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BEATING A RETREAT

Prospects for the Transition Process in Afghanistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US and its allies in NATO are now beating a retreat from Afghanistan. Although there are plans for a continuing US-led counterterrorism strategy in the region, the phased transfer of full responsibility for security, governance and development to the Afghan government, its forces and people is underway. But after one year of a transition process that started in 2011, and will officially be completed by the end of 2014, concerns are mounting over the formidable challenges facing the transition and whether it will succeed in delivering its objective: a self-sustaining Afghan state.

The intervention by the US-led coalition in Afghanistan has been shaped by the fact that it was based on two related agendas: to counter terrorism and to build a viable state to prevent Afghanistan again becoming a haven for Al Qaeda and its associates. These agendas have never been fully reconciled and have often acted at cross purposes. Despite claims by some Western diplomats that the international engagement in Afghanistan has been over-ambitious in scope, in reality the state-building process was never given the fighting chance it needed to succeed and that the majority of Afghans, wanting stability and development, had expected and hoped for.

The intervention veered from 'too little too late' in its crucial early years, to one of 'too much too late'. This peaked in 2010 with the temporary commitment of additional US military and financial resources to enable an intensified counterinsurgency (COIN) military campaign that prominent figures in the US military had argued would avert a highly damaging defeat while saving Afghanistan from itself. These efforts, however, still failed to tackle the causes underlying the country's deepening problems.

Growing opposition within key NATO member states to a continuing military engagement in Afghanistan, donor fatigue and the global financial crisis are critical factors informing the statements by Western diplomats that now stress the limits of what the international community will guarantee in Afghanistan. The transition strategy is presented by them as a realistic and responsible one, on the basis that by 2015 the Afghan government and security forces will be in a position to take responsibility for security, governance and development at levels that are 'good enough' to ensure reasonably positive prospects for stability.

However, to succeed in reaching its objective, the transition process cannot be divorced from actual conditions on the ground with respect to security, governance and development. Implementation of the transition without these conditions being sufficiently in place, in combination with the brevity of a transition timeline that is likely to be accelerated further, increases the risk of the Afghan state's collapse and with it, the prospect of

strategic failure for NATO. In the rush to get out of the quagmire that Afghanistan has become, the US and other NATO member states may be preparing the ground for more instability there, rather than less.

The predicament now facing the US and its NATO allies is that, while weighing the costs of failure in Afghanistan that would have profound effects on the region and beyond, political pressure is mounting domestically for a swifter exit. Increasing Afghan hostility to the international military presence poses a further dilemma, decreasing NATO's room for manoeuvre over the option of extending the transition timeline. The violent Afghan response in February 2012 to the discovery that copies of the Quran had been incinerated on a US military base and the massacre of 17 Afghan civilians, allegedly by one US soldier in March 2012, have further strengthened perceptions among some Western policy-makers that the international military exit from Afghanistan should be expedited.

The ten-year 'Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement' (SPA) signed by the US and Afghan Presidents on May 1 this year lacks clear guarantees or consequences should the commitments made therein not be met. The Agreement is only a first step in a further twelve month long negotiating process between the two governments on the exact nature of the Afghan/US military relationship. This is likely to prove an even more fraught process than reaching the SPA, with key aspects, such as the question of the legal immunity of US forces in Afghanistan after the end of 2014, to be decided.

NATO/ISAF efforts are focused on the mainly military process that is governing the phased security transition and on setting in place the security conditions for a self-sustaining Afghan state. The main strands of its transition strategy are to reduce the insurgent threat in order to improve security and theoretically enable the Afghan government to expand governance and service delivery throughout the country. But plans underway to do this, through an intensified counterinsurgency campaign and by building up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) numbers and capabilities, are increasingly viewed as vulnerable at best and transient at worst.

Though Afghanistan's best chance of avoiding anarchy following the withdrawal of international forces is widely recognised to depend on the ANSF's effectiveness, it still remains unclear how the funding shortfall faced by the Afghan government in resourcing its scaled-up security forces will be bridged, beyond the short-term. The imminent reduction of Afghan forces, possibly by as much as one-third, is being actively discussed within NATO, undermining the credibility of the transition strategy.

Prospects for an 'irreversible' transition also depend on international support for the Afghan security forces following the transition, especially through the commitment by NATO member states of sufficient numbers of mentors and trainers to cushion the transition's effects and to build ANSF capacity in light of the challenges ahead. It is unclear where these additional numbers of mentors/trainers will come from. The increase in the first three months of 2012 in 'green on blue' incidents has brought the basis of mutual trust, on which this key component supporting the transition strategy depends, into question.

Indications now point strongly towards the US and other NATO member states bringing the security transition process forward by completing the transfer of lead security to Afghan security forces by mid-2013. This would mean that NATO's combat role in Afghanistan will end in 2012 facilitating the option of an accelerated withdrawal of international military forces. Should this happen, Afghan security forces will take tactical control in countering the insurgency even sooner than expected, despite existing doubts about their state of preparedness to do so even by the end of 2014. Given the fact of the transition going ahead, this could engender positive outcomes if the ANSF can swiftly improve its capabilities through the act of taking command and provided that some level of international military presence will be available for support up to the end of 2014. However, well-founded concerns regarding the absence of security sector reform, ethnic and factional divisions endemic in the security forces and its relevant ministries, as well as corruption and the overall political context in Afghanistan militate against such improvements.

In essence, the viability of the Afghan state is critically challenged from within. The related problems of structural corruption, impunity and the absence of political and security reforms has hollowed out the Western-backed state building project from the outset. The side-effects of the security transition - from the closure of PRTs to the projected declines in development funding - will negatively impact government capacity, stripping away the veneer of progress over governance and service delivery. If the trend in declining funding levels continues, achievements in governance and development in Afghanistan may not prove to be sustainable. This scenario would erode the Afghan government's legitimacy amongst Afghans further and contribute to instability.

According to a former NATO Senior Civilian Representative, the purpose of the transition is to act as a 'forcing mechanism'. But a weak Afghan government cannot be forced into being a sufficiently strong or effective one

through the rushed withdrawal of the support on which it has come to depend. The primary question raised in this report is whether the transition amounts to a strategy at all. The conclusion reached that it does not, is based on a detailed examination of the context and content of the US and NATO's transition strategy, the obstacles confronting the wider strategy underpinning the military exit, NATO's approach to the criteria for implementing the transition, as well as the identifiable impacts and consequences of the transition. The report explores several factors that threaten to undermine the prospect of a successful transition.

Firstly, the idea that the official transition timeline can generate even minimally conducive conditions on the Afghan ground - that would substantiate claims that the transition strategy can succeed - is a delusion. The 'good enough' approach may exemplify the priorities of the US and NATO member states in radically reformulating their military engagement in Afghanistan, but it fails to establish what conditions are necessary to avoid the collapse of the central government and with it, the failure of the West's policy in Afghanistan.

Secondly, NATO's effective abandonment of a conditions-based approach in implementing the transition has in practice been rendered unavoidable by the brevity of the transition's timeline. But the weakness of Afghan institutions that may be subjected to additional and intense economic and political pressures linked to the transition, beyond the challenges of taking over responsibility for security, makes the risk of state collapse all the greater. So far, the US and NATO member states have shown no signs of reconsidering the viability of the transition timeline despite multiple factors, including the state of the Afghan security forces, that make this essential. Instead, the priority of the NATO member states most prominently engaged in Afghanistan is to keep the transition timetable on track, or even to speed it up.

NATO's marginalisation of governance criteria reflects a growing disengagement by the wider international community from attempts to address Afghanistan's problems which lie beyond enabling the transition and international military exit. Yet prospects that the transition process can deliver its objective of a self-sustaining Afghan state must be assessed against the overall context of failure by the Afghan government and its international partners to build the right conditions for a stable Afghanistan: What has been impossible to achieve over the last ten years will not be miraculously transformed by Afghan ownership, especially with overall security and economic indicators trending downwards.

Thirdly, prospects for a responsible withdrawal of international forces via the security transition are now entwined with Afghanistan's national reconciliation process which, so far, has focused on the insurgents. Despite its late and slow start, this has moved to the top of the international agenda as a means of ending the conflict and shoring up the security transition. Difficulties that must be overcome before substantial negotiations can start, range from establishing a consensus inside Afghanistan, with all relevant social and political actors, that a political settlement including the Taliban is a meaningful step towards a political solution in the broader sense, to addressing the lack of knowledge about the political aims of the Taliban and its sub-networks. The belief that political reconciliation can end the conflict is not shared by all Afghans, nor by all states in the region. How a potential political deal with the Pakistan-based Taliban leadership can be enforced, and what relevance any deal would have without an effective enforcement mechanism, should be prominent items for discussion at the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago.

Fourthly, if moves to bring the Taliban into the political process succeed, this is likely to collide with US plans to continue its counterterrorism strategy from bases inside Afghanistan. Taliban members of a future Afghan government are unlikely to agree to a longer-term US military presence given their long-standing rejection of foreign military forces within the country. Some insurgent groups may decide to fight on until the last foreign soldier leaves. The virtual collapse in relations between the US and Pakistan and the political turmoil within Pakistan, adds to the challenges faced by the US in its attempt to reformulate its engagement within, and from, Afghanistan while needing to address, with its NATO allies, the terrorist threats to Western interests, believed to be emanating from the region.

The prospects for what happens following the security transition will depend on fluid strategic, political and economic factors with differing international, regional and domestic dimensions. Overshadowing this highly complex situation is the question of whether the US, the main strategic actor in Afghanistan, will maintain this costly role. The lead-times involved in funding and implementing the transition's aftermath means that the time for decisions on this is fast running out in Washington. Whether the US Congress and other key actors within the international community will agree to continue to cover the financial costs of sustaining the Afghan government over the longer-term and will see this as being in the vital interest of the West, is a further question. That argument will be made at the NATO summit in Chicago, but it will be done against a background of a deepening global financial crisis, donor exhaustion with Afghanistan and increasingly negative perceptions of the Afghan government amongst the constituencies of the NATO member states that matter.

The danger is that US-led international policy and NATO's management of an orderly military withdrawal from Afghanistan will become more incoherent. This is being driven partly by well-founded perceptions of growing Afghan hostility to an international military presence and by NATO member states rushing to withdraw their forces on the back of the US troop drawdown, which is likely to be speeded up further.

The weakness of the government and its security forces is already understood by an Afghan population that is highly sensitised to shifts in power. This may further increase insecurity and create opportunities for the armed opposition to exploit. In addition to the possibility of a fully resumed insurgency, security vacuums created by the departure of foreign forces may result in conflict between and among Afghan military and paramilitary forces. It is important to note, in this context, that none of the Afghan civil society actors interviewed for this paper believed that the transition will lead to improved security and that international humanitarian organisations, with decades of experience in Afghanistan and the region, are gearing their operations towards post-transition scenarios in which the further fragmentation of power is a strong possibility.

The chances of strategic failure for NATO cannot be dismissed. The Afghan people would pay the immediate price should there be a wider civil war. The calculation may be that such an outcome is not, in and of itself, of vital strategic importance to the West. The same cannot be said for the broader consequences of this strategic failure which would cascade throughout the region and beyond in unforeseeable ways.

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