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Kabul's Horrific Bomb Attack Reminds the World of the Afghan Conflict

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The explosion of a giant bomb in a sewage tanker close to the diplomatic quarter in Kabul is receiving much publicity because of the heavy loss of life and because so many foreign embassies were damaged. A BBC driver was killed and four BBC journalists were wounded by the blast.

But, aside from spectacular incidents where foreigners are involved, the Afghan war has largely dropped off media and diplomatic agendas since direct foreign combat involvement ended. This has happened even though, over the past two years, the conflict has been escalating with the Taliban gradually gaining ground and the Afghan affiliate of Isis, also known as Khorasan Province and which holds far less territory, losing several of its strongholds in recent months. The number of civilian casualties last year was 11,000 of whom 3,500 were killed according to the UN, the highest number since 2009. The severity of the fighting also forced half a million Afghans to flee their homes.

The Taliban denies that it is responsible for the latest bomb blast and it has not yet been claimed by Isis, though it appears likely that it was behind the attack. Isis's Khorasan Province has been under severe pressure this year from Afghan and US special forces in its strongholds in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan. It was here that the US dropped what it claimed was the largest conventional bomb ever on an Isis tunnel complex on 13 April, though this was reportedly not as effective as first claimed. The Isis leader in Afghanistan, Sheikh Abdul Hasib, was killed in the fighting.

It is a traditional tactic for Isis to respond to setbacks on the battlefield by suicide bombings targeting civilians in order to show that it is still a force to be feared. Isis has made devastating attacks in Ramadan in many countries as it did earlier this week in Baghdad. Isis specialises in urban terrorism directed at civilians to a unique degree. In March this year its gunman entered a military hospital in Kabul and killed more than 50 people.

The war in general in Afghanistan is close to a stalemate, though the Taliban has been making ground since international forces withdrew at the end of 2014. They control or contest areas inhabited by more than 40 per cent of the Afghan population, though the government of President Ashraf Ghani holds all the provincial capitals. US air strikes limit the ability of the Taliban to win strategic victories or capture and hold urban centres.

President Trump is considering sending a further 3,000 to 5,000 troops to bolster the 10,000 who are already there as a "counter-terrorism mission". It became clear during the past two years that the Afghan government could not survive without foreign assistance, much of it from the US. While President Obama tended to play down its growing military engagement in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Mr Trump plays up more air strikes or troop reinforcements as a sign of stronger US resolution under his leadership.

In practice, it has been unlikely over the past decade that the Taliban would lose so long as it had a strong core of indigenous support and the covert backing of Pakistan, where its forces could always seek sanctuary. Though aware of this, the US has always balked at a confrontation with Pakistan as a leading US ally in South Asia and a nuclear armed military power. It has likewise been unlikely that the Taliban would win because of sectarian and ethnic limitations to their support in Afghanistan and the financial and military backing of the US for the government in Kabul.