

Afghanistan has more to worry about than US bases

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By Ahmed Rashid.

The fierce debate between the US and Afghanistan continues over when - and under what terms - President Hamid Karzai will sign the agreement to give US forces basing rights after 2014. Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid argues that the current impasse is distracting attention from far more important issues, which will actually determine the future course of stability in Afghanistan.

Nobody knows for sure what will happen in Afghanistan after 2014. The speculation is enormous, the range of optional scenarios mind boggling and the ignorance stretches from the US state department to the mountains of Khost.

However, it has been the military transition and the issue of how many US forces will stay on and under what terms that have preoccupied Washington and Kabul. The truth is that the military transition is probably easier than resolving other issues.

Critical factor .At present there are some 87,000 Western troops in the country, down from 150,000 last year. By next spring there will be fewer than 40,000 and at the end of the year 2014, zero - except for the tiny training force that the US is expected to leave behind.

The most critical factor in the next 12 months is the political transition and whether the presidential elections next April will be relatively free and fair and produce a legitimate government that is acceptable to most Afghans.

Caution is paramount when talking about elections in Afghanistan. On that hangs the future stability of the country - not the intensity of Taliban attacks or how many US troops remain.

President Hamid Karzai, who cannot stand again, will doubtless pick a favourite to support among the [11 candidates who are so far standing](#). Mr Karzai will want to make sure to choose the candidate who can best protect him and his extended family, especially from corruption charges.

The most likely candidates to gain his support are his brother, Qayum Karzai, or his Foreign Minister, Zalmi Rassoul.

The difficulty is that Afghanistan's 2009 polls were so widely condemned as rigged, almost fomenting a civil war in the process, that the 2014 process - and expected result - will lack credibility. If things are even half as bad as last time, all bets are off for future stability.

Pressure points

How Mr Karzai plays the ethnic card will be of vital importance.

In 2009, he claimed to have won a slim majority with the support of his fellow Pashtuns in the south and east, where the largest amount of ballot-box-stuffing took place.

The non-Pashtuns - the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and other ethnic groups in the north and west - refused to accept the results, claiming they had won, until US mediators intervened and the northern candidate Abdullah Abdullah willingly stepped down from contesting a second round. That scenario could well be repeated again next April with far more devastating results.

This time round the non-Pashtuns will not back down if they think Mr Karzai has rigged the elections. The West has no levers or pressure points it can apply on the regime to make it compromise - and it is unlikely to use aid as a weapon.

The biggest mistake over the past two years has been the surrender of any controls that were exercised over the last electoral process by the US, the UN, Nato and other Western bodies.

Equally lacking is an economic transition. Despite the \$100bn (\$61.1bn, 72.4bn euros) spent on social services in the country since 2001, the West has failed to build an indigenous economy that can provide jobs for the youth and revenue for the state.

The thousands of educated and pro-democracy Afghans who have worked for foreign forces will be out on the street with no prospects. Many of them will flee abroad and become illegal migrants. There is inadequate focus by Washington or Kabul on preparing for possible economic chaos once Western forces leave and aid packages are cut back.

That US and Nato promise of providing \$8bn (£4.9bn, 5.8bn euros) a year for the army and the economy may well dry up within a year as few in the US and Europe are in a mood to foot more bills, especially if the civil war continues.

Reconciliation .There is also no or little attention being paid to a regional transition - the diplomatic effort needed to get neighbouring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, China, the Central Asian republics and important near neighbours such as India, Russia and Saudi Arabia to forge an agreement not to interfere in Afghanistan's affairs. And not to arm and fund their favourite warlord proxy as they did in the 1990s, which led to the devastating civil war.

These transitions need, above all, reconciliation with the Taliban and agreements that bring them into the political system rather than leave them out in the cold as enemies.

The focus on reconciliation earlier on in the year has subsided.

Talks could resume if there is a new president in April who is seen to have wide support and whom the Taliban could trust. But are the Americans and Nato ready to help in such talks?

If these important issues are not discussed with Mr Karzai now, the consequences could be terrible.

A rigged election and a continuation of the war with the Taliban could lead to thousands of casualties, tens of thousands of refugees, a humanitarian crisis and international terrorist groups returning to Afghanistan.

The world will have no will to intervene once again, and the neighbouring states will pour in money and arms to try and control some of the warlords.

As the Americans leave and in order to highlight these [outstanding problems](#), what is needed is a genuine neutral mediator who can help all the elements in this complex equation reach the right conclusions.

The United Nations or the European Union or individual, non-controversial countries such as Norway or Germany could play such a role.

The tragedy is that the US and Nato-led war has emasculated the potential peacemakers and mediators. We need to prepare for the Western withdrawal now by building a major Western diplomatic initiative that will replace Western military force.