

ISSUE BRIEF

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How to Ensure That a U.S. Troop Drawdown Does Not Destabilize Afghanistan

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The Obama Administration has lost confidence in the government in Afghanistan, and it is easy to understand why. After the loss of nearly 2,300 U.S. troops in 12 years of military operations and the investment of over \$90 billion in U.S. reconstruction aid, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's refusal to sign a security pact allowing for a residual U.S. force presence post-2014 and continual rants and conspiracy theories about U.S. policy are inexplicable and unforgivable.

But allowing frustration with Karzai to lead to a total U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan this year would be a monumental mistake. The recent increase in al-Qaeda violence in Iraq should serve as a warning that failure to maintain a residual force presence in Afghanistan post-2014 would increase instability throughout South and Central Asia and embolden a vast network of Islamist terrorists with global ambitions. Moreover, renewed instability in Afghanistan would also likely spill over into Pakistan, where terrorist attacks are on the rise and the U.S. intelligence community's concerns over the safety and security of its nuclear weapons arsenal are growing.

Iraq Déjà Vu. There is a sense of déjà vu in that U.S. security talks are close to breaking down with

Afghanistan much the same way they did with Iraq two years ago. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari advised Karzai in December to sign the bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the U.S., warning him not to be under any illusions that the Americans are desperate to stay in Afghanistan.

The Iraqi government is currently struggling to control escalating violence that resulted in nearly 7,800 civilian deaths last year and the fall of the city of Fallujah in Anbar province to al-Qaeda militants last month. In November 2013 alone, Iraq experienced 50 suicide attacks.

When Karzai first announced last fall that he would not sign the BSA until after the April 2014 elections, observers thought he was trying to drive a hard bargain with the U.S. If that was the case, he lost the bargain when the U.S. Congress slashed development funding to Afghanistan by 50 percent in the fiscal year 2014 omnibus appropriations legislation that passed last month.

It is now clear that Karzai is sabotaging his own country's future. A formal assembly of Afghanistan's tribal elders urged him to sign the BSA late last year, and nearly all of the electoral candidates for the April elections have expressed their support for maintaining a residual U.S. force presence. The only entity that supports Karzai's refusal to sign the BSA is the Taliban, which has long called for the ouster of all international forces from the country.

Some media reports allege that Karzai is secretly negotiating with the Taliban (although the Taliban has strongly refuted the claims). If Karzai is holding unilateral talks with the Taliban, he is almost certainly being led down the garden path of scuttling the BSA to benefit the Taliban's military plans.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4147>

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While Karzai's position on the BSA is irresponsible and is putting his country's future at risk, the Obama Administration has also sent mixed messages on its commitment to Afghanistan. The Administration should have signaled long ago its intention to leave a robust residual force. Instead, the White House has refused to provide a firm indication of how many troops it would be prepared to leave after 2014. By proposing Washington either leave 10,000 residual troops or none at all, the U.S. military leadership may be signaling its frustration with White House equivocation over the troop numbers issue.¹

Focus on Long-term Strategy. With only two months to go before the Afghan elections, the U.S. should simply ignore Karzai and wait for the election to produce a new government, which would very likely sign the BSA promptly. Afghanistan should not again become a hotbed for terrorists bent on attacking the U.S. To ensure that Afghanistan does not implode as the U.S. draws down its forces, the U.S. must:

- **Continue military planning.** That involves leaving at least 10,000 U.S. troops on the ground after 2014 to signal to the region and international partners that the U.S. is not turning its back on the country and will remain engaged in bolstering the country's security. The U.S. loses nothing by waiting another two months until elections are held and a successor government takes Karzai's place. If the U.S. is patient, its NATO allies are likely to follow suit and also prepare to leave a few thousand troops to help with training and advising the Afghan forces. The U.S. has a responsibility to demonstrate leadership and long-term vision on this issue, especially when so much is at stake for the international community.
- **Maintain U.S. assistance programs.** While Congress has a responsibility to oversee aid to Afghanistan, it should also take into account the critically important role U.S. assistance programs have had in changing lives in Afghanistan and keeping the Taliban at bay over the past 12 years. U.S. legislators and policymakers should seek to enhance the effectiveness of the aid pro-

grams and ensure that they become self-sustaining. These are the post-conflict projects that are helping the Afghan and coalition forces win the peace in Afghanistan. Abruptly cutting them would undermine the Afghan government and create a governance vacuum that the Taliban would quickly fill.

- **Remain focused on the electoral process and clear-eyed about Afghan reconciliation.** There is enthusiasm among the Afghans for the upcoming elections, despite past flawed polls that were rife with allegations of rigging. The U.S. should remain supportive of the electoral process yet maintain distance from the candidates so as not to be seen as favoring one over the other. Meanwhile, the goal of Afghan peace talks should be to split the Taliban from al-Qaeda and encourage them to become part of the political process, not allow them to dominate power at the expense of other ethnic groups and progress made for the people of Afghanistan over the past 12 years. The U.S. should be realistic about the threat that Taliban extremists and their al-Qaeda allies pose and not pin false hopes on a political reconciliation process merely to justify a troop withdrawal.

A Long-Term Focus. The U.S. has tremendous stakes in the future of Afghanistan and therefore should take a long-term focus and develop a well-crafted strategy that manages the withdrawal of combat troops and transitions to a new security role of bolstering Afghan forces. If the Taliban regain influence and power in the country, it will embolden Islamist extremists throughout the region and increase the risk of international terrorist attacks.

Moreover, renewed instability in Afghanistan would also likely spill over into Pakistan, where terrorist attacks are already on the rise and the U.S. intelligence community's concerns over the safety and security of its nuclear weapons arsenal are growing.

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1. Jackie Calmes and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military Eyes Afghan Force of 10,000, or a Pullout," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/asia/military-eyes-afghan-force-of-10000-or-a-pullout.html> (accessed February 6, 2014).