

## Afghan Military Crisis is more acute than a car bomb

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Ahmed Rashid

Soldiers in position during the attack on parliament in Kabul © Getty Images

The devastating suicide attack on the Afghan parliament in central Kabul on Monday morning that killed at least six attackers and several security officers is more than just a symbol of the growing loss of control by the government of President Ashraf Ghani. It is a reflection of an ever-deepening political and military crisis that has erupted just less than a year after most Nato forces left the country.

Across Afghanistan — in the far north on the borders with Central Asia and in the deep south on the borders with Iran and Pakistan — the Taliban are making dramatic military gains and for the moment appear unstoppable. With the west having taken its eye off the Afghan ball, the game in the wider panorama of Central Asia is heating up as the Taliban, al-Qaeda and a dozen Pakistani, Chinese and Central Asian groups try to expand the war into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Despite the massive security and check points in the Darul Aman district where many government offices and embassies are situated, a car packed with explosives blew up outside the gates of the parliament, after which six Taliban gunmen fought a two-hour gun battle with security guards before they were killed. Inside a building close to the chamber at least 19 lawmakers were injured. The Taliban later said that their aim was specific — to disrupt the parliamentary hearing for the appointment of the new defence minister Masoom Stanakzai.

Ironically, Mr Stanakzai has spent the past three years quietly mediating with the Taliban on behalf of the Kabul government and he is considered by western diplomats as the main advocate for peace talks. The attack is most likely to be the work of the deadly Haqqani group, which is loyal to the Taliban and al-Qaeda and has vowed to continue fighting until all foreign forces leave Afghanistan — there are still some 13,000 Nato and US trainers in the country. However, the military crisis is more acute than a car bomb. Recently, senior Tajik intelligence officials in Tajikistan told me that there were up to 5,000 militants trying to capture northern Afghanistan so they could force an entry into Central Asia. The Taliban have surrounded Kunduz, an important northern provincial capital, and captured two outlying districts in the province. Heavy fighting is reported just two miles from the centre of Kunduz. Other Central Asian militants are concentrated in the north-eastern province of Badakhshan, a vast mountainous but strategic region bordering China, Tajikistan and Pakistan.

To the south, in the province of Helmand, where much of the heaviest fighting between the Taliban and US and British forces took place a few years ago, the Taliban have captured two district headquarters, including the crucial Musa Qala district on June 18. The neighbouring Uruzghan province is virtually lost to the government. Nato diplomats told me in Dushanbe recently that the 60 per cent increase in Afghan soldiers killed or wounded in the first four months of this year compared with the same period last year is unsustainable in the long term. More than 2,300 Afghan security personnel have been killed in 2015; the UN reports that in the same period nearly [1,000 civilians have been killed](#) and another 2,000 wounded.

Yet, at the same time, the Taliban are also involved in informal talks with government representatives. So far this year meetings have been held between the two sides in Dubai, Qatar, Norway and China, but formal talks have yet to take place. This is a clear reflection of a major split within the movement — a hardline faction wants to continue fighting and seize power while a more moderate faction wants to talk. The hardline faction appears to be increasingly influenced by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which the moderate [Taliban high command have denounced](#) for interfering in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, which had promised to deliver the Taliban for talks with the government, has failed to come up with the goods. Neither has Islamabad curtailed the flow of logistics to the Taliban from Pakistan, where the Taliban leadership is entirely based. In the light of these challenges, the government appears paralysed. Ten months after coming to power in Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani and his chief executive Abdullah Abdullah have still not formed a full cabinet or been able to halt the economic slide and capital flight out of the country. Now there is a full-blown political crisis, as parliament has completed its term but there is [no sign of agreement on holding any parliamentary elections](#). There is no doubt that President Barack Obama withdrew US forces far too precipitously last year, in a timetable determined by his desires rather than the realities on the ground. The Afghan army and political actors were not ready to take charge nor had the institutions of democracy been stabilised. The mistakes — similar to those made in Iraq — have left the country teetering on the edge. The big powers need to influence Pakistan to help curb the levels of violence and bring the Taliban into peace talks. The problem so far is that the US and Nato have failed to take the threats emanating out of Afghanistan seriously enough.

The End.