

# EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

MULTINATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT POLICY  
DIALOGUE  
LUIS BLANCO

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## ISAF Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and the Emerging Security Challenges for Neighbouring Central Asian States

### Introduction

Amid NATO's decision to complete the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in December 2014 and in the context of presidential elections, the central Asian region faces a period of apprehension. Afghanistan is not completely stabilized. But Hamid Karzai has been able to hold together an intricate political system which allows the central government to function and consolidate institutional governance. His replacement may become a challenge for the maintenance of political stability in the country. The withdrawal from NATO-ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops and its replacement by Afghan National Security Forces in a moment in which Taliban groups continue to be active outside Kabul and several provinces of the country also contributes to the feelings of uncertainty shared by neighbouring countries. Countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan expressed officially their concerns to the 68<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly in September 2013, warning about the worrying regional and security threats associated with the post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan.

In this context, the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised in Brussels on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2013 an expert dinner roundtable entitled 'ISAF Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and the Emerging Security Challenges for Neighbouring Central Asian States'. The event counted with the keynote speech of H.E. Ambassador Patricia Flor, European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, and with the speech of H.E. Ambassador Homayoun Tandar, Afghan Ambassador to the EU. The event was also

attended by other Central Asian Ambassadors, diplomatic staff, representatives from the European External Action Service and NATO, and think-tank experts. The present report will address the main topics of discussion during the event: Afghanistan and ISAF withdrawal, the EU Strategy to Central Asia, and challenges for the promotion of stability in the region.

### Afghanistan and ISAF withdrawal

In June 2013, Afghan national forces started to take control of the security of the country. Today Afghan National Security Forces sum more than 350,000 security agents including members of the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police and the Afghan Air Force. Areas which some years ago were beyond control of the central government in Kabul, like passage corridors connecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan, are now controlled and secured by national forces. The country is definitely not where it was ten years ago. Nevertheless some uncertainty remains regarding the capacity of Afghan National Forces to cope with a still much alive Taliban insurgency after the completion of ISAF withdrawal. The European EUPOL's Mission supporting the implementation of the National Policy Strategy has a mandate until the end of 2014. But it seems likely that the mission will remain necessary and will probably be extended beyond that date. Hamid Karzai's government has been able to establish a degree of political stability in the country and provide capability to sustain a fragile process of institutional governance. However, the security environment in the country is far from being stabilized. The central government is not in total control of its ter-

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ritory. Afghan National Forces have been suffering attacks on a much regular basis and the number of military casualties has been increasing. There is still much work to be done and the presidential elections scheduled for April 2014 bring more uncertainty to the present political context in the region. Hamid Karzai is not eligible for another mandate and so far none of the 11 candidates stands out as a certain winner. A second round will probably be necessary and it is currently impossible to say if the new Afghan president will have the political capabilities to keep the country stable, managing the intricate system of political loyalties necessary to hold the country together. The Taliban will certainly try to use the period of elections to create more instability in the country and challenge the power of the central government. It will be an important test for Afghan National Forces to show that they have the necessary capabilities to replace ISAF and to provide continuity in the stabilisation process of the country.

#### **The European Union Strategy to Central Asia**

The EU has expressed its desire to establish a long term commitment towards the stabilisation and economic and social development of the Central Asia region. In this context, the European Council adopted in June 2007 the document 'The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership'. Since then, the EU has been increasing its engagement with the region in areas like education, energy and transport, trade and economic relations, and has increasing its development assistance to the Central Asian space. The strategic engagement with the Central Asian region is not recent. For example, since 2002 the EU has been cooperating with the region through the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), an initiative that aims at sharing the European expertise in Integrated Border Management (IBM) with Central Asian countries. More recently, the EU has been strengthening its efforts to develop a cooperative strategy that addresses the security and development nexus. In June 2013, a High Level Security Dialogue with Central

Asia was launched. With this initiative, the EU intends to promote the development of economic linkages through the construction of pipelines, roads, energy lines, and thus to contribute to the economic growth of the region. Moreover, it aims to prevent the growth of politico-religious radicalization, foster minority integration and improve the climate for private investment in the countries that compose the region. It is a dual strategy that approaches development and security in Central Asia in a comprehensive way.

#### **Challenges for the promotion of stability in the region**

Central Asia has its own security problems associated with the lack of good governance, which affects to a lower or higher extent all the countries of the region. Organized crime and radicalism are and will remain important challenges in the near future. In this context, destabilisation in the immediate neighbourhood would only lead to an even more dangerous scenario for Central Asia. The next developments in Afghanistan thus play a fundamental role for the future of the region.

The current scenario is extremely complex. Several actors have a key role in the region and may have the capability to influence the impact that the ISAF-NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan may have on Central Asia. One of them is Pakistan. This country is an essential piece in the puzzle of Afghanistan's future. Fortunately the Pakistani leadership is aware of that and is conscious that a deterioration of the fragile stability that has been achieved in neighbouring Afghanistan in the last years might generate difficult consequences for the government in Islamabad. The Pakistani authorities seem eager to confirm that the NATO-ISAF withdrawal will not be translated into a weaker commitment of Western powers to the maintenance of stability in the region and would be willing to collaborate with external actors under some conditions to avoid a crisis in the region. However, the commitment of other key regional actors is also necessary. Countries like Turkey, Iran and Russia may prove essential in this tran-

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sitional period in Afghanistan. They have the capacity to influence any situation resulting from the finalization of the NATO-ISAF mission. These key players are not only relevant for the future of Afghanistan but also for the promotion of security and social and economic linkages between South and Central Asia.

In addition, NATO and other Western actors like the EU must be aware of the responsibility that they bear in Afghanistan. Whereas the NATO-ISAF troop withdrawal is a reality, the continuity of the engagement with the country is essential. Afghan's sovereignty and right to decide the extent of this collaboration must be respected but it is evident that the country needs Western support during the further process of consolidation of institutional governance that will take place in the years ahead. 2014 will present major political challenges to Afghanistan. It is of everyone's interest that what has been achieved so far may not be lost. In this context, it is essential that Afghan elections take place and occur in the most secure and democratic way possible. The legitimacy of the future Afghan leadership will be essential for the further stabilisation of the country and NATO and the EU will have a key role in supporting the electoral process and the implementation of its outcome.

### Conclusions

There were visible improvements in Afghanistan in the last decade. However, the political situation remains highly volatile and there are still major security concerns to be addressed by Afghan authorities at the moment. NATO-ISAF withdrawal will be a great challenge for the Afghan leadership. In this context, it is essential that the electoral process that will empower a new president be held as fairly and as democratically as possible. Western actors and neighbouring countries must support the country in this very delicate phase of consolidation of democratic political institutions. A relatively smooth process of leadership transition will demonstrate that the efforts done in the last years are achieving the desired results.

However, Afghanistan will remain in need of external support. Cooperation with partners cannot be unidirectional and should not focus exclusively on security. A dual strategy merging security and development support is necessary for a long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan. This will also imply strengthening economic and social linkages with neighbouring countries of South and Central Asia. There are resources available from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, the EU, and other sources, for the promotion of infrastructure and investment in the country and in the region. It is essential that they create a secure and stable environment in order to harvest the fruits of development efforts expected by the international community and, especially, by the Afghan people.

NATO-ISAF troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is a sensitive issue and presents some risks for Central Asia. Nevertheless, as long as NATO, the EU and other relevant regional actors remain committed to support this transitional phase and as long as domestic democratic governance keep evolving, Afghanistan will be in conditions to remain in the path towards full exercise of its sovereignty, stability and positive integration with the neighbouring region.