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What Will a Post-NATO Afghanistan Look Like?

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With the proposed NATO pull-out at the end of 2014, the security situation in Afghanistan is once again under scrutiny – and with good reason. A long-term security agreement between Washington and Kabul looks increasingly unlikely, raising the possibility of a full NATO withdrawal that would leave Afghanistan to stand alone without direct American or European security assistance. This article will examine the stability prospects for Afghanistan should NATO leave without some kind of permanent military deployment being left behind.

The Afghan Security Forces: Ready or Not?

Since taking greater responsibility for the security of their country, the Afghan security forces have not performed well. Though they now carry out the vast majority of military and security operations, this increase has been marked by a spike in casualties, both for Afghan military forces and civilians caught in the crossfire with the Taliban. Poor training is also evident in the increasing number of beatings, lootings, and extrajudicial executions being reported by the UNAMA.

In addition to training problems, there are also issues with recruitment and retention. While Afghan security forces now number around 345,000 overall, desertion and end-of-service contribute to a loss of around 30,000 troops a year. The Afghan Air Force also has significant problems with obtaining working replacement parts and the general availability of modern military aircraft, both of which will represent a significant hurdle to future military operations. As it stands right now, the air force would be limited to a peripheral support role should NATO pull its air assets out of the country.

Even given these apparent limitations, there are questions of how such a large military will be paid for. Afghanistan's annual budget is around \$1.7 billion, but the amount needed to maintain existing personnel levels is around \$4 billion annually. At the moment, this shortfall is being paid for by the United States, but it is not clear how Washington would continue its substantial support without a security agreement in place - especially given the corruption issues that have hounded the Afghan government. As such, the US military estimates that the Afghan government will only be able to pay 12% of its troops unless new sources of outside funding are found.

It is also worth noting the ethnic character of the Afghan military. A large majority of its troops and, in particular, its officer corps are of Tajik origin from the north of the country. This stands in stark contrast to the almost entirely Pashtun Taliban. Given the nature of Afghan politics, with its strong ethnic component, this is a worrying development, as it frames the conflict with the Taliban in ethnic terms and in doing so contributes to a lack of Pashtun recruits that hinders the growth of a representative national security force.

Possible Scenarios

Militants are rehabilitated into the political process

One possible outcome to a complete withdrawal is that the door may open for bringing militant groups like Hezb-i-Islami and more moderate elements of the Taliban into the government, assuming a round of successful negotiations take place. This appears to be Karzai's current strategy, given his talks with the Taliban and stalling on a security agreement with the United States. Such an approach would have several benefits, such as weakening the insurgency in the south and perhaps even convincing Pakistan that its interests in the country will be given sufficient attention (Pakistan's support for the Taliban can be linked in part to regional strategic concerns).

However, such an outcome is not without risks – not least that hardline anti-Taliban elements in the country, along with the military, would find such a deal unpalatable. The Tajik-dominated army already looks upon Karzai with suspicion due to his Pashtun background and attempted mediation with the Taliban. With potentially large cuts in military spending looming, one source of instability could be Afghanistan's own outsized security forces, should they perceive the government is acting against the national interest. Large sections of the Afghan population

completely reject the Taliban as a political actor, and thus the path to political rehabilitation is definitely not without its risks.