



Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

www.natowatch.org



The elephant in the room: the war will not be over when the US President declares that it's over - not for women, children and other vulnerable Afghans; and not if the US retains a military footprint in Afghanistan until 2024

NATO Watch Chicago Summit Media Briefings Series

No.3 Afghanistan: the exit strategy and beyond to 2024

Anticipated outcomes

Most of the key decisions pre-date the Summit. The US and NATO have both finalised agreements with the Afghan Government to wind down this unpopular war, paving the way for headline-grabbing announcements that the conflict is close to an end. But critical details remain unresolved and uncertainties abound. While a carefully choreographed Summit is unlikely to add much to the bigger picture, some donor pledges might be forthcoming. Further details should emerge on the future size and configuration of the Afghan security forces and the likely tasks of a follow-on mission for NATO after transition has been completed in 2014.

The back story

From 1933 to 1973, Afghanistan was a self-reliant state largely free of tribal infighting. A parliament and universal suffrage was introduced and women were slowly granted more rights during that time. The War in Afghanistan (Oct. 2001-present)—effectively a new phase of a war that started in 1978—began with US armed forces, backed by the UK, Australia and the Afghan United Front (Northern Alliance), launching [Operation Enduring Freedom](#). The primary driver of the invasion was 9/11, with the stated goal of dismantling al-Qaida and ending its use of Afghanistan as a base. Removal of the Taliban from power and creation of a viable democratic state were additional war aims.

[The International Security Assistance Force](#) (ISAF) was established by the UN Security Council at the end of December 2001 to secure Kabul and the surrounding areas. NATO assumed control of ISAF in 2003. ISAF includes troops from 50 countries, with NATO members providing the core of the force. Over a decade into the war, US and NATO forces continue to battle a widespread Taliban insurgency, and the war has expanded into the tribal areas of neighbouring Pakistan.



At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, NATO and the Afghan Government agreed a [Declaration on an Enduring Partnership](#), a plan for transition to Afghan leadership before 2014. At the February 2012 NATO Defence Ministers Meeting, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen referred to 2011 as “a turning point”, with “a decrease in the number of enemy initiated attacks and a start to the transition to lead Afghan responsibility for security”. [NATO Chiefs of Defence](#) meeting in late April reported that the security zone was further expanded in the south and east of the country while the control of the Afghan Government was extended to more of Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Considerable improvements in the quality and capability of the Afghan security forces were also noted.

However, uncertainty and contradictory messages on the transition process have dominated pre-Summit discussions. [Claims that US and NATO officials are misleading the public](#) about the successes being achieved on the ground in Afghanistan only add to the uncertainty. In 2011 civilian casualties rose for the fifth year in a row and a report by the [Afghan Analysts Network](#) says “ISAF’s desire to present accounts of events as favourably as possible is to be expected, but sometimes this slips into propaganda, half-truths and, occasionally, cover up”.

NATO Ministers have done little to lessen the uncertainty about how and when the mission would end. On the first day of the meeting the UK Government announced it would relinquish its lead combat role in 2013 - 12 months ahead of schedule. The US, France and Spain had already indicated that they would bring combat units home early, while others (such as Canada, the Netherlands and Norway) have already pulled out most of their troops and switched the remainder to training missions. Australia indicated last month that its troops could begin leaving as early as next year and the newly elected French President Francois Hollande has promised to withdraw combat troops by the end of 2012.

NATO officials maintain this trend was expected and signals the coalition's growing confidence in the country's fighting forces and the transition to Afghan security control. The number of coalition forces is due to fall to around 68,000 by the end of 2012 (from around 130,000 today), before all active combat



The third tranche of areas to be handed over to Afghan security are expected to be more difficult than the previous two

even meeting the limited goal of setting peace talks in motion now seems unlikely

troops leave by the end of 2014. After the joint [Foreign and Defence Ministers](#) meeting in April, Rasmussen said that in Chicago NATO will finalise:

A concrete and concerted plan for managing the final stages of transition, as the main focus of our efforts shifts from combat to training, advice and assistance. And it will mean approving a plan for our engagement after the end of transition in 2014.....For the international community, it will mean setting out how to support Afghanistan once transition is complete. That will include funding sustainable and sufficient Afghan security forces. NATO and our ISAF partners will carry our fair share of that task. But of course, this is a commitment for the whole international community.

As foreign troops prepare to leave at least six major challenges remain about the exit strategy:

Future sustainability of Afghan security forces: The current target for the Afghan security forces (army and police) is around 352,000. After 2014 that number is expected to shrink to about 230,000, with a price-tag of about \$4 billion a year. The timetable for reductions, however, remains unclear. The British Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, said in April: "I think the intention is that the numbers will run through 2014, through 2015, and will then start to go down to get to the target number of 228,500, which will be achieved by the end of 2017".

Military commanders and diplomats have been arguing against an early cut in numbers and Rasmussen has indicated that any decision would depend on the security situation in the country. The third tranche of areas to be handed over to Afghan security are expected to be more difficult than the previous two, which were in areas where there was a relatively light ISAF footprint to begin with. NATO's confidence fails to address questions about whether the security gains are real or whether insurgents are only waiting until international forces withdraw. There are also concerns about 120,000 disaffected former soldiers being made unemployed in an economy highly unlikely to find them other jobs.

And who will pay for Afghan security forces after 2014? A tentative funding plan under discussion calls for the US to contribute about \$2.2 billion of the \$4 billion, with the Afghan government contributing \$500 million and donations from the allies covering the remaining \$1.3 billion. Japan and the Gulf States are also likely to be approached to contribute. Questions also remain as to whether the Afghan National Army (ANA) will be ready to assume full responsibility for security before the 2014 deadline. NATO officials say the build-up of ANA forces is on track with combat training now being supplemented by training in the "finishing touches" (engineering, medical services, special operations and logistics) to make the army a fully sustainable force. But the ANA is notorious for its high rate of desertion, with up to 25% of its recruits melting back into the local population when they grow tired of fighting. Growing numbers of ['green-on-blue' attacks](#) are another concern.



Peace talks and Afghan reconciliation: Plans for negotiating peace with the Taliban and other militants that cut their links with al-Qaida have been on the table since at least the beginning of 2010. After initial, uncertain contacts, the US State Department has sought to accelerate the process this year so that serious peace negotiations could be announced at the Chicago Summit. But even meeting the limited goal of setting peace talks in motion now seems unlikely, the US administration having largely failed to execute a series of good-faith measures, including moving Taliban detainees out of Guantanamo Bay (although some [high-level insurgents in Afghanistan have been released in exchange for pledges of peace](#)); convincing militants to drop their opposition to talks with an Afghan government they deem illegitimate; and on-going political opposition in Washington.

Mending the breakdown in cooperation with Pakistan: The continuing [breakdown in cooperation between the US/NATO and Pakistan](#) is having an enormously damaging effect on withdrawal plans. Outstanding issues include an end to drone strikes (which the US refuses to agree to) the delayed reopening of the supply road from the port of Karachi to NATO forces in Afghanistan and US charges that Pakistan continues to allow militant groups on its territory to launch attacks on Kabul and other Afghan cities. Many in the US Congress and the military now see Pakistan as an enemy rather than a friend and Pakistan has yet to decide to participate at the Chicago Summit.

Future sustainability of Afghan development and human rights: More of the international focus is expected to turn to strengthening Afghan capacity in governance and development. An upcoming donor conference in July will be crucial to the security transition. But existing human security and development 'gains' are patchy, at best. Afghanistan continues to face daunting challenges, including endemic poverty and lack of human capacity; insecurity; weak governance and institutionalized corruption—1.5 million ballots cast in the 2009 presidential election

the Chicago Summit is expected to create a more unified NATO-wide game plan, goals and timeline



Afghanistan is an allegory for much that the US and NATO allies have got wrong since 9/11

were deemed potentially fraudulent by the EU and Afghanistan is currently ranked 180 (out of 182) on Transparency International's corruption index; opium exports equal to 22% of gross domestic product; rampant gender inequality (despite some genuine gains, such as 2.7 million girls enrolled in school, up from 5,000 under the Taliban); and policy, regulatory, and institutional constraints that have limited effective growth in public and private sectors.

The logistics of withdrawal: NATO needs to determine how to organize and coordinate the logistically complex withdrawal of 130,000 troops and 70,000 vehicles and containers with equipment out of the landlocked country. NATO is looking to Russia to help manage the logistics and Moscow has offered Ulyanovsk's Vostochny airport as a hub. The need for a Russian transit hub has gained added impetus following the closure of the NATO transit route through Pakistan.

NATO's post-2014 role: The recently signed ten-year 'Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement' between the US and Afghanistan, sets out the broad terms for a US military presence up to 2024 (and pledges the two nations to begin work on a more detailed pact to be completed within a year). The agreement, which was not made public, reportedly confirms previous assurances that the US will not build permanent military bases in Afghanistan or use its soil to launch hostile attacks on its neighbours (including Iran), but does allow the US to continue to deploy smaller contingents of special forces to hunt militants and advisers to train Afghanistan's army and police. Several other countries have signed similar agreements with Afghanistan. The earlier NATO-Afghan agreement signed at Lisbon also allows for a continuation of the alliance's traditional role of building defence capacity, but the ISAF mission (and related Provisional Reconstruction Teams) will no longer exist. All these existing agreements are broad, by intent; and the Chicago Summit is expected to create a more unified NATO-wide game plan, goals and timeline.

NATO Watch conclusion

The current situation in Afghanistan is the outcome of decades of internal conflict and external intervention. Of the many dysfunctional relationships amongst those in charge of the political and military strategies in Afghanistan—between President Karzai, local warlords, various little 'would-be viceroys' and the fractured military command—one thing is abundantly clear: this was an American-led war. From day one, the real strategic decision-making has taken place in the White House and Pentagon. NATO and the other 'international protectorate' actors in Afghanistan (UNAMA, ISAF, EU, OSCE and a host of private sector and non-governmental acronyms) have largely acted as a *de facto* arm of American foreign policy.

In sum, whichever way you look at it, Afghanistan is an allegory for much that the US and NATO allies have got wrong since 9/11. It is clear that the counter-insurgency strategy for the war has not worked: it not only drove Taliban fighters and al-Qaida across the Pakistan border and knitted them more tightly together; it also fuelled local discontent and violence within Afghanistan. Hence, economic and political stability remain elusive despite the presence of 130,000 foreign troops and over \$57 billion already spent in aid.

While "In Together, Out Together" remains the official position, unity is under severe strain as leading troop contributing countries head for an early exit to appease sceptical voters. Planned troop withdrawals are largely 'conditions-based', but those conditions are being diluted all the time. The risk of prematurely leaving a dangerously unstable legacy is clear. Ensuring that the Afghan endgame does not become a dangerously rushed job will be an extremely difficult task. In particular, any Afghan troop cuts after 2014 must be accompanied by a fully-funded demobilisation strategy and intensified efforts to improve the quality and accountability of Afghan security forces. This is a moral and legal responsibility that needs to be met at the Chicago summit.

(photo credits: flickr)

