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Hard Talk Aside, Little Desire by the West to Leave Afghanistan

By HELENE COOPER

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Listening to the Western defense officials gathered at a NATO meeting here on Wednesday, it would be easy to think that the United States and the rest of the international military coalition in Afghanistan have shifted into a full-speed withdrawal from the country by year's end.

After all, the statements from NATO officials all picked up where President Obama left off on Tuesday. He abruptly announced that he had instructed the Pentagon to begin planning for a complete withdrawal because President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan was continuing his refusal to sign a bilateral security agreement that would allow Western troops to remain past 2014.

“We all know the facts,” the NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said. “If the bilateral security agreement between the United States and Afghanistan is not signed, there will be no NATO status of forces agreement with Afghanistan. And if there is no agreement, there will be no NATO troops in Afghanistan after 2014.”

But as all the withdrawal talk has hardened, another message can be read that may be a truer gauge of what Western officials really want to happen in Afghanistan.

Mr. Rasmussen sent that other message too, when, after warning about a full withdrawal, he quickly qualified it: “Let me stress, this is not our preferred option.”

And there, defense analysts say, lies the truth that makes the Western ultimatum to Mr. Karzai look more like posturing than policy.

Few of the interested parties — and especially not the Pentagon — really want to cut and run out of Afghanistan after 13 years of war in which almost 3,500 coalition troops, mostly American, have been killed; an untold but exponentially higher number of Afghan civilians have died or been wounded; and \$700 billion has been spent.

The reason is simple: Military commanders and policy experts say that without a remaining core of Western troops to support the Afghan government and continue training the security forces, the chances are high that significant swaths of the country will fall back under Taliban control, just as they were before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

After the blood and sweat of the past 13 years of war, that potential return to old realities is seen as a particularly bitter pill.

“If we withdraw, and the international community withdraws its aid, you will see the potential for the Afghan government to collapse, the insurgency to gain momentum and territory, take over eastern Afghanistan, recreating a safe haven for terrorist elements that still harbor an anti-U.S. agenda,” said Michèle Flournoy, a former top Pentagon official in the Obama administration. “After all of this effort and all of this sacrifice and all of this progress, you’re back to a new safe haven for terrorists? It’s like, it just makes no sense.”

American intelligence officials have warned in classified assessments that insurgents could retake key areas of Afghanistan in the south and the east in as little as a year after American troops are fully withdrawn. The assessments also warn that Kabul, the capital, could quickly come under more serious attack than it has in recent years.

Such a turn could also lead to insecurity for India and Pakistan, foreign policy experts say, with each of the nuclear-armed South Asian nations entering a more aggressive proxy war in Afghanistan in a bid for regional influence and a trump card to play against the other.

“The neighboring countries, they all want us to stay,” said David Sedney, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. “If we were to leave, the consequences for Pakistan, for the Indians — these countries want a stable Afghanistan.”

American planners are thinking about what would happen if the United States is forced into a full and final troop withdrawal. Part of that contingency planning, officials say, will include looking to other countries — perhaps in Central Asia — for air bases that would allow continued drone operations in the region.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel alluded to that this month when he said at a news conference that the military was “constantly updating” where to put drone bases, “where the threats are most significant, where do you have allies that are willing to work with you.”

But military officials say that a complete pullout from Afghanistan, where the United States now has the luxury of the base at Bagram from which to provide support, would hurt the American counterterrorism effort.

Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said as much during a meeting with commanders in Afghanistan on Tuesday, urging them to keep pushing. “It is not an indication that we’re not committed to a mission beyond the end of 2014,” he said, “because we very much believe the Afghan security forces could use our help.”

General Dempsey said that Western threats to fully withdraw were weakening the Afghan forces’ resolve, and that the impasse over the security agreement was encouraging the Taliban to be more aggressive. “It is having an effect on the enemy, and in some ways I think encourages them, and intelligence supports that,” he said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Many Afghan officials — including all 11 of the presidential candidates vying to succeed Mr. Karzai this spring — have said they want some American troops to stay. And on Wednesday, Mr. Karzai’s spokesman, Aimal Faizi, insisted that a security deal could eventually be reached.

“I would like to restate our position on this: There is no zero option,” he said, referring to the possibility of leaving no American troops in Afghanistan.

Other officials emphasized how critical international aid was to keeping any sort of stability in Afghanistan after 2014.

“I personally believe that Obama will not go with the zero option,” said Aryan Yoon, a member of the international relations committee in the Afghan Parliament. She added, “The Americans should know that the minute they pull out from Afghanistan without leaving a residual force, the country will plunge into a civil war and will go back to the ‘90s.”