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Déjà vu

Afghanistan prepares for another withdrawal

Twenty-two years after the withdrawal of the Soviets, Afghanistan is steeling itself for the exit of US troops by 2014. Thomas H Johnson explains how ethnic and political divides, coupled with weak institutions, provide seeds for a return to a heightened conflict after troops leave.

KEY POINTS

- Ten years after US troops entered Afghanistan, a set timetable is in place for a withdrawal of international troops by 2014.
- The political and social fragmentation emanating from Afghanistan's contemporary conflicts remain a key challenge in rebuilding a cohesive and legitimate Afghan regime.
- De facto secession of swathes of territory to the Taliban, or an agreement of power sharing between the government and the Taliban, could instigate ethnic and factional rivals in the north to resist the Kabul regime.

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The 10-year anniversary of the arrival of US troops in Afghanistan in October 2001 has focused international attention on the prospects for stability in the country following the scheduled withdrawal of US and NATO forces by 2014. This timetable invites comparisons with the Soviet occupation (1979-1989) and subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan, after which the country entered a prolonged political crisis and civil conflict. While there are major differences between the US and Soviet experiences, and the post-withdrawal prospects of both, there is a high risk that, as in 1989, the withdrawal of foreign forces could see an upsurge in insurgent attacks and a steady deterioration towards major civil conflict.

In the context of Afghanistan's modern history, two occupying forces have attempted to solidify control and bolster feeble regimes – the Soviet Union and the US-NATO alliance, which remains ongoing. Afghanistan's severe social, political and economic upheavals since 1973 have had a formative impact on nearly two generations of Afghans and left a damag-

ing scar on society and its government institutions. The United States has endured a commitment to stabilising Afghanistan longer than the Soviet experience but, with increasingly little time to act, the US is pursuing several contentious strategies that bear the hallmarks of floundering Soviet approaches attempted 20 years earlier.

As the US effort in Afghanistan enters its final stage, shifting strategies such as military efforts that focus on key population centres, reconciliation and reintegration of insurgents, creating local defence and militia units to defend the countryside, and the 'Afghanisation' of the war effort have taken precedence in the lead-up to the expected withdrawal of US and Western forces starting in 2012. By 2014, the US presence in Afghanistan will be restricted to mentoring and advising national troops, not combat, according to the plans implemented by US President Barack Obama in 2011.

Repeating the past

Clearly, the US and NATO attempt to support a fledgling regime in Afghanistan bears similar hallmarks to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, when an unpopular Afghan Communist regime held onto its de facto grip on power between 1978 and 1992. When the Soviet army withdrew the last of its forces on 15 February 1989, most analysts predicted an imminent collapse of the weakening Communist regime led by Mohammad Najibullah. However, the acute lack of political and military cohesion among the various resistance fronts battling the Communist Afghan government undermined any serious effort towards the formation of an alternative to the widely disliked Najibullah regime. Moreover, the Soviet Union supplied the Afghan regime with billions of dollars' worth of arms as the Soviets were withdrawing, which helped to stem the tide of the mujahideen (various loosely aligned Afghan opposition groups), at least temporarily.



US Marines carry a wounded Afghan civilian to a US Army helicopter after he was wounded in a suicide attack in the Helmand province, southern Afghanistan, on 8 September.

The current Afghan political situation resembles the unpopular Najibullah regime in many ways: an often corrupt and mistrusted cabal of powerbrokers that is viewed as illegitimate by parts of the country, a regime dominated by foreign influence, and one whose authority rarely penetrates into the countryside, where an estimated 80% of the population resides. Like the Soviets, the US has announced that on top of the hundreds of billions of aid and support it has already spent in Afghanistan, over the next eight months Afghanistan will receive an additional USD2.7 billion in arms shipments that have been referred to as the “iron mountain” by NATO security analysts. This represents the largest transfer of military equipment by the US or NATO in the past eight years of conflict in Afghanistan.

In essence, the US effort in Afghanistan represents a paradox: propping up and reconstituting an increasingly unpopular regime, while attempting to militarily defeat a kaleidoscope of insurgent groups, a large portion of whom are local guerrillas radicalised by the perceived or actual abuses inflicted on them and their communities by the very regime the US is trying to support. To help mitigate this divide, US efforts to ‘Afghanise’ the war effort – by partnering with Afghan security personnel on both kinetic military operations and simple presence patrols and aid dispersal operations – are the cornerstone of the transition of security responsibilities from US/NATO forces to the Afghan government, and the prelude to withdrawal. This mirrors the Soviet efforts in the late 1980s to withdraw its forces and attempt to turn the war over to the Afghan government.

The success of US policies of ‘Afghanisation’ depends on the strength and effectiveness of the Afghan security forces and their ability to maintain regime continuity and stability against a robust Afghan insurgency and jihad. Moreover, the Afghan National Army (ANA) faces a tremendous challenge in terms of soldier retention, as well as desertion. A 2011 NATO study estimated that at least one in seven Afghan soldiers deserted during the first six months of 2011. Between January and June 2011, 24,590 soldiers deserted, compared to the same period in 2010, when 11,432 did so. In June alone, more than 5,000 soldiers deserted, nearly 3% of the 170,000 soldier force. While some may desert specifically to join the insurgency, a host of other reasons have driven these desertions, including financial issues, fear of facing combat and ethnic tensions within the military.

In addition to the retention problems faced

by the ANA in fielding an adequate force, the ANA is also confronted by a wide variety of additional personnel problems, ranging from illiteracy, drug use and medical problems, to a tremendous dependency on foreign forces for mission effectiveness. The ANA’s inadequate combat capabilities and apparent lack of dedication are extremely significant problems. This was illustrated by the so-called Battle of Kamdesh (Camp Keating) on 3 October 2009, near the town of Kamdesh, Nuristan. According to media reports, the ANA soldiers at Combat Outpost (COP) Keating quickly broke and ran or hid under blankets in the face of a Taliban attack so intense that the outpost was essentially overrun, with eight US soldiers killed and 22 wounded. Although efforts have been made to improve training since this point, the ANA still remains over-dependent on the US and ISAF forces to provide guidance and material support for security efforts.

The US Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), established by the US Congress to provide in-

dependent reporting and audits concerning US Afghanistan policy and missions, released a report in June 2010 that exposed significant issues concerning the ANA. Specifically, SIGAR found that “the measurements used in the assessment system [of the Afghanistan Nation Security Forces: ANSF] overstated the capabilities of the ANSF, particularly for top-rated army and police units that did not always maintain the ability to conduct independent operations”. SIGAR’s claim was substantiated in August 2010, when 300 personnel from the First Brigade, 201st Army Corps, were sent into the village of Bad Pakh, in Laghman province, in an attack against the Taliban that was entirely unco-ordinated with US or NATO forces. Although touted as among the best units in the ANA, this unit suffered heavy casualties and required significant NATO assistance for withdrawal. This event, the Battle of Kamdesh and many others ultimately raise the question as to whether or not the Afghans will be able maintain security and stability once US and international forces depart.

from Parwan province, a strategic area just north of Kabul, marking the first of 10,000 US troops expected to be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2011. Another 13,000 US troops will leave by the end of 2012, and the Afghan government will be solely responsible for the country’s national security by 2014. July 2011 also marked the completion of the first phase of the security transition from NATO to the ANSF. By late July, the Afghan government controlled security for the cities of Lashkar Gah in the south, Herat in the west, Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, Mihtarlam in the east, and the relatively stable provinces of Bamiyan, Panjshir and Kabul. Within two months, security incidents had steadily increased in Lashkar Gah, Bamiyan, Kabul, and Mihtarlam. Local engineers in Bamiyan were reported by media as saying that the surge in attacks had severely disrupted security for the Ashpusht mine by the first week of September; the mine is a key economic source for hundreds of local residents who work there. Other insurgent attacks left scores of Afghan police in Bamiyan dead or wounded since the security transfer, with the district of Tala wa Barfak nearly succumbing to insurgent control.

Like the Soviet Union, which eventually cut off essential aid and military supplies to the Afghan government in 1991, the US is likely to substantially decrease its financial commitment to the Afghan government and its armed services after 2014, with some SIGAR estimates indicating that less than USD3 billion will be allocated in support of Afghan defence forces. However, in the meantime, the US is ramping up its financial and material support in preparation for the expected drawdown after 2012.

Ultimately, the implications of a US and NATO withdrawal may be more damaging to Afghanistan in economic rather than strategic terms. According to the World Bank, 97% of Afghanistan’s approximate USD28 billion gross domestic product (GDP) is directly related to foreign military and development aid and the in-country spending of foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan. Only one-third of the Afghan government’s USD4.5 billion budget comes from internal revenues. The economic dependence that Afghanistan has developed over the course of the war on foreign sources may be its major weakness. As yet, there appear to be no alternative sources of funding for the USD6 billion to USD8 billion per year required to maintain its planned 379,000-man security force.

Starting in September 2011, Afghanistan is

‘Afghanistan remains deeply ethnically fragmented and this fragmentation presents significant challenges’

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Transition of security

On 15 July 2011, the US withdrew 650 soldiers



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Soldiers show their joy as the Soviet army leaves Afghanistan in February 1989, near the border of Soviet Uzbekistan, after a 10-year war. In the present situation, there is a high risk that, as in 1989, the withdrawal of foreign forces could see an upsurge in insurgent attacks and a steady deterioration towards civil conflict.

set to receive what NATO war planners have termed the “iron mountain”, a nearly USD2.7 billion allotment of advanced war material. The shipment will consist of 22,000 vehicles, 44 aircraft and helicopters, 40,000 additional weapons, and tens of thousands of radios and other communications equipment. The weapons shipment, which is expected to be completed by March 2012, represents the largest delivery of modern weaponry in recent Afghan history. “In the next eight months, we are getting more equipment than we have got in the past eight years,” Ashraf Ghani, a top adviser in the Hamid Karzai administration and overseer of the security transition, told press in August 2011: “This time it is not all discarded equipment,” he added, “it is brand new.”

Despite the increase in modern weaponry and equipment, deeply entrenched ethnic and political divides have hampered the growth and organisational capacity of the Afghan armed forces. These dynamics represent a long-term obstacle preventing Afghanistan from becoming a country able to defend itself from external threats or preventing a domestic political and security implosion. The Soviet-Afghan conflict, and the ensuing civil war period following the collapse of the Communist Afghan regime in 1992 helped polarise the

conflict based partially on ethnic composition and by region, and by extension, along political lines as well. The rise of the Taliban in 1994, and their consolidation of most of the country by 1996, prompted a forced unification among anti-Taliban military factions throughout most of the ethnically diverse northern provinces.

These militia fronts and political factions collectively formed the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UIF), commonly referred to as the Northern Alliance. Following the destruction of the Taliban regime in November 2001, a cadre of UIF commanders and specifically those aligned with Shura-e Nazar, the military council formed by military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in 1984, were given supremacy over the Afghan interim administration. This initial level of influence would spill over into the formal creation of Afghan government ministries, including tremendous influence over the Ministry of Defence and its intelligence organs. Field Marshal Mohammed Qasim Fahim, Karzai’s first Minister of Defence, promoted his Panjshiri Tajik allies into officer positions in the ANA, and later among the provincial governments in the north. Tajik dominance of the security structure became clear as 90 of the first 100 generals appointed to the new army were from the

Tajik-dominated Panjshir Valley, which, according to the non-governmental organisation International Crisis Group in 2010, helped fan the flames of ethnic, regional and political factionalism within the armed forces. While more Pashtuns have joined the officer corps since Rahim Wardak, an ethnic Pashtun, became Minister of Defence in December 2004, the Tajiks still have officer numbers that do not reflect national population demographics, at around 40% to 50% of total officers.

The US, NATO and Kabul have struggled to entice southern Pashtuns to join the ANSF. A study by the *The New York Times* in September 2011 showed that the number of southern Pashtuns in the Afghan National Army is minuscule, reflecting both fear of and sympathy for the insurgents among the southern Afghan population. According to *The New York Times*, the number of southern Pashtun Afghan army recruits declined by 30% between January and June, in comparison with the same period in 2010. The predominantly Pashtun provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Oruzgan, Zabul, Paktika and Ghazni that make up 17% of Afghanistan’s total population have only contributed 1.5% of the recruits to the Afghan army since 2009. This does not bode well for the stability or integrity of the Kabul government, serving



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Afghan men protest against the United States in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in March. The success of US policies of 'Afghanisation' depends on the strength and effectiveness of the Afghan security forces.

instead to confirm suspicions of pro-Tajik bias on the part of the central administration.

The legacy of these ethnic and political divides will not only have implications for organisational cohesion among Afghanistan's national armed forces, but will also impact on the implementation of the national reconciliation and reintegration efforts launched by the Afghan government and financially supported by the international community. Ethnic fragmentation is also evidenced in and has tremendous implications for the electoral politics of Afghanistan, where repeated elections have demonstrated that Afghan voters cast their ballots according to their ethno-linguistic affinities.

Reconciliation and reintegration

Since 2008, the US and the Afghan government have sporadically attempted to engage in talks with major insurgent factions including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and Hezb-i-Islami, regarding political settlements or de-escalation initiatives. Many of these pre-conditional meetings have occurred in third countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Maldives, the United Arab Emirates and, according to international press reports, Germany during mid-2011. Publicly, the Afghan Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, have denied engaging in any such dialogue with the West. However, the release of a message purportedly issued by Mullah Omar to mark the end of Ramadan in September 2011 implied that some discussion about prisoner exchanges was taking place, although not dialogue for a peace process.

Other groups, such as the Haqqani Network, have issued only the occasional denial of engaging in political discussions, although some Pakistani intelligence personnel have indicated publicly that they are willing to represent the Haqqani faction in talks with the Afghan government. The Hezb-i-Islami faction, led by the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, represents the most responsive group to pre-negotiations so far, with official representatives holding offices in Europe (Norway) and even the US.

Although various demobilisation, disarmament and reconciliation programmes have been active in Afghanistan since May 2003, the Peace Through Strength (PTS), or Takhim-e-Sohl, reintegration initiative established in May 2005 initially emerged as the most promising, although it quickly became hampered by the usual accusations of mismanagement, lack of resources, corruption and failed promises. The London conference held in January 2009 sought to mitigate these shortfalls by earmarking an estimated USD141 million to help reinvigorate the faltering PTS programme by folding it and smaller initiatives into a more streamlined and better funded Afghan National Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). Since the influx of financial resources, NATO had registered nearly 1,700 former fighters as of July 2011, including a few senior Taliban commanders such as Maulavi Azizullah Agha from Kandahar. The Afghan government, according to NATO, is in talks with between 40 and 50 locally armed groups that represent a further 2,000 fighters seeking to reintegrate.

NATO's initiatives seek to mimic a similar national reconciliation programme launched

by the Communist Najibullah regime in 1987. Although the national resistance facing the Communist regime during the Soviet occupation was far greater, Najibullah expressed his confidence in a meeting held in April 1988 that out of the 270,000 'counter-revolutionaries' threatening the state, around one-third were communicating with the government, around 50,000 were deemed irreconcilables, and the remaining rebels maintained a 'wait-and-see' position. By contrast, the two reconciliation programmes hosted by the contemporary Karzai regime have probably reconciled fewer than 5,000 potential insurgents and criminals.

Afghanistan's diverse society and traditional ethnic and tribal rivalries will continue to complicate the efforts to reintegrate insurgents and divide public support for such efforts, despite the creation of a High Peace Council tasked with overseeing and directing overtures to insurgent fronts. The fragmentation of many Afghan communities and deep historical and political grievances has proven problematic in the past and these patterns appear set to continue, with the relatively low level of uptake for the reconciliation programmes illustrating these problems.

Yet at the same time, the ongoing strength of the Taliban and its apparent ability to maintain recruitment levels has resulted in the emergence of groups, often from ethnic minorities, designed to fight against a Taliban empowered either by a security vacuum following the US withdrawal or an increase in political legitimacy from negotiations. For instance, media reports of former UIF commanders and ethnic Hazara fronts rearming themselves are prevalent since overtures to the Taliban first surfaced in 2009. Despite the UN's efforts to disarm illegally formed groups during the first part of the past decade, when 94,262 small-arms and 12,248 heavy weapons were collected, fewer than half these armaments were destroyed; many went to the reconstituted army and police forces where the management and documentation of these arms was non-existent.

The ability for non-state actors to arm themselves in Afghanistan is astoundingly robust, and criminal smuggling networks that excel at weapons and explosives trafficking remain active throughout all of Afghanistan, giving credence to fears that any future civil conflict in Afghanistan could easily echo the dark period of Afghanistan's civil war in the early 1990s that killed an estimated 55,000 Afghans in Kabul alone. One of the most influential opposition blocs to negotiate with the Taliban is led by Amarullah Saleh, the former Afghan National Directorate for Security intelligence chief, who said in an August 2011 interview with CNN that if the Taliban were permitted to return as a "Hizbullah-like entity," then he

and his anti-Taliban constituency must “rise up” against them (the government and the Taliban).

Future trends

Following the withdrawal of US and international forces from Afghanistan, beginning in 2012 and continuing steadily towards 2014, Afghan political and security conditions will remain vulnerable to the litany of threats and challenges currently plaguing the country. Despite ongoing reconciliation and negotiation efforts, these are likely to make an appreciable impact on the security situation. The Taliban and other Afghan insurgents may view the announced withdrawal of international forces by 2014 as an opportunity to step up their attacks and prepare to expand their presence post-2014. With the prospect of a vastly reduced security presence from 2014, there is little incentive for the insurgents to engage in genuine negotiation.

Acute divisions arising from the past decade of power grabs, corruption and graft, as well as the engrained nepotism and cronyism based on a complex relationship of tribal affiliation, ethnicity, ideology and factional loyalties, has already deeply divided any remaining thread of Afghanistan's social cohesion. The experiments by international forces with locally based defence militias could either serve as a bulwark against increased insurgent attacks or, more likely, encourage a deterioration into renewed social conflict in an environment of weakening state control. A weak national armed services infrastructure, which will be fully responsible for Afghanistan's national security in 2014, is likely to crumble amid an emboldened union of insurgent forces supported by regional powers such as Pakistan and Iran. Mass desertions from the Afghan army and polarised ethnic-based militias will compound the problem, further fragmenting the country.

In short, US and international withdrawal could serve as the catalyst for the multitude of anti-government forces to come into conflict with each other, while continuing to resist the Afghan state following the loss of a unifying enemy: foreign forces. Propelled by clandestine armed support from neighbouring sponsors, the Arab Gulf and transnational organised crime syndicates, the fragmented factions could rapidly undermine what stability has been achieved during the past 10 years. Despite a veneer of stability in some, mainly urban areas, many of the dynamics that underpinned the conflicts of the past 40 years remain strongly entrenched. As such, the withdrawal of international forces in 2014 could herald a return to the broad-ranging type of civil conflict that took hold in Afghanistan as the post-



US President Barack Obama, left, and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai, right, walk off stage following their joint news conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington in 2010.

Soviet Najibullah regime came under increasing pressure.

Despite the international withdrawal, there is unlikely to be the same kind of financial and military abandonment of the country that took place following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The US and other international actors will remain engaged, albeit at a much lower level than between 2001 and 2014, and signs of a major deterioration in the security situation would spark international concern. This could potentially spark a boost in funding, training and advisory initiatives, although any thought of returning international troops to Afghanistan would be highly politically sensitive.

Conclusion

Even after 10 years, the conflict in Afghanistan is by no means over. On the contrary, deep-rooted ethnic and political divides, coupled with still weak political and security institutions, hold all the seeds for a return to the heightened conflict that characterised much of the decade before 2001.

The level of social and political fragmentation in Afghanistan initially assisted the US-led military coalition's efforts in dismantling the Taliban regime and its many franchised components, but has since proved to be a substantial obstacle in rebuilding and restructuring a functioning national army. As yet, there do not appear to be sustained efforts to reverse this trend and counter negative perceptions of the security forces, creating the potential for a fragmentation of the notionally unified struc-

ture into potentially combative factions.

Afghanistan remains deeply ethnically fragmented and this fragmentation presents significant challenges for the development of cohesive and legitimate governmental institutions. Over the past 100 years, national politics have not been of much concern to the ordinary Afghan, who made decreasing the state's influence at a local level the major priority. As such, there is little entrenched confidence in the necessity for or durability of a centralised Kabul government. This will undermine ongoing efforts to forge a unified country and continue to strengthen locally based insurgent groups. Given these factors, the post-2014 environment is likely to see a drift away from the more centralised approach, bringing with it the possibility of renewed conflict and political unrest. ■

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