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The Great American Debate: Is the Drawdown of Forces in Afghanistan a Realistic Option?

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Abstract

As Afghanistan prepares for transition, United States (US) civilian and military leaders are fiercely debating over the scale and pace of a drawdown in US forces. Given that the Taliban insurgency is demonstrating its potent strike capabilities even in the relatively stable north and west of Afghanistan and talks of a negotiated settlement are gathering momentum, the US military is keen to pursue the current counter-insurgency strategy in order to negotiate from a position of strength. However, the civilian camp in the administration is unwilling to concede to an extended war and is citing rising costs and new geopolitical priorities to bring the US troops home. As the debate between the two camps intensifies, it is bound to impact the course of transition to the Afghan forces over the next three years.

Introduction

An emerging consensus in favour of the drawdown of forces from the 'long war' in Afghanistan is gathering momentum in US policymaking circles. Buoyed by the accomplishment of one of the key objectives for a US military presence in the Afghanistan region – the killing of Osama bin Laden – and compelled by the rising costs of war, which is being seen as too expensive to continue, President Obama seems set to keep his 1 December 2009 promise to bring the troops home. In a new set of domestic and geopolitical priorities,

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which include addressing the economic difficulties in the US and refocusing their attention to East Asia, the US presidency appears to be convinced about the need and timing for this move out from Afghanistan. The drawdown, which was slated to begin in July 2011 and to be completed by 2014, will leave only a few thousand US troops in charge of counter-terrorism duties, as outlined by the yet to be formalised US-Afghan strategic partnership. As the date draws closer and Afghanistan grapples with an uncertain future marked by the divisive debate in the US and among its allies, it is almost a certainty that the 'boys are going home', boosting President Obama's re-election bid in 2012.

Widening the Civilian Military Divide

The articulations from both the civilian and military viewpoints have shown a persisting difference of perceptions as evident from the time of the inception of the Af-Pak strategy. Under Vice President Joe Biden, along with his National Security Council (NSC) Adviser Tom Donilon, the civilian camp has adopted to weigh heavily on the aspect of the finite resources and troops for counter-terrorism operations and are pushing for a July 2011 announcement of 30,000 in cuts over the succeeding 12 months, while the military perspective led by commander of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops, General David Petraeus, advocates a larger footprint in the counter-insurgency campaign combined with departing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates who emphasises on the need of lowest possible reduction over a longest period of time (i.e. 15,000 troops over 18 months).

While the US civilian leadership does not appear averse to an accelerated reduction of forces, the military hedges against any such step. The latter fears that a sudden and drastic reduction of troops from Afghan provinces would not only weaken the defences of vulnerable areas, but could also lead to a capitulation of the recovered areas from the control of insurgents. Such a move would probably only prove to be counter-productive, especially when the present assessment of capability of the Afghan forces for independent action remains uncertain, particularly with the Afghan National Police, which will form a critical component of the future counter-insurgency campaign. General Petraeus has expressed his concerns about an overhasty withdrawal, warning that the Taliban will attempt to regain lost territory, 'We've always said they would be compelled to try to come back.'² Voicing similar concerns, Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, Deputy Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, has said, 'I am concerned about a drawdown that is not totally aligned with the growing Afghan capabilities or is so rapid that the army and police will make mistakes or temporarily leave gaps. Now, if this happens the Taliban can regain their foothold among a fearful population.'³

² David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, 'Steeper Pullout Is Raised as Option for Afghanistan', *The New York Times* (6 June 2011), <http://mobile.nytimes.com/article?a=799555&f=77>. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

³ 'US Military Warns Against Hasty Afghan Withdrawal', *Voice of America* (3 June 2011), www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/US-Military-Warns-Against-Hasty-Afghan-Withdrawal-123121268.html. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

The military viewpoint against a hasty drawdown is buttressed by the ongoing 'spring offensive' of the Taliban, which is marked by steep levels of violence, even in the relatively stable areas like Herat in western Afghanistan. Insurgents have stepped up attacks in parts of Afghanistan that were announced by President Karzai on 22 March 2011 as 'stable'. Such response to attacks is scheduled to be handed over to Afghan military control by July 2011, coinciding with the beginning of the drawdown of US forces. Going by the trends of violence so far, the Taliban insurgency appears to have put a new emphasis on a campaign of assassinations towards important government and police officials. Afghan official and local sources have revealed to the author that the insurgent campaigns and targeted killings of key government officials and police chiefs are intended to undermine the early stages of a transition to full Afghan responsibility for security in seven of the country's provinces and cities, most of which have been considered safe and incident free.

On 30 May 2011, the Taliban attacked an Italian NATO base, as well as the central shopping district in the western city of Herat killing seven people, most of which were civilians. Two days earlier, on 28 May 2011, a bomb planted at a meeting between German NATO officers and local police officials in northern Afghanistan killed General Daoud Daoud, the regional police chief for northern Afghanistan. On 24 May 2011, the Taliban ambushed the convoy of Gulab Mangal, Governor of Helmand Province, as he left the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. The Governor's car was riddled with bullets, but he miraculously survived.⁴ Since April 2011, two suicide attacks have taken place in the Laghman Province. While 14 civilians were killed on 23 May 2011, a previous attack in the barracks of the Afghan National Army killed four people.⁵

This escalation of violence is clearly part of the insurgent's strategy to instil fear among the local people who are likely to view the US withdrawal as conceding to the violence potential of the insurgents, rather than the US' domestic and economic compulsions. A withdrawing army amidst an ongoing battle is less likely to be viewed as a victorious army. Even the process of attracting the fence-sitters from the insurgency to the ongoing attempts of reconciliation is likely to suffer as a result.

The lack of clarity and coordination in defining the end game in Afghanistan is evident in the approaches towards the processes of reconciliation. While the civilian administration's efforts have hinged critically on the success of the negotiated settlement with the Taliban, the same has never been fully embraced by the military commanders. Clearly, the military wants to fight and negotiate from a 'position of strength', where as the civilian administration, as evident from the Biden-Donilon approach, is unwilling to provide them that leverage. Vice

⁴ Rod Nordland, 'Taliban Aim to Derail Afghan Security Transfer', *The New York Times* (1 June 2011), www.nytimes.com/2011/06/02/world/asia/02afghanistan.html. Accessed on 3 June 2011.

⁵ Farzad Lamah, 'Taliban claim Laghman attack', *Central Asia Online* (23 May 2011), http://centralasiaonline.com/cocoon/caii/xhtml/en_GB/newsbriefs/caii/newsbriefs/2011/05/23/newsbrief-08. Accessed on 5 June 2011.

President Joe Biden and Obama's trusted NSC Adviser Tom Donilon favour troop cuts, regardless of the state of security in Afghanistan and the current status of negotiations with the Taliban.

As the US policymakers grapple with the contours of the political settlement and reconciliation attempts with the Taliban, the drawdown of forces is bound to be seen as fulfilment of the condition laid out by the Taliban. This in no way would help the US to negotiate from a position of strength. Senator John McCain, speaking at the recently concluded Shangri-la Dialogue on 4 June 2011, emphasised the critical need to talk from a position of strength, even if it requires weathering another season of fighting in Afghanistan. McCain insists that the troop withdrawal beginning July 2011 should only be symbolic and should not exceed the removal of more than 3,000 military personnel.⁶ Even the outgoing Defence Secretary Gates argues against a fast withdrawal. Gates has said, 'My view is that we have got to keep the pressure on. We are not quite there yet.'⁷ President Obama, on the other hand, insisted in April 2011 that the beginning of the drawdown would be significant, exclaiming, 'People will say this is a real process of transition; this is not just a token gesture.'⁸

However, these considerations of caution are unlikely to figure in the strategic calculations of the civilian camp. The heightened fiscal pressures, coupled with Osama bin Laden's killing will shift the balance of power towards the Joe Biden-led civilian camp that had been sceptical of the troop surge from the very beginning and now favour a troop drawdown faster than the top military commanders find it necessary to chart the course of the conditions on the ground to sustain the fragile and reversible gains.

Sustaining an Unsustainable War?

There is increasing bipartisan concerns in the US over the cost and sustainability of the Afghan War, especially in the current economically challenging times. Comparisons have already been made between the Afghan War and Iraq. The US\$1 million per year per deployed service member in Afghanistan figure – given the existing constraints of supplying fuel and other supplies to this landlocked nation – far exceeds what was comparatively cheaper in Iraq, where finding fuel for the forces was rarely problematic. Supplies to Afghanistan are trucked often through difficult routes, which add to overall costs.

⁶ 'McCain seeks small Afghan troop cut', *Financial Times* (6 June 2011), www.ft.com/cms/s/0/67fdc7ea-9020-11e0-85a0-00144feab49a.html#axzz1OaVN6yCA. Accessed on 5 June 2011.

⁷ David Alexander, 'Gates warns against quick pullback in Afghanistan', *Reuters* (6 June 2011), http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20110606/pl_nm/us_afghanistan_gates. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

⁸ Brian Montopoli, 'How many troops will Obama bring home from Afghanistan in July?', *CBS News* (6 June 2011), www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20069464-503544.html. Accessed on 7 June 2011.

In the fiscal year (FY) 2011-12, the US military will spend US\$113 billion on its operations in Afghanistan and is already seeking US\$107 billion for the following year.⁹ To many of the President's civilian advisers this price is just too high, given a wide federal budget gap that will require further cuts from domestic programmes and increased deficit spending. Moreover, concerns abound over the funding and feasibility of training and maintaining a huge Afghan army, which has already consumed more than US\$28 billion. The Pentagon seeks another US\$12.8 billion for FY2012. Questions are being raised on the feasibility of building and sustaining a large Afghan army, when the real need is developing an effective police force in Afghanistan.

Diminishing Footprints in Afghanistan?

There is a considerable amount about policy fuzziness not just on the contours of the pace and numbers of the drawdown, but also on the type of footprint the US needs to have in post-2014 Afghanistan. While the US Afghan policy can be expected to undergo another revamp after the 2012 US presidential elections, irrespective of its outcome, the year-long run up period will continue to be marked by several upheavals, each directed at reducing troop strength in the war-torn country.

At the start of 2011, with violence raging after nearly a decade of war, a minimal pullout of less than 5,000 troops was anticipated. Military experts contemplate that the drawdown of some 15,000 soldiers over the next year would balance political and military concerns without endangering the overall counter-insurgency campaign.¹⁰ An announcement to this effect by President Obama, through a primetime address on 22 June 2011, confirmed the withdrawal to be 33,000 troops by the end of 2012. This will bring down the curtains on the debate over the scale of the US military presence in Afghanistan till the end of 2012, still leaving another 68,000 troops on the ground.

However, the debate over the strength of the forces to be stationed in the post-July 2014 scenario is likely to continue. Key US officials and policymakers, during interactions and discussions with the author, have revealed that the number could be anywhere between 20,000 to 30,000 troops. This number will be confirmed with the signing of the yet to be formalised US-Afghan strategic partnership. These forces backed by a superior aerial power would possibly be stationed in 'joint facilities' (also known as strategic bases) and play a supportive role for the Afghan forces.

⁹ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'Cost of war in Afghanistan will be major factor in troop-reduction talks', *The Washington Post* (31 May 2011), www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cost-of-war-in-afghanistan-will-be-major-factor-in-troop-reduction-talks/2011/05/27/AGR8z2EH_story.html. Accessed on 1 June 2011.

¹⁰ Missy Ryan and Caren Bohan, 'Analysis: White House prepares initial Afghan drawdown', *Reuters* (2 June 2011), www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/02/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSTRE7510PV20110602. Accessed on 3 June 2011.

The drawdown understandably will allow US forces to limit themselves to counter-terrorism efforts, while gradually allowing Afghan forces to do the bulk of the counter-insurgency duties. However, the intended strategic communication that the US forces will stay put in the joint facilities to hedge against both internal and external aggression seems to have sent a confused message to the regional stakeholders. This is evident from the ‘hedging’ strategy the regional powers are currently adopting. Regional countries like Iran, Russia and China are likely to view even the limited US military presence as a part of a containment strategy. Without a process of regional dialogue and consultations, such concerns will only increase. This would propel regional powers to increasingly sustain their strategies of supporting proxies, in a situation of significant political re-alignment, further adds to Afghanistan’s destabilisation. As the consensus on the drawdown and end state remains elusive, the prospects for long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan and the region will continue to be a distant goal.

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