Afghan policemen inspect the site of a motorcycle bomb in the city of Kandahar on Dec. 6, 2011.

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The Afghan exit strategy is fraught with peril

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail
Published Wednesday, Dec. 07, 2011 2:00AM EST

The international community’s 2014 exit strategy from Afghanistan rests on two pillars: training an Afghan security force that can stand on its own feet, and fostering regional co-operation on a conflict that defies borders. Forging a political settlement with the Taliban is considered by most to be the indispensable third pillar of this strategy, even if U.S. and NATO officials are reticent to recognize it as such. Unfortunately, an assessment of progress in all three areas gives cause for serious concern.

September’s assassination of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who chaired the Afghan high peace council overseeing negotiations with anti-government groups, appears to have derailed efforts to find common ground with the Taliban. Pakistan’s absence from the just-concluded Bonn II Conference
over an accidental NATO bombing that left 24 of its soldiers dead has similarly left prospects for a regional strategy bleak. The final pillar, the training program for the Afghan National Security Forces, has fared little better.

As the 2014 target for the withdrawal of most international troops looms, NATO’s training mission is scrambling to add nearly 50,000 soldiers and police to Afghanistan’s 306,000-strong security force over the next year. The Afghan security forces are now responsible for seven geographic areas accounting for 25 per cent of the population. The prospects, however, of creating a force capable of assuming security responsibility for the entire country by 2014 remain dubious.

According to U.S. government sources, only one of the Afghan National Army’s 161 units is capable of operating independently; this represents a regression from the four units that were rated as independent in June. No units of the police are capable of functioning without direct coalition assistance, and no sections of the ministries of Interior and Defence (which will soon be charged with managing the security situation) are capable of autonomous action. All are rife with corruption. Meanwhile, the number of security incidents confronting the Afghan security forces continues to increase, with the UN citing a 39-per-cent rise in 2011 over the previous year.

Some view these problems as transitory amid a record of steady improvement, a message trumpeted at Bonn. The real dilemma, however, is that even if Afghanistan could achieve the desired force levels and improve the impact of its training programs, the force would be fundamentally unsustainable without massive and prolonged international subsidies. The U.S. Defence and State departments have requested more than $5-billion to sustain the Afghan police and military in 2012. Continued training and operations add further billions to the tab. Contrast these figures with the Afghan government’s revenues in 2010, which were a paltry $1-billion.

Although donors in Bonn have pledged to finance the Afghan government over the next decade, several U.S. accountability offices note that there has been no comprehensive study of the actual costs of sustaining the Afghan security forces after withdrawal, and the conference simply postponed any concrete assessment. In a climate of economic crisis and fiscal austerity, it seems unlikely that donor countries will continue to bridge such a glaring resource gap for the foreseeable future.

After 2014, Afghanistan will almost assuredly be stuck with a bill it can’t pay – but if it does not keep training and developing the security forces, attrition will quickly decimate NATO’s achievements. One in seven soldiers and police desert each month, and for every 10 soldiers trained another 13 trainees drop out. Any disruption in salary payments to the security forces that will likely accompany a drop in international subsidies will compound this problem.

With all three of the pillars of the international exit strategy teetering, what is the likely outcome of the transition? What is at stake?

If the Afghan security forces do prove unsustainable after 2014, they will likely splinter into factions led by various strongmen. (The army’s leadership is largely comprised of former Northern Alliance commanders.) In the best-case scenario, Afghanistan will feature controlled instability and limited sovereignty with the Taliban controlling the bulk of the south and parts of the east of the country, various warlords controlling the central and northern regions, and the government controlling an enclave around Kabul and some key urban centres, with low-level conflict along the fringes.
worst-case scenario, the country will return to the civil war that devastated it during the 1990s. Either outcome could easily sacrifice the most basic goal and achievement of international intervention: ousting al-Qaeda and denying safe haven to it and other Islamist militant groups. Even more worryingly, it could foist upon Afghanistan yet another humanitarian crisis.

The real tragedy of the situation is that international assistance may have inadvertently created the conditions for renewed civil war. When Operation Enduring Freedom commenced in 2001, the Taliban controlled over 90 per cent of the country and the Northern Alliance was barely hanging on. The intervention has restored a rough parity, which could portend a long and bloody struggle. Indeed, most Afghans view the past 10 years not as the beginning of a new era of peace, but rather as a temporary lull in an ongoing conflict.

While the international community is struggling to implement its Plan A for the future of Afghanistan, Afghan groups and regional states such as Pakistan, Iran and India are already onto Plan C, making strategic calculations about which Afghan factions will best serve their interests and security following the international withdrawal.

The optimistic final communiqué from the Bonn II Conference belies the harsh realities on the ground in Afghanistan, tragically demonstrated by Tuesday's suicide bombings, which killed dozens of Shia worshippers celebrating Ashura. Instead of trying to grasp victory from the jaws of defeat, NATO and its international partners will soon have to acknowledge the severity of the situation and work to head off its most dire consequences.

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