From the ground in Afghanistan, uncertain future

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Arriving into Kabul you are struck by two contrasting images. Streets jammed with noisy traffic, pavements spilling with hawkers and women in sky-blue burqas wending their way through the crush of people.

And then just a few metres from this bustle of everyday life are whole streets walled off, defended by layer upon layer of guards with machine guns behind sandbags and blast barriers set up in a zigzag manner to stop or at least slow down the suicide bomber.

These are the green zones of the Afghan capital where the top international military brass, diplomats, officials, and staff of the dozens of non-government organisations work and live and party, cut off from the turbulent nation outside, like virtual prisoners.

A drive inside the wire can be an eerie experience; SUVs with jammers silently racing down the street past huge unmarked buildings that look like fortresses with 20 ft high walls and heavily armed guards on watchtowers, looking at you nervously.

You know you are in a war zone, despite the heaving traffic outside, and that everything can change within a minute an attack begins of the type the Taliban or more specifically the Haqqanis have repeatedly carried out deep within the most secure enclaves.

Less than two years before the Western military withdrawal is completed and security responsibilities for the whole nation handed over to Afghan national forces, the walls are getting higher, the concertina wires strung further out and more areas disappearing under the security blanket in what must be one of the world's most militarised capitals.

Each time I visit Afghanistan, and this is beginning from the spring of 2002 when the Taliban had been vanquished and hope was high, more and more parts of the country have become no-go areas.

The West is leaving - indeed the whole conversation last summer was about the departure and whether it will be advanced - but so fraught is the situation that the unspoken fear is that withdrawing forces may be targeted. For some, it has brought back memories of the 1842 retreat of the British army from Kabul that went horribly wrong with the annihilation of the entire force down to the last man, woman and child except for a surgeon who survived to tell the tale of Gandamak massacre.[1]

The withdrawal this time will obviously be a far different affair, carried out on giant C130s instead of horseback as happened then. But just in case and in a reminder of the Taliban strength, one of the issues that figured in Track II talks that Taliban representatives had last year in Paris was to ensure the orderly withdrawal of French troops from eastern Kapisa province where they have faced a spate of attacks.

The surge troops that President Barack Obama sent are already gone, and now across Afghanistan the United States is shutting down scores of bases as the remainder 66,000 troops draw down, leaving Afghan forces to fight an undefeated Taliban.[2]

Each time I visit Afghanistan, and this is beginning from the spring of 2002 when the Taliban had been vanquished and hope was high, more and more parts of the country have become no-go areas. You are shown a map each time and the areas marked in red that denote high risk are not just the south and east of the capital, but the north as well and the immediate environs of Kabul itself including Wardak—the logistical route to mount an attack on the Afghan capital. There was a time when the north was considered safe, but now the furthest you can visit without raising the level of risk is the Panjshir valley.

To fight this resilient enemy, Afghan national security forces (ANSF) have been built up to a strength of 350,000, more than double NATO's peak strength of 150,000 soldiers, but this is a force that has been raised overnight, built up of 95 percent of recruits who could not write their name or count till 10 at the time of entry.[3]

Worse, even granted the Afghans war-fighting abilities, the ANSF lack the air power, the surveillance capabilities, logistics and medical facilities that were available to NATO. Yet even then, the world's most advanced military failed to prevail over the Taliban.

The strategy, as a senior commander told me recently, was never to build an ANSF that could operate without international assistance, because it was simply unrealistic. Instead the idea was to develop a military which would lead the fight against the insurgency but backed by international forces that would help with the logistics, medical facilities and above all air power which is key to fighting in the mountainous country.

Indeed, even America's far more developed European allies such as France and Britain rely on U.S. support for operations, as we saw in the Mali mission when French jets were refuelled by the United States Air Force.

But the American people are done with the Afghan war, especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden, and as they struggle with an uncertain economic recovery and fatigue, there is little appetite for a prolonged engagement in far-off Afghanistan.

Over the next few weeks, President Obama will decide on the recommendations of his commander in the region that a force of 6,000 to 20,000 troops is needed. The White House has suggested that 3,000 to 4,000 may be sufficient, and just before President Hamid Karzai was visiting Washington in January, the administration indicated even the zero option was on the table.[4]

While a force of 20,000, largely of Special Forces, could still be in a position to help out ANSF on some covert missions, anything in the range of 3,000 can only perhaps defend the bases in Bagram, Kandahar and perhaps U.S. installations in the capital. One suggestion is to reach an agreement under which the United States will maintain and have access to a number of bases they built but will be handing over to the ANSF. That way, they can still spring in forces to carry out missions rather than arriving cold turkey in the country.

In any case, the sense in Washington and which is echoed in Kabul, is that it's time to liquidate the mission and if any footprint has to be kept, it has to be ultra-light.

Some people do argue, though, that while the fight is far from over in Afghanistan, it might be even more serious in next door Pakistan and for that reason alone, America must have a presence. The seeping radicalisation of Pakistani society, the violent extremism it has bred, constitutes a threat to itself, but also to its neighbours including Afghanistan, India and beyond.

For now though, with the United States turning its back on Afghanistan, the regional countries are back in play and no country has clawed back into the frame as much as Pakistan has in just over the past few months. From the ignominy of the bin Laden raid when the world discovered that the world's number one fugitive was living in relative comfort in a Pakistani military town, to returning to a key role in facilitating peace talks with the Taliban, the security establishment has fought back.

As the United States pushes for talks with the Taliban now that it has decided to end the military mission, Pakistan has freed the first batch of prisoners to help set the stage for negotiations and promised to release more. Late last year, Afghanistan's High Peace Council visited Pakistan and set out a roadmap for talks that had been drafted by the inner circle of President Hamid Karzai in coordination with Pakistan.

The roadmap envisions, among other points, a series of confidence-building measures to be implemented in the first half of 2013. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US are to work together towards arranging direct peace talks between the HPC/Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Further down the road, the next steps are a ceasefire, an understanding on the withdrawal of international forces as well as modalities for the inclusion of Taliban and other armed opposition leaders in the power structures of the state.[5]

While the goals seem a bit too ambitious given the ground situation and the inflexibility shown by the Taliban, the centrality of Pakistan to the endgame has been reasserted. It leaves India, which has invested treasure and some blood over the past 11 years, pushed to the sidelines.

A return to a Pakistan-based fundamentalist regime allowing militant groups sanctuary is exactly the outcome India has sought to avoid in Afghanistan, providing aid and investment designed to reduce the landlocked nation's reliance on Pakistan.

Thus the highway that India helped build linking western Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar offers the country an alternate access to sea, other than its sole route to Karachi port. India has also committed itself to development of the Hajigak iron ore mines, an investment that can run to $11 billion, which if it went through could transform central Afghanistan. Thanks to the northern distribution line it has set up, Kabul is no longer a city suffering blackouts. It has gifted Afghanistan its new parliament building and hosted a rising number of students at its universities.

Above all, many of the officer corps has taken courses at top Indian military institutions, and under a Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in Oct 2011, the door has been opened to expanding this programme.[6]

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And yet, as the endgame nears, it is Pakistan—blamed by Afghans for most of their problems—which is offering to safeguard its future. The geographical reality puts it in that position along with shared religious, ethnic and cultural links, but to the Afghans it is another tragedy that they must turn to the very country they trust the in the least to help them.

You can see that on the ground in Kabul. Driving through its deserted streets at night time, you are likely to be stopped at street corners by policemen once, twice or even more at any of the dozens of checkpoints. If you look like a South Asian their guard is up even more. "Pakistani or Indian?" the cop barks out as you lower your window. When I answer "Indian", he wants me to produce a passport to prove that, and as it happens, I am not carrying one.

So I am pulled out of the car in the Afghan winter and given a full body search, with the policeman muttering under his breath that everyone goes around claiming to be an Indian, especially Pakistanis.

To be an Indian in Kabul is to be greeted warmly wherever you go, whether it is negotiating a security barrier or seeking a meeting with a government official. There is an easing of tensions (in Afghanistan, the fear uppermost in the mind is that the stranger at the door could be an attacker and you don't have too long to judge), Bollywood is almost immediately mentioned, and your hosts will go out of their way to help.

To be a Pakistani is a bit more fraught. The body search is rigorous, the questioning hostile, and, more often than not, you have to be rescued by a Western colleague especially if you are entering one of those heavily guarded, unmarked restaurants frequented by foreigners.

To the ordinary Afghan, India and Pakistan have followed two different paths in the country beginning from the ouster of the Taliban in 2001 when there was hope in the air and you could walk in the streets of Kabul (instead of trying to escape it) to the current time when the Taliban have fought back and hold the momentum as the West withdraws after a long and ultimately, unsuccessful engagement.

While the Indians have been applauded for helping build roads, getting power lines into the capital, running hospitals and arranging for hundreds of students to pursue higher education in India, the Pakistanis are accused of the violence that Afghans see all around them, from the attacks in the capital to the fighting on the border and the export of militant Islam. It's become reflexive: minutes into an attack, the blame shifts to Pakistan. "They must have done it."

A Rand study into the differing strategies adopted by the rivals in Afghanistan quotes a 2009 BBC/ABC News/ARD poll which showed that 86 percent of Afghans thought Pakistan had a negative influence in Afghanistan, with only 5 percent saying it had made a positive contribution. India's impact, by contrast, was seen as positive by 41 percent of Afghans and negative by only 10 percent. Overall, 74 percent of Afghans held a favourable view of India against 8 percent of those who had a positive impression about Pakistan.[8]

That's the scale of the challenge before Pakistan as it tries to manouevre its way back into a post-2014 settlement and install a regime that would protect its interests. Unlike 1996 when it helped the Taliban's rapid ascent to power, Pakistan has a raging insurgency within its own borders straddling Afghanistan. It may need to lean on the Afghan Taliban to rein in the Pakistani Taliban that remains a recalcitrant enemy and it certainly does not have the level of leverage it had with the Afghan group as it did more than a decade ago.

In that and in the huge goodwill of the Afghan people lies perhaps India's opportunity. It must remain invested in Afghanistan, expand the scale of its training of the ANSF both at top counter insurgency schools in India and *in situ*, and tie its plans with both Russia and Iran, both of whom are equally concerned about the potential return of the Sunni Taliban in Kabul.

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Notes

1. The Anglo-Afghan wars 1839-1919 http://books.google.com.sg/books?id=ghZHPgAACAAJ&dq=anglo-afghan+wars&hl=en&sa=X&ei=PcIVUZDZLMjJrAf3_ICICA&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA
2. US drawdown accelerates WSJ http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324581504578235893292795864.html
3. ANSF strength http://www.army.mod.uk/operations-deployments/22813.aspx
4. Zero option. Foreign Policy http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/01/07/a_zero_option_for_afghanistan
5. HPC peace document, FP http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/121213_Peace_Process_Roadmap_to_2015.pdf
6. Author on India in Afghanistan. Reuters http://blogs.reuters.com/india/2012/11/12/india-stepping-up-to-the-challenge-of-post-2014-afghanistan/
7. Rand Study http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf
8. Kanwal, IDSA http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/PeaceandStabilityinAfghanistanTheRoleofNeighbours_gkanwal_131212