

### III. The end of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan

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The conclusion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan on 31 December 2014 marked the end of the longest and largest military operation in recent history.<sup>1</sup> ISAF was established in 2001 in the wake of a United States-led intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent removal from power of the Taliban regime, which had ruled the country since 1996. In the 13 years that followed, ISAF evolved from a small multilateral force, with the aim of securing Kabul, to a large operation led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), conducting security and counterinsurgency operations throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Another major focus was to support the Afghan authorities in developing indigenous military and police forces capable of providing security for its citizens. Altogether, 51 states contributed military personnel to ISAF, which at its height in 2011 comprised more than 130 000 troops operating from 800 bases across Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

NATO heads of state announced an exit strategy for ISAF at the NATO Summit in Lisbon in 2010. Together with their Afghan counterpart, they agreed on a preliminary timeline based on the gradual handover of security responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), aiming to complete the transition by the end of 2014. At the 2012 Chicago Summit, NATO formally decided that ISAF would conclude by this date, but committed to supporting the Afghan authorities beyond 2014 through a smaller follow-up mission. At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO leaders reaffirmed their intention to launch this mission, Resolute Support (RSM), on 1 January 2015—on condition that the Afghan Government would sign a new bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the USA and a new status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) with NATO.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ISAF has been included in the SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database since 2001, when the UN Security Council authorized it to contribute to stabilization and capacity-building efforts in Afghanistan. The SIPRI Yearbook analyses trends in peace operation deployments using data both including and excluding ISAF, due to its large impact on these trends and because it was not a conventional peace operation in terms of its involvement in combat and counterinsurgency.

<sup>2</sup> NATO assumed command of ISAF in Aug. 2003. NATO, 'ISAF's mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014)', [n.d.], <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_69366.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm)>.

<sup>3</sup> Stancati, M. and Hodge N., 'Afghanistan signs security pact with US, NATO', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 Sep. 2014. For information on ISAF deployments and troop contributions in 2014 and previous years, see section IV and the SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/pko>>.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, 'Lisbon Summit Declaration', 20 Nov. 2010, <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_68828.htm#afghanistan](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm#afghanistan)>, paras 3–4; NATO, 'Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan', Press Release (2012) 065, 21 May 2012, <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_)

*2014: A year of transition and uncertainty*

The signing of the BSA and SOFA was long overdue and was arguably the most anticipated event of the year. The outgoing Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, had refused to renew the existing agreements before the presidential elections in April, despite repeated warnings by the USA and NATO that they would not maintain troops in the country beyond 2014 without the appropriate legal frameworks.<sup>5</sup> The process was delayed even further when the first round of elections failed to produce a winner, and a second round in June led to a stalemate between the two remaining candidates—Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah—who both claimed victory amid allegations of widespread ballot fraud. While both candidates had every intention of signing the BSA and SOFA, the slow process of forming a new government forced the USA and NATO to consider the option of a complete withdrawal by the end of 2014 (the so-called zero option). Although a worst-case scenario, this prospect amplified already existing concerns about the security and stability of post-ISAF Afghanistan.

Following a diplomatic intervention by the USA and a compromise involving, among other things, a United Nations-sponsored recount of all eight million votes, Ghani and Abdullah eventually agreed to share power in a National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG signed the BSA and SOFA on 30 September, one day after its inauguration, finally providing NATO with the legal basis to deploy the RSM.<sup>6</sup> The UN Security Council endorsed the RSM in a resolution in December 2014.<sup>7</sup>

The electoral crisis, which lasted several months, had significant spill-over effects on security in Afghanistan. Taking advantage of Kabul's pre-occupation with the political situation and the uncertainty surrounding the continued presence of international forces in Afghanistan, the resurgent Taliban significantly expanded its offensive campaigns and inflicted more casualties on the ANSF during 2014 than in any previous year.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile the USA and NATO accelerated the redeployment of personnel and equipment from Afghanistan, at the same time as taking preparatory meas-

texts\_87595.htm>; and NATO, 'Wales Summit Declaration on Afghanistan', Press Release (2014) 121, 4 Sep. 2014, <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_112517.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112517.htm)>.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. 'Obama orders Pentagon to prepare for full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 25 Feb. 2014; and 'NATO to plan for all options in Afghanistan, including "zero option"', Reuters, 27 Feb. 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/27/us-afghanistan-nato-idUSBREAIQ12X20140227>>.

<sup>6</sup> Stancati and Hodge (note 3).

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2189, 12 Dec. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, D. and Stewart, P., 'Afghan casualties on battlefield at unsustainably high level: US general', Reuters, 5 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/05/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSKBN0IP2MM20141105>>; and Harper, J., 'US commander: Afghan casualties "not sustainable"', Stars and Stripes, 5 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.stripes.com/news/us-commander-afghan-casualties-not-sustainable-1.312364>>.

ures for the transition into the follow-up RSM.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the year, 37 military bases were either closed or handed over to the ANSF. ISAF continued to focus its efforts on training and advising the 350 000-strong ANSF, which assumed lead responsibility for security in all Afghan provinces in mid-2013 and led 99 per cent of all security operations in 2014. However, coalition forces did provide limited—yet critical—operational and tactical support to the ANSF in areas where Afghan capabilities remained underdeveloped, most notably in aviation (close air support and medical evacuation); intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); and logistics.<sup>10</sup>

*Beyond 2014: From ISAF to Resolute Support*

The RSM commenced operations on 1 January 2015, as planned. Unlike ISAF, it is explicitly not a combat mission. It was established to support the Afghan authorities as they carry full responsibility for the security of Afghanistan for the first time since 2001. The mission is mandated to ‘train, advise, and assist’ the Afghan Security Institutions (ASI) and the ANSF to further strengthen their capacities and capabilities to function as effective independent security providers. As the ANSF are already well equipped and trained, the RSM will concentrate on the ministerial, institutional and operational levels. In practice, this means that the RSM will support the ASI and the ANSF in enhancing their capacities in several functional areas, such as strategic and operational planning, force generation, intelligence, budgeting, anti-corruption, and strategic communication. In addition, some tactical advice will continue to be provided to Afghan Special Forces.<sup>11</sup>

Although the RSM is a non-combat mission, it is authorized to use force in self-defence. Given the dangerous environment in which it operates, NATO will continue to prioritize force protection in the RSM.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in early 2015 only 1200–1400 of all RSM personnel were estimated to be carrying out the RSM’s core tasks of training, advising and assisting the ASI

<sup>9</sup> At the end of 2014, ISAF still comprised approximately 13 000 troops, compared to 85 000 at the end of 2013 and 100 000 at the end of 2012. See SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/pko>>.

<sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, ‘Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan’, Oct. 2014, <[http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014_Report_Final.pdf)>; US Department of Defense, ‘Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Campbell via satellite in the Pentagon Briefing Room’, 2 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5512>>; and NATO, ‘The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2014’, 30 Jan. 2015, <[http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static.fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_01/20150130\\_SG\\_AnnualReport\\_2014\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static.fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_01/20150130_SG_AnnualReport_2014_en.pdf)>.

<sup>11</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Fact sheet: Wales Summit—NATO’s changing role in Afghanistan’, 4 Sep. 2014, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/04/fact-sheet-wales-summit-nato-s-changing-role-afghanistan>>.

<sup>12</sup> US Senate, ‘Statement of General John F. Campbell, USA, Commander, US Forces—Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the situation in Afghanistan’, 12 Feb. 2014, <<http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Campbell02-12-15.pdf>>.

and the ANSF.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, NATO has pledged to continue providing robust air support to the ANSF until the Afghan Air Force is fully functional. The ANSF's lack of aviation capability is a significant shortcoming and they therefore remain reliant on the USA and NATO in critical areas such as close air support, ISR, and medical and casualty evacuation.<sup>14</sup>

The RSM comprises approximately 13 000 troops.<sup>15</sup> As was the case with ISAF, the RSM depends heavily on US contributions. In May 2014, US President Barack Obama announced his intention to maintain 9800 US troops in Afghanistan after 2014.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the year, the USA increased the number of authorized troops to 10 800 to compensate for NATO's inability to generate sufficient personnel contributions for the RSM. Whereas the USA had counted on its allies and partners in NATO to provide up to 4000 forces, the late signing of SOFA prevented certain countries from fulfilling their troop commitments to the RSM at short notice. By maintaining an additional 1000 troops in Afghanistan, the USA averted the early closure of key bases (e.g. the Kandahar airfield) due to personnel shortfalls.<sup>17</sup>

Although NATO has not officially set an end date for the RSM, the USA has already announced its intention to reduce its military footprint in Afghanistan to an ordinary embassy presence by the end of 2016. Half of all US troops are scheduled to redeploy from Afghanistan by the end of 2015, after which the USA plans to retain 5500 troops in Kabul and on its military base at Bagram airfield. The remaining US troops are set to withdraw by the end of 2016.<sup>18</sup> It is expected that other RSM states will follow suit and consolidate their military presence in the Kabul area. This would mean that

<sup>13</sup> Münch, P., 'Resolute Support light', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 Jan. 2015, <[https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/20150112-PMuench-Resolute\\_Support\\_Light.pdf](https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/20150112-PMuench-Resolute_Support_Light.pdf)>.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, J., 'NATO promises Afghans air support after 2014 as it shuts key base', *Stars and Stripes*, 26 Oct. 2014, <<http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/nato-promises-afghans-air-support-after-2014-as-it-shuts-key-base-1.310559>>.

<sup>15</sup> As of 26 Feb. 2015, the RSM comprised 13 195 troops, of which 6839 were from the USA. Georgia (885), Germany (850), Romania (650), Italy (500), Turkey (500), the UK (470) and Australia (400) all contributed at least 400 troops. NATO, 'Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key facts and figures', 26 Feb. 2015, <[http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_02/20150227\\_1502-RSM-Placemat.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_02/20150227_1502-RSM-Placemat.pdf)>.

<sup>16</sup> Approximately 1000 US Special Forces in Afghanistan are not part of the RSM but form a parallel US counterterrorism mission—Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS). OFS is a follow-up mission from Operation Enduring Freedom, which also closed at the end of 2014. The mission of OFS is to conduct counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. In Nov. 2014 President Obama partly reversed the decision to limit US combat operations in Afghanistan to targeting al-Qaeda and included the possibility of US forces supporting the ANSF in offensive operations against the Taliban during 2015 if necessary. See White House (note 11); US Department of Defense, 'Statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom's Sentinel', News Release no. NR-631-14, 28 Dec. 2014, <<http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=17091>>; and Mazzetti, M. and Schmitt, E., 'In a shift, Obama extends US role in Afghan combat', *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed, A., '1000 extra US soldiers will remain in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 6 Dec. 2014.

<sup>18</sup> White House (note 11).

the RSM would comprise approximately 8000 troops operating from Kabul during 2016.<sup>19</sup>

The withdrawal of US troops by the end of 2016 is in line with President Obama's promise to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq before leaving office in 2017. However, pressure has been mounting from both inside and outside the USA to allow for a more flexible drawdown, conditional on the security situation on the ground. Recalling the rise of the Islamic State following the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011, critics of Obama's rigid schedule are concerned that a premature departure from Afghanistan may have similar consequences. President Ghani has already called on the US Government to re-examine its timeline for withdrawing US forces, citing their critical role in supporting the ANSF to prevail in their fight against insurgents. At present, the plan to end the US military mission remains intact, but the USA does seem prepared to decrease the pace of withdrawal in accordance with the recommendations of its military command in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ryan, M., 'In Afghanistan, a tight timeline for new US-led training and support mission', *Washington Post*, 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan, M., 'White House weighs adjusting Afghan exit plan to slow withdrawal of troops', *Washington Post*, 10 Feb. 2015.