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## Preface

Tens of thousands of civilians are killed in the US war in Afghanistan in the past 17 years, the responsibility for which is attributed to all parties engaged in war in Afghanistan. However, killing Afghan civilians and forces in the air strikes by foreign troops is a controversial issue that had even raised the opposition of the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai in his second term of Presidency.

Currently, although the US policy toward the Afghan war is not announced, the change in the combat tactics of the US is proven bloody for Afghans, and in several recent strikes, the American troops have killed dozens of Afghan civilians and soldiers.

Such incidents have repeatedly occurred in the past one and half decade and particularly after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG). The question why the NUG is silent against these attacks and, with this silence of the government, what will the consequences of such attacks in the future be?

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about Russian warning of undertaking military measure in Afghanistan. Special Russian Representative in Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov has said in a recent interview that if the Afghan government and foreign troops failed to suppress ISIL in Afghanistan, Russia would undertake military action in Afghanistan. Russian officials accuse the US of sending ISIL fighter in Afghanistan in unknown helicopters. How serious Russia's warning is in the current circumstances? It is a question that we have analyzed in the second part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

## The altering tactics of US war and the consequences



Since the past several weeks, Afghan forces, a school and a large number of civilians were targeted by the US airstrikes. According to the reports, the US troops carried out an airstrike on Afghan soldiers in Greshk district of Helmand province several weeks ago which killed 15 of them. Overall, within five days (between 16 and 21 July), the US has carried out 52 air strikes only in Helmand province.

In the meanwhile, the spokesman for the governor of Kunduz said that NATO forces had mistakenly targeted the Mashhad High School instead of Ghaltan High School, where the Taliban were hidden. Head of the Mashhad High School has also confirmed the attack and has said that the assault was carried out at 4 am.<sup>1</sup> However, the NATO forces denying the responsibility for the attack has quoted the Afghan National Directorate of Security that a gas tank had exploded in the school.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heart of Asia, NATO airstrikes targets school in Kunduz, 16 July 2017, see it online:

<http://www.heartofasia.af/index.php/national2/item/4442-nato-airstrike-targets-school-in-kunduz>

<sup>2</sup> Pajhwok, NATO denies airstrikes hit Kunduz school, 15 July 2017, see it online:

<http://m.pajhwok.com/en/2017/07/15/nato-denies-airstrikes-hit-kunduz-school>

Moreover, a US drone struck a death ceremony in the Haska Mina of Jalalabad leaving around ten civilians dead and several others injured, according to the initial reports.<sup>3</sup> It is not the first time that such a tragedy occurs in Haska Mina; before this, the US air forces had bombed a wedding ceremony on 6 July 2008 killing 47 civilians.

How has the US war changed after the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Kabul and Washington? Why is the Afghan government silent against the US airstrikes? With the new administration coming into play in the US, how the US war tactics have changed and what will be the consequences? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

### **The US war after BSA**

After the signature of BSA, the US war in Afghanistan changed in theory and the role of the US soldiers were limited to advising and training the Afghan forces; however, it was not the case in practice; the American troops were present in the battle ground.

According to the statistics of the US Air Forces, the US carried out 411 airstrikes in 2015 in various parts of Afghanistan. According to another organization, the US has carried out 235 or 236 strikes in this year, in which between 989 and 1441 people are killed, among them were from 60 to 81 civilians, 3 to 17 of them children.<sup>4</sup>

The US Forces carried out 117 air assaults in 2016, and according to another organization, the number of these attacks in 2016 was between 69 and 73, which have killed 431 to 471 people including 15 to 22 civilians and children.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pajhwok, 10 civilians killed in Haska Mena drone strike, see it online:

[http://www.pajhwok.com/en/subscription-required?redirect\\_from=489767](http://www.pajhwok.com/en/subscription-required?redirect_from=489767)

<sup>4</sup> See online:

<https://voiceofpeopletoday.com/get-the-data-a-list-of-us-air-and-drone-strikes-afghanistan-2015-2016/>

<sup>5</sup> For further information, please visit the link below:

<https://voiceofpeopletoday.com/get-the-data-a-list-of-us-air-and-drone-strikes-afghanistan-2015-2016/>

Such attacks occurred twice in Kunduz as well, the most known of which was the airstrike on an MSF hospital. Each one of these assaults has caused serious death tolls to both Afghan civilians and Afghan forces, but we do not want to discuss them further here.

### **Cruel bombings and the government's silence**

Since the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, it is not the first time that Afghan civilians and Afghan soldiers are being targeted by foreign air strikes nor is it the first time that the Afghan government was silent against these attacks.

What is worse is that, sometimes, some officials of the NUG justify these attacks, instead of condemning them. For instance, after the attacks on civilians in Kunduz province, while the attack was internationally condemned, the Afghan Chief Executive released a statement in which he blamed the Taliban for the assault instead of criticizing foreign forces.

The bloody airstrike in Kunduz ten months ago was the only incident in the past three years about which the Afghan Presidential Palace and Chief Executive Office released statements and even in these statements they have not condemned the main elements behind the attack (the attackers).

The question is why, compared to the Karzai's government, the NUG does not raise its voice against the foreigners? Afghan officials are probably to respond this question; nonetheless, we can say that the first and foremost reason behind it is the "two-headedness" and weak status of the government. According to the US Ambassador in Afghanistan, after the beginning of his second tenure, Hamid Karzai was a non-strategic partner for the US because he would publicly criticize US deeds.

The second reason behind the silence of the NUG against foreigners is its reliance on them for survival. That is why the NUG does not want to annoy its partners by criticizing them. Also, in the second term of Karzai's presidency, the Afghan government was not facing the current security and economic challenges either. Moreover, at that time, Karzai was in his second term of presidency, and he did not want to end it with silence.

## 2017 and the deadly airstrikes

According to the recent report of UNAMA, the current year was the bloodiest year for civilians in Afghanistan. More civilians are killed in the first six months of this year than the entire past year, in all over Afghanistan, 1634 attacks have occurred<sup>6</sup>, the largest number of strikes since 2011.

Only in June this year, the Americans have carried out 389 rocket attacks, more than the total number of attack in 2013.<sup>7</sup> At that time there were 50 thousand US soldiers in Afghanistan, and now there are less than 10 thousand US forces in this country.

The statistics mentioned above indicate that the US war tactics have changed and now it mainly relies on air strikes; however, the US does not care whether or not these assaults hit the target. On the other hand, it shows that still the Afghan air forces are not self-reliant and their existence and fight are probably relevant with the airstrikes of the foreigners.

Such blind attacks by foreigners can have two consequence in the war against them. First, it will further turn the people against the foreigners and, hence, will increase the existing hatred against the foreigners. Second, even the Afghan soldiers are not spared in these irresponsible strikes of the foreigners, the trust gap between the two allied forces will increase, and it will also result in the augmentation of the number of green on blue attacks. Only in the past two months, the American troops are targeted twice by the Afghan soldiers. On the other hand, the mysterious silence of the Afghan government will increase the distance between the nation and the state.

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<sup>6</sup> Washington Post, US Air Strikes in Afghanistan are at levels not seen since Obama troop surge, 17 July 2017, see it online:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/07/17/u-s-airstrikes-in-afghanistan-are-at-levels-not-seen-since-obama-troop-surge/>

<sup>7</sup> Guardian, Afghanistan: civilian deaths at record high in 16 year war says UN, see it online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/17/civilian-deaths-in-afghanistan-war-at-record-high-says-un>



## Russia in Afghanistan; its concerns and the probability of military intervention



The special representative of the Russian President in Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov has recently said that Russia would probably undertake military measures against the ISIL in Afghanistan. He stated that if the Afghan and American governments failed against the group, Russia would undertake military option.

In response to the remarks of this Russian official, the Afghan government has said, “the countries in the region must act responsibly against the terrorism, as does Afghanistan.” The Afghan government warns that having any contact with “terrorist” groups on behalf of any country can make the situation very critical.

The emergence of ISIL in Afghanistan created mistrust in Kabul-Moscow relations and, in the past two years, the Russian officials have repeatedly expressed their

concern about the presence of the group in Afghanistan. After the remarks of the local Afghan officials and some members of the Parliament about the landing of unknown helicopters in the areas controlled by this group, the concerns of Russians have increased.

Here we have analyzed Kabul-Moscow relations, Russia's concerns about the presence of ISIL in Afghanistan and the confrontation between Moscow and Washington in this country.

### **The Kabul-Moscow ties**

After 2001 until the second term of Karzai's Presidency, relations between Afghanistan and Russia were relatively warm, and after the beginning of the second term of Karzai's government, due to his oppositions with Washington, relations between the Afghanistan and Russia improved and the Afghan officials repeatedly visited Moscow.

After the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), Kabul sought to form a regional consensus against terrorism. Therefore, trying to achieve this end, President Ghani and National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar traveled to Russia and Russians promised to cooperate as well.

The Afghan government assumed that insecurities in the Northern Afghanistan and the emergence of ISIL in the country would urge Russians to extend their military cooperation with Afghanistan. However, on the contrary, Moscow became suspicious of Kabul's fight against ISIL and established close relations with the Taliban which was the beginning of the deterioration of relations between Kabul and Moscow.

The mysterious emergence and fast expansion of ISIL in Afghanistan and after some members of the Afghan Parliament accused National Security Council of supporting ISIL, Russia became suspicious about the Afghan government's fight against ISIL. Therefore, instead of extending state-to-state relations with the Afghan government, Russia strengthened its ties with the Taliban.



These suspicions went on to the extent that Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral meeting about Afghanistan was held without the presence of any Afghan representative, which further increased the distance between the two countries and the Afghan government strongly reacted against it and criticized holding such meetings.

### **Relations between Russia and the Taliban**

Russian authorities have officially confirmed that they recognize the Taliban as a real armed political opposition of the government and that they (Russians) are in contact with them. Speaking of these relations on their websites, the Taliban has called these ties as the recognition of this group by the countries in the region. Therefore, these relations are not just rumors leaked to the media but a confirmed fact by all parties.

Since Russians believe ISIL to be a serious threat to them and the Taliban are practically in a war against them, Russians have preferred to deal with the ISIL in Afghanistan through establishing relations with the Taliban. There are two probable answers for why Russians chose the Taliban over the Afghan government. First, Russia believes that the Afghan government does not have the ability needed to confront ISIL. Second, Russia accuses both the Afghan government and its foreign allies of supporting ISIL.

In his remarks, Zamir Kabolov has said that attacking the Taliban, foreign forces have freed ISIL fighters that were surrounded by the Taliban in Nangarhar province. Nevertheless, the Afghan presidential palace says that the countries that believe the Taliban are against ISIL are seriously misled.

Russia confesses its relations with the Taliban and justifies these ties with the need to tackle the threat of ISIL and to ensure the security of its citizens and diplomats in Afghanistan. However, from a different angle, rivalry with the US is viewed as the primary factor behind these relations.

## US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan

After the 9/11 attacks and the US military attack in Afghanistan, a new phase of Russian policy towards Afghanistan started. Although primarily Russia supported the US initiative to overthrow the Taliban regime and form a new government with the support of ISAF, in recent several years, besides regional and international issues, the permanent US bases in Afghanistan and then the emergence of ISIL in this country affected the Russian policy and in the case of Afghanistan, to some extent, Russia put the policy of neutrality aside.

Emergence and expansion of ISIL in Afghanistan altered the geopolitical situation in the region and after the trilateral meeting between Russia, China and Pakistan over the issue of Afghanistan this change revealed itself in practice.

Russian officials, especially the special Russian representative in Afghanistan, have repeatedly criticized the US policy in the region in general and the US policy in the fight against terrorism in particular.

On the contrary, NATO and the US accused Russia of supporting the Taliban. In the meanwhile, both the Afghan and American officials are concerned about relations between Russian and the Taliban. According to the Commander of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan General John Nicolson, Russia has joined Iran and Pakistan in extending “harmful influence” in Afghanistan. He said that Russia wanted to win legitimacy for the Taliban and ISIL was just an excuse to justify Russian policies.

The special Russian representative in Afghanistan has said in his recent remarks that if the Afghan government and foreigners failed against ISIL, Moscow would not remain indifferent. He warned of Russian military action in Afghanistan which conveys the picture of Afghanistan turning into the battle ground of Russia and the US.

Besides preventing the expansion of ISIL in Afghanistan, Russia uses the option of “relations with the Taliban” as a mean to pressurize the US in other international cases as well and given the recent warning of Russia, it seems that after Ukraine

and Syria, Afghanistan will be another area for Russian-American rivalry, which will further complicate the situation in Afghanistan and will turn Afghanistan into a battlefield for another type of proxy wars.

Although if the influence and activities of the ISIL expand in Afghanistan, there is a possibility of Russia targeting their sanctuaries in this country; currently it seems that such remarks are just to pressurize the Afghan and American governments and in the current circumstance, when the US and NATO are present in Afghanistan, Russia's military intervention seems unlikely.

The end

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**Note:** Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

