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The Chinese-American Race for Hegemony in Asia

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
and **Nicola Mocci**

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AFGHANISTAN 2015: THE NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT AT WORK:
REFORMS, WAR, AND THE SEARCH FOR STABILITY

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The end of the Karzai era and the establishment of a coalition government were the most important events of 2015 in Afghanistan. After the disputed 2014 presidential election, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah signed an agreement for the formation of a government of national unity. On this basis, Ghani took office as President, while Abdullah was appointed Chief Executive Officer, a position that corresponds roughly to that of a prime minister. Despite high expectations, the government faced enormous difficulties because of the disagreement between the two leaders. This division also characterized the reform agenda, which was an integral part of the 2014 deal. Ghani and Abdullah pledged to change the electoral system and to reform the Constitution. However, the two leaders have found themselves in disagreement on the contents of the reforms, particularly in relation to the electoral system. The dispute has therefore caused a climate of political uncertainty. Meanwhile, the military situation has deteriorated because of the intensification of the offensive of the Taliban. The military mission «Resolute Support» has seen the international forces reducing their activity to a consulting and training role. This has highlighted the weakness of the Afghan National Army. However, in mid-2015 the Taliban faced an unexpected internal crisis, with the death of their leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar. With regard to foreign relations, Ghani successfully sought to re-establish positive relations with the United States, and vigorously pursued the peace process. The two main changes in this regard were the search for a direct approach with Pakistan and the formal inclusion of China – along with the United States – in what has become the «Quadrilateral Approach» to the peace process. Finally, this essay summarizes the evolution of the Afghan economy, which appears once again to be conditioned by the uncertain political framework and by the negative effects of reduced foreign military presence, despite an improvement in tax revenue.

1. Introduction

The end of the Karzai era and the establishment of a coalition government in Afghanistan dominated 2015. After the highly disputed 2014 presidential election, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah signed a deal which provided for the formation of a National Unity Government (NUG). According to the agreement, Ghani was appointed President, while Abdullah was sworn in as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a newly-created position corresponding to that of a prime minister. However, the deal did not bring to an end the political confrontation. Despite the solemn pledges of political unity made by the two leaders, the government has faced great dif-

ficulties in agreeing on basically all political choices. The formation of the cabinet had to wait until the end of 2014, but the key position of Minister of Defence has been left in the hands of an acting minister due to the lack of consensus on the appointment. Such disagreement also characterized the agenda of reforms, which was included in the 2014 deal. The two leaders made a commitment to change the electoral system in time for the new parliamentary elections, which were due to take place in the summer of 2015. Moreover, they committed themselves to reforming the Constitution, in order to replace the presidential system with a parliamentary one. However, since the beginning of the government, the two leaders have shown very different approaches towards the agenda: while President Ghani appeared reluctant to take concrete steps, Abdullah was much more active, showing signs of impatience at Ghani's apathy. The confrontation between the two leaders caused a serious political *impasse*, which led many observers to express doubts about the capacity of the NUG to deliver political stability. In the meantime, the military situation deteriorated due to the intensification of the Taliban's offensive. The start of the «Resolute Support Mission» in January 2015 resulted in the international forces downgrading their activity to an advisory and training role. As widely expected, these circumstances highlighted the weakness of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and its inadequacy in taking on the task of leading the war against the Taliban. However, in mid-2015 the insurgents faced an unexpected internal crisis, with the announcement of the death of their leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. The loss of the charismatic *mujahidin* commander led to a struggle for succession within the Taliban which has affected their unity and strength.

On the foreign policy front, President Ghani successfully tried to re-establish positive relations with the US, and eagerly pushed forward the peace process, as promised during the electoral campaign. The two main developments in this regard were the President's initiative to directly approach Pakistan in bilateral talks, and the formal inclusion of China, together with the US, in what has become the «Quadrilateral approach» to the peace process.

Finally, in the year under review, the political uncertainties and the withdrawal of the international military forces adversely affected the economy, which nevertheless recorded, overall, a slight improvement.

2. *The NUG and the reform agenda*

The results of the presidential elections largely determined the political developments in 2015.¹ The September 2014 deal signed by the two

1. Martin van Bijlert, 'Electoral Reform, or Rather: Who Will Control Afghanistan's Next Election?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 17 February 2015. See also Diego Abenante, 'Afghanistan 2014: Political Transition without Democracy?', *Asia Maior* 2014, pp. 392-94.

main contenders, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, was not merely a power-sharing plan. Besides the distribution of the governmental posts, the deal included a plan for the reform of both the Constitution and the electoral system. The statement issued by the two leaders at the time declared a change in the Afghan political system with the introduction of the post of «executive prime minister» – therefore modifying the current presidential system – as one of the main purposes of the agreement.² The deal also established a two-year deadline for the convocation of a constitutional *Loya Jirga* (traditional grand assembly). Such a decision had delicate political consequences, because it implied that the CEO – the role held by the opposition leader Abdullah – was an interim figure, and he would have to give up his position within two years. The fact that the two leaders had agreed on a form of government was in itself an important achievement, given the country's political history. In fact, the non-Pashtun communities –, which were for the most part Abdullah's supporters – never quite accepted the presidential form of government, which was decided on at the 2001 Bonn conference at the insistence of both the Pashtun majority and of the US.³

However, the more complex point of the government's agenda turned out to be the electoral reform. Although described in the post-election joint statement as a necessary step «to ensure that future elections are fully credible», it became soon the real point of contention between Ghani and Abdullah.⁴ The dispute concerned the result of the last elections. According to Abdullah, the elections were largely marred by fraud, and the responsibility for this lay with the electoral bodies: the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC). Therefore, the changes Abdullah and his supporters had in mind involved a radical reform of the two institutions. In February 2015, Asef Ashna, the deputy spokesman of the CEO, stated that «the (electoral) reforms include the dismissal of the commissioners of the election commissions, who have upset the elections and who are responsible for damaging the people's trust in a democratic process».⁵ As expected, this statement caused a strong reaction on the part of the electoral commissioners. Not only did they refuse to be held responsible for the problems of the last elections, but also in-

2. 'The «government of national unity» deal (full text)', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2014.

3. The Pashtuns, being the most numerous ethnic group in Afghanistan (approximately 42% of the population, according to the *CIA World Factbook*), wanted a presidential system, which was favoured also by the US. Of course, the other ethnic groups saw the presidential system as strengthening the Pashtuns and, accordingly, much preferred a parliamentary system.

4. The agreement was also signed by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General Jan Kubis and by the US Ambassador James B. Cunningham. See *Ibid.*; David Loyn, 'Afghanistan's attempts to reform voting face failure', *BBC News*, 14 February 2015.

5. Quoted in Martine van Bijlert, 'Electoral Reform, or Rather: Who will Control Afghanistan's Next Election?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 17 February 2015, p. 5.

sisted that the reform of the system was their own business, claiming that the government had no authority to interfere.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the election commissioners found an ally in the President and his supporters. In fact, Ghani rejected Abdullah's demand of a reshuffle of the IEC and the IECC, and insisted that the reform had to be limited to the electoral rules. Significantly, while Abdullah ignored the IEC and IECC in preparing his own proposals, Ghani had a meeting with the IEC commissioners and listened to their proposals.

3. Why were the reforms so important?

There was more than one reason that caused the President and his circle of supporters to be so cautious about revising the electoral commissions and the electoral matter at large. First, a replacement of the IEC and of the IECC might be interpreted by the public as an admission that the vote had been marred by fraud. This would have undoubtedly damaged the President's image and strengthened his opponent's. Secondly, the choices made about the electoral system would have relevant consequences for the future Constitution. As we noted above, the reform of the Constitution required the convening of a *Loya Jirga*. However, the formation of the *Loya Jirga* was to be preceded by the election of the new parliament and district councils; according to article 110 of the Constitution, more than 85% of the *Jirga*'s members should be elected from a pool of delegates chosen by those assemblies.⁷ In short, prevailing in the future Parliament would be a necessary step in order to acquire a majority in the future *Loya Jirga*, and therefore to influence the reform of the Constitution. The consequence of this was that all political actors were determined to play a role in the electoral reform. With these premises, it is easy to understand why the reform agenda became an arena of contention between the two main factions, and between the two main factions and all of the other minor groups that wanted to play a role in Afghan politics.⁸

To make things even more complex, the Afghan electoral schedule required that the parliamentary and district council elections be held not later than 23 June 2015; that is, before the end of the *Wolesi Jirga*'s (the lower chamber's) term. Although the February 2015 joint declaration by the President and the CEO stated that no further elections would be made without the reform, it soon became evident that only a miracle would allow the process to be completed in time. According to the September 2014 agree-

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Ehsan Qaane & Martine van Bijlert, 'Elections in Hibernation: Afghanistan's Stalled Electoral Reform', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 17 June 2015, pp. 1-8.

ement, «immediately after the establishment of the NUG», the President would appoint a special commission for the reform of the electoral system. In reality, it took as long as five months for Ashraf Ghani to sign the necessary decree. Unsurprisingly, the President's inaction aroused anxiety in Abdullah and his supporters, who began casting doubts on the President's real intentions. In January, the CEO began moving on his own path. His representative announced the drafting of two proposals; one to amend the electoral laws and to establish an anti-fraud mechanism, and a second one to modify the electoral system with the introduction of a quota of proportional representation.⁹ The Parliament also decided to take the initiative: although article 109 of the Constitution forbids the *Wolesi Jirga* from amending the electoral laws during its last year of office, the assembly started discussing amendments to various articles of the law on electoral bodies. The prevalence of CEO's supporters in the parliamentary commissions – not surprisingly – led to amendments that were very close to Abdullah's views, which added new fuel to the confrontation.¹⁰ These developments emphasised once more the extreme fragmentation of the Afghan institutions and the lack of consensus among the political forces.¹¹

In February, the President reacted by trying to take control of the process. First, he launched a consultation with the IEC and the civil society on the electoral laws; two months later, he appointed – without consulting the CEO – a chairperson to the special commission for the reform of the electoral system.¹² The news caused a new conflict, given that the person nominated by the President – Shukria Barakzai – had been a member of Ghani's electoral team, which obviously led the CEO's circle to cast doubt on her impartiality. The deputy spokesperson of the CEO went so far as to accuse Barakzai of being involved in «large-scale fraud» during the past election.¹³ As was largely expected, the confrontation made it impossible to complete the reform according to the constitutional schedule. Unsurprisingly, the international actors followed these events with growing concern. In May, they decided to put some pressure on Kabul, and announced the «end (of) their financial cooperation» with the Afghan electoral institutions due to the lack of reforms.¹⁴ Given that the international donors financially supported about 80% of the IEC budget, including the salaries of the electoral commissioners, their decision to withdraw from the process meant bringing to a halt the electoral machine. The donors' initiative was decisive

9. Martine van Bijlert, 'Electoral Reform', p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

11. 'The Challenging Electoral Reforms Process', *The Daily Afghanistan*, 28 December 2015.

12. Ehsan Qaane & Martine van Bijlert, 'Elections in Hibernation', p. 3.

13. *Ibid.*

14. 'International Donors Pull Funding for Election Commissions', *Tolonews*, 11 May 2015.

in ending the stalemate; after more than three months of negotiations, in July 2015, Ghani announced the appointment of Sultan Shah Akefi as the new chairperson of the commission. An academic belonging to the Hazara community, and with extensive experience in parliamentary work, Akefi was acceptable to the opposition. In addition, the President appointed the other 14 members of the body—seven names from each party—including the UN Deputy-Special Representative for Afghanistan as the 15th component without voting rights.¹⁵ The international partners reacted with relief to the news, and invited the government to announce an electoral calendar as soon as possible.¹⁶

However, great obstacles remained along the way. Apart from the technical complexity of the reform itself, the organization of the district council elections was not an easy task. The main reason was that these elections had never been held in the past; therefore, a complex work of boundary definition and the gathering of population statistics were required. Not surprisingly, the previous governments had decided to cancel the plans to hold district council elections together with other polls.¹⁷ In any case, the special commission seemed to act efficiently. Starting work in late July, after one month it submitted a list of proposals to the President and to the CEO.¹⁸ The draft proposals included a correction of the electoral system with the introduction of a quota of parliamentary seats (85 out of 250) allocated through proportional representation; the creation of a voter's identification system; and the division of the provinces into smaller electoral constituencies. Having been discussed for years, the proposals were not new; however, their publication caused a new dispute between Ghani and Abdullah, because some of the former's supporters viewed the draft as too close to the CEO's views. For example, the head of the IECC, Abdul Sattar Saadat, already at the centre of the 2014 electoral dispute and considered close to the President, described some of the proposals as «illegal», and stated that their acceptance would amount to admitting the illegitimacy of the previous presidential election.¹⁹ On the other side, Abdullah was quick in lauding the work of the Commission, while Ghani himself remained silent.

Apart from the parties' strategies, the introduction of a proportional quota would undoubtedly be a revolution for the Afghan political system.

15. Shakeela Ibrahimkhail, 'President, CEO Agree to Appoint New Head of Electoral Reform Commission', *Tolonews*, 20 April 2015; 'President Ghani Appoints Electoral Reform Commission Chief and Members', *Khaama Press*, 16 July 2015.

16. 'UNAMA Welcomes Establishment of Electoral System Reform Commission, Calls for Electoral Calendar', *UNAMA-United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, 19 July 2015.

17. Martine van Bijlert, 'Electoral Reform', p. 7.

18. Muhammad Hassan Khettab, 'Electoral Reform Panel Officially Starts Work', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 22 July 2015.

19. Mujib Mashal, 'Afghanistan's Electoral Reform Plan Is Met With Skepticism', *The New York Times*, 31 August 2015.

Not only would it reinforce the political parties' influence at the expense of the independent parliamentarians, but it would also force the Kabul politicians to look for candidates able to mobilize the vote banks in the provinces, therefore changing the balance of power between the capital and the provinces. In any case, the complexity of the task, and the failure of the attempt to build a political consensus, made delaying the parliamentary election an unavoidable choice. By June, the President had already issued a decree extending the term of the parliament until the holding of fresh elections.²⁰ In late December, Ghani announced that the elections would be postponed until 15 October 2016.²¹

4. The deteriorating military situation

Since the formation of the NUG, the insurgency has intensified its offensive against the government. The pressure by the Taliban began in February and reached its apex in September/October. Significantly, in 2015 the Taliban did not interrupt—except in Kabul—the military operations at the beginning of the winter season, as they had done in the past. The higher intensity of the fighting was also due to the reduction of the international allies' activity to a training and advisory role, which allowed the insurgents to engage the Afghan armed forces in open battles. As a result, the geography of the war changed during 2015, with the Taliban extending their offensive to provinces that had been relatively peaceful in the past, principally in the Northern areas. Of particular importance has been the capture by the Taliban of the city of Kunduz, which was recovered by the ANA two weeks later, only thanks to the deployment of US Special Forces and air support.²² The fall of Kunduz to the insurgents was a shock for the Afghan public, since it was the first time since 2001 that the Taliban occupied an urban area. Moreover, Kunduz was far from the territory under Taliban influence, being disconnected from their support networks in Pakistan. The strategic position of the city, near to the Tajikistan border, contributed to spreading insecurity through the Northern provinces.²³ Moreover, with their attack

20. 'Afghan Leader Extends Parliament's Term, Promises Election Date', *Reuters*, 19 June 2015.

21. 'Afghanistan to Hold Delayed Parliamentary Elections in October', *Reuters*, 31 December 2015.

22. Lailuma Noori, 'Afghanistan's Major Events in 2015', *The Kabul Times*, 2 January 2016; 'Afghanistan: Country Summary', *Human Rights Watch*, January 2016, pp. 1-3.

23. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Afghan National Army After ISAF', *AREU-Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, Briefing Paper Series, March 2016, p. 2; Emma Graham-Harrison, 'However Long it Lasts, Taliban Capture of Kunduz is a Major Blow to Afghan Government', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2015.

on Kunduz, the insurgents showed the capacity to penetrate regions that had been considered centres of anti-Taliban activity. The insurgents also conducted large-scale military operations in the South, particularly in the Helmand and Uruzgan Provinces, and launched attacks against civil targets, like the airports of Kabul and Kandahar and even the national Parliament.²⁴

Although the Taliban rarely established stable control of these territories, these events augmented their confidence, while increasing the feeling of insecurity among the population. During the year under review, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) continued to register a very high number of casualties, which increased by 70% in the first 15 weeks of the year, compared to the same period in 2014; a rate that former US commander, Gen. Joseph Anderson, described as «not sustainable».²⁵ Despite the unavailability of exact data, many observers have considered the year as the bloodiest since 2001.²⁶ Moreover, the confidence shown by the Taliban increased the perception that they can still prevail in military terms, which has made political reconciliation more arduous.²⁷

These developments obviously emphasised the difficulties for the ANA in leading the military operations against the insurgents, following the reduction of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) role under the «Resolute Support Mission». There was certainly an expectation that the change in military responsibilities would lead to a weakening of ANA control in the rural areas, and therefore a growing threat to the cities. However, the speed of the process and the inability of the ANA to maintain a hold on the territory surprised many analysts.²⁸ According to well-informed sources, for the first time since 2001 the ANA has begun having problems with recruitment. The army is also suffering both from the withdrawal of foreign advisers at unit level, and from a weakness of equipment and logistics.²⁹ The high casualties suffered and the lack of major victories have also created a low morale in the troops, which was reflected in desertion and «ghost soldiering» (troops that are included on the soldiers' list, but who are not serving).³⁰ The decision by the President to augment the salaries of the

24. Lailuma Noori, 'Afghanistan's Major Events in 2015'.

25. Franz-Stefan Gady, 'Afghan Forces are Suffering Record Losses', *The Diplomat*, 5 May 2015; Azam Ahmed, 'Misgivings by U.S. General as Afghan Mission Ends', *The New York Times*, 8 December 2014.

26. Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope in Afghanistan: A June 2015 Update', *Brookings Institution*, 26 May 2015, p. 1.

27. Emma Graham-Harrison, 'However Long it Lasts'.

28. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Afghan National Army', cit., p. 15.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

30. Joseph Goldstein, 'Afghan Security Forces Struggle Just to Maintain Stalemate', *The New York Times*, 22 July 2015.

army was also a demonstration that the NUG was aware of the problem.³¹ Another serious issue was the inability of the government to improve the mechanism of appointments based on merit. Contrary to the announcements of the NUG, politicization and patronage still condition the careers of the military, causing a serious adverse impact on ANA morale.³²

In this context, it is not surprising that Ashraf Ghani, during his first official visit to Washington in March, formally asked the US administration to freeze the plan of withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, a request that the US President accepted.³³ The decision of the Obama administration was also based on other elements, besides Kabul's request. The most important was the resilience of *al Qa'ida* in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although considered moribund, according to reliable sources the Islamist network was still active in 2015 in the mountainous tribal areas, despite repeated operations by the US Special Forces.³⁴ The second reason was the emerging evidence on the infiltration of the so-called Islamic State's *Wilayat Khorasan* (namely the «Khorasan province», Khorasan being a region in Eastern Iran) into the eastern region of Afghanistan.³⁵ Finally, the decision by the Obama administration to maintain «flexibility» on troops' deployment was linked to the needs of the CIA and of the Special Forces to operate in two large military bases at Kandahar and Jalalabad. Washington has therefore redefined its initial plan of withdrawal in order to maintain about 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, which the US officials consider the minimum useful force.³⁶ Still, disagreement exists between the Afghan and American actors – as well as between US officials – about the future prospects of American military presence in the field. While President Obama has promised to withdraw all US troops by the end of 2016, Ashraf Ghani – aware of the ANA's weakness – has insisted on a protracted US military presence. Apparently some of the US staff also shared that fear; according to them, the Afghan scenario after a complete US pull-out would resemble too closely the post-1989 period, when the Islamist insurgency was quick to occupy the political vacuum.³⁷

31. Antonio Giustozzi & Ali Mohammad Ali, 'The Afghan National Army', pp. 3-14.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

33. Michael D. Shear & Mark Mazzetti, 'U.S. to Delay Pullout of Troops from Afghanistan to Aid Strikes', *The New York Times*, 24 March 2015; 'Afghan President Ghani Credits US Role During First Washington Trip', *BBC News*, 23 March 2015.

34. Michael D. Shear & Mark Mazzetti, 'U.S. to Delay Pullout'; Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope', p. 4.

35. Antonio Giustozzi & Silab Mangal, 'A Gathering Storm? The Islamic State Campaign in Eastern Afghanistan', *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, 13 November 2015, pp. 1-9 (<http://www.janes.com/security/terrorism-insurgency>).

36. Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope', p. 4.

37. 'Afghan President Ghani Credits'.

5. *The power struggle within the Taliban*

The apparent position of strength of the insurgents came under scrutiny in mid-2015 when, after many unconfirmed reports, Kabul's National Directorate of Security (NDS) – the Afghan intelligence agency – revealed that Mullah Muhammad Omar, the charismatic leader of the Taliban, had died, apparently, in 2013. After two days of silence, the Taliban official sources confirmed the news, and, at the same time announced the appointment of Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, as the new Taliban leader.³⁸ The loss of the acknowledged leader inflicted a tremendous blow to the movement, given that Mullah Omar was perhaps the only unifying force in a traditionally fragmented movement. In fact, not all the factions accepted the appointment of Mullah Mansour; some founded a parallel organization under the leadership of another veteran mujahidin commander, Mullah Muhammad Rasul. The actual balance of forces between the two leaders was difficult to ascertain, given that the estimates were often politically motivated. According to US diplomatic sources, about 80-90% of the movement supported Mansour, while the rest of the insurgents were loyal to Rasul. However, Taliban sources suggested that Mansour had a much more limited strength of about 55-60% of the Taliban.³⁹ While the struggle of power inside the movement did not generally affected their ability to fight, it nonetheless emphasised their internal rivalries and divergent opinions on a variety of topics, which may be the sign of a possible fracture in the movement. Moreover, the attempt by the Islamic State to penetrate the Af-Pak region created a further alternative to Mansour, with some of the disappointed field commanders and rank-and-file declaring their allegiance to the «Islamic State», in open disagreement with the current Taliban leadership.⁴⁰

More importantly, the two sides showed different attitudes towards the issue of reconciliation with the NUG. Akhtar Mansour has been known for years as one of the most pragmatic and pro-dialogue Taliban commanders.⁴¹ This was confirmed by his role in the opening of the Taliban «political office» in Qatar in 2013, as well as by his support – though with scarce enthusiasm – of the peace initiative launched under Pakistani guidance in Murree (in the Pakistan province of Punjab) in July 2015.⁴² On the other

38. Thomas Ruttig, 'From Mullah Omar to Mansur: Change at the Top of the Taliban's Top Leadership', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 31 July 2015, pp. 1-5.

39. Antonio Giustozzi & Silab Mangal, 'An Interview with Mullah Rasool on Reconciliation Between the Taliban and the Afghan Government', *The Royal United Services Institute*, 16 March 2016.

40. Daud Qarizadah, 'Afghan Taliban: Mullah Mansour's Battle to be Leader', *BBC News*, 23 September 2015.

41. Borhan Osman, 'The Murree Process: Divisive Peace Talks Further Complicated by Mullah Omar's Death', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 5 August 2015, p. 2.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-6; Thomas Ruttig, 'From Mullah Omar to Mansur', p. 6.

side, Mullah Rasul rejected the attempts to negotiate with the NUG made by Mansour, accusing him of pursuing «personal interests».⁴³ However, differences within the Taliban are much more fluid than they may appear on the surface, and well-informed sources emphasise that differences of opinions regarding whether to negotiate – and under which conditions – exist on both sides, as well as in the other Taliban splinter groups. Mullah Rasul himself, while condemning the Murree Process, has emphasised that he is not against «reconciliation in principle»; rather that he is opposed to Mansour's control over the negotiation. Mullah Rasul has publicly insisted that reconciliation must not sacrifice basic Taliban «principles», such as the insertion of more *shari'a* norms into the Afghan Constitution, and the preliminary withdrawal of all Western soldiers from Afghanistan. Interestingly, Rasul has also criticized the current state of the reconciliation process, based on the «Quadrilateral approach»; that is, on the participation of the US, China and Pakistan, with the exclusion of Iran.⁴⁴ While the appointment of Mullah Mansour has undoubtedly kept the door open for negotiation, it has also had a divisive effect on the Taliban groups, which, in turn, has paradoxically made negotiating more difficult. Moreover, Mansou's need to reassure the movement of his unwillingness to negotiate at all costs explains the dramatic increase in violence during the autumn.

6. Ghani's foreign policy

The most obvious change with the passage of the presidency from Karzai to Ghani was probably recorded in foreign policy. First, Ghani worked hard at reversing the Afghan-US relations, which had reached their lowest point during the last months of the Karzai era, with the latter's refusal to sign both the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US, and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with NATO. Significantly, one of President Ghani's first acts was to sign both treaties.⁴⁵ Moreover, whereas Karzai based its political action in recent years on a stronger nationalist sentiment, exploiting the existing discontent among the population caused by the US bombings' civilian victims, the nationalistic anti-US rhetoric all but disappeared with Ghani's election. When the President visited Washington in March, he thanked the US soldiers who fought in Afghanistan, and the US government for its military and financial support.⁴⁶ This «different relationship» was acknowledged by the US officials, who described Ghani as «more cooperative» than his predecessor.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Ghani's

43. Antonio Giustozzi & Silab Mangal, 'An Interview with Mullah Rasool', p. 2.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Diego Abenante, 'Afghanistan 2014', p. 384.

46. 'Afghan President Ghani Credits US Role'.

47. *Ibid.*; Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Blood and Hope', pp. 2-5.

cordial tone towards the US is easily understood in the light of his extreme need for continued military support, as noted above. The second new aspect was Ghani's initiative – supported also by Abdullah – to directly address Pakistan about reviving the peace process with the Taliban. This in fact was not a true innovation, in that it reflected a widespread belief among Afghan politicians – often repeated by Karzai in the past – that the Taliban are controlled by Islamabad, or at least that Pakistan may persuade the Taliban to sit at the negotiating table.⁴⁸ This vision – which probably overestimates the strength of Pakistan vis-à-vis the Taliban – stems, among other factors, from a vision of the war as a conflict between states (that is, Afghanistan and Pakistan), rather than between different components of Afghan society.⁴⁹ That there has been a tendency on the part of Kabul and the US to overestimate the role of Pakistan in controlling the Taliban – or most of them – has been shown by the complex events of the Murree Process, that is, the negotiation conducted in summer 2015 under the auspices of Pakistan.⁵⁰ Well-informed sources suggest that the negotiation has actually been imposed on the Taliban by Islamabad, with the consequence of creating a rift between some of the Taliban commanders and the Pakistani civilian and military authorities. The result has been that, so far, the process has had limited results.⁵¹ That said, it has to be recognized that the NUG have energetically carried on the attempt to build a new confidence in relations with Islamabad, also taking advantage of Nawaz Sharif's new government in Pakistan, an attempt which has been acknowledged by Islamabad.⁵² Regardless of whether Pakistan does or does not have the power to control the Taliban, there is no doubt that peace in the region must come from a change in relations between the two neighbouring states.⁵³

7. *The economic situation*

The political uncertainties and the withdrawal of international military forces affected the economic results of 2015. The political *impasse* caused by the reform difficulties and the military situation have counterbalanced the positive effect of the formation of the NUG. Accordingly, the economic improvement during the year under review has been modest when compa-

48. Borhan Osman, 'The Murree Process', pp. 9-10.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

50. Ismail Khan, 'Afghan Government, Taliban, Resume Peace Talks in Murree on Friday', *Dawn*, 29 July 2015.

51. Borhan Osman, 'The Murree Process', pp. 7-8.

52. Rod Nordland & Mujib Mashal, 'Afghan President Receives Unexpected Welcome in Pakistan', *The New York Times*, 9 December 2015.

53. See 'Resettling Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan', *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report N° 262, 28 October 2014, pp. 11-24.

red to the 2014 estimates.⁵⁴ However, the overall macroeconomic situation has remained stable and there are hopes of a gradual recovery in the next few years. The GDP growth rate marginally increased from 1.3% in 2014 to 1.5% in 2015. There was a slight growth in services, from 2.2% (2014) to 2.8% (2015), while the industry expansion rate was 1.4% lower than the previous year's 2.4%. The data on new firm registrations showed a small rise in investment activities; however, these remained low in comparison with the 2012 level. The agricultural output was negative at -2.0% in 2015, mainly due to unfavourable weather conditions.⁵⁵ The inflation rate decreased to 1.5% from 4.5% in 2014, which may be explained by the fall of private consumption. The exchange rate saw the afghani depreciated by 7% against the US dollar, due to the decrease in foreign aid and the tendency of Afghan consumers to save their wealth in foreign currencies because of the political and military uncertainty.⁵⁶ The area where the Afghan economy improved most was in the fiscal sphere. Domestic revenues improved from 8.7% of the GDP in 2014 to 10.4% in 2015, which was, in part, the result of the Kabul government's reforms in tax policy and arrears collection, and, in part, an effect of cautious expenditure management. Total expenditure slightly increased from 26.2% in 2014 to 27% in 2015.⁵⁷

The issue of opium poppy cultivation also slightly improved during 2015, with the total area under cultivation estimated to be 19% less than 2014. This was even more significant in the context that this was the first decrease since 2009. A similar improvement was recorded with regard to the areas where poppy eradication was carried out, with an increase of 40% from 2014; this was due to enhanced coordination between the government's agencies and increased protection on the part of the military. However, the data for 2015 confirmed the connection between opium production and insecurity, with 97% of the total production of opium taking place in the Southern, Eastern and Western provinces, where the political and military situation is most unstable.⁵⁸

54. 'Asian Development Outlook 2016: Asia's Potential Growth', *Asian Development Bank*, March 2016, p. 151.

55. 'Afghanistan Development Update', *The World Bank*, April 2016, pp. 1-10.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2015. Executive Summary', *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, October 2015, pp. 5-9.