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The Zero Option? Prospects for Further U.S. or NATO Support for Afghanistan

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski

The end of the NATO-ISAF mission in 2014 will not end the conflict in Afghanistan, so the U.S. foresees the continuation of assistance to the country. But by delaying agreements with the U.S. and NATO, Afghan President Hamid Karzai might force them to approve the "zero option," i.e., quitting the NATO training mission and U.S. counter-terror operations. In the worst-case scenario it might endanger Afghanistan on a scale much greater than that seen in Iraq at present.

The U.S. and NATO Plans. According to the previous plans put forth by the U.S. and NATO and agreements with the government of Afghanistan, the ISAF combat mission in the country will end in December 2014. From this point forward, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will take full responsibility for the security of the country, but should do so with the financial assistance and presence of a small NATO training mission and U.S. counter-terrorist efforts.[1] In June 2013, NATO defence ministers agreed on the concept of the operation that should begin in 2015; however, the proposal still needs the approval of the political wings of the Alliance. In summer 2013, the U.S. approved a civil-military plan of action to 2024. All of these plans assumed that with the end of 2013 there would be clear agreement for maintaining a U.S. military presence, including personnel, in Afghanistan and that similar agreements would have been concluded between NATO and the Afghan government. The Alliance had also planned a special summit about Afghanistan, scheduled for soon after the Afghan presidential elections on 5 April 2014. But due to the prolonged negotiations between Afghanistan and the U.S. and the recent start of negotiations with NATO, the summit in Cardiff was rescheduled to 4–5 September 2014, and the agenda of the meeting had to be expanded.

There is an expectation that at the next summit NATO should finally confirm the scale of its planned presence in Afghanistan after 2014 as well as the financial, logistic, advisory and training assistance measures for the ANSF through 2018. If that happens, the summit would be not only a historical milestone in what has been NATO's most difficult mission to date as well as in the process of building up the ANSF and in the handover of responsibility for the security of the country but also a symbolic confirmation of the success of the strategy for the country after 2009. The NATO summit should also result in the approval of contributions to the next Afghan mission. Until recently there had been pledges for a troop force of 9,000 soldiers from the U.S., 800 from France and Italy, 750 from Georgia, 450 from Australia and 250 from Romania.

Tensions between Karzai and the West. The implementation of all of NATO's plans should guarantee the continuation of the positive trends in Afghanistan, including the further weakening of the Taliban and the stabilisation of the country into the next decade. This is now greatly in question due to the rescheduling of the signature of the negotiated bilateral security agreement with the U.S., which determines the status of the remaining contingent and establishes judicial immunity for American soldiers from 1 January 2015. President Karzai, contrary to the main political forces and tribal elders who back the text of the agreement, is refusing to sign it before the presidential election. Moreover, Karzai is rejecting American pressure, claiming threats to simply quit Afghanistan are only a bluff.

[1] See: W. Lorenz, M.A. Piotrowski, "NATO in Afghanistan after 2014," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 43 (496), 25 April 2013.

Most likely, President Karzai's motivation to prolong the negotiations is an attempt to tie the desire of the U.S. and NATO to maintain a presence in the country with Western approval for the election victory and succession of power by Quayum Karzai, the older brother of the president. Although Western countries do not want to directly influence the elections in 2014, they probably would accept the election of Karzai's brother. There is an expectation in the West that these elections should be more clean, without the manipulation and fraud observed in 2009. Without transparent and representative election results it is hard to expect Afghan citizens granting lasting legitimacy to the government in Kabul. A perception of electoral fraud might also have a quick impact on the ANSF (if it operates without NATO assistance), which could disintegrate into local militias of government-trained troops and reactivate the loose coalition of Afghan Tajiks, Uzbeks and Khazaras.

Clearly, President Karzai is exaggerating the strategic and economic importance of his country to the U.S., which rather has an essential interest in first and foremost countering Al Qaeda in the region. This misperception of U.S. interests is also encouraging Karzai to seek closer partnerships with India, Iran and Russia. Afghan elites are correctly assuming these countries are reluctant to accept the pro-Pakistan Taliban in Kabul, but in the long term these neighbours cannot offer the troops or means that the West can to maintain the government. Despite Karzai's poor experience with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration is also ignoring the role of Vice President Joe Biden, who since 2009 has been in favour of the zero option in Afghanistan. This is an important factor not only because of Biden's influence on Obama's decision-making but also his ambitions for the White House in 2016.

Lessons from Iraq for Afghanistan. Analogies between the U.S.-led coalition's intervention in Iraq and the NATO-ISAF mission in Afghanistan have been simplified as both conflicts have different internal and international roots. But at some point both needed synergy in the counter-insurgency strategy and changes in counter-terrorism tactics to match broader political and economic stabilisation goals. The consequences of both include high human and financial costs, particularly during the "surge" period when the number and activities of coalition troops and local security forces were increased, respectively in Iraq (2007–2008) and in Afghanistan (2009–2011). Karzai might make a mistake similar to the one made by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Maliki, who due to internal politics delayed the signing of an agreement on immunity for American troops participating in training and counter-terrorist missions. The lack of agreement on this between the U.S. and Iraq resulted in the rapid withdrawal of American military and civilian advisors at the end of 2011 and has precluded further and close bilateral cooperation on security issues. It should be stressed that the Iraqis' refusal came at a time when Al Qaeda in Iraq was being suppressed by local tribal militias but, at the beginning of 2014, the terrorists had become energized by the escalation of the Syrian civil war and the increase in the Sunni-Shia conflict in the Middle East. Taking into account the instability of Pakistan and the strength of the radical factions based there, Afghanistan is at similar risk as Iraq of destabilisation after 2014.

In many other aspects, the situation between Iraq and Afghanistan looks different. Afghanistan does not have the same level of economy or resources that could help it guarantee it has enough finances to pay for its own security forces and ensure its sovereignty. Iraq, with almost 10% of the world's oil reserves, is able to finance a national security force of 700,000–800,000 troops. Plans for the exploitation of minerals in Afghanistan are impossible without stability and the country lacks foreign investment and sufficient revenues to the state budget from exports. Afghanistan is nearly fully dependent on foreign assistance, without which the collapse of the state budget and country's legal economy will follow. Apart from its political problems, the lack of approval of the agreements between Afghanistan and the U.S. and NATO might also complicate the logistics of the last combat rotation of ISAF troops. While in Iraq it was possible to move 50,000 troops to the nearest ports in the Gulf in the period July–December 2011, in landlocked Afghanistan the potential full withdrawal needs to be organised earlier along long routes via Pakistan and Central Asia.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Plans for NATO assistance to Afghanistan after 2014 have been prepared, but due to Karzai's calculations these might be moot. Given the context, we cannot exclude the use of the "zero option," especially if during the next two or three months there is no change in the attitude of the Afghan president or moves to sign the bilateral agreements with the U.S. and NATO. The lack of these agreements not only complicates plans for this year but also the planning for further and necessary assistance to Afghanistan.

It is in the common interest of the West to avoid a long-term destabilisation of Afghanistan on the scale of that now seen in Iraq. This scenario would make a fiasco of the history of the NATO-ISAF mission. There is also the necessity to continue the training and counter-terrorist tasks in Afghanistan as a lack of military advisors on the ground would exclude Western influence on ANSF financing and other forms of economic assistance after 2014. Without the military presence of the U.S. it is hard to imagine any similar commitment from other NATO, EU or Asia-Pacific countries. It is also clear that the future stability of the country depends on a genuine partnership between the government in Kabul and the U.S. and NATO.

Over the next few months, the NATO countries have rather limited opportunities to improve relations between the Obama and Karzai administrations to find a way through the current impasse. However, discreet European diplomacy is urgently needed to make Karzai's advisors aware of their stake in the future of Afghanistan. Regardless of positive or negative changes in the situation, the West should offer expertise and finances in support of transparent presidential elections in Afghanistan in the spring. There is still time left before the elections and NATO summit in Cardiff for Poland to adapt to its options (or lack of them) in Afghanistan after 2014.