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Can NATO Rethink its Exit Strategy from Afghanistan?

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At a glance...

- *The NATO transition plan for Afghanistan is based on faulty assumptions and must be rethought before time runs out.*
- *The international community must invest in a successful political transition in 2014, lest fraudulent elections lead to renewed civil conflict in Afghanistan.*
- *Canada and other NATO allies have the opportunity to exercise leadership in spurring consideration of an exit strategy that will better promote the shared security of Afghanistan and the West.*

The United States and its partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have embarked on a political and military transition in Afghanistan whose outcome will determine whether the country will begin to break free of the continuous warfare it has suffered since 1979 or will plunge into a new round of civil conflict. The principal feature of the transition is a plan to reduce international combat forces drastically by 2014, perhaps to just a few thousand, and to transfer lead responsibility for security to the Afghan National Army, police, and a patchwork of local militias. Because it involves military plans that encompass several dozen national governments, difficult logistic and supply challenges, and coordinated aid and external financing from around the world, the transition plan is necessarily bulky and difficult to move in new directions—it is the proverbial ocean liner, pointed at the distant horizon of 2014 and difficult to maneuver off its path.

What if the NATO transition plan for Afghanistan is unsound, however? What if it is based upon faulty assumptions or has generated risks that are being inadequately considered by the U.S. and its partners? Does NATO or the Obama Administration have the capacity to honestly reassess the plan, identify its vulnerabilities, and adjust? Or do politics, fiscal limits, and the sheer exhaustion of Western governments with Afghanistan's intractable problems mean, in effect, that the choice is between success or failure of the plan outlined, on a kind of automatic pilot, with no opportunity to change course or mitigate failure? The ebbing of energy and political will to cope with Afghanistan is evident in many Western capitals beset by crises they did not imagine at the time of the Afghan intervention more

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than a decade ago, particularly the financial crisis and its hangovers. There is a tendency in the West to blame the Afghans for the problems that have accumulated during the intervention, and equally, to blame Pakistan for allowing the Taliban to operate from its territory, as if NATO were not complicit in the failure to achieve its goals in the country.

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No number of international conferences or NATO planning committees can alter the reality that the transition in Afghanistan is going to be, at best, very difficult, and that a number of the assumptions on which the American-designed exit strategy is based may be flawed. At a minimum, these assumptions require honest challenging and reassessment while it might still be possible to change them.

Afghanistan has a history of international armies leaving under pressure, so one way to think about the NATO exit strategy is to compare it with historical examples. Infamously, one exit by a British expeditionary force of about forty thousand soldiers, in 1842, did not go very well. The entire force, but one man, was destroyed on its way to Jalalabad. That long-ago example has perhaps too often reared itself as a cliché of Western thinking about Afghanistan, but it is nonetheless a reminder that the Afghan body politic is infused with nationalism and streaks of xenophobia, and it can alter its perceptions of friends and enemies quickly.

If there is a lesson for today from the 1842 example, it may be that when a foreign occupying or intervening army signals weakness or the intent to withdraw, the incentives shaping the actions of Afghan factions under arms can shift rapidly. That is certainly happening in Afghanistan today. In 2009, as the Obama 'surge' began, it was apparent to all Afghan actors in the war that the United States and the international community intended to increase their investments in the country—military and otherwise. For the Taliban, the surge presented a challenge to its rebellion, to which it has responded with asymmetric strategies that have allowed it to fashion a durable stalemate. For non-Taliban factions under arms, the incentives created by rising investments argued for patience, hedging, and rent-seeking while the money was good. Now the situation has reversed. Whereas before, in general, the incentives for Afghan actors were to wait out the West, now the incentives may tempt some of them to act—to try to control and seize the political and military spaces that NATO has announced it is abandoning. This may tip groups previously neutral to the Taliban side; it may give rise to new violence only peripherally related to the Taliban's insurgency; and it will certainly create challenges for the 2014 political transition in Afghanistan, which is scheduled to include a presidential election with new and competing political personalities coming to the fore.

As the United States fashioned its transition plan after 2009, it drew upon two examples of counterinsurgency strategy linked to a withdrawal of international troops: the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, and the U.S. surge-and-withdrawal from Iraq which concluded last year. After the invasion of 1979, the Soviet 40th Army led a brutal scorched-earth campaign that included indiscriminate aerial bombardment and violent sweep-and-destroy operations around the country. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered a speech in which he acknowledged that Afghanistan was a "bleeding wound." That signaled that he was prepared to plan an exit. He allowed his generals one more effort to win the war militarily, but when they failed, Gorbachev entered into negotiations that produced the Geneva Accords and he prepared for a full military withdrawal. One concern for the Soviets was force protection as they pulled out to the north. In the end, they succeeded in extracting all of their formal military forces and left behind a small and mostly undeclared advisory force of several thousand military and political advisors.

The government in Kabul that the Soviets left

behind, led by President Najibullah, did not collapse, notwithstanding many forecasts that it would. It survived for three years, until the spring of 1992, when it fell only because the Soviet Union itself no longer existed and was in no position to maintain the air bridge of supplies on which Najibullah depended. The success of the Soviet exit in these respects did attract attention from American commanders as they planned the surge-and-withdrawal strategy in 2009. They borrowed from Soviet military planning—military geometry—and also the Soviet emphasis on building up and equipping Afghan forces to take the combat lead.

At the end of their war, the Soviets came to grips with the fact that they had lost control of the countryside and were never going to regain it. They controlled Afghanistan's major cities—Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, the Shindand air base and various other towns. They tried to control some of the roads linking these cities and towns during the daytime, and that was about it, but they reinforced the areas they did control. They built layered ring defenses around the cities. In Kabul's case, they pushed the defense at least twenty-five kilometers outside the capital. All of this provided a solid security structure for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the handover of the lead defense role to Afghan troops.

The American-led plan has fairly explicitly embraced this design, with variations. American Special Forces and military planners have worked from this footprint but have emphasized a more forward, active defense, with night raids on Taliban commanders and border security forces intended to challenge more directly those guerrillas who use sanctuary in Pakistan. The idea is that if a Taliban unit tries to come down from North Waziristan to attack Kabul, it will encounter a lot of pickets along the way. Other similarities to the Soviet approach include the use of local militias or police, sometimes connected to tribal authority.

The Soviets enjoyed some advantages that NATO does not enjoy. Najibullah was a thug with blood on his hands, but he was a strong and adaptive leader. He built a surprising number of allies around Afghanistan as Soviet forces departed, playing on the fear that many Afghans understandably had of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and other Islamist leaders of the armed opposition. President Karzai has virtues, but strong, even ruthless, alliance-building internal leadership has not proved to be one of them. This raises a critical question about the American exit strategy: in the absence of a proxy leader as formidable as Najibullah, and given that Afghanistan is scheduled to plunge itself into a contested presidential election in 2014, who will provide the narrative and the leadership for national political unity as international combat forces are reduced?

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Iraq's influence on the NATO exit strategy is obvious. It is personified by the decisive leadership role in both wars played by General David Petraeus, who commanded the Bush Administration's surge of about twenty thousand troops into Baghdad in 2007. That intervention stabilized Iraq's civil war, reduced violence, and ultimately set conditions for the withdrawal of American troops. Petraeus carried those lessons with him to Afghanistan. If there was a single element of his learning from Iraq that influenced his decision-making about Afghanistan, it was the belief that local militia forces, local police, and the systematic conversion of opposing guerrillas into security forces allied with the state could be achieved.

Petraeus is a very bright man and he knew intellectually, and often said, that Afghanistan was not Iraq. The truth is, however, that he emphasized quite a lot of the same approaches. A problem with this export of the Iraq model to Afghanistan has to do with the coherence of tribal authority in the vital areas of the south and east. In Iraq's Anbar Province, the Sunni tribes were thoroughly intact. When they changed sides, they did so in a unitary way. In Afghanistan,

what coherence there ever was in tribal decision-making has been undermined and even decimated by three decades of war and the rise of new claimants to power, including warlords, commanders, and religious ideologists. The response to this problem has not been to change assumptions about the value of local militias, but to take a very localized, one-valley-at-a-time approach. The question is whether this is producing security and stability or its opposite. The early evidence, I believe, is not as encouraging as NATO press releases would suggest.

Let us turn, then, to the full list of assumptions that continue to provide the basis for the campaign plan that Petraeus and NATO partners have constructed for Afghanistan since 2009.

One was that the south of Afghanistan, including where Canadian forces had served in Kandahar, should be understood as the 'center of gravity' of the war against the Taliban, because this was where the Taliban had arisen and where they had the greatest historical presence and credibility. The implication was that the best way to break Taliban momentum was to attack their center of gravity in Kandahar and Helmand. There were alternatives to this approach, such as concentrating on the Pakistan border in the east and going after the Haqannis in North Waziristan. In the end, however, the assumption was that it was vital to break the Taliban's 'center of gravity' in the south, even though some of these areas were relatively isolated from Kabul, other population centers, and the Pakistan sanctuary.

A second important assumption was that the Afghan National Army, an institution with a long history and considerable coherence and even success before the country began to crack up in 1975, could be successfully built up to hundreds of thousands of men under arms, and led by confident, capable officers, by 2014. In Iraq, the United States, did rapidly build up large military and paramilitary forces in a short time. Of course, the Iraqi army and police had been intact and serving a police state for many decades before the American invasion of 2003. In Afghanistan, the army had been under pressure and continually involved in civil war for several decades. Yet the assumption was and remains that it could be scaled up quickly and effectively.

A third assumption has been that Afghanistan will be stable enough politically, particularly in Kabul, in terms of constitutional power-sharing arrangements at the center, to allow a transition of security forces to occur as early as 2014.

A fourth assumption, as outlined earlier, is that bottom-up, coercive 'reintegration' of opposing Taliban forces, converting them from enemy forces to neutral or supportive of the state, one valley at a time, would work in Afghanistan as it did in Anbar Province in Iraq after 2007.

A fifth assumption has been that a 'civilian surge', as the Obama Administration termed it—the dispatch of diplomats, aid workers, agricultural officers, and other civilians specializing in governance, justice and the economy—would supplement and strengthen the shaky performance of the Afghan government to such a degree that ordinary Afghans would see that governance had improved, and that their future lay with Kabul, not with the Taliban.

Finally, a sixth assumption has held—and this was explicit in the American-designed campaign plan for the war in 2009 and 2010—that the plan and the exit strategy could succeed as designed even if the problem of Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan was not addressed. The specific form of this assumption was that the campaign plan could succeed as long as the Taliban's exploitation of Pakistani sanctuary did not get any worse.

How many of these six assumptions look to have been firmly borne out by events? There are some on which the jury is still out. There are others, such as the assumption about the civilian surge and improved governance, that have already been proved wrong.

There are others that look doubtful. Are these assumptions being reevaluated honestly? It is human to get things wrong. There is no shame in acting upon bad assumptions. What is unacceptable is to do so and then fail to come to honest terms with mistakes—and adjust as rapidly as possible. I fear that is happening now. The campaign plan is on a form of automatic pilot; a series of international conferences issue statements ratifying it, but on the ground it is plain that the track down which this plan is running may not hold its weight.

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There are a number of major questions that should be considered in reassessing these assumptions and the plan on which they are based.

The first is how long the center of Afghan politics can hold in Kabul, and what can be done to reinforce it. The Afghan army and police services require a state to be loyal to—national leadership that they believe in, and may be willing to fight and die to defend. How will the symbolic and practical power and credibility of that state be strengthened through 2014, and not split apart by another fraudulent election or by some transparent power grab by the (putatively) outgoing Karzai palace?

The army's unity and coherence is already under challenge. There are ethnic imbalances in its officer corps, as is well known. Cronyism and corruption play a subtler, less easily mapped but no less dangerous role in sapping the cohesion, morale and durability of the security forces. If the army becomes a fief of corrupt individuals who use appointments of key generals and other officers to protect their own interests rather than the national interest, then the durability of the Afghan security forces, on which so much of Western strategy has been weighted, will be doubtful.

Another question is who will succeed President Karzai, and how will this constitutional transition be constructed in 2014? You might think, following the public discourse in Washington, that the only major event anticipated in Afghanistan in 2014 is the reduction of international military forces and the transition to an Afghan lead in security matters. In political strategy, you might also be forgiven for thinking that the only strategy that is receiving any resources and attention is that associated with direct talks with the Taliban. In fact, Afghanistan is scheduled to have what looks, from here, to be a very challenging presidential election in 2014, one in which President Karzai is constitutionally prohibited from running again. Karzai has said publicly and privately that he intends to go. Even if we take him at his word (and the history of such transitions worldwide would give cause for worry and skepticism), there is little visibility on how his successor is going to emerge, how the patronage-driven Karzai palace is going to play, and how competition among various vote banks is going to be managed peacefully.

There are cruel, violent strains in the recent history of Afghan politics. This is hardly a transition that can be taken for granted or left to United Nations election technocrats, who lack the leverage to influence major political actors. In the 2009 presidential election, documented fraud created a crisis. From Karzai's perspective, the fraud was probably unnecessary; if there had been a clean vote, the president probably would have won anyway. But it was not a clean vote. The leader of the opposition, Dr. Abdullah, reacted very responsibly to the affront of stolen votes. He stood in his rose garden in Kabul and held a series of press conferences. Not a single militia was mobilized, not a rock was thrown in anger. The incentives of rising international investments in Afghanistan, as described earlier, argued for forbearance and patience. That is not likely to recur in 2014 if fraud on a similar scale is carried out.

The time is now for the international community to

begin planning and investing in a successful political transition in 2014. Talks with the Taliban might facilitate such an election by persuading the armed opposition not to challenge the vote violently. But that cannot be the only serious investment in a successful transition. The United Nations and other institutions critical to the nascent election system in Afghanistan must be reinforced, emphasized and strengthened now, in anticipation of multiple challenges in 2014.

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Another question, which perhaps only those of us outside of governmental systems can have the temerity to ask, is "What is Plan B?" If some or a majority of the assumptions on which the current exit strategy is based are flawed, what timely adaptations might mitigate this problem? Surely it is not in the interests of either NATO governments or regional governments to barrel bravely ahead along the lines already drawn without admitting even the possibility that adjustments—perhaps major ones—may be required. At a minimum, there is an opportunity to start thinking now about alternatives, before it is well and truly too late. This is a challenge of leadership—not only for the Obama Administration but also for Canada and other influential NATO capitals whose governments invested blood and treasure in the project of Afghan stability. This is no longer a 'forever war'; the end of international military involvement is within sight. Nor is the prospect of Afghan stability adequate to protect large sections of the population and facilitate Pakistan's emergence from its own dark period of insurgency impossible to imagine. But it will not come easily and it is unlikely, in 2014, to flow rigidly from plans and assumptions made five years before.

The costs of the mistakes made in Afghanistan are shared. The failures of policy involve many complicit parties. Yet NATO arrived in Afghanistan in 2001 in recognition that it had, during the dark period of 1990's, ignored the linkages between Afghan security and Western security. An exit of combat forces is a certainty, but there are reasons to keep working on how that exit occurs and what it leaves behind, hard and dispiriting as that work can sometimes be. The security of Afghans, Canadians and Americans will remain linked, come what may.

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