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Is the U.S. Admitting Defeat in Afghanistan?

By Tony Karon

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The law of diminishing returns - and rising costs - appears likely to bring Western troops home from Afghanistan even as the Taliban insurgency rages.

Don’t expect to hear about it in the presidential campaign debates, but the U.S. will leave Afghanistan locked in an escalating civil war when it observes the 2014 deadline for withdrawing combat troops set by the Obama Administration — and supported by Gov. Mitt Romney. The New York Times reported Tuesday that the U.S. military has had to give up on hopes of inflicting enough pain on the Taliban to set favorable terms for a political settlement.

Instead, it will be left up to the Afghan combatants to find their own political solution once the U.S. and its allies take themselves out of the fight.

Washington has known for years that it had no hope of destroying the Taliban, and that it would have to settle for a compromise political solution with an indigenous insurgency that remains sufficiently popular to have survived the longest U.S. military campaign in history. Still, as late as 2009, the U.S. had hoped to set the terms of that compromise, and force the Taliban to find a place for themselves in the constitutional order created by the NATO invasion and accept a Karzai government it has long dismissed as "puppets." This was the logic behind President Obama's "surge," which sent an additional 30,000 U.S. troops into the Taliban's heartland, with the express purpose of bloodying the insurgents to the point that their leaders would sue for peace on Washington's terms. But the surge ended last month with the Taliban less inclined than ever to accept U.S. terms as the 2014 departure date for U.S. forces looms.

Now, according to the Times, the best case scenario has been reduced to on in which, as a result of NATO's training and armaments, "the Taliban find the Afghan Army a more formidable adversary than they expect and [will] be compelled, in the years after NATO withdraws, to come to terms with what they now dismiss as a 'puppet' government." Some would see that as another in a long line of optimistic assessments. The Afghan security forces, or at least its ethnic Tajik core, may well find the political will to fight the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, and the means to prevent themselves from being overrun. But it's a safe bet that the security forces will control considerably less Afghan territory than NATO forces currently do.

And once it is clear that even a raging Taliban insurgency is no longer considered an obstacle to the departure of U.S. and allied combat units, the rationale for staying even through 2014 becomes murky. Already there's been talk of having little more than a residual force of trainers and special forces in place by the time the withdrawal deadline arrives — and that such a force would stay beyond the deadline, anyway. NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen conceded in an interview with the Guardian that the Alliance is considering an earlier withdrawal, its morale battered by ongoing "insider" attacks, which in this year alone have seen more than 50 alliance troops killed by members of the very Afghan forces they're mentoring.

More pessimistic analysts harbor doubt that either the current system of government, or the security forces, will long survive a U.S. departure. Despite Western donors and backers still issuing the same pleas for good governance and anti-corruption efforts that have been made of President Hamid Karzai for the best part of a decade, there are serious doubts that an election scheduled for 2014 — in which Karzai, after two terms, is constitutionally barred from running — will be any more successful in creating a new national consensus than previous, crooked elections have been. Karzai, in fact, but is believed to be preparing to run his older brother, Abdul Qayum, in his stead, and keep power within his immediate circle.

His regime remains shot through with corruption, but the West has long struggled with the absence of a credible alternative. And a transition in which Afghans will be required to take charge of their own security against the Taliban is likely to exacerbate Karzai's tendency to empower warlords whose backing he needs in a fight. And with NATO eyeing the exits, it's an open question just how much pressure Karzai will face to ensure a credible election.

British Conservative MP Rory Stewart, who served the coalition authority in Iraq and who, in 2002, famously walked the length of Afghanistan, alone, documenting his encounters with locals along the way, insists that it's time to face up to grim reality in Afghanistan. He recently wrote in the Financial Times:

If the U.S., Britain and their allies leave Afghanistan, there will be chaos and perhaps civil war. The economy will falter and the Afghan government will probably be unable to command the loyalty or support of its people. The Taliban could significantly strengthen their position in the south and east, and attack other areas. Powerful men, gorged on foreign money, extravagantly armed and connected to the deepest veins of corruption and gangsterism, will flex their muscles. For all these reasons departure will feel – rightly – like a betrayal of Afghans and of the soldiers who have died.

But a decade of war has proved that Western armies are no more capable than their Soviet counterparts had been in the 1980s of eliminating an indigenous insurgency in Afghanistan. Stewart continues.

In the absence of "victory", three alternative strategies have been proposed: training the Afghan security forces, political settlement with the Taliban and a regional solution. But training Afghan forces, which cost $12bn in 2010 alone, will not guarantee their future loyalty to a Kabul government. Two years and many regional conferences have passed since the formation of the Afghan Higher Peace council, and the clear NATO endorsement of reconciliation: but there is no sign that insurgents, the Kabul government or its neighbours will reach a deal, or feel much desire so to do. So there is no military solution, and no political solution either. Nor will there be before the troops leave. We will have to deal for decades with a troubled Afghanistan, which is not likely in my lifetime to be as wealthy as Libya, as effectively governed as Iraq, as educated as Syria, or as institutionally mature as Pakistan.

Western countries, he argues, have done as much as they are able; their only option now is provide financial backing to sustain the Kabul government and the sort of military support — from nearby airbases — that would prevent the Taliban mobilizing heavy weaponry to overrun its rivals. The rest will be up to the Afghans to sort out among themselves — a conversation that will be conducted with weapons until the limits of each side's capacity to impose its will are apparent to their commanders and regional backers, and that new battlefield equilibrium sets the terms for new political arrangements. Chances are, it's not going to look much like the Afghanistan the U.S. had hoped to leave behind.