

US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan unravelling

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The first month of 2013 revealed not only the precarious state of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, but also its potentially catastrophic regional consequences.

In a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by Michael Keating and Matt Waldman, which argues for a deal between the US government and the Taliban, the authors paint a stark picture.

Pointing out that “even in the winter fighting ‘lull’ there are an average of 50 insurgent attacks a day across the country,” the authors write: “Disillusionment about Afghanistan in Washington and other capitals is growing... Meanwhile, the Taliban remain strong; warlords are reported to be rearming; and many Afghans that can are leaving or getting their money out. More than 32,000 Afghans made asylum applications in 2012—more than any other nationality worldwide.”

The authors warn of a “relapse into civil war” that would be disastrous “for the wider region.”

Even before the official drawdown of US/NATO troops, Kabul is becoming the scene of ever more frequent attacks on the occupation regime. During one week in January, insurgents stormed two security buildings in the very heart of the capital.

On January 16, a suicide squad attacked a heavily-fortified spy compound of the intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), in central Kabul, killing at least one commando and wounding dozens of civilians.

The spy compound is situated on a usually crowded road near Kabul’s police headquarters, the Interior Ministry, a hospital, shops and a parade of embassies, including ones representing India, Iran, Turkey and the Netherlands, as well as a restaurant popular with expats.

Before dawn on January 21, insurgents stormed the

traffic police headquarters in Kabul, located a few kilometres from the NDS spy compound. The traffic police HQ building is in close proximity to the Kabul parliament, the Russian embassy and several other diplomatic outposts.

The adage about US-backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai being little more than the mayor of Kabul seems hopelessly outdated, as the US and NATO and their quisling forces struggle to secure even the most heavily fortified parts of the capital city.

Attacks by insurgents outside the capital are a routine occurrence. In one suicide attack on January 26, the chief of traffic police and the head of counterterrorism were among at least 10 people killed at a busy market in the northeastern city of Kunduz.

Kunduz is the site of a major German military (Bundeswehr) base. German parliamentarians recently overwhelmingly approved a 13-month extension to the Bundeswehr’s operations in Afghanistan. The mission is being gradually downsized and is currently officially due to end by 2015.

The official image that Washington and its allies have been seeking to portray is that of a smooth handover to Afghan police and security forces in conjunction with a foreign troop drawdown in 2014. Belying this, UK Defence Secretary Philip Hammond was forced to admit last month that there had been a doubling of casualties among Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) over the past year, as well as spikes in desertion rates from the army.

The classified figures were given by NATO commanders to the UK’s Ministry of Defence to help Hammond and Lieutenant General Richard Barrons prepare for questions from Members of Parliament.

The Taliban and insurgent forces have killed an estimated 1,100 members of the Afghan security forces

in the past six months, as NATO troops have stepped back and left the local army and police to face the insurgency.

Barrons said the ANSF had suffered badly from attacks by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The number of personnel deserting and not returning to their posts in the 350,000-strong ANSF has reached a monthly average of 2.6 percent and peaked in October at 3.1 percent. The target was to keep the levels to 1.6 percent.

According to the latest Pentagon review, only one of the ANSF's 23 brigades is able to function independently.

The 2014 US/NATO troop drawdown—leaving thousands of foreign troops and military personnel still stationed in Afghanistan—is aimed at facilitating the long-term subjugation of an increasingly restive Afghan population by indigenous forces. There are already growing indications of how brutal a process this will be.

According to a report released this week by the United Nations, almost one third of all detainees recently transferred to the control of Afghan security forces have been tortured. The 139-page report found that between October 2011 and October 2012, of the 79 detainees interviewed, 25 were tortured. The methods included hanging prisoners by the wrists and beating them with cables. The report adds that the Afghan spy agency is also operating secret facilities.

The potentially calamitous regional impact of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan has also been evident in recent weeks.

Officials in Uzbekistan have made it known that they want to make a deal with US/NATO forces to provide safe passage along its roads out of Afghanistan for the troop pullout if the departing forces leave their military equipment in Uzbek hands.

The *New York Times* wrote that with the high cost of shipping used equipment to the US, “what Uzbek officials are offering, however, has value.” The *Times* continued: “Over the next two years, NATO forces are expected to remove about 70,000 vehicles and 120,000 shipping containers from Afghanistan, and the way out will require rail lines and well-surfaced roads.

“Although Pakistani ports are seen as the most efficient avenue for the cargo's withdrawal, alternatives will be important, and allied officials are

mindful of a potential disruption if Pakistan ever decides to again close the routes or ask for more money, as it did during a diplomatic crisis with the United States in 2011 and 2012.”

Washington has taken the Uzbek proposal seriously enough to partially lift a set of decade-long arms sales restrictions and to hold interagency meetings on the issue.

In December, Uzbekistan pulled out of Russia's regional security bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as it stepped up its requests for US/NATO weapons. Russia responded by offering a \$1 billion arms deal to Kyrgyzstan.

It is the growing rivalry between Washington and Beijing that is emerging as the major fault line in regional politics. While encouraging, or at least allowing, the advances of China into Afghanistan in recent months for the purpose of alleviating its own difficulties, Washington is opposed to any obstacles to its long-term assertion of US hegemony over the region.

Beijing signed a strategic partnership last summer with Afghanistan. This was followed in September with a trip to Kabul by its top security official, the first by a leading Chinese government figure in 46 years, and the announcement that China would train 300 Afghan police officers. China has hinted at readiness to help negotiate a peace agreement around the NATO troop drawdown.

A recent *Associated Press* article noted that China “is stepping up its involvement as US-led forces prepare to withdraw, attracted by the country's vast mineral resources, but concerned that any post-2014 chaos could embolden Islamist insurgents in its own territory.”

It noted, “Chinese enterprises have already bagged three multi-billion-dollar investment projects... a definite shift toward a more hands-on approach to Afghanistan is underway.”



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