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## Afghanistan on Brink of New Wave of Escalating Tension

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Tajik President Emomalii Rahmon, during his Aug. 2 2015 visit to the town of Khorugh, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, claimed that «extremists may try to infiltrate Tajikistan» from neighboring Afghanistan. Dushanbe is taking steps to strengthen its national borders and to thoroughly train its military units and detachments, given the possible deterioration of the status quo in Afghanistan (IRA), where the confrontation between the Taliban and Kabul is being complicated by activity within the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) armed opposition group.

While visiting Kabul, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey discussed this issue with President Ashraf Ghani. Dempsey described IS, which has begun to expand its influence into the IRA, as a trans-regional terrorist threat that needs to be addressed at the trans-regional level. First and foremost, the arrival of IS into Afghanistan signals new threats against the countries of Central Asia.

Of course, in its original incarnation, the Islamic State was one of many groups created with the financial and military support of the West and its allies in order to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad. But now IS seems to have spiraled out from under American control, notably by taking advantage of the fact that in 2014 NATO reduced its footprint in Afghanistan, leaving only 9,800 troops in the country to help the local army fight Taliban militants. According to

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the alliance will retain a «military component» in Afghanistan, but the latest failures of the Afghan army show that Kabul is not able to establish peace in the country on its own, and NATO's «military component» is having little effect on the situation.

Today there can be no doubt that further attempts to neutralize the armed Afghan opposition force are doomed. In this context, Washington, Kabul, and their allies in the Western coalition have been forced to undertake a number of serious attempts to find new ways of reconciling with the Taliban. In recent months, several informal, preliminary talks have been held between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government. In early July, official talks were held in Islamabad for the first time, and ways to create a favorable environment for reconciliation were discussed.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called the talks «a breakthrough», adding that they «must succeed». White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest stated that the US welcomed the talks, and he called them «an important step in advancing prospects for a credible peace». The Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban agreed to meet again after the Muslim month of Ramadan, but now the situation has taken a dramatic turn for the worse.

On July 29, Afghan officials reported that Mohammed Omar, a Taliban leader who had not appeared in public since 2001, had died in 2013 in a hospital in the Pakistani city of Karachi. On 1 August 2015 a memorial service was held in Kabul for this leader of the Taliban movement, which caused outrage among Afghans. First, this was because Omar died two years ago, and second, it is very surprising that officials are calculating that now Islamists will rush to take part in the peace talks. And taking their cue from Kabul, US intelligence then confirmed the report of the death of Mullah Omar two years after the event itself, which is likely a sign that the Americans are poorly informed about what is happening within the Taliban movement, which the US military has seemingly been battling for over ten years. According to the National Priorities Project, an NGO that studies the US budget, Washington is spending \$4 million every hour on its military operations in Afghanistan, which includes funding for intelligence work. One indication that Washington has gotten little return on its money is the fact that Mullah Omar was included on the list of the CIA's most wanted international terrorists.

What is actually going on inside the Taliban leadership? The Taliban camp is currently split. The family of Mullah Omar does not support Mansoor Akhtar's appointment as the new Taliban chief and insists that the leadership be passed to the eldest son of the late Mohammad Yaqoob. Never before in its history has the Taliban movement experienced such loud public disagreements within its ranks. It has reached the point that spokesmen from the anti-government Taliban splinter group, Fidai Mahaz, have claimed that Mullah Omar was poisoned by the newly elected leader Mansoor, as reported by the news agency Khaama Press.

The struggle for power threatens to escalate into a war between the supporters of Mansoor and Yaqoob. It is a mistake to think of the Taliban as a unified movement. Originally the Taliban was a conglomerate of Pashtun tribes, where clan, family, and financial interests trumped ideological convictions. It will be difficult for the Taliban to find a new leader who will suit everyone. In addition, the previous incarnation of this movement – dating back to when Mullah

Omar led the Taliban to victory in the war between armed Afghan factions that broke out after Soviet troops withdrew from the country in February 1989 - vanished long ago.

There is no unified leadership in Afghanistan. The country is divided into zones of influence controlled by various armed groups, most of which are nominally classified as Taliban affiliates. And now the threat that Afghanistan could fragment further has increased significantly. Currently a new group, consisting of former Taliban members and representatives of Afghan cells of IS, is waging battles in the eastern part of the country against military divisions that remain loyal to the Taliban leadership.

However, even these forces can now be split into supporters of Mansoor or Yaqoob. In addition, the Islamic State is calling on all Taliban members to stop fighting and join them. If they refuse, IS is threatening them with death. Fighting for personal power, the Taliban's leaders are not responding to this issue. It should also be taken into account that with the publication of the death of Mullah Omar, many Taliban members may consider themselves freed from their oath to him, making them quite willing to accept a seemingly legitimate transfer of allegiance to the IS banner.

There have already been cases of militant training camps within Afghanistan submitting to the authority of the Islamic State, including immigrants from the countries of Central Asia. Functionaries from IS are taking over the lucrative drug trade from the Taliban. More and more people who are not ethnically Afghan are joining the transnational criminal syndicates involved in the production and transportation of drugs. One of the Islamic State supporters' current goals is to take control of the organized criminal groups that operate in a number of countries in the region.

It is clear that the leadership of the Islamic State has no plans to use their presence in Afghanistan to shore up the Taliban's fight with the central government. IS aspires to an independent role and does not intend to coordinate its actions with the Taliban, instead seeking to reshape it. In practice, this will mean a further escalation of the inter-Afghan conflict, with the involvement of a broader spectrum of warring parties.