

The US-Taliban peace agreement: the growing regionalism and reducing US influence in Afghanistan

Victor Santos Mendes¹

Introduction

The United States' military presence in Afghanistan is part of the list of conflicts in which the Americans have been involved and seem to be unable to get out. Even after nearly twenty years involved in this war, instability and insecurity persist in Afghanistan, which raises questions about the US military capacity. Donald Trump's isolationist foreign policy has driven the return of US troops home, either to end this endless war and to reduce the country's expenditure around the world, given its goals of focusing on the domestic environment and improving the national economy. Meanwhile, despite presenting very different proposals from the Trump administration, Joe Biden maintained the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

Even though it is a topic of congruence between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, it is necessary to rise the potential risks regarding this movement, which are great and not interesting for the US, especially given the scenario faced by the Afghan government in internal negotiations with the Taliban and how have been the US negotiations with the group regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country. Furthermore, the departure of the United States from this theater creates a power vacuum that could open space, even for opposing regional powers of Washington, which would mean geopolitical losses for the United States.

¹ Master's degree student at the International Security and Defense Program (PPGSID) of the Brazilian National War College (ESG) – Min. Of Defense (Brazilian National War College (ESG), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – victorsantosmendes@gmail.com; <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0006000577283824>).

Thus, this analysis seeks to understand the possible scenarios facing the withdrawal of US and allied troops from Afghanistan, which is expected to be completed on September 11, 2021, twenty years after the 9/11 attacks against US territories. This analysis aims, through a regional lens, to expose the conjunctures both in the domestic context of Afghanistan, and in the international dispute between the regional actors, in order to clarify the growing regional influence in this theater, as well as the lesser American impact, which tends to degrade even more so with the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

What to expect from the US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan?

The September 11 terrorist attacks against the American territory were a major milestone. That moment reiterated that, despite the end of the Cold War, the history was not over, as written by Fukuyama (1989) years before. The liberal democratic values were not widespread throughout the international system, and the attempt to do so led George W. Bush's NSS (National Security Strategy) to accuse the export of democracies promoted by the Bill Clinton administration, of motivating the 9/11 (GÓES, 2018).

At that time, irregular wars largely replaced traditional conflicts (VISACRO, 2013), delivering new challenges to the States and demanding new solutions (BEHM, 2017). The motivations of these new conflicts go beyond ideological and economic aspects, being now, cultural factors (HUNTINGTON, 1993). Technological and communication developments have generated greater interaction between different civilizations. Modernization conquered societies and alienated individuals from local cultural values and the Western preponderance in dictating the world order raised the interests of non-Western societies to assert their values, fostering the antagonism between civilizations, which according to Huntington (1993), explains conflicts since the end of the Cold War.

The invasion of the Afghanistan, led by the United States, in the War on Terror, a counterinsurgency war, has hitherto cost approximately US\$ 750 billion for the Americans (THOMAS, 2019). However, even so, there were several difficulties, as in the invasion of Iraq, beyond not having achieved the expected results (HANSON, 2017), which raises questions about the American preponderance and its geopolitical influence, fundamental

aspects for the unipolar stability (ACHARYA, 2014). In this context, changes were already necessary to deal with new threats, such as insurgencies and terrorism (HANSON, 2017).

After long and costly nineteen years of war, it is difficult to assume that the objective of the “Enduring Freedom” operation has been achieved, once instability and violence still persist in the country (TARIQ; RIZWAN; AHMAD, 2020). Although an agreement was reached between US and the Taliban in February 2020, major concerns still surround the conditions of Afghanistan.

The absence of the Afghan government from the negotiations is one of the most critical points of the agreement, as decisions regarding the government and the Afghan territory were agreed without the local government’s consent (FARR, 2020). Although the United States tried to keep the Afghan government in the negotiations, its gradual removal came under Taliban’s pressure, what represents a victory for the group (THOMAS, 2019). Meanwhile, in the face of political instability and concerns about the veracity of the results of the last elections in the country, which were postponed for several years, two political leaders declare themselves winners, making the local negotiations between the national government and the Taliban even more difficult (FARR, 2020).

The Afghan districts controlled, influenced or contested by insurgent groups rose from 28% in November 2015 to 46% in October 2018, followed by increases that also underwent the territories under control and contested by the Taliban, the largest of the insurgent groups in the country (THOMAS, 2019). Meanwhile, although al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015 was considered minimal, training camps of the group were discovered in the country and UN reports from January 2019 highlighted the country's continued use as an al-Qaeda shelter and its strong ties with Taliban, what raises great concern about the compliance of the latter with the agreement (THOMAS, 2019).

Furthermore, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), an Islamic State cell in Afghanistan, has been active and leveraging power since 2014. It has already received financial assistance from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and has claimed responsibility for large attacks in the country (THOMAS, 2019), which highlights the jihad dynamism, little understood by the West, and how this movement secure its recruits

(PANTUCCI, 2020), somehow underpinning the “clash of civilizations” idealized by Huntington (1993).

Close to completing two decades of American presence in Afghanistan, instability and violence are explicitly increasing in the country (THOMAS, 2019), which demonstrates the American incapacity with regard to counterinsurgent wars, aside from the failure in the attempt to pacify the country, what may indicate US geopolitical weaknesses, which tends to progress with the complete withdrawal of the American and allied military forces until April 2021, as agreed (TALIBAN; USA, 2020).

The declared interest of Washington to return with its troops to the US, according to Fawzia Koofi, a member of the negotiating team, increases the Taliban's bargain and its conviction of victory, once if they do not reach an agreement with the Afghan government, they will win the war against it as soon as the remaining foreign troops leave the country (REALS; MUKHTAR, 2020).

Despite the change of administration in the White House, current President Joe Biden maintained the position of his predecessor Donald Trump for Afghanistan, the withdrawal of American troops in order to put an end to the longest war the United States has ever been involved in. However, while Joe Biden administration advances with the US troops withdrawal, the agreements in Afghanistan, between the Afghan government and the Taliban, do not move forward (BOOT, 2021). As in 2020, given the confirmation of the withdrawal of American and allied troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban continues to entrench its victory and, therefore, it also maintains its disinterest in moving forward with the negotiations – despite the greatest efforts made by the Biden administration – because it considers that it will overcome Afghan forces the once foreign troops leave it (BOOT, 2021).

“No mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state, or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors, and force them to admit their defeat at our hands. Fortunately, today, we and you are experiencing better circumstances.” (BOOT, 2021).

Furthermore, this also benefits neighboring countries and regional powers (THOMAS, 2019). Although Pakistan has been a major American partner in the past, the Trump administration weakened relations with the country, which is counterproductive, once Islamabad has major counterterrorist efforts in partnership with the US and facilitates American action in territories within Afghanistan. According to the Afghan government, Pakistan seeks to exert influence in its territory through ties with insurgent groups – such as Taliban – in order to guarantee its interests and balance the Indian influence in the country. This is also the case of Iran, which seeks to pressure the American military forces in Afghanistan (THOMAS, 2019).

A greater presence of Central Asian countries is also observed in Afghanistan's pacification. According to Acharya (2014), it is possible to attribute to regionalism, albeit partially, the reduction of expectations on global institutions – developed under the aegis of the West – which corroborates the reduction of the American capacity in its peacebuilding efforts in the country. Regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are more relevant than they have been in the past, demanding joint endeavors against threats that have worsened in recent years in Afghanistan and that jeopardize the security of the region (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019).

In this respect, the Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation and the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan gain great importance in the country's pacification (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019). The former becomes the main forum to join efforts to end violence in Afghanistan (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019), in which, aside from the United States, NATO and the United Nations, several regional governments are part of it, having agreed, for example, to adopt mechanisms from SCO and other institutions, to combat terrorism (US EMBASSY IN KABUL, 2018). The latter, a conference based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, consolidates this country, a regional actor, as the driver of a closer cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019). Additionally, according to the conference's statement – which repeats the words “region” or “regional” 27

times – it will reach a regional economic and security agreement to yield peace in Afghanistan and stability in the region (TASHKENT CONFERENCE, 2018).

According to the local government, the conference is essential to the country's peace process, as this cooperation will reduce Islamabad's influence in Afghanistan (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019). Apart from it, Ashraf Ghani's government recognizes it as a "model of regional cooperation", beyond its convergence with the government's peace initiatives (ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN, 2019).

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin's government presents itself as another major obstacle to the agreement between the United States and the Taliban. Since 2014, the Russian presence in Afghanistan has increased significantly, establishing a strategic partnership with Taliban in 2015, which according to the Kremlin, is restricted to combating ISKP, that has had significant growth in the country (GOHEL; BAILEY, 2020). Therefore, Russia sees Afghanistan as another scenario to face the United States, just as it did in Syria (GOHEL; BAILEY, 2020), where Washington lost power by leaving its Kurdish allies, paving the way for their negotiations with Putin and al-Assad (YACOUBIAN, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Michael Green and Gabriel Scheinmann (2021), another regional power that could benefit from this US movement is China. The US air base in Afghanistan is closer to Chinese territory than any US base in the Pacific region, and it is the only US base in countries sharing land borders with the Chinese territory (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021). Thus, the US presence in Afghanistan should be seen as something geopolitically positive in confronting the growing Chinese power (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021).

In the face of the announcement of the withdrawal of US troops and allies from Afghanistan under the Trump government, which was maintained by Biden, China announced the expansion of its international infrastructure initiative to Afghanistan, the Belt and Road, which has been guaranteeing to China, in other countries, military partnerships and installations at its disposal (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021). Thus, China presents itself as a strong candidate to fill the power vacuum to be left by the US, especially given the high

probability of the Afghan government to face challenges on fighting the Taliban in this context (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021).

Thus, Green and Scheinmann (2021) understand that the withdrawal of US troops from this theater tends to significantly harm India's security, which is today one of the great US partners to face China. If the Afghan government manages, as far as possible, to govern the country, the greater will be the chances for China to advance agreements with Afghanistan, while if the Taliban advances with its objectives of an Islamic government in the country, the greater will be Pakistan's influence in Afghan territory, which also poses a threat to India's security (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021). In any case, India will have to devote greater efforts to its security on the northern border, diverting attention from the Indian and Pacific oceans, where India is an important US partner to face various challenges (GREEN; SCHEINMANN, 2021).

Thus, the regionalism enquires the geopolitical influence of the great powers (ACHARYA, 2014), in this case, the US', which witnesses agreements, conferences and regional organizations gaining more relevance in the pacification of Afghanistan. As Acharya (2014) states, the role of regional actors inhibits the ability of external powers to influence the region, which makes the US government seek support from regional powers for the country's pacification and stability in the region, such as Indian support, which was considered insufficient by Donald Trump, and the strengthening ties with Uzbekistan, which leads this mission, but did not let his visit to the White House affect his relations with Moscow and Beijing (HAMIDZADA; PONZIO, 2019).

Conclusion

Considering all that have been depicted so far, great concern hangs over Ghani's government, which sees great opportunities for Taliban and the rise of the ISKP in a country that is still unstable and violent. Despite US administration change, the White House policy remained on the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, which raises Taliban's disinterest in advancing negotiations with the Afghan government, as they declare themselves

victorious, especially since the foreign troops departure, as they will have a great and easier scenario to advance its territorial conquest around the country.

Aside from that, geopolitically, it is possible to conclude that the regional influence in Afghanistan is higher than in the past, which means less US impact in the country, even though it's been almost twenty years that the Americans fight this conflict. Russia envisages the opening of one more relevant theater to face and balance the American power, while China expands its Belt and Road initiative to Afghanistan, possibly in order to have it as one more geopolitical ally and to be a great candidate to substitute the American forces in Afghanistan in the future. It is important to emphasize that the probable scenarios with the US withdrawal from the country, both with greater control by the Afghan government, and with the Taliban's advance in the control of territories in the country, harm the Indian security, which is a great US partner in the region, either to face the rising China and for challenges in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

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