ARTICLES

Can Afghanistan hold on?

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President Barack Obama's decision last week to break his promise and keep thousands of US forces in Afghanistan when he leaves office is a stark indication of how quickly the country has slid back into crisis. The White House's reassessment has been prompted by the Taliban's dramatic gains of territory in recent weeks and the Afghan government's inability to stop it.

But Obama's plan to retain 5,500 troops beyond 2017 will do little to address those severe military setbacks. Nor will it be able to end the acute economic and political paralysis of the leadership in Kabul, which has already caused tens of thousands of Afghans to flee to Europe, and a steady erosion of support for President Ashraf Ghani. Can the Afghan government hold on?

On October 1, the Taliban captured their first city since losing the country to US forces in 2001. Kunduz, with a population of 300,000 and strategically situated on the border with Central Asia, had been under siege by the Taliban for much of this year, but a surprise attack by a few hundred Taliban just after a religious holiday overran its defenses and the security forces needed two weeks to retake the city.

Meanwhile, the unexplained, horrific bombing by US aircraft of a Kunduz hospital run by the international medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières, in which twenty-two people were killed including twelve of MSF's staff and three children, has caused outrage around the world and led to the organization rejecting a US apology and demanding an international investigation. It has also forced the US to curtail its use of air power over Kunduz.

The entire Afghan state is now threatened. Afghan officials told me that the Taliban pose a grave threat to some seventeen of the country's thirty-four provinces. Of those, a half dozen are in danger of falling completely into Taliban control, including Helmand and Uruzgan in the south—the traditional Taliban heartland where the rural areas are entirely Taliban-controlled; Faryab, an isolated but strategic province in the north-west bordering Turkmenistan; Farah in the south-west, bordering Iran; and Badakhshan and Kunar provinces in the northeast, bordering Pakistan and China.

The fall of any one of these provinces to the Taliban before the harsh Afghan winter sets in would cause further panic in Kabul. The UN says the insurgency has spread more widely than at any time since 2001 and it has evacuated its staff from four provinces in recent weeks.

What the continuing presence of US troops beyond 2017 can do is keep international attention on Afghanistan. With US—and most likely NATO—troops on the ground, the international community will not be able simply to turn its back on Kabul, despite the severity of other crises around the world. And the continued deployment will increase the likelihood that the US and NATO will keep funding the Afghan government and military for some years to come. Most funding programs had been scheduled to end in 2017.

But the reality is that the promised 5,500 US troops are little more than half of the current number (9,800), which has been unable to prevent the Taliban from making dramatic gains. Even with the addition of 4,000 to 5,000 troops that European officials say NATO will provide beyond 2017, the total deployment will be far too little to change the situation. And there are meanwhile few provisions for the international forces to fight or provide adequate air cover for the Afghan army.

Obama's decision is another defeat for his pledge to have all US forces out of Iraq and Afghanistan by the end of 2016. Seven years ago Obama inherited a critical situation in Afghanistan from former President George Bush, which forced him to immediately deploy tens of thousands of more troops, reaching a total of more than 100,000 in 2010. Yet there have been few lasting achievements from that surge, which ended in 2012, and now Obama seems likely to leave his own successor a similarly unresolved and precarious war that threatens to destabilize the region.
The loss of Kunduz has already triggered widespread alarm, especially in Central Asia, with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, which are deploying troops on their respective borders with Afghanistan. There is evidence that foreign fighters from Central Asia joined the Taliban for its offensive on Kunduz, and President Putin, speaking in Kazakhstan on Friday, called on other ex-Soviet nations to be prepared to act together to repel a possible attack by "terrorists" now seeking sanctuaries in Taliban-held areas of Afghanistan.

The battle of Kunduz has also added to Afghanistan's already desperate refugee situation. According to the UN, more than 120,000 people fled Kunduz city and the province of the same name, but with the evacuation of all aid agencies and with most government offices closed in the north, little aid could be delivered to any of them. There are now more than one million Afghans displaced inside the country because of the fighting and Afghans have already become the second largest group (after Syrians) of people trying to seek asylum in Europe.

Meanwhile, the Taliban's success at Kunduz has prompted other Taliban forces around the country to step up their attacks against government forces. On October 13, Afghan forces repelled some 2,000 Taliban fighters who converged from several directions to try to take the city of Ghazni south of Kabul, and there was heavy fighting before the Taliban were pushed back. Ghazni, an ancient multi-ethnic city, lies astride the crucial Kabul-Kandahar highway, which is now considered too dangerous to travel on. Much of the province of Ghazni is in the hands of the Taliban. Unlike its Iraqi counterpart, which has largely collapsed in the face of ISIS's offensives last year and this year, the Afghan army has proved it can fight. But it has taken heavy casualties: more than 5,000 Afghan security forces have been killed so far in 2015, twice the number of the same period last year. What the soldiers lack is good leadership and effective lines of command. Though Ashraf Ghani's government was formed following elections a year ago (which

resulted in a power sharing agreement with rival candidate Abdullah Abdullah, who became chief executive), he has yet to appoint a defense minister. Meanwhile, there are too many Afghan generals representing too many different security forces—regular troops, special forces, a variety of militias, and village guards—producing a situation of chronic squabbling and disorganization. Kunduz had ten generals but no single general in charge. And corruption has undermined the trust between officers and soldiers.

Senior Afghan officials say that the Afghan army urgently needs more air cover to help it prevent the massing of Taliban forces outside major cities. But there is no proper Afghan air force and Western governments have failed to step in. The US began training Afghan pilots only in 2007, and officers are now training on US-made helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft; they will not be able to be deployed before 2018, according to senior Western officials I spoke to. For the new Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the current offensive has been a shrewd political move. Mansour faces internal opposition to his leadership—partly because he and six other Taliban kept secret that founding leader Mullah Mohammed Omar died, apparently from health complications, two years ago. Mansour had been ruling in Omar's name since then and building up his power base, but failed to win the trust of many Taliban commanders. Now, by launching a successful military campaign, he is hoping to keep the Taliban united through the battlefield. The current insurgency has also stalled Afghanistan's best opportunity for a peace deal in years—the talks that began this summer between the Taliban and the Kabul government in Pakistan. In recent months, both President Ghani and his co-ruler, Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, have tried to effect a rapprochement with Pakistan and gain its help in mediating with the Taliban. The first round of talks, held on July 7, and was endorsed by China, the US, and all of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors. But further talks have been suspended amid the changing military situation and acrimony about the continuing protection that Taliban leaders enjoy in Pakistan.

As the war comes closer to Kabul, President Ghani has quickly lost the enormous popularity he enjoyed last year. Daily governance has been brought to a standstill, with crucial projects such as issuing identity cards, passing electoral reforms, and scheduling parliamentary elections on indefinite hold. Meanwhile, the government has failed to tackle corruption and bolster the economy, and is literally running out of money.

There is now a large-scale flight out of Afghan capital—especially to the Gulf, where many Afghans with sufficient funds have bought houses. Ghani is trying to stop the mass exodus of educated young Afghans to Germany, but with little sign of success. Many politicians are now ganging up against Ghani, including former President Hamid Karzai who is demanding that Ghani rescind any agreements made with Pakistan; another former presidential candidate, Omar Daudzai, is along with many others calling for Ghani's resignation and for a Loya Jirga (national assembly) to be convened to set up an interim government. The international community, deeply disappointed with Ghani's performance, is delaying or withholding vital financial contributions to the government until promised reforms and actions are taken.

What the Americans have lacked throughout Obama's second term is an overall strategy for containing the Taliban and bringing a stable political order to the country. Obama has shown little interest in Afghanistan beyond doing what he has to prevent the total collapse of the current state. But it is unclear how much longer that will suffice. The Afghan government may not survive another major victory by the Taliban—especially if it captures a large Afghan city. If that happens, the US and its NATO allies will be forced to act—or concede defeat.
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