

# Afghanistan: A Dangerous Projection of Presidential Inauguration

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*The inauguration of the new president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, was accompanied by a [series of terrorist attacks](#) in Kabul – near the international airport, Kabul University, and the compound of government buildings. But of course the current presidential election has not been an easy one. Suffice it to note that **after the second round of the elections, it took three months to announce the results, which was more than six months after the launch of the election campaign itself.***

*The historically entrenched rift between the country's ethnic groups and regions played its part in that delay. This election initially raised the fear that its outcome might seriously exacerbate ethnic animosities, splitting the country into mutually hostile enclaves. Every political party in Afghanistan has its own armed legions, and no one has forgotten the war in the 1990s, which was to a large extent an ethnic conflict.*

*The obvious reluctance of the now ex-president, Hamid Karzai, to leave the Arg (the presidential palace in Kabul) has added a certain element of intrigue to the wait for the election outcome. Whenever it seemed that the negotiations over the results had reached an impasse, Karzai could refer the matter to the Supreme Court, demanding that the [Loya Jirga](#) (the representative assembly with the power to make decisions on constitutional issues) be convened, and thus extend his status as president for an indefinite period ...*

 Just two days before Ashraf Ghani's inauguration, the governor of the Balkh province, Atta Mohammad Noor (on the picture), was still refusing to publicly congratulate him on his victory.

Many observers have already passed an optimistic verdict on the elections, describing the final compromise as a sign of the success of the democratic transformations wrought in Kabul during its period of oversight by Western counselors. But it would be wrong to rush into far-reaching conclusions. **Just two days before Ashraf Ghani's inauguration, the governor of the Balkh province, Atta Mohammad Noor, was still [refusing to publicly congratulate him on his victory](#) (i.e., refusing to recognize his assumption of the office).** That Tajik leader controls a large part of the Afghan North, far beyond the borders of Balkh, and, *with fairly sizable military forces at his disposal, in fact conducts his own foreign policy, increasingly distancing himself from Kabul.* Because all the major routes from Central Asia cross the territory under his control, which also encompasses a significant section of the border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the capitals of the region have no choice but to take him quite seriously indeed.

**This points to an obvious weakness in the newest power scheme in Kabul.** Constructed after many months of bargaining between the contenders and the

groups supporting them, in addition to external forces, that power scheme is in reality **setting up a system of dual power in an already decentralized country: according to the agreements, the head of the country's executive power, Abdullah Abdullah, is taking over from President Ashraf Ghani control of the leading ministries: foreign affairs, defense, and finance.** Another bit of local context is extraordinarily significant for Afghanistan and could be used against any politician – *Ashraf Ghani has a Moronite Christian wife. This detail could prompt a reaction against the president at any moment, and that would find ready support among the conservative segment of society, especially the rural Pashtun population.*

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai is one of the “Beirut Boys,” the nickname used in Kabul for the group of Pashtun leaders who were invited to *study at the American University in Beirut on USAID scholarships back in the 1970s, and then in the US, and were also given the opportunity to work at the World Bank and other international organizations.* In short, they were ushered into the highest echelons of international power. For example, **Ashraf Ghani, the presidential candidate now supported by the Americans, once even had his name put forth as a candidate for secretary general of the UN.** From the same group emerged Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi, Zalmay Khalilzad, and a number of other well-known figures

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Bilateral Security Agreement includes several very vague articles that allow USA to do whatever they want in Afghanistan under the head of common fight against terrorism.

**The inaugurated president is apparently aware of the weakness of his own positions.** One of his first actions will be to sign an agreement with the US. There is much that is quite impressive within this 32-page agreement, known as the [BSA \(Bilateral Security Agreement\)](#), and one is led to conclude that the artificially contrived idea of the so-called “*withdrawal of American troops*” is nothing more than verbal gymnastics. *The US is leaving behind nine full military bases, seven civilian airports, and five land-based transit centers in Afghanistan ...* And in order to support the long-term vision and scope of the American plans in the region, the Pentagon announced a tender last spring to find contractors to carry out airdrops of supplies for forces in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. But for what purpose, to what ends, and where might there arise a need for airdrops of goods, and what goods specifically?

What's more, after 2014 the US will officially relinquish responsibility for providing security in Afghanistan – the third clause of article 2 of the agreement clearly and unambiguously entrusts Afghan security forces with this duty. The parties recognize that ANDSF (the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, which will include members of the security forces from the Afghan interior and defense ministries, and, if needed, the National Directorate of Security) are responsible for securing the people and territory of Afghanistan.

**“The Parties shall work to enhance ANDSF’s ability to deter and respond to internal and external threats. Upon request, the United States shall urgently determine support it is prepared to provide ANDSF in order to respond to threats to Afghanistan’s security.”**

The following paragraph, clause 4, is also very vague: **“The Parties acknowledge that U.S. military operations to defeat al-Qaida and its affiliates may be appropriate in**

**the common fight against terrorism.” This, in fact, provides the Americans with the unauthorized right to conduct independent military actions that are not coordinated with the Afghans.**

The majority of Afghan society is not currently enthusiastic about the continuation of the American military presence. Probably this is why the assistant to the new president of Afghanistan, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, the former interior minister, who was appointed the presidential adviser on national security immediately after the inauguration, signed his name to the agreement on behalf of Kabul. *Hamid Karzai avoided signing his own name for almost a year, knowing that it could mark the end of his political career. The fact that the agreement is being signed at such a low level also signifies an attempt by Ashraf Ghani to evade responsibility for the actions of the American military in the future.* On the American side, the agreement was signed by the US ambassador to Afghanistan, James B. Cunningham.

✘ This kind of military base requires no fewer than 3,000-4,000 people for safe, full-scale operations. Pentagon is going to preserve at least 3 military bases of this size, if no larger.

Regardless, Ashraf Ghani’s most prominent characteristic is his focus on the US and his submission to the State Dept., which affects how he is perceived by both the Afghan political establishment, as well as by merchants in the bazaars of Kabul, and this to a significant extent shapes the public mood in the country. **The question of whether his presidential achievements will have any staying power will depend on the extent of the American involvement in subsequent proceedings in Afghanistan.** Obviously the **American troop contingent will be much larger than is being publicly acknowledged**. In terms of cooperation with Afghan security forces, particularly the army, a great deal of technical expertise will be required to keep the army operating at even a minimal level of effectiveness, because without this aid it could simply cease to exist as an organized, armed entity that is subordinate to the government. *Units are needed to ensure the security of these military professionals, which is necessary for their work to build infrastructure and logistics in the country. Units of special-operations forces and armed factions of intelligence agencies from the US and other NATO countries will also remain in place in Afghanistan. A significant percentage of the hired soldiers might currently be working for private security firms in Afghanistan.* Back in August 2010, Hamid Karzai decided to suspend the operations of private security firms in his country, but then reconsidered his decision under pressure from representatives of NATO countries. According to some estimates, these firms (which are actually military units) employ about 40,000 people, about ninety percent of whom are Afghans. Foreign mercenaries, mostly former American soldiers, hold key positions. The American government is the main employer – almost half of them work directly for the Pentagon. In other words, given all these parameters, **at least 50,000 people will remain there.** *Just one military base in Shorabak, near Kandahar, which has several thousand square meters of underground buildings and a 3,000-meter runway, requires no fewer than 3,000-4,000 people for safe, full-scale operations ... The bases being retained by the Pentagon in Bagram and Mazar-i-Sharif are of a similar magnitude, if not larger.*

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**The Afghan security forces** have been increased, now employing close to the goal of 350,000, while the army numbers about 185,000 and the police – 147,000. However, **the problem is their ability to carry out their assigned functions. Both the army as**

well as the police are marked by their members' affiliation to different ethnic groups, forced mobilization in many cases, and a low level of training, organization, and discipline, in addition to corrupt officers. *Afghan security forces are also plagued by mass desertion* (losing up to 50,000 soldiers per year in the last 3-4 years). There are many examples of troops being recruited by the enemy, as well as networks of agents from Taliban groups penetrating military units. *Attempting to train personnel in command positions, especially the lower and middle ranks, can be profoundly challenging, and one reason for this is the fact that Afghan society is generally poorly educated.* The security forces are not able to independently maintain or operate any sophisticated equipment or weapons, nor, in many cases, can they handle logistics or plan combat operations. Left without significant support, they may experience the same fate as that of the Afghan army after the Soviet withdrawal, although when that happened the Najibullah regime turned out to be surprising resilient, lasting another three years. But today's political elite in Kabul will not have access to this type of resource. **Soldiers can simply disperse - joining up with Taliban groups created around detachments of combatants, which every self-respecting politician in Afghanistan controls, and which are primarily based on ethnicity.** *Moreover it is significant that [army officers are predominantly made up of ethnic Tajiks from the former Northern Alliance and are controlled by Tajik leaders](#), while the majority of ordinary enlisted men are Pashtuns.*

However, regardless of whether some form of the army survives or not, it is inevitable that the intensity of military operations will sharply increase and the conflicts become more complicated. Not only in terms of "*Taliban against the government.*" The Taliban are now a diverse group, no longer the more-or-less centralized "Taliban" of the 1990s. **Today's Taliban are now more of an umbrella group, overseeing many forces with fingers in many pies, which includes ordinary criminal activities. And in addition to the Afghan factions themselves, of which there are now dozens, there are also international terrorist groups based in Afghanistan.** The greatest concentration of these foreign groups, consisting primarily of emigrants from the former Soviet Union, China, and Arabic countries, has been documented in two areas: the provinces of Badakhshan and Kunduz - i.e., the Tajikistan section of the border - and the provinces of Badghis and Faryab - the section of the border with Turkmenistan.

**And this means that the time has not yet come for simple solutions to further Afghanistan's peaceful development.**

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