

Exit from Afghanistan: strategy before schedule

BY RICHARD GRECO

As American troops in Afghanistan begin to come home, it's better to consider investing more time with a greater number of trainers and redefine measurable and realistic benchmarks than to accelerate a large-scale withdrawal.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan will begin in July and continue through 2014. While President Obama's military advisors have not yet made their recommendations on the specific exit schedule, pressures are mounting for an accelerated timeline. Polls show that 70% of Americans believe the United States should withdraw substantially by the end of this summer. In fact, some say that the sudden elimination of Osama bin Laden should mean declaration of "mission accomplished" and an immediate withdrawal. Others want to save the \$2 billion per week that the Afghan War costs and redeploy these resources as soon as possible to help our own weak economy.

Any exit schedule—accelerated or otherwise—must be part of an exit strategy. And any exit strategy must ensure consolidation of our gains without laying the groundwork for a wider conflict. The answers to three basic questions may help shape such a strategy: Is victory achievable? Is a peace settlement possible? Can peace be sustainable?

Is victory achievable? Yes, we are close but not yet there. Victory in Afghanistan may be defined as the perpetuation of a secure, secular government that denies safe haven to Islamic extremists and ensures human

Newly trained army officers of the Afghan National Army and instructors during a graduation ceremony at the National Army's training center in Kabul, Afghanistan.



XINHUA / CONTRASTO

Afghan police officers take part in a graduation ceremony in Herat province, March 10, 2011. Two hundred police officers received certificates after a four-month training course.

rights, especially for women. Victory's sine qua non is the capacity of the Afghans to secure their own country. US commanders on the ground report that Afghan military and police forces have made real progress in mastering the training they have undergone over the past few years but that important challenges remain. Just a few weeks ago, the city of Herat was the site of two Taliban attacks on NATO and civilian targets that killed 5 civilians and wounded 30. This attack was far from the usual areas of Taliban influence and demonstrates a clear need to ensure that, as troops begin next month to hand over security responsibility and control of an area covering one quarter of the country's 26 million people, the National Army and police forces are well-recruited, trained, and equipped while still being able to lean on outside support as needed. It may be better to invest more time and a greater number of trainers and redefine measurable and realistic benchmarks than to accelerate a large scale withdrawal that leaves important gaps in security capacity.

Is a peace settlement possible? Yes, but it will re-

quire time, regional participation, and strong carrots and sticks, which we have. The objective of any settlement is a truly stable end to hostilities in Afghanistan. But Afghanistan itself is part of a wider region. Lasting settlement can be achieved in stages by first focusing on a deal among the Karzai government, local warlords, and the Taliban, and then on the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors. The Taliban will likely renounce violence in exchange for legitimate participation in the Karzai government (even one with expanded control) and a complete withdrawal of US troops. Ironically, this may be the easy part. More challenging, the Pakistani government will have to reach an accommodation with the Taliban for fear that a cease-fire may turn the attention of Taliban fighters to destabilizing Pakistan itself. The Pakistani position may be shaped by China's vision of the region post-war. With its insatiable appetite for natural resources and massive direct investment in Afghanistan, China may offer itself as an alternative to US influence in the region out of a genuine self-interest to see peace and stability.

Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia all have their own concerns about the final settlement and, if unhappy, may fall into the old habit of supporting rival factions across ancient ethnic and sectarian fault lines. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the matter most important to each of these regional parties is the level of American influence (i.e., troops) that will remain in the region after the exit. Herein lies US leverage in the drive towards a settlement – withdrawal is both a carrot and a stick, with the promise of total withdrawal the carrot and the ability to adjust the schedule according to settlement milestones the stick. Accelerate the withdrawal, and you lose the stick.

Is peace sustainable? Yes, but only with real military and diplomatic enforcement mechanisms. The Afghan nation has a history of coming into being primarily in opposition to occupying forces. When foreign forces are withdrawn, Afghan politics revert to a contest over territory and influence over people by various tribal groups. Therefore, any failure to enforce the peace means that the stage will be set for a future and potentially wider conflict. Even the perception of failure will fan anti-American and jihadist flames. Already attempting to create this perception before settlement talks even begin, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri said of Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar, “We promise him obedience in jihad for Allah and to set up sharia law.” A wider conflict that involves terrorist and jihadist elements would threaten the security of Afghanistan’s neighbors like Russia, China, and Iran, and could spread to nuclear-armed India and an already unstable Pakistan. That is why any negotiated settlement with the Taliban must be predicated upon adoption of a zero-tolerance policy on terrorism, jihad, and sharia law. It should also be accompanied by long-term multilateral diplomatic efforts defining Afghanistan as a permanent, common international security interest. Only an international mechanism involving nations bound by common declared security interests will be able to enforce any Afghan settlement. This mechanism should take the form of a small NATO force with a permanent commitment of troops and money, a residual American

security force with well-defined rules of engagement, a permanent regional security conference, or better, all three.

Henry Kissinger recently observed, “The American role in Afghanistan is drawing to a close in a manner paralleling the pattern of three other inconclusive wars since the Allied victory in World War II: a wide consensus in entering them, and growing disillusionment as the war drags on, shading into an intense national search for an exit strategy with an emphasis on exit rather than strategy.”

But by asking the right questions and by prioritizing strategy before exit, the US may have a real chance at exercising leadership, achieving victory, and shaping lasting settlement of a major global security issue.

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