



What comes next

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KABUL AND KANDAHAR

Afghanistan gets a rotten press in the West but the outlook is not all bad, particularly if the country's security forces, shown above, do what is hoped

WHEN a bodyguard working for southern Afghanistan's most notorious power broker gunned down his boss in July, a medley of voices loudly declared the end was nigh for Kandahar. Ahmed Wali Karzai, head of Kandahar's provincial council and brother of Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's president, had long been accused of running a mafia-style criminal syndicate that excluded important tribes from influence, encouraging them to support the Taliban. Nonetheless, his death caused talk of a dangerous power vacuum. In fact, the city and province of Kandahar now look in better shape than they have for years. Roads in the province which were once laced with landmines, are far safer than they were and farmers from areas that were once war zones say they can drive their goods to market without fear.

Next week an international conference on the future of Afghanistan will be held in Bonn. It comes almost exactly a decade after the first, which was intended to launch one of the poorest countries in the world, torn apart by war for more than a quarter of a century, on a path towards stability, democracy and the rule of law. After numerous setbacks, the mood at next week's conference will be far less heady than it was ten years ago, just after al-Qaeda's Taliban hosts had been swept from power. But it will not be pessimistic.

As the experience of Kandahar, once the centre of Taliban power, suggests, the news from Afghanistan is by no means all bad.

For a start, the fact that this conference is the first to be Afghan-led says something about the country's slowly growing capacity to organise (if not yet pay for) itself. This week saw the announcement of the second phase of the transition process, under which the Afghan government and its national security forces (ANSF) gradually take over responsibility for the country (see map on next page). By the end of 2014, when most of 130,000 combat troops of ISAF (the American-dominated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force) will have left the country, the transition to Afghan command must be complete.

The aim of next week's conference is to commit the international community to supporting Afghanistan after 2014. The support needed is many-sided: to prevent violence from reaching intolerable levels again; to help the government develop its capacity to provide the services that its citizens depend on, in particular a less corrupt and more efficient system of administering justice; to create the scope for economic progress, including the exploitation of the country's plentiful mineral and energy resources; and, finally, to send a clear message to Afghanistan's neighbours that the country is not going to be abandoned as

happened in the past.

In addition, a ten-year strategic-partnership agreement with America is expected to be signed before long. A *loya jirga* called by President Karzai last month overwhelmingly gave it its backing. America is likely to retain a military presence in the country of around 20,000 troops who will provide the Afghan army with a range of "enablers" from command and control to logistics and close air support.

A report published by the World Bank last week suggested that Afghanistan will need an open-ended commitment from foreign donors of at least \$7 billion a year, much of which will probably have to be spent on security unless the insurgency has weakened by 2014. This is a chunky, but not an impossible amount, given the sums that have been already been spent on Afghanistan (\$440 billion by America alone).

The questions that cash-strapped voters in Western countries are entitled to ask is whether this will not on past experience just be throwing good money after bad, particularly if either the Taliban come storming back once the foreign troops have left or the country again descends into bloody civil war, as it did some years after the departure of the Soviet Union in 1989. There is a tendency to conclude that little has been achieved in the past ten

"years apart from the killing of Osama bin Laden (in Pakistan) and the suppression of al-Qaeda, thanks mainly to American drone attacks. Afghanistan, it is widely assumed, is a hopeless case not worth any more of the West's blood or treasure.

From hope, through horror, to today

A better way to look at Afghanistan is not to lump the past ten years together, but to think of it in terms of four distinct phases. The first was the period of illusion between 2002 and 2004 when the Taliban appeared to be beaten and ludicrously high expectations of what Afghanistan could become took hold. The second was from 2006 to 2009 when the Taliban used the distraction of the Iraq war to reignite the insurgency from its safe havens in Pakistan's tribal areas. The third phase, the "surge", ran from late 2009, when Barack Obama announced he was sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan.

The fourth phase, which has recently begun under the new ISAF commander, General John Allen (who replaced the higher-profile General David Petraeus in July), is drawdown and transition. By the end of this year, 10,000 American troops will have left Afghanistan, and another 23,000 are due to be home by September 2012. To the surprise of sceptics, including some within ISAF itself, at least some parts of the strategy that has evolved since the dark days of 2009 appear to be working.

The main military effort has been in the south and south-west, concentrated on the former Taliban strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar provinces. There is no doubt that the Taliban has taken a terrible beating in those areas. In particular, the targeting of what ISAF calls "mid-level commanders" appears to have been effective. ISAF commanders say that the average life expectancy of these fighters is less than three weeks. The impact of this attrition is that the Taliban's command and control is under severe pressure. The insurgents can no longer mount co-ordinated or complex attacks in the south, and are increasingly reliant on the indiscriminate use of fairly crude improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide-bombings.

One result is that the Taliban are much more likely to kill civilians, whose support they ultimately depend on, than foreign or Afghan forces. ISAF reckons that across the country, 85% of civilian casualties in 2010 were caused by the Taliban. This year's opinion survey by the Asia Foundation found that sympathy for the Taliban is at its lowest level since the surveys began in 2004, and that the number of Afghans who have no sympathy with the insurgents has risen from 36% in 2009 to 64%. The latest ISAF figures for the number of enemy-initiated attacks since June in the Pushtun heartland provinces of Helmand and Nimroz show a fall of 29%. In the east,

however, attacks rose by 21% and now account for 39% of attacks across the country. As the military campaign switches to the east, the potential for more damaging border clashes with Pakistan is bound to grow (see box on next page).

A critical test is whether the Afghan army and police will prove capable of holding what General Allen calls the "human terrain" as American troops are either sent home or moved eastward. He thinks they will. He believes that there is strong local support for the army and that much of the enemy has either gone home or chosen not to fight. In Kandahar an ISAF commander recently remarked that the Taliban now feel like "the away team".

A lot is riding on the answer. General Allen calls it "the defeat mechanism" of the insurgency; a Western diplomat suggested that the Taliban will not really be beaten until they are defeated by Afghan forces in Kandahar. As far as numbers are con-



cerned, the answer currently stands at about 300,000 and should reach its target strength of 352,000 by 2014 with plenty of time to spare. Soldiers and policemen going absent without leave is still a big problem, but General Daniel Bolger, who runs the NATO training mission, is confident that as leadership improves at platoon level, and as NATO gets better at handling cultural differences, things will improve.

The Afghan army will find it harder to meet the professional standards it will need if it is to win the confidence of ordinary Afghans, particularly in the south. General Bolger thinks he is getting there. American military mentors praise the Afghans for their fearlessness and the speed with which they move around the battlefield. "They will never be as good as us troops, but they don't need to be," says an American officer. "They just have to be better than the Taliban."

A priority is to get more recruits from the Pushtu-speaking parts of the south. One Afghan brigade commander from Kandahar is bullish that his men can do the job, but he also reveals the deep ethnic ten-

sions within an institution that is top-heavy with northern Tajiks. "I don't trust any of my Pushtun soldiers," he says. Another aim is to "Afghanise" the night raids that have disrupted the insurgency but at the cost of offending sensibilities. Though the army is respected, up to a point, by most Afghans, the perception of the police is much less positive. They are seen as less well trained, frequently corrupt and often linked to human-rights abuses.

Most Afghans, says the Asia Foundation report, strongly support the reconciliation efforts of the government's peace council. But since the assassination in September of the council's chairman, Burhanuddin Rabbani, by a suicide-bomber, hopes have dimmed. Masoom Stanekzai, the head of the council's secretariat, who suffered injuries in the blast, believes that the peace council is targeted because it is a threat to some of the Taliban's backers-by which he clearly means Pakistan.

Mr Stanekzai supports the establishment of a Taliban office, perhaps in the Gulf state of Qatar, authorised to negotiate. Like other Afghans, he says that if talks are to get anywhere, there must be "an address" for the Taliban. He argues that with the withdrawal of foreign forces in 2014 and an inclusive political process, there are no excuses left for the insurgency.

Most Afghan officials believe that though a political settlement of some kind is both desirable and necessary, it may have to wait until after 2014. In the meantime the effort to reintegrate former Taliban fighters into their communities is showing results, perhaps because very few of them have any ideological commitment to the insurgency. Since the programme began a year ago with a budget of \$40m, nearly 3,000 fighters have been enrolled into training schemes and only a tiny handful have returned to the battlefield. But most of the "reintegrated" are from the north and ISAF intelligence sources are unconvinced that it will have much effect.

The government's score card

The insurgency's resilience should never be underestimated. But it has suffered heavy casualties and its "offer" to the Afghan people, even among its traditional supporters in the south, has diminishing appeal. Despite the general weakness of governance in Afghanistan and corruption that reaches from top to bottom-the Karzai administration is not seen by Afghans to be as completely hopeless as Western media suggest. According to the Asia Foundation, satisfaction with the government's performance is at 74%. Confidence in provincial government, at 80%, is at its highest level since 2007.

Under the Taliban 1.2m children were in education, hardly any of them girls; today there are 8.2m, 40% of them are girls. Only 8% of the population had access to basic

"health care; today 80% have this. The role of women has been changed fundamentally: 27% of seats in the lower house of Parliament are held by them. As one woman put it: "When the Taliban first took power, people didn't really know what they were like. They do now and the women of Afghanistan will never forgive them."

Other social changes include rapidly growing mobile-phone ownership-60%

of Afghans have one-and a thriving and outspoken media represented by 75 television channels and 175 radio stations. Afghan journalists are still learning their trade, but they claim they have the freedom to investigate corruption, although most work for companies that are owned by business interests and power-brokers. An American diplomat who was in Afghanistan in 2002 and has now returned

says that although it may take 30 years to develop the other institutions that civil society depends upon, there has nonetheless been "an unremarked revolution".

A big test will be whether the presidential election scheduled for 2014, which Mr Karzai has promised not to contest, will be undermined, as was the previous one in 2009, by large-scale vote-rigging. Parliamentarians are pressing the independent electoral commission to get on with establishing a biometric database for registering voters before it is too late. A relatively clean election would do a lot to prevent a possible spike in violence that could undermine the transition process. But that may be hoping for too much-some analysts fear that a broken electoral system will not have been repaired in time.

Many other things could still go wrong. Only glacial progress has been made against the criminal networks who run the opium business and are often tangled up with the Taliban. The potential for the poppy-growing regions to become a mini narcostate on Colombian lines remains.

So does Pakistan's strategic paranoia about encirclement, particularly if there is a pro-Indian government in Kabul that is hostile to its interests. But as one Afghan minister says: "Nothing would do more to guarantee Pakistan's influence with us than if it were to make a real effort with the Taliban to deliver peace." That remains wishful thinking. In particular, Pakistan is reluctant to take on the formidable Haqqani network in the east that has been responsible for a spate of spectacular attacks in Kabul this year.

There is also a danger of a "drawdown recession" as Afghan companies that have grown fat on contracts to support the huge isaf presence in the country see their lucrative business wither over the next three years. But the World Bank thinks that, after 2014, the economy, now growing at 9%, can continue by about 5-6% a year.

Although there is understandable nervousness about what happens after 2014, there is also optimism and an appetite among better-educated younger Afghans to take responsibility for their country's future. A common complaint is how Afghanistan is portrayed in the West as a lost cause. "Why are you ali so gloomy," they ask. "Can't you see that things are getting better here?"

The future of Afghanistan is fraught with risk and the insurgency will almost certainly not disappear. But the Taliban are unlikely to return to power and there is a determination to avoid a collapse into civil war of the kind that happened in the years after the Russians left. The expression coined by General Petraeus, "Afghan good enough" is hated for its patronising overtone. Muddling through, on the other hand, is probably not a bad way of thinking about what comes next.

Pakistan and America

Till deaths us do part

LAHORE

Relations between the two look increasingly poisonous

THE NATO helicopters that on November 26th flattened Volcano and Boulder, two Pakistani military outposts on the Afghan border, also blasted the alliance's own strategic interests. The Americans (and others) promptly talked of an accident, offering condolences and an inquiry into how 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed, and 13 more injured, during a confused night of fighting. They also spoke of provocation by Taliban fighters, who enjoy sanctuary on Pakistani soil and tentative backing from its army. A suggestion was even aired that there had been firing from the bases themselves.

Pakistan responded with fury, denying any provocations and accusing the attackers of outright aggression. NATO had grid references for the posts, hundreds of metres inside Pakistani territory, yet had bombed sleeping soldiers and others who raced to help. Pakistan said that the attack continued for an hour or more, despite frantic appeals to halt—though America retorts that the air assault lasted only 15-20 minutes. Pakistan's media dutifully pumped out the army line, stirring public outrage.

Relations look dire. As a result of the incident, Pakistan's government said on November 29th that it would boycott the Afghan talks that are about to open in Bonn. Its army told America it must, within days, stop using Shamsi airbase in Baluchistan for launching its drones. Two land corridors that provide NATO in Afghanistan with half its supplies were shut. American demands for military intervention against insurgents in North Waziristan will again be batted away.

Yet the fact that the broad relationship has survived other severe tests this year suggests it may get over this one too. Pakistanis were whipped into a fury when a CIA contractor shot dead two men in Lahore in January, provoking weeks of confrontation. That quarrel had just about been patched up by May, when American special forces discovered and killed Osama bin Laden nesting

in what was probably a Pakistani army-spy safe house in a military town, Abbotabad. Then, in September, it was the Americans' turn for dismay, after an Afghan insurgent group, the Haqqani network, seen as having close ties to the Pakistani army, launched a prolonged attack on their embassy in Kabul.

The spate of incidents may continue. Anti-Americanism in Pakistan is rising to intense levels, which could spur younger, religiously minded officers, especially those who have not been trained by America, to demand a snapping of ties.

Yet policymakers both in Pakistan and America are likely to conclude that they still get enough from each other to make it too risky to break up just yet. America needs Pakistan to get the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network to talks, to do more on counter-terrorism, to allow drones to keep flying in its tribal areas and to keep its big nuclear arsenal safely locked up. In turn, Pakistan's army, which to its neighbours looks isolated and paranoid, needs American aid. The result could be dismally cynical: each side using and attacking the other—and growing ever more bitter.



They shouldn't have been killed