Transition in Afghanistan

Richard W. Weitz

Abstract: NATO has made progress constructing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which have assumed the lead for most combat operations, resulting in declining NATO casualties. The ANSF's ability to suppress the Taliban insurgency, however, depends on NATO's training and equipping it sufficiently to replace the military intelligence, aviation support, logistics, and other enablers NATO now provides. The Afghan government also needs to improve its performance. Further progress is likely, but a renewal of the civil war that devastated Afghanistan in the 1990s remains a fearful possibility.

In June 2013, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) assumed the lead combat role throughout Afghanistan against the tenacious Taliban insurgency. US combat forces in Afghanistan are scheduled to decrease to 32,000 by the end of the year.[1] After next year, the United States intends to have a smaller Enduring Presence force operating under NATO command and a separate focused counterterrorism mission. If the ANSF performs well in the next year with a declining US military presence, we could see a successful NATO-ANSF transfer. The risk remains uncomfortably high, however, that the Afghan government will eventually succumb to an onslaught of the intensely ideologically motivated Taliban fighters linked to al Qaeda Islamist extremists. Both groups enjoy sanctuary and support in neighboring countries. Still, the most likely scenario is renewed civil war among multiple armed factions such as Afghanistan experienced during the 1990s.

Even a flawless ANSF-NATO handoff would not guarantee a benign end to the conflict. Many political, economic, diplomatic, and myriad other variables could affect the war's outcome. In his 2012 speech at Bagram Air Base, US President Barack Obama identified five lines of American effort regarding Afghanistan in coming years. In addition to strengthening the ANSF, these efforts included building a strong Afghan-American partnership; supporting an Afghan-led peace process; enhancing cooperation between Afghanistan and its region; and successfully implementing the 2014 security, economic, and political transition. The latter goal includes transitioning to an ANSF-led war, a private sector-led economy, and successfully holding free and fair elections next year. The Pentagon will have only a modest influence over many of these factors, as is often the case with recent civil conflicts involving the United States.

The prospects for a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban have experienced several ups and downs. However, few expect a meaningful peace deal before most NATO combat troops leave

Richard Weitz is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia as well as US foreign, defense, and homeland security policies. He is a nonresident senior fellow at CNAS. He has published numerous books and monographs.

1 Bailey Cahall, "President Obama said to be considering "zero option" in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy AfPak Channel*, July 9, 2013, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/09/president_obama_said_to_be_considering_zero_option_in_afghanistan.

Afghanistan. In their 31 May White House news conference, President Obama and visiting NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen did not even mention the possibility of a negotiated settlement to the war. Instead, they announced plans to hold a NATO summit in 2014 that would finalize details for Operation Resolute Support, the alliance's new post-2014 train, advise, and assist mission in Afghanistan.[2] Even so, perhaps the most serious problem preventing a peace agreement is the belief among Taliban leaders that, following the withdrawal of NATO, the ANSF will succumb to their more highly motivated fighters.

The Challenging Transition to Afghan Lead

Despite a decade of intense work and sacrifice, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan has yet to secure its main objectives of empowering a legitimate post-Taliban government sufficiently to ensure security throughout the country and prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a terrorist safe haven.[3] The double military surge in Afghanistan—which saw two waves of tens of thousands of additional US and NATO troops enter the country following Obama's inauguration in 2009—helped blunt the Taliban resurgence and restore Afghan government control of the country's population centers, especially in the south. The Taliban generally ceased its large-unit operations and returned to its earlier focus on targeted assassinations, terrorist bombings, and demonstrations at high-visibility public events. For example, the Taliban swiftly followed the 18 June NATO-ANSF transition ceremony in Kabul with a 25 June attack on the presidential palace and other downtown Kabul targets.[4] Although these attacks are routinely suppressed within hours, they do succeed in challenging Afghan government morale by engendering negative commentary in the Western media about the ANSF's inability to counter the Taliban without a NATO combat presence.

In addition to these tactical gains, the surges provided ISAF time to strengthen and prepare the ANSF to assume the lead role in combating the Taliban insurgents. In 2011, NATO formally launched a plan to transition full responsibility for security to the Afghan government, with reduced NATO training and equipping of the ANSF. The ensuing period has seen NATO forces in Afghanistan decreasing in number and shifting to a support role of training, advising, and assisting. Hundreds of ISAF bases have been closed or transferred to ANSF control, while the ANSF has assumed responsibility for ensuring security in increasing numbers of provinces, cities, and districts.[5] Afghan forces began leading the majority of frontline operations in July 2012 and now take charge of almost all combat missions (though NATO special forces and intelligence are still heavily involved in the concentrated attack on the

2 "Remarks by President Obama and NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen After Bilateral Meeting Oval Office," *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 31, 2013, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/31/remarks-president-obama-and-nato-secretary-general-anders-rasmussen-afte

3 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Operations and Missions," February 21, 2013, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52060.htm

4 Abdol Wahed Faramarz, "Tough Job Ahead for Under-Resourced Afghan Forces," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, July 1, 2013, http://iwpr.net/report-news/tough-job-ahead-under-resourced-afghan-forces.

5 "Unused U.S. Military Base to Be Demolished in Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 18, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-us-destroys-unused-base/25042351.html.

Taliban insurgents network).[6] Most recently, the ANSF has taken charge of planning and coordinating the joint Afghan-US patrols in eastern Afghanistan, the last sector to transition to ANSF lead and the main focus of this year's counterinsurgency campaign.[7] As a result, NATO casualties in 2012 declined to a level below that of any year since 2008, while Afghan army and police battle deaths and injuries have risen to several hundred per month.[8]

Despite several high-profile showcase attacks in Kabul and elsewhere, the ANSF units have thus far been able to maintain overall security in these transferred areas, albeit with substantial ISAF support. Measurable progress has also occurred in terms of various metrics such as territory under Afghan government control, captured or killed Taliban or al-Qaeda leaders, and growth in ANSF size and missions (more brigade- and corps-level operations).[9] Most recently, the Afghan government has begun constructing a national military education infrastructure, from elite academies to military occupational specialty schools, as well as its own helicopter-based Air Force. When Afghan President Hamid Karzai met with US officials in January 2013 in Washington, they agreed to accelerate the military transition timetable (Milestone 2013). In June 2013, the ANSF assumed the lead combat role throughout the country.[10] Whereas the Pentagon concluded that only one Afghan National Army (ANA) brigade could conduct independent operations in 2012, the US Defense Department believes that the ANA now has one corps, five brigades, and 27 battalions capable of independent operations.[11]

Strategic Partnership

On 2 May 2012, officials from Kabul and Washington signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement. Under its terms, the United States pledged economic, security, and diplomatic assistance to Afghanistan for ten years after 2014. In return, the Afghan government agreed to improve accountability, transparency, and the rule of law; protect the rights of all Afghans, regardless of gender; and pursue further domestic reforms and capacity-building programs aimed at addressing the underlying socioeconomic, political, and other drivers of insurgency.[12] Afghanistan's cooperation with the United States and its allies will

6 Ben Barry, "The endgame in Afghanistan," *Discussion at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, Arundel House, London, July 11, 2013, http://www.iiss.org/en/events/events-s-calendar/the-endgame-in-afghanistan-9bb2.

7 Carlo Muñoz, "US troops adjust to Afghan National Security Forces lead in combat ops," *The Hill*, July 13, 2013, http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/operations/310687-us-forces-adjust-to-afghan-lead-in-combat-ops.

8 Cheryl Pellerin "Afghan Forces Achieving Security Success, Official Says," *American Forces Press Service*, July 11, 2013, http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120443

9 U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," December 2012, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/1230_Report_final.pdf and Joseph F. Dunford, "Statement Of General Joseph F. Dunford, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, Before The House Armed Services Committee On The Situation In Afghanistan," April 17, 2013," http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20130417/100660/HHRG-113-AS00-Bio-DunfordUSMCG-20130417.pdf.

10 Matt Spetalnick, "Obama, Karzai accelerate end of U.S. combat role in Afghanistan," *Reuters,* Jan. 12, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/12/us-obama-afghanistan-idUSBRE90A0ZT20130112.

11 "Statement Of General Joseph F. Dunford."

12 "Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America," May 1, 2012, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf.

also continue under their Enduring Partnership Agreement, signed at NATO's 2010 Lisbon Summit. In addition to encouraging further domestic reforms, these framework agreements reassure the Afghan government, as well as other United States and NATO regional partners, that they will not be abandoned despite the withdrawal of NATO's combat forces. The agreements also provided leverage with the Afghan Taliban, Iran, and Pakistan by weakening their conviction that NATO countries will simply wash their hands of responsibility for Afghanistan after 2014. For this reason, Iran lobbied the Afghan parliament to reject the Strategic Partnership Agreement and Iranian security forces harassed Afghan diplomats following its approval.[13]

Nonetheless, the durability of the post-surge military gains remains under question as the United States and other coalition members withdraw their forces and reduce their other military support. As of July 2013, there are approximately 65,000 US troops, 30,000 NATO forces, and perhaps an equal number of foreign security and military support contractors fighting on behalf of the Afghan government. More than 3,250 ISAF members (including more than 2,000 US soldiers) have been killed in action during the Afghanistan campaign. ISAF had 130,000 soldiers at its peak strength in 2011, when 50 countries contributed combat personnel to the mission. Western governments have been gradually reducing forces since then. By September 2012, US force levels had fallen from peak levels by 33,000 troops, reaching pre-surge levels.[14] In his January 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama announced that 34,000 US troops would depart Afghanistan within a year.[15] That will lower US forces approximately 32,000 by early 2014, with further decreases likely delayed until after the April 2014 elections. Other foreign military contingents are following a comparably steep drawdown.

In an open congressional hearing in early 2012, a National Intelligence Estimate issued in December 2011 was described as warning of "dire" outcomes and a protracted "stalemate" unless ISAF and ANSF made considerably greater progress toward their transition objectives.[16] ISAF then experienced a series of challenges in 2012 that included the burning of Qurans inside Bagram Air Base by US soldiers, the massacre of 17 Afghan civilians by one American soldier, and the circulation of photographs of US military personnel defiling the bodies of dead Taliban fighters. These developments contributed to an escalation of insider attacks, when Afghan soldiers turned their weapons against United States or other NATO forces in ugly cases of fratricide. Although these incidents have declined in recent months, the Taliban has some supporters throughout the country. The movement sustains a strong presence in eastern Afghanistan near its Pakistani support bases, but Taliban attacks in north and west Afghanistan have become more frequent now that NATO force levels in these regions have declined. In general, Taliban fighters are using more aggressive direct attacks to supplement their

13 Sardar Ahmad, "Afghan-US Pact Strains Ties With Tehran," *Agence France-Presse*, May 8, 2012.

14 U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," December 2012, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/1230_Report_final.pdf.

15 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Obama wants to cut troop level in Afghanistan in half over next year," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-12/world/37051681_1_afghanistan-afghan-army-troop-level

16 "Senate Select Intelligence Committee Holds Hearing on Worldwide Threats," *Defense Intelligence Agency,* January 31, 2012, www.dia.mil/public-affairs/testimonies/2012-01-31.html

standard employment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs remain a potent tool of carnage). IEDs still inflict the most casualties of ANSF personnel. The Taliban's growing presence and changing tactics have contributed to higher overall ANSF casualties, more desertions, and the periodic overrunning of poorly commanded ANA units in remote locations—though the ANSF eventually recovers many of these outposts.[17]

Furthermore, according to the United States Department of Defense, "The insurgency continues to receive critical support—including sanctuary, training infrastructure, and operational and financial support—from within neighboring Pakistan."[18] Afghan-Pakistan conflicts reoccur with disturbing regularity over border checkpoints, cross-boundary shelling, and Afghan claims of Pakistani collusion with the Afghan Taliban. For more than a decade, the Taliban have enjoyed an invaluable sanctuary on Pakistani territory from which its fighters can recruit, train, and operate across the porous Afghan-Pakistan frontier—notwithstanding recurring American warnings that the Taliban's activities redound negatively on Pakistan's own stability. Meanwhile, Karzai stokes anti-Pakistan sentiment to mobilize Afghan nationalist support, which can provide an excuse for Afghan leaders to blame setbacks on Islamabad rather than try to overcome them through needed domestic reforms.[19]

Afghan Capability Challenges

The ANSF has grown faster than expected, reaching its full complement months ahead of schedule. Between December 2009 and October 2012, the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) helped the ANSF expand by more than 140,000 personnel, to approximately 352,000 soldiers. Notwithstanding its larger size, growing responsibilities, and ISAF's extensive train and equip program, the ANSF still has major weaknesses and gaps, such as insufficient airborne and signals intelligence capabilities, spotty senior officer leadership, inadequately robust logistics given the country's weak national infrastructure and challenging geography, and weak management and administrative skills. In particular, the ANA lacks adequate enablers such as aviation, casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), combat medical support, and Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (CIED) capabilities. The Army has only 28 Mi-17 helicopters, the primary CASEVAC aircraft.[20] The ANA officer corps is thin in key qualities such as literacy, leadership, aggressiveness, and management skills. It also does not have an ideal ethnic balance. Further work is needed to teach the Afghans better gunnery, engineering, and weapons maintenance skills. In terms of morale, ANA units suffer from high desertion and defection rates, aggravated by a persistent shortage of noncommissioned officers (NCOs).[21] The Afghan National Police (ANP), especially the newer Afghan Local Police (ALP) deployed in remote locations as a human-and-physical-terrain-denial

17 Nick Hopkins, "Taliban kill 1,100 Members of Afghan Security Forces in Six Months," *The Guardian,* January 23, 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/23/taliban-afghan-security-forces-nato]

18 U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," December 2012, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/1230_Report_final.pdf.

19 Ben Barry, "The endgame in Afghanistan."

20 Jim Michaels, "Afghan forces blunt Taliban offensive, commanders say," *USA TODAY,* July 2, 2013.

21 "Statement Of General Joseph F. Dunford."

and intelligence-gathering force, also needs better equipment and training before it can fulfill its important mission of preventing the Taliban from returning to areas conquered by the ANA.

The ANSF needs a better human capital strategy. Although the ANSF still suffers from high levels of attrition, especially among the locally recruited police, widespread poverty ensures a large number of recruits eager for gainful employment. The main challenge now is to raise the quality of much of the ANSF, ideally to the high level found in the Afghan Special Operations Forces (ASOF). ISAF has focused on imparting skills through training and mentoring, while the Afghan Ministry of Defense concentrates on removing incompetent field commanders and improving its vetting and retention processes.[22] NATO's Security Force Assistance has changed from that of partnering and combat to using its Security Force Assistance Teams (SFATs) to train, advise, and assist sponsored ANSF units to conduct independent combat operations. Afghan political and military leaders are generally satisfied with this progress, though some complain about NATO's resistance to their efforts to obtain tanks, combat aircraft, and major conventional weapons systems.[23] The alliance is building the ANSF into a primarily counterinsurgency force rather than a conventional military given the absence of threats to Afghanistan by other countries' conventional armed forces.

With ISAF support, the ANSF has adopted a "layered security concept" that compensates for weaknesses in each element of the ANSF. The concept seeks to address persistent coordination problems between them (especially between the ANA and ANP) by integrating all ANSF elements into a joint defense in depth. This interlocking protection web encompasses the ANA, ANP, ALP, ASOF, Afghan Border Police, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and other ANSF elements, which will soon include Mobile Strike Force battalions, which move by ground vehicles. An Operational Coordination Center (OCC) will control the network as well as disseminate relevant tactical intelligence among its components. ISAF still provides enablers for this layered defense system, especially aviation assets, but the forces in the field are almost all ANSF personnel.[24]

Air Power Problems

Combat aviation presents a special problem. Analysts believe that it will not be until 2017 that the Afghan Air Force, whose presence could at least strengthen local pride and morale, will be able to operate without substantial foreign assistance.[25] Aviation has proved to be a key asymmetrical advantage for ISAF and Afghan partners since the Taliban lacks any air support. ISAF air surveillance and strikes provide one of the most effective instruments for countering Taliban infiltration across the Afghan-Pakistan border—a persistent problem that looks unlikely to be

22 "A Discussion on Afghanistan with General John Allen," *Brookings Institution*, March 25, 2013, http://www.brookings.edu/events/2013/03/25-allen-afghanistan#ref-id=20130325_allen

23 "Can Afghans take the lead?," *Inside Story, Aljazeera*, June 18, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2013/06/201361872036451240.html.

24 "Statement of General Dunford" and "Discussion with General Allen."

25 Josh Smith, "Afghan Aircrews Training To Proceed Without Foreign Aid," *Stars and Stripes*, February 22, 2013.

resolved anytime soon. But ISAF has found it difficult to build a new Afghan Air Force from scratch given the country's austere conditions, bad weather, and remote forward locations of ANSF units that need aerial supply, aerial surveillance, and air casualty evacuations air surveillance. The greatest challenge is the time required to train enough skilled Afghans sufficiently to maintain and operate an air force.

At present, the United States Air Force (USAF) is pursuing a graduated approach toward transferring missions to their Afghan counterparts, with a slower pace of drawdown than seen with the US Army and Marines. NATO is providing the ANSF with indirect fire weapons such as artillery to compensate for the reduced ISAF combat air support.[26] The expectation is that ANSF ground forces will need to adapt and fight differently, with less combat air support, after 2015. NATO could also rely on US air assets located over-the-horizon in other countries even after 2014.[27] However, whether NATO governments would order something such as a spoiling air strike in 2015 or beyond against Taliban forces that began to pose a significant threat is uncertain.

Since the NATO combat withdrawal decision makes it harder for the Taliban to claim it is fighting to rid the country of foreign troops, Taliban leaders rely on exploiting their narrative of Western abandonment of Afghanistan. A common message is that, whereas NATO is removing its combat forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban fighters will remain. To counter this narrative, NATO planners are reconsidering their earlier decision to reduce the ANSF to 230,000 troops after 2015 for affordability reasons. The February 2013 NATO defense ministry formally considered supporting the larger force until 2018 as a means to better ensure Afghanistan's security, but perhaps even more importantly as a means to counter the abandonment narrative that NATO planners see as a greater threat to the alliance's campaign goals than the Taliban.[28] But actually sustaining the larger force will require greater financial contributions from NATO and non-NATO countries than currently planned, despite the continued global economic slowdown and other priorities. General Joseph Dunford, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, recently warned that, "The gains that we have made to date are not going to be sustainable without continued international commitment," quickly adding that, "We are not where we need to be yet."[29] Whether these supplementary finances will soon materialize is doubtful, but ISAF and NATO can make meaningful progress toward overall economic development by continuing to combat illiteracy and innumeracy, promoting the recruitment of national minorities within the ANSF, and imparting more dual-use technical skills that have civilian application, including project and logistics management.

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26 Michaels, "Afghan forces blunt Taliban offensive."

27 US Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Press Briefing with Maj. Gen. Polumbo from the Pentagon Briefing Room," April 23, 2013, defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5225.

28 Adam Entous and Naftali Bendavi, "U.S., NATO Consider Keeping Large Force Of Afghans," *Wall Street Journal,* February 22, 2013.

29 "Afghan gains not yet sustainable: NATO," *The Australian*, June 15, 2013, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/afghan-gains-not-yet-sustainable-nato/story-fn3dxix6-1226664184461.

Overcoming Insider Threats

The surge in "green-on-blue" attacks, in which supposedly friendly Afghan soldiers turn their weapons on their ISAF advisers, has impeded efforts to address the ANSF weaknesses. These "insider attacks" represent a major problem since they exploit a crucial vulnerability by seeking to disrupt the vital ISAF partnership and training programs with their ANSF colleagues. The highest annual total of insider attacks occurred in 2012, when there were at least 60 confirmed cases of ISAF troops being killed, which accounted for more than one-fifth of all ISAF combat deaths that year (almost one hundred more ISAF soldiers were wounded).

Year	No. of Attacks	No. of ISAF Casualties
2007	2	2
2008	2	2
2009	6	10
2010	6	20
2011	21	35
2012	46	60

Table 1. Afghan "green-on-blue" attacks. Source: International Security Assistance Force; as of March 2013; some attacks in 2012 are still under investigation and not included above.[30]

NATO analysts assess that only 10-25% of the attacks are directly caused by Taliban action (infiltration, impersonation, co-option, etc.), attributing most attacks to personal grievances (inter-personal disputes), or spontaneous action (retaliation for some obnoxious act committed by the Western countries, such as burning of Korans or showing anti-Islamic films, or simply post-traumatic stress).[31] Yet, the Taliban tactic of claiming responsibility for all these attacks unnerved ISAF advisers, who at times interacted less, or under more restrictive conditions, with their Afghan counterparts. On several occasions, NATO removed its advisers from Afghan work posts and suspended partnered operations in the field. The French government explicitly cited the insider attacks, which killed several French soldiers, to justify the withdrawal of French combat forces earlier than originally planned.

The rapid increase in the ANSF's ranks contributed to this insider problem since it led to a relaxation of recruitment and supervisory standards.[32] The surge in the number of ISAF advisers collocated with ANSF personnel also increased the number of targets. At one point, almost 5,000 NTM-A trainers served in Afghan institutions, while 400 ISAF military and police advisory teams deployed with ANSF units in the field. They trained more than 3,200 ANSF instructors in a "train-

30 "What lies behind Afghanistan's insider attacks?" *BBC,* March 11, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19633418.

31 Luke Mogelson, "Which Way Did The Taliban Go?" *New York Times Magazine*, January 20, 2013.

32 "Statement Of General Dunford."

the-trainers" program aimed to allow NTM-A to reduce its presence like the rest of NATO.[33] Even if only one of every 500 Afghan soldiers turns his weapons on an ISAF colleague, that figure yields dozens of attacks given the ANSF's large size.

ISAF Commanding General John Allen recognized that foreign forces had to rely on fellow Afghans to use their superior cultural knowledge and human intelligence to curtail such incidents. ISAF partnered with the Afghan government to adopt a comprehensive response strategy, which aimed to reduce the number of "green-on-green" attacks in which ANSF personnel attacked their Afghan comrades. Afghan and ISAF personnel took measures to improve vetting and screening of new ANSF recruits; enhance counterintelligence efforts; make ISAF and Afghan personnel more aware of each other's cultural sensitivities as well as behavioral traits of potential attackers; designate Guardian Angels to protect ISAF soldiers from insider attacks; and deploy mobile training teams to enhance force protection against insider threats. Furthermore, the ongoing reduction in the size of the ISAF mission and its use of smaller ISAF advisory units (security force assistance teams) embedded for long periods in only high-level ANSF units reduced the number of opportunities and targets for insider attacks. Most of the green-on-blue attacks do not involve soldiers who serve together on a constant basis. Rather, attackers find it easier to kill people whom they encounter in episodic or random contacts.

The Post-2014 NATO Mission

A critical question remains unresolved: how many United States and other foreign troops should remain after 2014 and what missions should they undertake? The Pentagon and other NATO militaries are assessing numerous variables as they decide how many forces they should recommend remain (hence the range in numbers): the ANSF's performance this year; the strength of the Taliban and al-Qaeda; progress in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process; the April 2014 elections process; and the regional security environment (especially the policies and performance of the new Pakistani government).[34] Determining how many ISAF troops stay after 2014 and how fast other soldiers can leave Afghanistan also requires establishing in advance what specific missions NATO will perform after 2014. In principle, these tasks could include defending the Afghan population; protecting foreign civilian workers; killing and capturing key Taliban leaders; and building the ANSF through further training and advising in accordance with the transition plan NATO developed in 2010 and reaffirmed at its May 2012 Chicago summit.

The February 2013 NATO defense ministerial discussed how many forces to keep in Afghanistan beyond 2014, what they will do, and how rapidly other forces would depart. The numbers under consideration at that meeting ranged from 8,000 to 12,000 military personnel, with most of these troops coming from the United States and other NATO countries, as well as from a few NATO partners in ISAF such as Australia.

33 ISAF Headquarters Public Affairs Office, "ISAF Press Briefing September 5, 2011," http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-press-briefing-september-5-2011.html

34 Peter R. Lavoy, "Embargoed Until Delivered," *Testimony of Dr. Peter R. Lavoy before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, July 11, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Lavoy_Testimony.pdf

The United States might contribute between one half and two thirds to this total. The NATO ministers are now using this figure as a "planning" guidepost for pacing their own 2013-2014 reductions.[35] This number represents the middle-range of the three figures the Pentagon presented to NATO last November, but seems less than the US military commanders in the field would prefer.[36] The larger NATO force would amount to roughly 18,000 to 23,000 troops, while the smallest option discussed in November 2012 was from 3,000 to 6,000 troops.[37]

Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) Stress

Until recently, there had been no serious discussion of a "zero option" for US troop presence, but keeping NATO military forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 depends on the successful negotiations of a SOFA between the Afghan government and various international partners, which would define the legal rights and responsibilities of the foreign forces. When he met Karzai this January in Washington, Obama insisted that the new US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement under negotiation to replace the existing US-Afghan SOFA would have to provide comprehensive legal immunity for US troops in Afghanistan. Karzai has accepted this condition in principle, but the issue proved sufficiently controversial in the case of Iraq as to prevent any American forces (besides the standard Marine Guards, etc.) from remaining in that country after 2011. Relations between Karzai and Obama grew so testy in the summer of 2013 over proposed peace talks with the Taliban, with Karzai accusing Obama in a video link of seeking a separate peace with the Taliban, that the administration let it be known that the zero option was under serious discussion.[38] But Karzai's entourage might be correct that such talk was simply a negotiating ploy that neither side could ever accept given their mutual need for some US military presence for both Afghan and regional security considerations.[39] The White House might announce its intent to keep a major troop presence in Afghanistan after 2014 while simultaneously declaring that the United States was prepared to negotiate the SOFA with the next Afghan government as well as the Karzai administration.[40] In addition to defusing the immediate crisis, this approach would reflect the reality that Karzai's successor could repudiate any deal negotiated by his predecessor.

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35 Adam Entous, "U.S. Sets Out Post-2014 NATO Force For Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2013.

36 "The Afghan Horizon: 'Afghanistan will not stand alone' — NATO declaration," *Chicago Tribune,* January 19, 2013; Carlo Muñoz, "US Military Advisers: Impasse Won't Stop Handoff to Afghan Troops," *The Hill*, July 9, 2013, http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/army/309791-us-military-advisers-impasse-wont-stop-handoff-to-afghan-troops.

37 Adam Entous, "U.S. Sets Out Post-2014 NATO Force For Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2013.

38 Mark Mazzetti and Matthew Rosenberg, "U.S. Considers Faster Pullout in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/09/world/asia/frustrated-obama-considers-full-troop-withdrawal-from-afghanistan.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&ref=asia&pagewanted=all&.

39 "United States could leave Afghanistan early as tension between Obama, Karzai mounts," *Reuters*, July 9, 2013, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/u-s-pull-troops-afghanistan-year-report-article-1.1393607#ixzz2YfnwGXZ9.

40 Stephen Hadley, "Assessing the Transition in Afghanistan," *Testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, July 11, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Hadley_Testimony.pdf.

The February 2013 NATO defense ministerial discussed the alliance's post-2014 train, advise, and assist mission. NATO is considering establishing training bases in the four main sectors of Afghanistan as well as a central headquarters in Kabul. The training mission might keep the current leading roles of Germany in the north, Italy in the west, and the United States in the east and the south. NATO trainers would work with ANSF units only at the corps level and conduct all their training on bases rather than in the field. [41] Most likely, American soldiers in Afghanistan after 2014 will be assigned to units having at least one of three broad missions: advising and training select ANSF units as part of the post-2014 NATO force; protecting State Department and other civilian personnel on interagency missions; and capturing or killing high-value terrorists in Afghanistan as part of a separate counterterrorism force under US command. Unlike NATO trainers, this counterterrorism force of several thousand US military personnel would have US Special Operations Forces (SOF) embedded with lower-level Afghan units such as the Afghan SOF brigades. Some of these SOF personnel could be dual-hatted to perform US counterterrorism and NATO training missions. It is possible that these SOF forces might also support high-priority missions in neighboring countries, ranging from killing terrorists to neutralizing weapons of mass destruction (like a Pakistani nuclear weapon) that might fall under the control of a terrorist group.

Concluding Observations

The prospects for a peace agreement with the Taliban have risen and then fallen in recent months, with much attention paid to allowing the Taliban to establish a negotiating office in Doha. The initiative backfired after the Taliban representatives tried to fly their old flag and name it after their deposed government, leading Karzai to accuse them of seeking to establish a government-in-exile with American connivance.[42] Yet, the Karzai government has contributed to the peace problem by pursuing several, often conflicting negotiating tracks, dealing with self-proclaimed Taliban representatives who lack much influence with the movement, and leaving much of Afghan society fearful that the government will reach a deal with Taliban leaders and other local elites at their expense.

In any case, it seems unlikely that a settlement is achievable before most US combat forces leave. Even if the talks start soon, the experience of other negotiations seeking to end a civil war suggest they will likely take considerable time to realize a deal. The parties need to feel comfortable working with one another, compromise their initial demands, and then sell any deal to their respective leaderships. On the government side, there will need to be a means to incorporate the interests and demands of many Afghan stakeholders who now feel excluded from the peace process. Regarding the Taliban, its leaders still reject US demands that they negotiate directly with Karzai's government, adopt

41 Thom Shanker, "NATO in Talks on Scale of Afghan Role After 2014 Deadline," *The* New York Times, February 23, 2013.

42 Kathy Gannon, "Taliban Close Qatar Office to Protest Flag Fracas," *Associated Press*, July 9, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-close-qatar-office-protest-flag-fracas-19613331#.Udv_Wz5hlSY.

a formal cease-fire, sever ties with international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, and acknowledge the legitimacy of the post-2001 Afghan Constitution.[43] Another complication is that the Taliban consists of many fighters who are motivated by local grievances that will not be resolved by curtailing the NATO military presence or in peace talks with the central government. Whether the Taliban has a genuinely moderate wing able to induce the rest to support a peace deal remains unclear.

Prospects for Success

The ANSF has been making steady progress in improving its fighting capabilities, but its long-term capacity will be challenged by an expected loss of interest and support in NATO capitals after their troops leave the field. Much attention has been paid to whether we will have a zero option (or zero outcome, with no US troops after 2014), but this debate often overlooks that, whatever the military rationale for any troop presence, symbolism becomes important. A larger foreign troop presence can better counter the abandonment narrative, though it would be wise to concentrate those troops that remain in few basing facilities to minimize their force protection requirements. A more urgent question is the pace of any drawdown. A straight-line or accelerated withdrawal to 2014 could prematurely undermine the still vital US training mission of the ANSF. A better strategy would be to keep as many troops as possible in Afghanistan for as long as possible. Not only will this provide the ANSF with better training and the US forces with more combat opportunities, but it would better support the enormous task of moving large volumes of US and NATO defense items out of the country as well as the troops.

Beyond 2014, the United States could best achieve its core counterterrorism objective of preventing the return of al Qaeda or other transnational terrorists to Afghanistan by being able to continue drone strikes in Afghanistan, perhaps using bases in a neighboring country if a new US–Afghan SOFA proves elusive. Sustaining some Pakistani support for the US-backed Afghan war effort, as well as for the larger war on terror, will also prove critical. The Pakistan–United States relationship is held together by common interests rather than a genuine sense of partnership or shared values. The war in Afghanistan has been a source of tension between them but also helped hold them together. With the US military withdrawal, and the resulting decline in US aid to Islamabad, this source of cooperation will weaken.

In addition to the combat issues, a key test for this new arrangement could be Afghanistan's April 2014 national elections. In its partnership agreements with NATO and the United States, in the July 2012 Tokyo Conference Mutual Accountability Framework, and in other ways, the Afghan government has pledged to make governance and other reforms in return for continued foreign security and economic support. In particular, Afghan authorities have committed to conduct free and fair elections, under international supervision and with independent election commissioners, in which none of the candidates or parties would receive special administrative resources or other inappropriate advantages to tilt what should be a level playing field. If the Afghan political institutions

43 James F. Dobbins, "Assessing the Transition in Afghanistan," *Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, July 11, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Dobbins_Testimony.pdf.

perform as badly as in the 2009 national ballot, if the ANSF fails to provide a safe and secure electoral environment, or if President Karzai decides to renege on his vow not to run for reelection (or cynically orchestrates a close relative or associate as his successor), then international enthusiasm for the entire Afghan project would substantially diminish. But the decreasing Western military presence and interest in Afghanistan is reducing US leverage in this and other areas.