

Afghanistan: Withdrawal and a Regional Solution?

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AFGHANISTAN: WITHDRAWAL AND A REGIONAL SOLUTION?

The US and NATO have begun a phased withdrawal from Afghanistan as a result of shifts within three distinct contexts: the operational context on the ground in Afghanistan; the domestic political contexts of ISAF participant states; and NATO internal debates. Alongside withdrawal, Western policy circles are increasingly emphasising a 'regional solution' to Afghan security. However, this rhetoric appears to be less of an active policy-choice and more of a strategy by default that neglects complex regional dynamics.



Potential for a regional solution? The presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran meet in Islamabad. February 17, 2012. Reuters/Mian Kursheed.

Over a decade since their launch, Western military operations in Afghanistan are being drawdown, with most US and NATO-led troops expected to have been withdrawn by 2014. This withdrawal does not however represent a *mission accompli* in realising the three main goals that the US, ISAF and NATO set itself for these operations in 2001: one, to eliminate Bin Laden (the said mastermind behind 9/11) and the Al-Qaida terrorist network; two, to remove the Taliban from power and to prevent Afghanistan from continuing to serve as a safe-haven for terrorists; and three, to bring stability to Afghanistan and its people through the creation of a functioning stable and democratic state. With the establishment of the Afghan Interim

Authority as a temporary local authority in the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, the issue of state-building was added to this agenda. And indeed, after NATO took permanent command of the ISAF force in October 2003 and its mandate was expanded territorially to reach across most of Afghanistan, ISAF's goals were further expanded to cover the maintenance of security, the aiding of reconstruction and development and the facilitation of good governance.

However, ten years after the launch of operations, ISAF-NATO has had limited success in achieving its wide-ranging, and at times competing, goals. Its primary success has been in its aim of eliminating Bin

Laden and eradicating much of the Al-Qaida stronghold in Afghanistan. However, in spite of the 30,000 US and 1,000 coalition troop surge in 2010, instability, insecurity, poor governance and lagging economic development persists. Furthermore, according to many observers, the ISAF-NATO operation has not been successful in fully preparing and training the Afghan army to take over responsibility for securing the country once they withdraw. By contrast, Taliban forces are not only returning, but are increasing their presence and control over large areas, to such extent that both Western actors and the Karzai regime are now being forced to acknowledge that they can no longer be excluded from political negotiation processes.

In terms of security, Afghanistan is becoming more, rather than less, unstable, experiencing daily terrorist attacks, road side bombs and political assassinations, such as that of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a key peace negotiator with the Taliban and former Afghan president, in September 2011. Civilian casualty rates are increasing year on year, with 3,021 civilians killed in 2011, a level exceeding even those seen under Taliban during the 1990's. As a result, popular Afghan support for the NATO-led troops is fading. Indeed, Afghan political support for the presence of Western forces has been further eroded in recent weeks following several incidents involving the US military that have caused angry reactions from the general Afghan population and its political leaders, leading to calls for the US and other NATO states to withdraw now. This

ISAF in Afghanistan (January 2012)

- ▄ 50 Troop Contributing Nations and 28 Provincial Reconstruction Teams
- ▄ Total Troop Strength: 130,236
- ▄ 5 Largest Troop Contributors: United States (90,000), United Kingdom (9,500), Germany (4,715), Italy (3,956), France (3,832)
- ▄ All contributors have declared their intention to withdraw by the end of 2014. However, there is no commonly agreed timetable for withdrawal between the contributing states.

latest episode marks a new low in relations between the West and the Afghan government.

Politically, the West's support of the Karzai regime and influence on the creation of new institutions of political power has had only limited success in transforming Afghanistan into a stable democratic state. The level of popular support for the Karzai regime across the country is highly questionable, with serious concerns raised about the fairness of elections. The effectiveness and reach of the state is severely undermined by widespread corruption, weak leadership, clientelism, nepotism, co-option of officials into the drug trade and piecemeal deals between local authorities and warlords. In 2010 Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as the world's third most corrupt country. Furthermore, uncertainty exists over the future role of the Taliban in a national political solution, with the recent breakdown in US-Taliban talks, and the Taliban refusing to negotiate with the Karzai regime. Thus, the ISAF-NATO operation, while successful in disrupting the activity of terrorist networks operating within Afghan territory, has not realised its aim of facilitating a stable and secure Afghanistan.

Explaining the withdrawal

The rationale for the ISAF-NATO withdrawal can be explained by the change in dynamic within three distinct contexts over the last decade: the creeping mission fatigue and strategic confusion within the ISAF-NATO operation in Afghanistan; the unpopularity and disconnection with the aims of the operation among the domestic political audiences of ISAF-NATO states; and the on-going divisions within NATO about its *raison d'être*.

The decision to withdraw was in large part taken against an operational background of mission exhaustion, strategic confusion and a sense that the prospects for realising ISAF-NATO's wider goals in the near future are remote. Following the initial success of removing the Taliban, disrupt-

ing terrorist training camps and the decision to expand its mandate, the ISAF-NATO operation has been beset with confusion, inconsistency and disagreement about its aims and strategic approach. In terms of goals, there was confusion and divergence between the coalition partners' interpretations of viable political solutions, over whether the primary goal was the elimination of Al-Qaida or Taliban, and over what constitutes security and good governance in the contemporary Afghan context.

Operationally, the coordination of all of the partners was highly problematic, particularly with regard to their deployment and participation in combat operations. This was magnified by the fact that different states had been granted different mandates by their governments, with the most poignant divergence over whether states were authorised to engage in direct fighting with enemy combatants or were required to refrain from combat and only play support roles. There was also no uniformity in the various ISAF-NATO partners' approach to development and state building practices in their respective regions of responsibility. Indeed, the impact of the 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' has been sporadic, and for the most part limited, whereby the \$57bn pledged in foreign aid since 2001 has had relatively little impact in improving health, human security and education provision on the ground.

This lack of a clear strategic and operational vision coupled with the continued insecurity and instability within Afghanistan, has left many convinced that ISAF-NATO's attempts to facilitate a stable and secure Afghanistan, at least in the short-term, are futile. Taking this into account, decision-makers may have been persuaded that their continued presence in Afghanistan would not have yielded any further progress toward their stated goals.

In conjunction with mission fatigue and strategic confusion on the ground, a similar fatigue and uncertainty about the value of the ISAF-NATO operation has de-

veloped within Western actors' domestic contexts. In the second half of the 2000s – as memories of the high-profile terrorist bombings on the soil of the US and Europe in the first half of the decade have faded, the death-toll of soldiers active in Afghanistan has increased, and concerns about national, regional and global financial crises have intensified – disapproval of the ISAF-NATO operation has grown amongst domestic populations of the active ISAF-NATO countries.

Against this background, the political elites in Europe and the US have been unable to successfully and coherently articulate a strong case for the need to be in Afghanistan, creating domestic political contexts in which the continued maintenance of national troops in Afghanistan has become almost politically unviable for many ISAF-NATO states' governments. Additionally in the case of the US, some have argued that advancements in defence technology, primarily drone technology, enables the targeting of enemy combatants in difficult terrain, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, without the need to send troops on the ground thus saving time, expenditure and the lives of national soldiers.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan must also be seen within the context of a wider geostrategic reorientation by many of the active ISAF-NATO states. As outlined in its January 2011 Defence Strategic Review, the US is shifting its strategic focus away from Europe and the Middle-East towards the Asia-Pacific. From this perspective, it is necessary to relocate troops and military capacity from Afghanistan and into this new theatre. Likewise, European governments are now strategically questioning their priorities in light of the Eurozone and wider European financial crises.

A third contextual factor is the on-going difficulties and disagreements within NATO itself, about both the Afghan operation and the wider identity and agenda of the alliance. The strategic confusion and disagreements in NATO's Afghan operations have been in part framed by a wider discussion within NATO about its *raison d'être* in the contemporary global landscape. Since the end of the Cold War an internal debate within NATO has been played out, which revolves, in general terms, around whether NATO should concentrate on security provision among its membership alone (a position favoured by West European members) or whether

it should become an actor with a global reach that can play a role in other regions and conflicts around the world (a position favoured by the US).

In this light, Afghanistan was seen as an important test-case of NATO as a global actor. However, it has proven to be one in which the division between its members, including in terms of their vision for the role of NATO, were further crystallised in the strategic confusion and disagreements on operational matters. As a consequence, many feel that to safeguard the integrity of NATO, it is necessary to withdraw before these divisions, and its relative operational failure within Afghanistan, threaten the long-term future of the alliance.

A ‘regional solution’: a strategy by default

At the same time as announcing their withdrawal, several key Western actors have begun to articulate the importance of a ‘regional solution’ to Afghan insecurity, emphasising the role that neighbouring and nearby states, such as Pakistan, India, Russia, China, Iran and the Central Asian Republics, could and should play in the future stability of Afghanistan. In spite of the increase in rhetoric on both the advantages and need for a regional solution within Western policy circles, no clear vision of what this ‘regional solution’ would entail has been outlined. In addition, there is little evidence that this idea has been developed through engagement with the said regional actors. As a result, one is left with the impression that the promotion of a ‘regional solution’ by Western actors is less of an active policy, and more a strategy by default to fill the void left by, and legitimatise, the impending Western withdrawal.

There have been some attempts by Western actors to encourage discussion of the role that the region can play in Afghanistan’s security at high-profile international conferences on Afghanistan, such as the recent Afghan-Turkish sponsored Istanbul Conference and the 10th anniversary Bonn Conference in December 2011. However, in practice, Western (US) engagement with regional states on Afghan security has, for the most part, been limited to logistical support for US, ISAF and NATO operations via supply routes and corridors.

Another aspect to the rhetoric on a regional approach, asserted primarily by the US, is that of a ‘New Silk Road’ strategy. Launched at a UN General Assembly meet-



ing in September 2011, this idea envisages the creation of a network, with Afghanistan as its hub, of economic, trade and transit routes to link Central and Southern Asia, in a manner akin to that of the ancient ‘Silk Road’. However, as yet and similarly to the discussion of a high-level political coalition between regional actors, the practicalities of developing a ‘New Silk Road’ remain uncertain.

A viable approach?

The attention currently being placed on a ‘regional solution’ by Western actors will find some support from the states neighbouring and in close proximity to Afghanistan, as these states consider that an unstable Afghanistan threatens their domestic security. Concerns about the spillover effect of instability and terrorist networks from Afghanistan into Pakistan have been voiced both in Islamabad and New Delhi, Iran is anxious about the impact of Afghan refugees within its borders and the Taliban’s intentions towards Tehran, while Russia and the Central Asian Republics are alarmed by the unchecked export of illegal narcotics onto their territory and the spread of networks of extremists from Afghanistan.

However, in spite of a degree of rhetorical goodwill to the idea of a ‘regional solution’, these actors’ investment in the amorphous proposal of a ‘regional solution’ is very limited. Indeed, many of the national leaderships within Afghanistan’s wider neighbourhood would rather that the ISAF-NATO troops did not withdraw in the first place, due to their reservations about the impact of the likely power vacuum in Afghanistan that this withdrawal will leave in its wake. In fact, this view is even held by several regional actors who have problematic relationships with the West.

It is also important to recognise that while most regional actors note the importance of Afghanistan to their own domestic and regional security situations, they do not consider it to be a priority in their foreign policy. Pakistan is primarily orientated south to India; Iran towards the Middle East; China to the Asia-Pacific; Central Asia to Russia, China and in some cases Iran; and Russia towards Europe. Hence, Afghanistan is a secondary concern for almost all the relevant regional players, and thus their commitment to a sustained and long-term strategy in Afghanistan is highly questionable.

Furthermore, regional political dynamics are also a barrier to the development of a ‘regional solution’. While the logic that insecurity in Afghanistan should, and can only effectively, be addressed via a coordinated regional strategy is flawless, the practicalities of facilitating and enacting such a multilateral regional approach are far from straight forward. At a political level, major obstacles exist to the creation of a viable and effective coordinated regional approach to Afghan security due to the difficult current and historical relations between many of these states. Hence, it is unrealistic to expect the region’s political elites to approach the issue of Afghan security in isolation. Instead, the complex and conflictual dynamic between these actors will impact on any multilateral discussion of Afghanistan. For example, the continued dispute over Kashmir between Pakistan and India will not likely disappear in the strategic thinking of Islamabad and New Delhi when discussing Afghanistan, whilst Russia’s position on Afghanistan is closely intertwined with their policy towards and relations with the Central Asian Republics and vice versa.

The wider geopolitical landscape also works against a cohesive regionally coordinated approach. Indeed, the US rhetoric advocating a 'regional solution' seems particularly contradictory at a time when US bilateral relations with several of these regional actors have reached new lows, most notably in relation to Pakistan and Iran.

The promotion of a common regional framework sponsored by the US seems highly unlikely to succeed against this background of tension. This problematic dynamic was illustrated by the decision of the Pakistani leadership to boycott the December 2011 Bonn conference on Afghanistan and to close the Kyber pass supply route used by ISAF-NATO forces, in response to the death of 24 Pakistani soldiers in a NATO air strike on the Pakistan-Afghan border on 26th November.

In addition to the difficult high-level political relations between many of the region's states, there is little familiarity and knowledge between the different regional contexts of Central and Southern Asia, and the northern and southern regions bordering Afghanistan respectively. As a result, Afghanistan is viewed from completely different vantage points by actors in Central and Southern Asia, views which would have to be reconciled to reach an agreement on a coordinated approach to security in the wider region surrounding Afghanistan.

Conclusion

As the ISAF-NATO states prepare to draw-down and ultimately withdraw their military presence from Afghanistan, leaving the responsibility for domestic security to the Afghan army and police force, Western foreign policy establishments should not completely forget about Afghanistan. To a large extent, the various aims of the participating states in ISAF-NATO have not been realised: Afghanistan remains an unstable and unordered political and security space, and many of the dynamics within this context that were seen as threatening to Western states' domestic security – terrorism, flow of illegal narcotics, immigration, regional stability – remain relevant. Therefore, Western actors, and the global community in general, should remain engaged with Afghanistan's development and security situation, even though their direct role in military operations on the ground will have come to an end.

Within this perspective, the promotion of a 'regional solution' certainly seems a relevant strategy, however a more nuanced and realistic view on this approach needs to be taken. The difficult dynamic between many of the regional actors, as well as the lack of capacity and will of these states' leaderships to play a role in Afghanistan, create some very strict limits to the extent and nature of any 'regional solution'. Therefore, one should not expect a consistent and strong regional approach to emerge; it is more likely that an ad hoc system of bilateral, trilateral and multi-lateral interactions between regional ac-

tors will develop. Taking this into account, a long-term and flexible approach is required.

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