Afghanistan year zero

THE SPECTATOR MAGAZINE, LONDON, 13 December 2014

All bets are off when the US troops pull out.

Ahmed Rashid.

From Washington to Kabul and in every capital in between, governments, armies, intelligence agencies and the media are asking what will happen in Afghanistan next year when the US and Nato finally leave after 12 years fighting a war they did not win.

Despite the enormous amount of intel- ligence available, the truth is that nobody knows, not even the Afghans. The best pre- dictions can only be based on knowing what is going right, what is going wrong and what can be done to minimise the dangers of things getting worse.

But for more than a year we have been deluged with the so-called success story of the military transition — the handing over of security to the 350,000-strong Afghan army and police — as western forces pull out. We have been told repeatedly that as US-Nato forces step down, Afghan forces will step up.

The truth is that the military transition is probably the easier part. Yet even that is proving difficult because Taleban attacks and Afghan government casualties have increased enormously in the past year. This only highlights the vulnerabilities of the Afghan forces, which are 80 per cent illiterate and have an annual desertion rate of 20 per cent. At present there are some 87,000 western troops, down from 150,000 last year. By next spring there will be fewer than 40,000 and at the end of the year none but the tiny training force that the US is expect- ed to leave behind. Whether a US-Nato training mission of under 10,000 troops stays on is subject to a heated debate between President Karzai and the Americans as they battle over terms and conditions, but ultimately Karzai is likely to agree.

Afghan army losses have been so high that the defence ministry no longer disclos- es the figures, but one official spokesman told me that a staggering 1,273 police offic- ers and 770 village policemen were killed between March and October this year. During that period the Taleban mounted 6,600 attacks in 30 of the country's 34 provinces. That is an impressive record for a force that is supposedly on the wane.

There are four other transitions that need to be addressed with equal intensity in the next 12 months. The most critical is the political transition and whether the presidential elections next April will be relative- ly free and fair and produce a moderately legitimate government. Note the cautious terms. On that — not the intensity of Tale- ban attacks — hangs the future stability of the country.

Though President Hamid Karzai cannot stand again, he will doubtless pick a favour- ite among the 11 candidates standing so far. Karzai will want to choose the candidate who can best protect him and his extended family (especially from corruption charges) and possibly give him a role to play in the future. The most likely candidates to gain his support are his brother Qayum Karzai or his foreign minister Zalmai Rassoul.

To achieve a 'positive' result may well entail some poll-rigging. However if the elections are even half as rigged as they were in 2009 when a civil war was just avert- ed, all bets are off for future stability.

Electoral stability rests on how the eth- nic card is played. In 2009 Karzai claimed to have won a slim majority with the sup- port of his fellow Pashtuns in the south and east, where the largest amount of ballot box stuffing took place. The non-Pashtuns in the north and west refused to accept the results, claiming they had won, until US media- tors 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 Karzai has rigged the elections. The West has no levers it can apply to the regime to make it com- promise. 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. Rigged elec- tions might well lead to a multisided civil war with losers fighting the winners and the Taleban fighting everyone.

Equally lacking is an economic transition. Despite $100 billion spent on social services in the country since 2001, the West has failed to build an indigenous economy that can provide jobs for the young and revenue for the state. In the 1970s Afghanistan grew all its own food, now it has to import vast quantities — even agriculture has been ignored.This year has seen the biggest poppy crop on record ensuring that more Afghans are dependent on income from heroin rather than wheat. 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.

Moreover, with the US Congress and western parliaments already fed up with Afghanistan, it is unlikely that they will fulfil their promise to provide aid for the army, the economy and education of up to $10 billion a year for the next five years.

Also lacking is a regional transition — the diplomatic effort needed to get neigh- bouring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, China, the Central Asian republics and important near neighbours such as India, Russia and Saudi Arabia to agree not to interfere in Afghanistan's affairs, and not to arm and fund their favourite warlord proxy as they did in the 1990s. Instead they should reorientate their political competition, and use Afghanistan's strategic location to bring more cross-border trade, oil and gas pipe- lines and jobs to the entire region, making it a success story rather than the failure it presently is.

These three transitions depend above all on a fourth, reconciliation with the Taleban and agreements to bring them in from the political cold. The Taleban are as divided as the Afghan government over whether talks will produce results. The last attempt at direct talks with the US in Qatar in 2010- 11 collapsed, but the Taleban delegation is still in Doha. Talks could resume only if there were a new president who was seen to have wide support and whom the Taleban could trust, while the Americans are more prepared to offer compromises such as the release of Taleban prisoners from Guantanamo.

The Taleban are ripe for talks and com- promise. The raison d'être for their cause — jihad against foreign occupation — will end when the Americans leave. Many want to stop fighting and reduce the heavy casualties they face. They want to leave their sanctuaries in Pakistan and the controls exercised by the Pakistani intelligence agencies and go home. They are proud Afghans and they detest being called Pakistan's poodles.

Only reconciliation can deflect an ultimate debacle for the Afghan army. Without an air force or heavy weapons and with the high levels of low morale, desertions and ignorance, the Afghan army can- not fight the Taleban with the same intensity as the Americans did. They might hold their ground for six to 12 months at the most. For safety's sake the regime would then order the army to adopt a Fortress Kabul strategy, as tried and tested by the communist regime from 1989 to 1992 after the Soviets left Afghanistan.

The army would secure the major cities and some main roads on which they depend for supplies from outside.They would not go on the offensive to retake lost territory. The countryside — first in the south and later in the north where resistance would be fierce — would slowly fall into the hands of the Taleban, leaving the country split between large rural areas controlled by the Taleban and ever more fragile cities controlled by the regime.

There would be thousands of casualties, tens of thousands of refugees, a humanitarian crisis and international terrorist groups in the blank spaces of the countryside. The world would have no will to intervene again and the neighbouring states would pour in money and arms to try to control some war- lords and determine the outcome of the war to their advantage. Mess would become morass.

This is a scenario everyone wants to avoid — both the regime and the Taleban and neighbouring states— for it entails total destruction and a potentially never-ending civil war. Only al-Qa'eda and other groups who fear losing their sanctuaries would want such an outcome, and they will do eve- rything in their power to sabotage a peace deal between Kabul, the Taleban and neighbouring states.

Despite the fact that most scenarios point to a gloomy conclusion, it is not inevi- table. The departure of western forces — an irritant to many — will make it more prob- able that the Afghan factions will sit down with one another and hammer out a deal. In addition, none of the regional powers is economically or political strong enough to determine the outcome in Afghanistan on its own, so they need to co-operate with one another. (Remember that if Afghanistan is a failing state, so are most of its neighbours.)

What is needed is a genuine neutral mediator who can help all the elements in this complex equation. The United Nations, the European Union or individual, non-controversial countries such as Norway or Germany, with international support behind them, could play such a role. The tragedy is that the US and Nato-led war has emasculated the potential peacemakers and mediators. The US should have enlisted third-party mediation when it began its failed talks with the Taleban in 2010, but hubris, arrogance and the acute divisions within the Obama administration got in the way.

Above all, ordinary Afghans will be putting pressure on their next government to end the war. A civilian movement both inside the country and in neighbouring countries could do much to help a peace process. Only peace could re-energise the West to fulfil their aid commitments to Afghanistan. Nobody is going to fund an endless civil war.

There is much at stake for the Afghans and for the rest of the world, including the future of al-Qa'eda, the safety of nuclear- armed Pakistan and a grand bargain with Iran over its nuclear programme, and help- ing build peace in the region. Much as the US and Europe would like to leave this region to its own devices, it remains too important to be left alone. The Afghans deserve a chance for peace and an end to the wars that began 35 years ago. But they cannot achieve this alone. They need their neighbours and the West to remain committed if peace is going to have any chance of creeping in.