

Time is Running Out in Afghanistan: The April 5th Election is Only the Prelude to Transition

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April 2, 2014

The war in Afghanistan is not so much forgotten as in limbo. It may not be ‘Waiting for Godot,’ but it is obviously waiting for something. No leadership on the issue has emerged from the White House in months. There are no public plans or budgets for either the military or civil side of the war, no one has defined what will happen if the Bilateral Security Agreement is signed or what a “zero option” really means.

Waiting for an Afghan Godot: No Real US Budget, No Real Plan

The Pentagon and ISAF no longer issue any kind of detailed military progress reports or metrics and the State Department and USAID never did. The State Department FY2015 requested \$5.9 billion in aid funds for Overseas Contingency Operations, or OCO. It funds “key programs in Iraq and Pakistan and helps sustain hard-fought gains in Afghanistan through the 2014 transition.”

Only \$2.6 billion of this is allocated to Afghanistan under conditions where State cautions that, “the Administration has not yet determined the size and scope of any post-2014 US presence,” but indicates that the US will sustain, “our diplomatic platform and security operations in Kabul, Mazar-e-sharif, and Herat, while assuming selection reductions in personnel in preparation for transition. The budget prioritizes technical assistance and channels more aid through Afghan institutions, while holding the Government of Afghanistan accountable for undertaking concrete reforms and improving efficiency and sustainability, FY2015 funds will sustain gains in health and education, projects to facilitate economic self-sufficiency through improved agricultural production, good governance, rule of law and women’s rights as laid out in the strategic Partnership agreement.”

In short, buzz words waiting for a plan, and hopes that the war, governance problems, and economic strains won’t create a crisis. All of them mixed with implied promises about progress and reforms for which there seem to be no clear time limits, conditions, and commitments

There also seem to be additional funds for security enhancements for US personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that total \$5.1 billion. Exactly what this means in terms of real Transition planning for Afghanistan is anyone’s guess. There seem to be no contingency funds for any kind of economic crisis in Afghanistan as aid and military spending are cut, or planning for what could

happen if the April 5th election results in a run off, a prolonged delay in forming an effective government, or while the three most likely candidates -- Abdullah Abdullah and Zalmay Rassoul and Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, all of whom lack detailed experience in governing -- show whether they can actually lead a state that now has to operate largely on its own.

No effort is made to address the economic and governance warnings in the World Bank Afghan economic update issued on October 1, 2013.

(<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/10/18433329/afghanistan-economic-update-poverty-reduction-economic-management>)

As for the Department of Defense's FY2015 budget request, it provides no details on Afghanistan at all. The total request for OCO funds is also stated to be a nominal placeholder waiting for a real budget request – although the placeholder numbers in the DoD budget brief do send the signal that the total for OCO funding dropped from a peak of \$162 billion in FY2010 to \$85 billion in FY2014, has a placeholder number of \$79 billion for FY2015 and will then drop to \$30 billion for FY2016-FY2019.

The Uncertain Status of Military Aid

The closest thing to a recent unclassified official status report on the Afghan War, and plan for Transition in Afghanistan, comes from General Joseph F. Dunford – the Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan – and his testimony to the Senate and House Armed service Committees on March 13, 2014 (available at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/dunford_03-12-14).

Unlike the State Department, General Dunford focuses on the reality that Afghanistan is still very much at war. He reports considerable progress on the part of the Afghan National security Forces – and focuses largely on their positive steps to the exclusion of many of the concerns raised by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan. He does not make highly detailed recommendations about the level of US and allied manpower, money, and support needed to keep the Afghan forces fighting.

General Dunford did, however, make it clear that anything approaching a zero option is a recipe for failure:

Despite the ANSF's successes throughout the fighting season, they also faced several challenges. Due to existing capability gaps and shortfalls, the ANSF relied on ISAF for enabler support, particularly in the areas of close air support, casualty evacuation, logistics, counter-IED, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The ANSF also suffered high casualties and instances of poor leadership, but impressively remained a cohesive and resilient fighting force.

On balance, after watching the ANSF respond to a variety of challenges over the past year, I do

not believe the Taliban-led insurgency represents an existential threat to GIROA or the ANSF. However, while the ANSF's performance shows they require less ISAF assistance in conducting security operations, they do need a great deal of help in developing the systems, the processes, and the institutions necessary to run a modern, professional army and police force.

...ISAF forces are in the process of re-orienting from combat advising at the unit level to functionally-based advising at the Afghan security ministries, the six army corps, and the police zones. In this new role, advisors are focusing on tasks that will build the ANSF's long-term sustainability to make the progress that has been made to date enduring.

At the security ministries, advisors are focusing on building ministerial capacity in planning, programming, budgeting, and acquisition. Advisors are also working to improve integration between the different security pillars— army, police, and intelligence service – at all levels. In the fielded force, advisors will focus on capability gaps like the aviation, intelligence, and special operations. They will also focus on developmental shortfalls in areas like logistics, medical, and counter-IED. At all levels, our advisors will work to improve Afghan transparency and accountability of donor resources, and reduce casualties and overall attrition. In total, our shift to functionally-based advising is putting the ANSF on a path to sustainment.

Despite our advisory efforts in 2014, four capability gaps will remain after the ISAF mission ends. I assess that without the Resolute Support mission, the progress made to date will not be sustainable. A limited number of advisors will be required in 2015 to continue the train, advise, and assist mission. These advisors will address gaps in 1) the aviation enterprise, 2) the intelligence enterprise, 3) special operations, and 4) the security ministries' capacity to conduct tasks such as planning, programming, budgeting, acquisition, and human resource management so they can provide tactical units the support they require to function. These advisors will put the Afghans on the path to sustainment that the Afghans can further develop after Resolute Support concludes.

In summary, although clear challenges exist along the security line of effort, I believe the physical capabilities and capacities of the ANSF will be sufficient to secure the election, to achieve transition in December, and – with a post-2014 advising mission – to provide for Afghanistan's long-term security. These collective efforts are hardening the Afghan state and giving it needed time to develop and mature. These efforts are also reducing the insurgency's operating space and incentivizing its participation in the peace process.

General Dunford warns that,

Uncertainty continues to exist throughout Afghan society and within the ANSF about the U.S.' and the international community's commitment to Afghanistan post-2014. Absent confidence and hope for a brighter future, many Afghans are planning for the worst. Numerous reports cite the depreciation of Afghan currency, plunging real estate prices, capital flight, and young, well-educated Afghans trying to emigrate. This uncertainty, and a subsequent fear of abandonment, spurs hedging behavior by Afghan power brokers. Uncertainty also spurs hedging by regional

actors. These behaviors have a corrosive effect on Afghan confidence and the broader campaign, and they distract attention from issues important to Afghanistan's future, such as good governance and economic development.

The Taliban continue to capitalize on these challenges and leverage the information environment to advance a narrative of coalition abandonment. In fact, the Taliban's failure to achieve their operational intent in 2013 was partially offset by their effectiveness in negatively influencing public perceptions about security and the future. In addition to undermining Afghan confidence and advancing a narrative that they are chasing coalition forces out of Afghanistan, the Taliban ranks continue to gain strength from their belief that all coalition forces will depart Afghanistan at the end of the year.

I believe a signed BSA and NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) will address the Afghan people's concerns and damage the Taliban's confidence. These documents – combined with clarity on the post-2014 mission and associated financial commitments from the Chicago Summit and Tokyo Conference – will significantly enhance Afghan confidence and erode our enemy's will. While the information environment is a challenge today, I believe it can be turned around.

In the meantime, we are working to mitigate the risk that uncertainty poses to the relationship between the ANSF and the coalition. We are communicating our commitment through both actions and words, and are expressing our confidence in the ANSF's ability to secure the election and the Afghan people post-2014. We are also working to ensure they know how proud we are of our relationship – a relationship built on trust and a common vision for a stable, secure, and unified Afghanistan.

His testimony strongly implies that that the kind of US and allied post-2014 manning levels (11,000-13,700 personnel) and Afghan military budgets (\$4.1 to \$6 billion) recommended earlier by General Allen and General Mattis are necessary, although he quotes a lower number for advisory personnel:

As ISAF looks to December, two campaign imperatives guide our actions. First, we are taking steps to reduce risk and ensure a smooth transition to the Resolute Support mission. We are also focused on maintaining simultaneity in the campaign by building ANSF sustainability while providing support to the ANSF as they prepare for the election and the fighting season.

To focus our efforts, ISAF has divided 2014 into three phases with specific outcomes. On March 1st, we completed our first phase. This phase saw us continuing to transition from combat advising to functionally-based advising, and working with the ANSF to disrupt high profile threats. Concurrently, we executed 50 tasks to increase Afghan readiness, such as improving vehicle maintenance and stocking ammunition supplies. These tasks will help the ANSF operate throughout the election and fighting season without taking an operational pause or reaching a point where their operations are disrupted or halted due to lack of logistical support.

In the second phase of 2014, from now to July, we'll complete the transition to functionally-based advising. This will facilitate the arrival of ISAF's final troop rotation in July and will begin

what we conceptually view as Phase 0 of Resolute Support. In the third and final phase, from August to December, we'll finish posturing the force to ensure a smooth transition to the post-2014 mission.

ISAF's retrograde and redeployment efforts remain on track or ahead of schedule. U.S. troops in theater number fewer than 34,000 – well below the 100,000 U.S. troops at the height of the surge. By December 31, U.S. forces will be at the post-2014 number decided by President Obama.

As forces have redeployed, ISAF has closed, de-scoped, or transferred tactical infrastructure – ranging from large bases to small combat outposts – to the Afghans. Coalition bases and outposts now number less than 90, from a height of more than 850 in 2012. In December, we'll be at our Resolute Support number. In terms of materiel reduction, fewer than 10,000 U.S. vehicles not needed for the post-2014 mission will be returned to the military services. This is down from a high of more than 40,000 vehicles in June 2012. To provide context, during the summer – and in the middle of the fighting season – we moved 6,000 vehicles.

In anticipation of a signed BSA and NATO SOFA, ISAF continues to plan for the Resolute Support train, advise, assist mission. This mission will focus on the four capability gaps at the operational/institutional and strategic levels of the ANSF that will remain at the end of the ISAF mission: 1) Afghan security institution capacity, 2) the aviation enterprise, 3) the intelligence enterprise, and 4) special operations. In accordance with NATO guidance, ISAF is planning on a limited regional approach with 8,000 - 12,000 coalition personnel employed in Kabul and the four corners of Afghanistan. Advisors will address capability gaps at the Afghan security ministries, army corps, and police zones, before eventually transitioning to a Kabul-centric approach focused on the Afghan ministries and institutions. Due to delays in the completion of the BSA, and at the recent direction of NATO, we will begin planning for various contingencies in Afghanistan while still continuing to plan for Resolute Support.

The Need for a Plan, a Budget, and a Clear Strategic Decision as to Whether to Stay

It is now only days before the Afghan election – an election that may or may not produce a victor who is acceptable to the Afghans, and that can actually lead and govern. Under the best conditions, it is likely to take several months for the new government to take hold and it could drag out until this fall. Yet, the most successful outcome of the election would still only be a prelude to the real world problems a terribly corrupt, weak, and impoverished state that is still at war will face.

It is very unlikely that the Afghan central government will be able to properly administer aid funds on its own, and nearly certain that it will take till at least 2016 -- and probably beyond 2018 to bring Afghan governance, security forces, and the Afghan economy to the point where Afghanistan can really operate on its own. Afghanistan will need every bit of US and other international aid it can get. It has none of the money that kept Iraq afloat after the departure of US forces, and Iraq is scarcely an example of security, stability, and success.

This is not a climate where the US can stand back and continue to wait. It is a time when the President needs to stop looking at options and face reality. He needs to make an honest decision as to whether to stay in Afghanistan and about the resources the US will commit. He needs to have a specific plan and budget for action, and he needs to learn whether he can win the support of the Congress and American people for the effort required.

He needs to find out from the new Afghan government whether it will do more than sign agreements and will actually act. He needs to set clear conditions for Afghan progress and reform, and for continuing US support and actually enforce them if the new Afghan government accepts. He needs to get allied commitments to provide personnel and aid.

He also needs to start reading the calendar. US and allied forces – and civilian aid efforts -- are in full retrograde. FY2015 is his last budget request for the period before full Transition. At some point in September through October, the Afghan forces and government will see virtually all outside combat forces gone and begin to see how many pledges of aid will actually be met.

If the President waits much beyond April to make the hard decisions, and take the actions that should have been taken a year ago, the end result may well be to snatch defeat from the jaws of uncertainty. The US may not leave at the end of 2014 with a bang like the zero option, but it may well repeat Vietnam and leave in a long agony of attrition that amounts to a whimper.