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Afghanistan: Conditions-Based Redeployment

Summary

- President Barack Obama's policy of a conditions-based redeployment in Afghanistan starting in July 2011 leaves him a lot of flexibility.
- The administration will likely decide to maintain the troop numbers in Afghanistan near the surge level next year, pending another review.

The Policy

In his speech at West Point in December 2009, President Barack Obama announced his decision to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan by the summer of 2010. At the same time, the president spoke about transferring responsibility to Afghans. He said:

“These additional American and international forces will allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces, and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July 2011. As we did in Iraq, we will execute this transition responsibly, taking into account conditions on the ground.”

The last of these additional troops are now arriving.

In his speech to the nation on August 31, President Obama reiterated the policy:

“And next August, we will begin a transition to Afghan responsibility. The pace of our troop reductions will be determined by conditions on the ground, and our support for Afghanistan will endure. But make no mistake: This transition will begin—because open-ended war serves neither our interests nor the Afghan people’s.”

The Parameters

Three variables will describe the redeployment: the start date, the slope of the line on a graph depicting the number of troops in country by month, and any changes to the slope over time. While the policy as stated last December could have allowed the administration more flexibility on the first parameter, President Obama's August statement makes it clear that the start date is, for all current intents, fixed.

The initial slope of the line—how many forces depart Afghanistan in August 2011—will clearly be determined by the president based on recommendations from his military and civilian leaders in Kabul and Washington. The redeployment could be rapid, as recently occurred in Iraq, or

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nominal, that is, it could start out very slowly. The pace of the redeployment could vary over time, again based on conditions.

Conditions on the Ground: Two Scenarios

Many variables will describe conditions on the ground next year. Conditions will be good if the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been able to gain momentum clearing insurgents from major cities, improving security for Afghan citizens and enabling local and national government officials to begin to provide services—local security, health, education, justice—to these citizens. If Afghan governments—local, provincial and national—are able to provide these services, public support for the government will be rising, Afghans will be cooperating with government and international forces as they continue to press the insurgents; local and national police will be protecting these citizens from abuse; economic conditions will be improving; investors, beginning with Afghans, will be starting to put their money into the country, rather than taking it out; and pressure on government officials to reduce corruption will be growing.

Conditions will be poor if insurgents are able to maintain or increase their operations. In this case, intimidation of officials and citizens alike will persist; Taliban justice will spread, undermining the legitimate—formal and informal—justice systems; Afghan officials will continue to avoid working in insecure parts of the country; and legitimate economic activity will be stymied.

In all likelihood, conditions will be good in some places, poor in others and mixed in still others. This will introduce a large measure of uncertainty and subjectivity into the president's determination.

Conditions in other countries could also affect the decision. For example, if a terrorist attack in the United States were to be traced to Taliban in Pakistan, independent of the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, the administration might opt to maintain high levels of troops in Afghanistan to respond to renewed terrorist threats in the region.

Two Options for Each Scenario

Consistent with the stated policy, if conditions on the ground next year are determined to be good—that is, the first scenario—the administration has at least two options: a gradual redeployment or a rapid redeployment. If conditions are found to be poor next year, the second scenario, the administration has the same two options.

If ISAF is making progress clearing insurgents from major cities, and if government officials at the local and national levels are beginning to provide services to Afghan citizens, the administration could argue that this progress justifies maintaining significant forces in country to consolidate the gains. A small contingent of forces could be redeployed from a relatively secure area. Alternatively, the administration could argue that the good conditions on the ground allow U.S. forces to begin a more rapid redeployment.

If the insurgents' progress has not been stopped by next year, the administration could argue that more time is needed to do so; they could maintain nearly the peak number of U.S. troops, perhaps redeploying small numbers from a particularly secure area. Alternatively, the administration could theoretically argue that the poor conditions on the ground after 10 years in Afghanistan suggest that the mission is unsuccessful and should be changed or terminated.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The author is the vice president for Post-Conflict and Stability Operations at the United States Institute of Peace. He has served in Afghanistan and Iraq. The views expressed here are his own.

Analysis: Two Scenarios, One Option

Of the two options—rapid or nominal redeployment—the option to rapidly draw down in the face of poor conditions appears extremely unlikely. If “conditions based” means anything, the administration will not withdraw in the face of conditions that indicate the insurgents are still able to threaten U.S. security from Afghanistan or Pakistan. Such a withdrawal would be a strategic defeat of unacceptable magnitude, would likely lead to civil war in Afghanistan between Pashtuns and former Northern Alliance forces, and would threaten the stability of nuclear-armed Pakistan.

A rapid withdrawal based on good conditions on the ground also appears unlikely. While it is too soon to judge, there are some positive developments on the ground. For example, the Kabul Conference in July was organized by Afghans and resulted in an ambitious reform agenda with full buy-in from President Hamid Karzai. Furthermore, there is some indication that senior leadership in Pakistan now takes the threats from insurgents at least as seriously as the threat from India. Additionally, the 30,000 surge troops are only now fully deployed, and General David Petraeus, the ISAF commander, instills confidence. A rapid withdrawal (or even the possibility of one) could undermine these favorable developments.

That leaves one option: nominal redeployment. This suggests that the administration will decide to keep U.S. troops at relatively high levels beyond next summer.



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