Why Are We Abandoning the Afghans?

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By Ahmed Rashid

What will Afghanistan look like in 2014, after a dozen years of occupation, more than 2,800 NATO soldiers killed, and an expenditure of $1 trillion? If the participants in this week's NATO summit in Chicago are to be believed, what they will leave behind is little more than a series of fortresses in enemy territory: Kabul and the other major cities will be protected by Afghan forces, while the countryside falls back into the hands of the Taliban. NATO leaders all but acknowledged that much of Kandahar and Helmand provinces—where 30,000 US marines had launched "the surge" two years ago to route out the Taliban—would quickly revert back to Taliban control once the Americans left.

President Barack Obama has said that the promise to end combat operations by next summer and withdraw all Western troops by 2014 is "irreversible." In other words, whatever happens on the ground when authority is handed over to the fledgling, largely illiterate, and drug infested Afghan army will not stop US and NATO forces from going home. The 350,000-strong Afghan army and police will be downsized by 100,000 men—not because they are not needed on the battlefield, but because the West will not pay for their upkeep. "Are there risks involved in it? Absolutely," Obama conceded while winding up the summit.

The US and NATO long ago abandoned any pretense that that they are trying to build a modern, democratic state in Afghanistan. But the lackluster meeting in Chicago showed just how far support for the Afghan mission has eroded in recent months. Now, even limited aims—like working infrastructure, a functioning civil service and judiciary, and basic economic stability—will be difficult to realize. Clearly there is a rush for the exits by Western leaders, but there is no Plan B to address worsening battlefield conditions and political crises if they occur.

US officials now speak blithely about "Afghanistan good enough," meaning that we should disabuse ourselves of any expectation that Afghans are capable of creating sufficient security, a sustainable economy, democracy, rights for women, or anything close to what the West insisted upon back in 2001. Even Obama admits to the possibility that the departure of NATO forces will leave behind a mess. "I don't think there's ever going to be an optimal point where we say, 'This is all done. This is perfect. This is just the way we wanted it,'" Obama said. "This is a process, and it's sometimes a messy process."

Even more demoralizing for the Afghans, however, is Washington's deliberate downgrading of its al-Qaeda strategy for the country. The way Tom Donilon, Obama's National Security Adviser, now describes the US's security aims for Afghanistan is so minimal that it is hard to square them with the policies that have been officially in place during much of the occupation. "The goal is to have an Afghanistan again that has a degree of stability such that forces like al-Qaeda and associated groups cannot have safe haven unimpeded," said Donilon, the day before the summit started. In other words the aim to "eliminate" al-Qaeda from the region is no longer in play; all that can be hoped for is a "degree of stability."

NATO leaders spoke deliberately about "ending the war" but nobody believes the war will end simply because NATO is leaving. The summit failed to outline any political strategy that would protect the Afghan government against the twin threats of overthrow by the Taliban or internal collapse precipitated by economic crisis, a multisided civil war, and acute ethnic divisions.

Instead NATO seems to have accepted that what follows its departure in 2014 will be a Fortress Kabul strategy pursued by a besieged Afghan government. More than one US commentator has spoken about the exit strategy as all exit and no strategy. A sustainable political outcome must begin with a genuine attempt to contain the violence and even end the war—goals that can only be accomplished if the US dialogue with the Taliban is made the central focus of US strategy in the time that remains. These talks, which were initiated by the Taliban two years ago first with Germany, then Qatar, and finally now the United States, have stalled not because of Taliban

intransigence but because of infighting within the Obama administration.

Consider the deal the two sides had worked out that has now been stalled: the release of five Taliban prisoners being held at Guantanamo in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl—a 25-year-old US army sergeant taken prisoner in eastern Afghanistan on June 30, 2009—and the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar. Most of the blame lies on the US side, which accepted the Taliban demands only to have the US military backtrack on them, leading the Taliban to suspend the talks. This agreement, which has few apparent downsides, would have done much to create confidence between the two sides; but Washington's contradictory positions on it have instead encouraged an atmosphere of mistrust.

Obama is not being honest when he claims that by 2014, the war "as we understand it" will be over. The war will be over only when the Taliban, the Americans, and the Karzai government come to an agreement. It is ironic that what the US government does not understand or refuses to accept, Bowe Bergdhal's father Robert does. He says that peace talks with the Taliban are inextricably linked to his son's release.

Even on its own terms, the US's planned military transition in Afghanistan makes little sense. The White House says it wants NATO countries to contribute $4.1 billion per year to maintain the Afghan security forces after 2014. The US says it will put in $2.4 billon, the Afghan government $500 million, while NATO allies are expected to cough up the remainder. Even though the summit was not billed as a donor conference, Washington sent around a list of what it expects each NATO country to contribute. So far the money has not been forthcoming. Meanwhile even as President Obama vows to cease all combat operations next year, US military leaders say they will be fighting until the last day.

Pakistan's refusal to reopen the supply route from Karachi to the Afghan border supplies has created another headache. At the summit, President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan faced humiliation as his government proved incapable or unable to reach a deal. US-Pakistan relations have virtually collapsed over the past year amid a series of incidents that have undermined the credibility of the civilian government and the military while Washington's belligerent statements have fueled anti-Americanism. But there is an even more serious crisis than the collapse of relations between Islamabad and Washington: Pakistan's internal political breakdown, as neither the army nor the civilian leadership have been able to address the urgent problems the country now faces, including an economic meltdown, home-grown terrorism by groups that were once supported by the military, attacks against all minorities by hardline Islamists, and almost continual mayhem and violence in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city.

In a lengthy statement after the summit, the Taliban said that once the NATO occupation of Afghanistan ends, "Afghans can reach a resolution regarding their country." That claim—which was not even discussed at the summit—needs to be fully tested by the US and its allies. If it is not, the Taliban may well devise their own resolution. After three decades of war and suffering and large-scale refugee problems, the Afghans and their immediate neighbors desperately need a break that only peace will bring.