

On the eve of their withdrawal, Anthony Tucker-Jones assesses the achievements of the International Security Assistance Force and considers whether Afghanistan can remain stable as it draws down

The legacy of Nato and ISAF's achievements in Afghanistan now hangs in the balance. Any residual Western military commitment rests in the hands of the country's two presidential candidates. The outgoing President Hamid Karzai continually made it clear he would not negotiate any basing agreement with Washington – such a decision rests with Afghanistan's future president.

In the West, President Karzai has been seen as an ungrateful ally at best – but the reality of his political position is that he has had to play to his domestic audience as well as an international one. Regular friendly fire killings on both sides as well as America's drone wars have not gone down well with the average Afghan. Inevitably, Karzai had no choice but take a hard-line with President Obama. This has partially soured US-Afghan relations.

The Obama administration has spelled out its plans following the Nato/ISAF withdrawal at the end of the year. Despite all combat operations having been handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Washington is prepared to leave a division's-worth of troops behind. Undoubtedly this is intended to signal to the Taliban that Washington has not simply walked away from Kabul. Similarly, Obama has an eye on safeguarding his presidential record over his handling of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, while the withdrawal is proceeding smoothly at the time of going to press, the thorny issue of a bilateral security arrangement remained unresolved.

As of April this year, ISAF had just over 50,000 troops in country from almost 50 nations under American General Joseph F Durnford. He has responsibility for winding down eight subordinate commands, which include five regional zones as well as an interagency anti-corruption task force in Kabul. The bulk of his forces are some 33,500 American, 5,200 British and 2,600 German troops. The ISAF mission ends in December, though the Nato allies and partners are still trying to complete plans for their intended Resolute Support mission that will provide an advisory force at the beginning of 2015 to help train the ANSF. Obama's announcement, it is hoped, will help kick-start this process as time is now running out.

The US's commitment to Afghanistan peaked three years ago – in 2011, US forces numbered over 100,000, giving ISAF manpower of around 140,000. But the following year Washington withdrew 33,000 having completed its surge operations, most notably in Helmand. Other coalition partners have already left. Canada completed its contribution to ISAF in March 2014, and at the end of May Danish troops who had fought alongside the British in Helmand were

withdrawn. During Denmark's deployment, more than 18,000 Danish troops rotated through Afghanistan losing 33 killed in action. Similarly, more than 180,000 German troops and civilians have contributed to the ISAF mission.

In the meantime, the cost of the US withdrawal is massive and has been estimated at some US\$4bn – this is over and above the actual cost of the war against the Taliban. A huge amount of material is being left behind for the ANSF or simply scrapped, including around 15,000 vehicles. Among the kit being donated are up to 1,700 mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles that are capable of withstanding improvised explosive devices. The ANSF will need these in the provinces to combat a resurgent Taliban.

President Obama formally announced at the end of May he hoped he could cut a deal with either of the presidential candidates, Abdullah Abdullah or Ashraf Ghani, over US forces remaining in Afghanistan beyond the end of 2014. Obama's proposal is that 9,800 troops are spread across Afghanistan to help the ANSF during 2015. By the end of the year half of these would be concentrated in Kabul with fewer than 1,000 remaining by the end of 2016.

Clearly Obama is playing a delicate balancing game with the US and Afghan publics. On the one hand he does not want to signal to the Taliban that he has abandoned a 13-year commitment to keeping them out of power. On the other he has to signal to the US public that the bloodletting is coming to an end – since 2001 around 3,500 Coalition personnel have been killed. Two thirds of these are American, while almost 20,000 US troops have been wounded. Delaying a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan until 2016 means Obama ends US military involvement just in time for the US presidential elections in November 2016.

After that, Afghanistan's future hangs on whether the ANSF, numbering 350,000-400,000, can hold on to ISAF's regional command zones in the face of Taliban attacks. Estimates put Taliban fighters at about 20,000, which means they are grossly outnumbered, but a lot depends on ANSF morale and desertion rates. Only time will tell.

The big question is: what can be learnt from ISAF's performance? Certainly the conflicts fought in Vietnam, the Balkans and Iraq provided vital lessons for politicians and military strategists. The war in Afghanistan has much in common with Vietnam, except the dense jungle of the latter was substituted for mountains of the former. Inevitably, the moral question of whether Operation Enduring Freedom fought to oust al-Qaeda and drive the



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OUT OF AFGH

Taliban from power was the right thing to do will dominate perceptions of the successes and failures of the campaign.

Nevertheless, the international intervention in Afghanistan was in many ways a unique operation. While the application of air power and Special Forces brought the Taliban down, Coalition ground troops were needed to keep the resurgent Taliban at bay and safeguard the fledgling democratic government in Kabul. Like the Balkans Wars of the 1990s, Afghanistan became an unwelcome and often unpopular open-ended military commitment that dragged on for over a decade. Like Bosnia, the campaign in Afghanistan only achieved a precarious peace

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AFGHANISTAN PART 2

OUT OF AFGHANISTAN PART 2

after more and more ground troops were sucked in, culminating in ISAF.

Elements of the Afghan conflict bear striking similarities with the Vietnam War. Like the “Vietnamisation” process during the Vietnam War, it took far too long to get the new ANSF up and running. As in the case of Vietnam, this meant that foreign troops had to endure the brunt of the fighting while indigenous forces were recruited, trained and brought up to strength ready for a hand over of security operations. In turn it meant that time and resources were expended fighting the enemy instead of concentrating on building up the ANSF.

This mirrored the problems face by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. It was not ready to shoulder the burden in South Vietnam, and this nearly ended in disaster in the late 1960s. In Vietnam the US military had to conduct and oversee much of the fighting. Similarities do not end there. In the case of the Vietnam War, US forces were never able to completely defeat the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese backers; in Afghanistan the international Coalition was never able to completely defeat the Taliban and their Pakistani tribal allies. Both wars ended in unwanted compromises.

Attempts were made to help Afghanistan develop a functioning democratic process with free and open elections. Central government was expanded out from Kabul into the provinces along with a functioning police force and military. Likewise improving education for both males and females was championed, as well enhancing and safeguarding women’s rights. What was originally intended as purely a security mission soon expanded to also encompass the war on drugs, with ill-fated attempts at eradicating the poppy harvest.

While Operation Enduring Freedom did not get Afghanistan completely back on its feet, it certainly made progress in many areas. When ISAF expanded its area of responsibility beyond Kabul and Nato took charge in 2006, it faced an enormous up-hill struggle. Afghanistan itself is physically divided by the mountain chain that runs from east to west toward Iran and impedes coherent security operations. The Taliban’s safe havens in Pakistan also proved a constant headache. It was difficult overcoming tribal and regional ties that take precedence over loyalty to Kabul. In Helmand the British Army found that the four main tribes were often at loggerheads – notably, the Ishaqzai sided with the insurgents.

Afghanistan’s patchwork of different ethnic groups inevitably compounded ISAF’s problems. The majority Pashtun and Tajik peoples often find themselves at loggerheads with the smaller groupings such as the Hazara, Uzbek and Turkmen. The Pashtuns, known as Pathans by the British Army, have a fierce fighting reputation. Likewise the country has two official languages – Pashto and Dari – but dozens of others are spoken. Sunni Muslims are in the majority, which puts the Shia at a disadvantage. Although predominantly Sunni, the insurgents are also drawn from the Shia and



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Sufi Muslim communities as well.

Essentially there are a good dozen or so major opposition groups, but they all tend to get lumped in together generically as “Taliban”. The diehards opposing ISAF and President Karzai’s government insist on loyalty to the Taliban Quetta Shura and Mullah Omar. Key among these groups are the Taliban, the Haqqani network, Hezbe-e-Islami, the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, along with a number of Kashmiri separatist factions. The Haqqani network and Hezbe-e-Islami are old Mujahideen organisations that had fought the Soviets, and so are led by veterans.

Did ISAF achieve its goals? The UN mandate included preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorists. ISAF has been partly successful in this respect; in recent years, international terror plots have tended to originate from Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. Nonetheless, the Taliban remains far from vanquished and it has the ability to reverse some of ISAF’s provincial gains.

Crucially, when President Karzai hands over power to his successor, it will be one of the first peaceful transitions in over 100 years of Afghan history. In addition, Afghanistan’s educational system has been held up as one of the country’s biggest successes, along with its health system. Likewise the position of women in Afghan society has been improved.

The final results of the Afghan presidential elections are not expected until late July 2014. If all goes according to plan, the total Nato presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, including US forces, is anticipated to be around 12,000. The question remains how such a sizeable military presence will play out in Afghanistan’s provinces. The Afghan people have been told for the last two years that the Western military presence is coming to an end – how they take the news that this may not be the case remains to be seen.

Packing it up: American soldiers sort through equipment left by units departing Afghanistan

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