

Report

US Withdrawal: Afghanistan and the “Disposability Dilemma”

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Abstract

Field work in Kabul by the author is the basis for this report examining attitudes of Afghan parties toward American withdrawal and the proposed security pact with the US which has raised considerable controversy in the country. The findings indicate although the Afghan army is in control, military experts believe its ability to confront the Taliban will disappear soon after the withdrawal of international forces. The stability of Afghanistan depends on many factors, foremost of which is building up the army and security institutions, tasks which should be accomplished in the next few years. In the midst of this are demands that any relationship with the US be based on mutual exchange of interests rather than subordination or dependence. This report is the second in a series from the author's field work in the country.

Introduction

The most recent National Intelligence Estimate report predicts Afghanistan will "likely descend into chaos quickly if Washington and Kabul don't sign a security pact that would keep an international military contingent there beyond 2014." (1) The author observed clear political polarization and fragility of the situation during her field work in the country late 2013, mere months before the scheduled US pull-out. This report examines attitudes and opinions of Afghan parties toward American withdrawal and the security pact as well as the future of Afghanistan based on interviews by the author with a

number of officials and political actors in Kabul. This piece is the second in a series from the author's field work in the country.

2014: Year of Challenges

This year's importance is clear in Afghan political circles – its impact on the future of Afghanistan can be seen in many ways, particularly in the US' rush to sign a security pact defining the relationship between the countries and Afghan President Hamid Karzai's reluctance to sign unless a number of conditions are met.

President Karzai does not want to outright reject the agreement and in an address to the House of Elders (Loya Jirga), he stated, "We reject giving a foreign country bases in Afghanistan. I am set on seeking reconciliation. If we do not reach reconciliation as a result of this agreement, we will lose everything – they will remain secure in their bases and we will fight among ourselves, coming out of it weakened by our wounds." (2)

Karzai set four conditions which must be met in order for the country to sign the security pact with the US: (3)

1. The signing shall occur after the next presidential election in order to ensure election results are not tampered with as they were in the last elections. Karzai has also given the US the option to agree not to interfere with the elections rather than delay signing the pact.
2. Restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan or start of earnest reconciliation talks with the Taliban.
3. Cessation of night-time military operations and US forces' entry into civilian homes.
4. Release of Afghan detainees from Guantanamo Bay.

The proposed US withdrawal is to come after 13 years of US presence by the end of 2014, and is intertwined with Afghan political elections. A recent Gelvum poll conducted in the country gauging voter opinions on the upcoming presidential elections found 61 per cent of voters would vote for a candidate desiring open talks with the Taliban and 51 per cent believed their candidate should build good relations with Pakistan. Other key findings were 71 per cent of voters supported positive relations with the US and 40 per cent believed it was important for candidates to maintain the presence of international forces beyond 2014. (4)

Afghanistan has witnessed four electoral cycles since the US overthrew the Taliban, but the elections have not stopped armed conflict or alleviated suffering of the people, a phenomenon which defies the typical logic of democracies – that with elections comes some semblance of stability.

Readiness of Afghan army

While the army does not believe the Taliban movement is in a position to return, particularly given its lack of military advancement, the Afghan army also does not wish to continue armed confrontation with them. Instead, army leadership announced their approval of the reconciliation process and efforts by the High Peace Council as well as an international community effort to safeguard and contribute to building the Afghan army. (5) The US is seen as particularly responsible for preparing the Afghan army to reach its desired strength in the eyes of many parties in the country. Practical steps to strengthen the army institutionally and make it more independent did not begin until 2011 and 2006, respectively. (6)

Army leadership recognized 47 points outside its control across the country, but they have been described as points which “do not carry political or strategic importance and will automatically fall.” In other words, there is typically no direct confrontation in these areas and violence is limited to mines and suicide attacks. (7)

On the ground, the Afghan army has been extensively trained in the last two years, particularly in confronting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but still suffers greatly from problems related to air units, foot and mobile intelligence and addressing mines and explosives. It seeks to solve these problems this year as well as assert its independence and confirm its presence as a national army to keep up with citizens’ growing confidence in them.

Security pact

While independence of the army is seen as a key goal, commanders of the Afghan army also believe in “the need for international forces to be present in Afghanistan at this difficult stage in its history.” (8) Any shakeup could impact this fragile and delicate stage, causing the army to see the benefit of Loya Jirga (assembly of Afghan tribal leaders) recommendations to sign the security pact with the US.

On the other hand, the army does not take the reservations and conditions of the Afghan president lightly and has added its own conditions for remaining international forces,

including American troops. For example, the army requests any remaining troops be stationed at specific bases following the planned pull-out – all geographic points close to Afghan army camps to guarantee the Afghan army's goal of ongoing training.

At the peak of the conflict, there were 140,000 international troops in Afghanistan. Currently, there are around 60,000 and it is estimated that about 20,000 will remain after US withdrawal by the end of this year. (9)

Agreement of necessity

The security agreement or pact between the US and Afghanistan has prompted a range of views, from those who believe it is a good thing to those who believe it is a necessity dictated by the country's past and present circumstances, all the way to those who believe it is not in the country's best national interests. This section will discuss these varying arguments.

The Loya Jirga (House of Elders) meetings have resulted in largely positive feedback on the security pact – the terms of the agreement were discussed and some suggestions were made. Tribal leaders party to these meetings see a need to expedite the signing of the agreement because they believe this will lead to permanent reconciliation and transparent and fair elections. They also argue that even Hamid Karzai's conditions are met by the pact, including the one prohibiting American soldiers from raiding Afghan citizens' homes, a key discussion point during talks.

Other supporters add the country is in a new phase, and that best efforts have been made during negotiations to address core issues Afghanistan is facing. This includes respecting national values and human rights, strengthening national governance and independence, and providing security and defence guarantees in the event the country is subjected to external aggression. (10)

For opponents, a key dilemma of the security pact with the US centres on civil peace – while some view it as a necessary precondition for reconciliation, others view it as a real impediment. For the Taliban, the agreement completely reordered the structure – they believe the proper order would have been for the reconciliation to occur, and for an interim government to be born out of that reconciliation. Then, the interim government would be responsible for running elections, meaning a new government would only be put in place after the security pact became final. (11)

Other opponents add the argument that the pact will decrease national sovereignty, particularly if remaining US troops and contractors continue to enjoy full freedom in leaving and entering the country, importing and exporting materials, storing weapons and conducting military operations. (12) In the eyes of opponents, the pact as it stands does not in any way make up for this loss in national sovereignty, neither by a clear budget for Afghan armed forces nor in terms of future external threats to the country. (13)

The 2012 Chicago Summit addressed the budget for Afghan armed forces in the future, but the American administration only pledged to look for financial resources rather than provide them, and the security pact does the same. In terms of addressing future external threats, the pact only requires consultations on the appropriate response but is not responsible for any subsequent action, something opponents say does not meet the requests of the Afghan negotiators.

“Disposability dilemma”

There are a group of supporters of another kind, those who demand a relationship with the US but in a different manner. They believe in order to face the challenges of war with the Taliban, the Pakistan problem and the lack of economic growth, Afghanistan must abandon the role of the “subordinate country” to the US. (14) They feel if the country signs the agreement without conditions, it will continue to be dependent on others.

Afghanistan found itself in a situation once before in which the US treated the country as a disposable item, something Afghans do not wish to experience again. “We have mutual benefits with the American administration but we are not subordinate to it. If Washington will not accept Karzai’s conditions, it means they think we are worthless.” (15) Furthermore, this group remembers all too clearly the Pakistan-US agreement made in 1960 in which the US built a military base on Pakistani soil to spy on the Soviet Union in exchange for supposed US fortification of the Pakistani army. After 13 years on Afghan soil, Afghans wonder how much longer the country will be a base for the US without reciprocation.

For this group, a strong army and strong security institutions are a prerequisite to democratization, and they demand that Washington should carry this responsibility. They also caution that talks with the Taliban do not equate talks with the Afghan people – reaching consensus without the consent of the Afghan government would mean “a return of civil war in Afghanistan.” (16)

There are two more opinions on the security pact, one of them which views Karzai's position as obstructing peace (17) and the other which views the pact as Afghanistan's only option given its weakened state. (18) The former group points to the Loya Jirga assembly as evidence of the Afghan people's readiness to accept the security pact, as does the latter, but for the latter, Loya Jirga's role will not have any legitimacy without the consent of parliament.

Conclusion

High levels of political conflict and the Iraqi experience with US forces' withdrawal only exacerbates the Afghan government's severe apprehension about the US' scheduled withdrawal late this year. Susan Rice's visit to Afghanistan early January failed to achieve any progress in negotiations to persuade Karzai to sign. Some interpret Afghan refusal to sign as an attempt to force Washington to reschedule withdrawal until 2015, giving the country a chance to hold presidential elections in April of this year.

While the Afghan army has stated it controls the situation on the ground, military experts believe its ability to cope with the Taliban will disappear soon after the withdrawal of international forces. The country's stability will continue to depend on building the army and security institutions over the next couple of years. There is also demand to build a new kind of relationship between the US and Afghanistan, one based on an exchange of interests rather than subordination and dependence.

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Endnotes

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- (2) President Karzai's speech at opening of House of Elders, 21 November 2013, broadcast live on video and audio media.
- (3) These conditions were reported in an interview with Hamid Karzai with Radio Al Hurra, exclusive interview with the Afghan president Hamid Karzai broadcast on 7 September 2013: <http://da.azadiradio.org/content/article/25181160.html>
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- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Hanif Atmar. Interview by author with former Interior Minister, Kabul, 3 December 2013.
- (18) Abdul Ghafoor Liwal. Interview by author with political activist and president of the Regional Studies Centre, Kabul, 4 December 2013.