreed to agree on four principles: a timeline for withdrawal of troops, preventing Afghanistan from becoming a platform for terrorism, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire. Lessons from the past suggest, however, that the Taliban may use diplomacy in order to enhance military goals, rather than make peace. Nonetheless, while previous efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban have not succeeded, there is a sense of increased faith in the ongoing talks. Analysts argue that this is partly due to the unprecedented high-level participation of the Taliban leadership, and partly because the Taliban publicly embrace the notion of peace to a greater extent than in previous talks.

The US president’s wish to withdraw permeates discussions in Washington, DC. Analysts argue that the nature of any eventual decision by the president is almost impossible to determine. They contend that a decision could result in an abrupt end to the peace talks, followed by a troop withdrawal; or to an orderly withdrawal that followed a peace deal. Official US representatives, on the other hand, provide little further clarity on the issue, although they do discuss the options foreseen by the analysts, such as a withdrawal after a peace deal, or a withdrawal in different phases, while the talks are still ongoing.

PERSPECTIVES AMONG TROOP CONTRIBUTORS

The TCNs support the US effort in the ongoing peace talks, even though they are concerned that both they and the Afghan government are being excluded. As of June 2019, the Afghan government was still not included. The TCN's concerns also extend to the issue of protecting the investments they have made – in human rights, women's rights, the rule of law, democratic values, and human development – since 2001. Billions of dollars have been invested, and human lives lost, yet the gains remain fragile. The official NATO position is the mantra, 'In together, out together', but what 'Out together,' actually entails is not evident.

The United Kingdom

After withdrawing its combat troops in 2014, the UK contributed a contingent of around 400 military personnel to RSM. Military contributions to Afghanistan rendered little support from the public or the political establishment, since security had not improved, in spite of thirteen years of fighting. However, with the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, and the US adoption of a new South Asia strategy, the UK's position has changed in recent years. The current British presence in Afghanistan, consisting of approximately 1,100 troops, is described by UK representatives as a response to both the policy of the US and its request for assistance. It constitutes part of the UK's bilateral relations with the US. By increasing the presence of British troops, the UK seeks to alleviate the US of the responsibility for the Kabul Security Forces (KSF).

However, the UK focuses solely on the security in and around Kabul and has no intention of deploying troops in the provinces, beyond the limits of the capital. The UK's presence is therefore less vulnerable to potential changes, when it comes to the US presence and its enablers. Official representatives of the UK describe the commitment to RSM as remaining solid, even in the event of an eventual American troop withdrawal. This is noteworthy, since it is a common view among TCNs that RSM is unlikely to sustain its presence without US infrastructure and capabilities.

The UK has recently adopted a new strategy for Afghanistan. Similar to the US, its priority in Afghanistan is counter-terrorism, but the UK also contributes significant development aid. British representatives reiterate that the UK has a longstanding commitment to Afghanistan. This is reflected in the plans for a new British embassy in Kabul. UK's engagement is closely linked to its colonial past. One role that the UK seeks is as a mediator in the conflict between the

two adversaries, India and Pakistan. That conflict is fundamental to the armed conflict in Afghanistan, as one of the latter's root causes. The UK has previously hosted trilateral talks with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The role as mediator is especially pertinent to the peace talks, according to UK officials, given the strained relations between the US and Pakistan. However, British representatives underline that in the event of a peace agreement between Afghanistan and the Taliban, with a subsequent oversight mission, the UK does not seek a role in such an effort.

From a completely different perspective, the UK's strategy in Afghanistan is also affected by the Brexit process in Europe, hence its need to build bilateral relations and signal continued international engagement.

Germany

Germany's engagement in Afghanistan is a long-standing one. It is a leading donor, and a main supporter to NATO and the effort in Afghanistan. In the event of a peace agreement, Germany's intention is to concentrate its future support in the north of Afghanistan. The reason given is that it is already established in the northern provinces, through its civil and military contributions and as lead for the former NATO regional command north, and the current TAAC, in Mazar-e Sharif.

According to official representatives, Germany's intention is to maintain the same level of military commitment, with 1300 troops, a mandate that was extended in 2019. According to German representatives, an American troop withdrawal would first and foremost affect force protection and, up to a certain critical threshold, gaps would have to be filled in coordination with other troop-contributing nations. A severe reduction, however, would most likely affect the broad regional layout of the RSM mission. From the German perspective, it is important to avoid this. Nonetheless, in January 2019, the German defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, stated that if the US decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, Germany would do the same. In apparent contradiction to this, other German officials have indicated that Germany would be interested in a discussion about replacing some of the US enablers in the event that the US withdraws some of its troops.

Germany hosted the Petersberg conference that paved the way for the peace agreement reached in Bonn in 2001. Those talks suffered from the absence of the Taliban and other armed insurgents, however, which contributed to the armed conflict plaguing today's Afghanistan. Currently, Germany is seeking to persuade the Taliban to start negotiating with the Afghan government, and has offered to host peace talks in Germany.

Italy

Italy's increased focus on its surrounding area, the Mediterranean Sea and Africa, has led it to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan. The issue of migration has become central to Italian foreign policy as well as policies related to military interventions. According to official representatives in NATO, Italy nevertheless remains committed to its framework responsibility within RSM and intends to stay in Afghanistan until the conditions for peace are met.

In 2009, Italy was the first NATO member in Europe to answer former US president Barack Obama's call for reinforcements, following signals that such commitments were an important factor in relations with Washington. In January 2019, as a reaction to the statement made by the current US president, Donald Trump, on US troop withdrawals, the Italian minister of defence stated that Italy was ready to leave Afghanistan within 12 months. This statement was later retracted. Italy is dependent on US enablers and would not be likely to increase its presence.

Turkey

Turkey and Afghanistan have a strong religious and cultural relationship that dates back to the Ottoman Empire Period. Turkey has not only understood its presence in Afghanistan as being part of a NATO-led mission, but has described it as a brotherly duty to help restore peace. Turkey's intention is to remain committed to Afghanistan, regardless of a potential American troop withdrawal. Turkey is currently committed to RSM until 2024, with approximately 600 troops, and as the framework nation in Kabul.

Religious and cultural ties have facilitated Turkey's military role in Afghanistan, although it does not participate in combat operations. Turkey has mediated between Afghanistan and Pakistan on several occasions; Ankara believes that in being a Muslim country it has an advantage in the role of mediator. Turkish officials emphasize the importance of coordination among the troop-contributing nations and express a concern that several actors, both international and local, feel left out of the ongoing process. Turkey is a benefactor of the Uzbek leader and warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, currently vice president of Afghanistan. Turkey is also closely associated with the Uzbek political faction Junbish-i-Milli Islami Afghanistan. Moreover, Turkey has always had diplomatic connections with the Taliban, but has to date not had a significant role in the peace talks.

Analysts speculate that if there was a peace agreement between Afghanistan and the Taliban, Turkey would lead an oversight mission, together with a group of

Arab countries. Turkish officials, however, reject this as speculation.

Turkey's engagement in Afghanistan is also based on strategic interests, since instability in Afghanistan poses a threat to the stability of the entire region. As a major actor in the region, Turkey is able to claim its position as a bridge between East and West, as well as an energy corridor to Europe.

DEPENDENCY ON US ENABLERS AND (UN)WILLINGNESS TO FILL GAPS

Given the US priority on fighting terrorism, it is unlikely that an initial withdrawal, with or without a peace deal, would be from within the US counter-terrorism mission, but rather from within the RSM. While a complete withdrawal of US troops would most likely create a situation that forced the other nations to leave Afghanistan, as well, due to security reasons, a severe reduction in US troops would risk affecting the RSM regional layout, and thus raise the issue of critical enablers and the discussion of filling the gaps.

The UK and Turkey, with their presence focused on Kabul, are less dependent on US enablers and would therefore be less affected by a potential US withdrawal. The UK and Turkey also have clearer bilateral political interests in Afghanistan, as well as in the region, which press them to remain committed, as long as the security situation does not deteriorate too much. An increase in Turkey's military presence in Afghanistan may not be unlikely, due to bilateral and cultural interests, as well as ties to several local actors, but these are the same reasons why it does not participate in combat operations against the Taliban. In the past, the UK has filled gaps left by US reductions, at its request, such as in taking over the responsibility for the KSF. A continued UK engagement in Afghanistan, as part of a broader British Central Asian policy, is likely to persist. However, a reluctance to extend the engagement beyond Kabul is likely to prevent the UK from filling any military gaps in order to keep the RSM regional layout intact.

Italy and Germany depend on US enablers for force protection to a higher degree than the UK and Turkey. Italy's tendency is to reduce its presence in Afghanistan; its previous political reactions associated with Afghanistan have seemed to be first and foremost connected to its relationship with the US, rather than with political interests in Afghanistan. Germany's perspective, which is that the filling of gaps would have to be done jointly within the RSM (and hence the ambition to solve the issue of gaps together with other TCNs), signals a certain willingness to adapt and possibly also increase the troop

presence. Given the discussion above, and war-weariness in national parliaments, it seems unlikely that those other nations joining Germany in filling the gaps would include the UK, Turkey or Italy.

'IN TOGETHER, OUT TOGETHER'

The TCNs remain committed to Afghanistan, because of bilateral as well as NATO interests. Their claim of being solidly committed to both RSM and Afghanistan nevertheless needs to be viewed in the context of the uncertainties that actually surround the ongoing discussions and speculation.

The bilateral political commitments of TCNs are, just as before, dependent on backing, in the form of military might. With no one filling the potential military gaps in the RSM regional layout, the bilateral political interests of TCNs are at risk, unless the security situation radically improves. It may well be that the mantra really does entail that the TCNs are in Afghanistan together, but a hasty decision in the White House might mean that RSM, as well as bilateral political interests, are out, altogether.

FUTURE RELATIONS IN THE WAKE OF A PEACE DEAL

There is a widespread view that the international community will hold financial leverage in Afghanistan for an extended period of time. In the wake of a peace deal, this is considered the main tool for safeguarding the gains in development and human rights that have been reached in Afghanistan. Despite a reluctance among the TCNs to discuss red lines for future support in the peace-negotiating framework, and focusing instead on future relations, it is clear that it would be politically impossible to continue funding a regime that does not respect human rights and women's rights. This widespread view, however, does not automatically equate to one where allies and partners share a mutual definition of the issues, especially on the definition of women's rights.

In terms of financial leverage, it is important to bear in mind that other sources of funding may be more attractive and less imposed with conditions for a future Afghan regime, possibly a Taliban regime. There are several regional and international actors with interests in Afghanistan and some of them may be less concerned with the human development gains that have been achieved. External funding, though, will not necessarily be the single

grievance of a possible future Taliban regime. High-level participation as well as publicly owning the ongoing talks signal a quest by the Taliban for portrayal as a legitimate political actor. The issue of legitimacy may well favour relations with former troop-contributing nations, in spite of potential ensuing caveats.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite a varying degree of military dependency on US enablers, the diverse bilateral interests in remaining engaged in Afghanistan are prone to the altering of conditions on the ground. This alteration may be at a level no longer requiring the current regional layout of the RSM before this window of opportunity closes, or the patience in the White House runs out, come what may.

In the wake of a peace deal, the key to future relations may lie in the safeguarding of gains in development, and may likely also be the key to the future pursuit of bilateral political or strategic interests.

While the Swedish military presence is likely to follow Germany's, the safeguarding of gains attained by and continued through development funding will require contingency planning and analysis of future engagement in and with Afghanistan.

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