

# End game

Western withdrawal need not mean civil war in Afghanistan.  
But America must talk to the Taliban

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Britain has been at war in Afghanistan for over a decade. Many Britons now take it for granted that its country's intervention in Afghanistan has failed and when Nato troops pull out in 2014 they will leave behind a volatile and unsettled state that could easily plunge into a civil war — much worse than what western forces inherited back in 2001.

No doubt the chance of Afghanistan fracturing in the hands of a corrupt, incompetent government, a well armed and motivated Taliban opposition in the south and ethnic warlordism in the north is high. Rapacious neighbours, especially Pakistan and Iran, may regenerate their proxy wars for influence, as they did in the 1990s. Al-Qa'eda is still active in many parts of the world.

Taliban attacks against Nato forces over the summer months have increased by 11 per cent compared to the same period last year. There are more than 100 Taliban attacks each month, and in July 46 US and Nato troops were killed. There has been no respite in the fasting month of Ramadan, when there is usually a fighting lull. Contrary to western leaders' claims, the tide of war is not receding.

Even more dangerous and disheartening is the Taliban re-emergence in Helmand and Kandahar, the southern provinces and Taliban heartland that were supposed to have been swept clean by US and British offensives over the years and where countless British soldiers have been killed. The US-led counter-insurgency war to win hearts and minds is being trumped by the Taliban's tactic of divide and rule by terror.

The enormous sums spent on development over a decade have still not created a self-sustaining economy, which could provide jobs for an Afghan youth bulge — 70 per cent of the population is under 25. What has emerged instead is a corrupt, wasteful, inefficient aid-delivery system which only reinforces the Afghan dependency on foreign handouts.

Nato is determined to leave by 2014 and is obsessed with the so-called transition — the handing over of military duties to the fledgling, under-trained and still illiterate Afghan security forces which are already heavily penetrated by the Taliban.

Yet a meltdown into civil war is still avoidable if Nato pursues the right strategies in the next 18 months.

The key to a future peace is not the military transition — the Afghan army on its own could never sustain the present level of fighting against the Taliban — but a political transition.

The Taliban are just as fearful of a civil war as other Afghans are because they know that, unlike in the 1990s, they could not win it. Government forces would retreat into a Fortress Kabul strategy — fortifying major cities and roads while leaving the countryside in the hands of the Taliban. The northern warlords are re-arming and would halt any Taliban push north of Kabul far better than they did in the 1990s.

After seven rounds of secret US-Taliban negotiations brokered by Qatar and Germany, the Taliban suspended further talks last

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January. The on-off dialogue was stalled and tied in knots not so much by Taliban intransigence but by the infighting and bureaucratic turf wars between the US Departments of State, Defence and the CIA, while Nato allies have been virtually ignored.

In the past few months the Taliban has strongly signalled that they want a resumption of talks. Yet with the American elections around the corner, the Obama administration will take no mediatory step that opens it to criticism from the Republicans. This is an unfortunate obstacle, since most experts recognise that 'Phase One' of any dialogue must involve the establishment of sufficient trust between the US and the Taliban so that violence can be reduced, leading to an eventual ceasefire. So far the US military appears least willing to offer concessions.

The complex negotiations that will be

needed for Phase Two — agreement on constitutional problems, a federal or centrally run country, the acceptance of democracy as the form of government, the role of Islam and women and continuing progress in areas such as health care and education — will involve careful preparation by the Afghan government and the West.

Moreover it is unclear how presidential elections will take place in 2014, a time when western forces will be leaving, and what guarantees President Hamid Karzai can give to ensure they are not a repeat of the farcical and heavily disputed elections of 2009.

Yet there are few signs that either the Afghan government or the US and its allies are preparing position papers for such political discussions.

Likewise, despite the US antipathy towards Pakistan and Iran, a dialogue leading to a non-interference agreement between all of Afghanistan's neighbours will be essential to keep the regional peace. Half-hearted diplomatic efforts have been stymied by the West's preoccupation with Iran's nuclear weapons programme and Pakistan's intransigence when it comes to ending the sanctuaries it gives to the Taliban and the lethal network run by Jalaluddin Haqqani.

What Afghans fear most is not a Taliban takeover, which is unlikely, but a total lack of preparation or strategy towards planning for difficult but not intractable political problems. A breakdown in discussing a political strategy among Afghans could easily lead to civil war.

Multiple political and diplomatic exercises have to be carried out simultaneously by the Afghans and Nato to ensure that they are prepared for all eventualities, including a comprehensive peace dialogue with the Taliban and Pakistan and Iran.

What is clear is that the Americans cannot do this on their own, but so far they have refused help from Nato or the United Nations and even declined help from other countries who have their own secret dialogues going on with elements of the Taliban such as Britain, Norway, Germany and Japan. The intransigence and infighting demonstrated by the Obama administration has been catastrophic in terms of wasted time and wasted opportunities. This cannot be allowed to continue after the November elections — no matter who wins the White House.

But Nato and Britain too have failed to be more publicly critical of what the US is not doing and the monopoly it exerts over the post-2014 'endgame'. There has been virtual silence from European governments as the US has continued to blunder.

Nato must insist that European powers, who have better records of dealing with the Taliban and Karzai, need to be involved in the peace process and the formulation of a political strategy. It is time Britain spoke out about what needs to be done.

