

Keep calm but stay committed in Afghanistan

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[Security and Conflict](#)

A complex suicide attack in Kabul this week left at least 28 dead and more than 300 wounded. As the Taliban claimed its responsibility, the attack seems to mark the start of the annual spring offensive of the various insurgent groups, announced officially on the 12th of April. The truth is, however, that since the end of 2013, the [fighting in Afghanistan](#) has not really seen a break over the winter months. The main reason



is the [end](#) of the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, finalized in December 2014, which has put an end to most combat activities of foreign troops in the country. In fact, ever since 2011, the narrative has been clear: The ‘West’ is on its way out of Afghanistan. This has created an environment for insurgent groups in which it is logical and tactically sound to test the strength of the Afghan security forces and the stability of the government.

Should we be worried about this latest attack? Yes, it not only shows that insurgent groups are still able to strike in the heart of Kabul, but it seems to confirm that the Taliban is increasingly also engaged in [urban warfare](#), challenging the authority of the Afghan government in urban centers. But we should be far more worried about the [ongoing fighting](#) in Helmand province, where the Taliban is controlling several districts, and the ongoing fighting in Kunduz, reminiscent of the tragic temporary loss of the city to the Taliban in September 2015.

Does this fighting represent a test of the very [survival of Afghanistan](#)? No, but it is part of a process (ironically, this time really ‘Afghan-led’) in which the power configuration will be reestablished following the withdrawal of international forces. The outcome of this process is very important as it will determine the parameters of the peace process and the shape of both the future government and the political system. While the National Unity Government has so far been unable to engage in serious peace talks with the Taliban, the government of president Ghani should still be considered as the [best bet](#) for political stability in Afghanistan.

What does that mean for the international community? There is only one possible answer here: in the face of growing insecurity, slow economic growth, enduring corruption and political instability, the international community needs to re-engage firmly with Afghanistan, recommitting to a serious long-term partnership that goes beyond the political rhetoric of international conferences such as the [London Conference on Afghanistan](#) in December 2014.

In financial, political, but also military terms, substantial international support is needed for many years to come. Reversing our disengagement means going beyond paying the salaries of

the afghan security forces or collaborating within an enhanced [NATO-Afghanistan Enduring Partnership](#). It should entail constructive support for a political solution to the ongoing conflict as well as structural assistance to the Afghan government that goes beyond the ad hoc and quick-fix attitude of the international community, exemplified in John Kerry's [recent visit](#) to Afghanistan.

We should finally realize that there can be no real exit strategy as long as the Afghan government requests and requires support. But while the writing has been on the wall for many years, the international community has, so far, not shown the willingness to reverse its disengagement into structural long-term commitment. The remaining question, then, is how many more Afghan refugees, complex suicide attacks, lost districts and civilian casualties are needed to open our eyes.