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The Guardian, Editorial

Beating a Retreat

10/08/2012

It comes as no surprise to learn that conditions on the ground are, on some counts, worsening

As western forces eye the emergency exit in Afghanistan, not a month goes by without someone in charge lowering expectations. Last week, Nato's secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen told this newspaper that the retreat could come sooner than expected in 2014, as morale had been sapped by insider killings. A day later, Sir Richard Stagg, Britain's ambassador in Kabul, said the west had done enough "hand-holding" and Kabul should be left to get on with running the country. They are not moving the goalposts. They are walking off with them.

Remember the old trope about conditions on the ground dictating the pace of Nato's withdrawal? It comes as no surprise to learn that conditions are, on some counts, worsening. The much-vaunted drop in civilian casualties may just have been a result of record snowfalls. August this year became the second deadliest month on record. The Taliban have not just weathered the US troop surge – the coalition forces, or Isaf as they are known, have been unable to dislodge them from the south and east. Next year's spring offensive promises to be the deadliest yet, spurred on by the imminence of withdrawal and elections.

Targeted killings of government officials and politicians have tripled. Three elections are to come as the Taliban press home their advantage – provincial councils in 2013, the presidency in 2014 and parliament in 2015, so the opportunity for mayhem is unbounded.

With the proposed rate of 20 base closures a month, the job of holding the country together will come down to an Afghan national army, only 7% of which is currently considered capable of independent action, even with foreign advisers. The International Crisis Group in a report on Monday paints a bleak picture of Afghanistan's readiness to prepare for elections and a transfer of power after Hamid Karzai's mandate ends. It quotes one veteran Afghan security official as saying there is no national army or police force, only a factionalised one which could instantly fissure. The international community, it warns, has one last chance to leave a viable state in Afghanistan, by helping Afghans prepare for an election and a smooth transfer of presidential power. About 18 months remain to prevent a repeat of the chaos and fraud of previous elections. Failure to do so in a corrupt and factionalised state would lead to civil war on the heels of Nato's withdrawal, especially if President Karzai tries to stay in power by declaring a state of emergency. Under these conditions the army would not maintain its nominal unity.

An exit like this would leave the US with just two points of historical comparison: the fall of Saigon in 1975, and Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. Of the two, the Soviet parallel is looking closer each day.