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Keeping options open: Why the number of US military troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 matters

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This Policy Brief argues that a substantial US military presence in Afghanistan after transition remains important for the international community for four reasons: it would support the continuation and sustainability of training efforts directed at the Afghan security forces; it could make it easier for other countries to commit military assets and forces to Afghanistan; it would provide immediate military options for the international community in case the security situation were to deteriorate substantially after 2014; and it would be the only substantial international counter-terrorism capacity in the region. These strategic objectives are not just US-oriented; they raise the question of how other countries will respond to the post-2014 reality. If they decide to not join US military efforts in Afghanistan in one way or another after 2014, they should realise that they will be dependent on US strategies and policy instruments with little room for influencing them. In particular, it will make the international community dependent on US military forces when faced with a crisis situation in Afghanistan or when a country's assets in Afghanistan come under attack.

The numbers game

In 2011 the security transition started the process of drawdown of foreign military troops from Afghanistan. The objective is to hand over responsibility for security to Afghan security forces in five stages. The ideal end state is that no foreign military troops would be necessary in Afghanistan after the completion of this process by the end of 2014. The reality, however, is that international forces will still be needed in Afghanistan after transition, for two main reasons: the continued need for training and capacity-building of security institutions; and the expected need for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in the coming years within and outside of Afghanistan that Afghan security forces cannot deal with.

Ever since the security transition process started, the debate has been about numbers. Part of this debate concerns the pace and sequence of withdrawal. How many foreign troops would return home and from which areas first? Although it is still not clear exactly how the current International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop-contributing countries will withdraw their forces in the last two years of transition, there is at least an end date: It is expected that all foreign forces working under the current ISAF mandate will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by December 2014.

The other part of the debate revolves round the question of the number of troops that would have to stay behind in Afghanistan after 2014, in one form or another, for the two reasons mentioned above. This question has primarily concerned the continued presence of US troops. The general assumption –

which to a certain extent holds true – is that other NATO countries have far less possibility on both the political and the financial front of contributing military forces in large numbers after the security transition process is completed. So far, only the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia have touched upon the possibility of stationing some (but few) special forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014. For other countries, even those that had a substantial military force in Afghanistan (such as the Netherlands), it is politically impossible.

Why the numbers game matters

The decision of foreign countries to opt for general troop withdrawal from Afghanistan was in many ways a political necessity. The main reasons behind this decision are the decreasing public support in ISAF troop-contributing countries and the depth of the financial crisis, which has resulted in obligatory spending cuts for the military across the board. However, the option of a continued US military presence in Afghanistan after 2014 is important for Afghanistan and the international community at large in at least four ways.

First, a US military presence is both directly and indirectly an important guarantee of the long-term success and sustainability of the international training efforts in Afghanistan. The direct effect is that part of the US troops would be involved in training beyond 2014. The indirect effect could be the possible, and often perceived as necessary, role of the US military as ‘force protection’ to support training efforts of other countries. For example, at the moment, the Dutch police training mission in Afghanistan cannot operate without the guarantee of military protection by a third country, currently the German military forces in the province of Kunduz.¹

Second, a sustained American military presence in Afghanistan could eventually convince other countries that a continued civil or military presence is not only important, but also necessary and possible. Despite the current political hurdles, there may be more options for other NATO countries to continue their training activities, special forces operations or civil–military projects if they are assured that the United States remains committed to Afghanistan on the military front. To continue to operate in Afghanistan, national parliaments in smaller countries will

not only demand a solid agreement with the Afghan government, but will probably see a US military force in Afghanistan as a precondition for any activities in Afghanistan.

Third, without a new international ISAF framework² beyond 2014, the prolonged US military presence would still give the international community the option of responding to serious security breaches and crisis situations in Afghanistan. Thus – besides its general impact on security, development and capacity building in Afghanistan – a US military presence would function both as a safety valve while the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are growing in numbers, strength and self-confidence (depending on the impact of the ongoing training efforts), and as an additional guarantee for the safety of foreign interests, infrastructure and staff in Afghanistan. Obviously, these functions could also be taken up by an international contingency force, but currently there is neither any discussion about the need for such a standby or back-up force, nor any debate about an international military (combat) force in Afghanistan after 2014.³ Without a new NATO-led military framework, not just Afghanistan but the international community at large will depend on US military forces when faced with a crisis situation or an attack on its embassies – unless other countries decide to join foreign military efforts after 2014. A US military mission is no alternative for a widely backed international military mission, but there is a risk that it will be the only serious foreign military capacity in Afghanistan during the fragile years following transition.

Fourth, the United States is currently the only nation that is considering structural counter-terrorism operations with a regional focus in Central Asia. A continued US military presence would therefore give the international community at large a response-and-strike capability against terrorist targets in the region. The problem, of course, is that unless other countries are prepared to commit serious counter-terrorism capacity, they will be unable to influence the political discourse, strategy and *modus operandi* of counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan or in the wider region. For example, while there is criticism about the extensive use of drones in the region by the Obama administration, other countries are not offering any alternative strike capacity.

How the numbers game relates to the US-led military strategy beyond 2014

The end of 2014 signals the end of combat operations and other direct military involvement of international forces under ISAF. That means that any foreign troops staying behind will work under a new strategy. Based on the leading role the US is expected to have beyond 2014, this strategy will have three central pillars:

1. Training, equipping, financing and building the capability of the Afghan security forces, with possibly a new non-combat mission for NATO (as agreed during the Chicago summit⁴ in 2012);
2. Broader Security Sector Reform (SSR), justice reforms and general security-related institution-building and governance efforts (as part of the so-called 'Transformation Decade' (2015–24) as agreed during the Chicago and Tokyo⁵ summits in 2012);
3. Counter-terrorism operations by the United States and perhaps some allies; consisting mainly of special forces and intelligence/logistics support. This part of the strategy still needs to be authorised by the Afghan government. The idea behind this pillar is that a (light) foreign military footprint in Afghanistan is critical to countering and combating (a re-emergence of) terrorist threats in the region, including Al-Qaeda. Part of counter-terrorism can also involve the first pillar by providing training to Afghan (special) forces.

While the first two pillars can be considered the continuation of the international community's efforts in Afghanistan on the military or security front (the embodiment of the 'from transition to transformation' slogan used in the Chicago and Tokyo summits), the third pillar is basically the revitalisation of the strategy that gave rise to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Thus, the foreign military strategy beyond 2014 can be said to have two very different characters: a widely supported indirect military strategy focusing

on training Afghan security forces and broader SSR that does not necessarily require foreign military troops beyond some force protection⁶ units; and an almost unilateral US counter-terrorism strategy of which the details still have to be clarified over the next two years, but which will require at least some foreign military in Afghanistan. The difference in character between these two policies is exacerbated by the fact that the continuation of the training would be focused solely on Afghanistan, while the counter-terrorism strategy hinted at so far could have strong regional implications. The regional terrorist threat currently consists mainly of remnants of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan-based militants.

An accelerated drawdown towards 2014

Before these two different policies become more concrete, however, there are still eighteen months remaining in the security transition process. This process has gathered speed since 2011. The US decision in June 2011 to bring troops home under an accelerated drawdown set in motion a wave of similar decisions in other countries. Twelve other countries with at the time at least 500 troops in Afghanistan announced troop withdrawals for 2011 or 2012.⁷ Only Sweden and Georgia *increased* the number of troops in Afghanistan at that point. Two other countries, Canada and France, have already ended their combat operations in Afghanistan.⁸ Australia is also expected to end its military operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2013, although it may leave some special forces in the country.

The following table shows the available numbers for the most important troop-contributing countries, including plans or estimates for 2013 and 2014. The colour green indicates that countries still have some combat troops during a given year. In contrast, the colour red shows there are no (combat) troops left, or only training forces. Given the political uncertainties around these decisions, the graph should be regarded as showing only a rough trend, and not necessarily as representing the exact course of the drawdown.

Country	Current troop level (March 2013)	Planned change in troop level by end of year				Possible level post-2014
		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
United States	66,000	-10,000	-23,000	-34,000	-24,000 ⁹	0-8,000?
United Kingdom	9,000	-400	-500	-3,800 ¹⁰	-5,200	Max. 200 special forces ¹¹
Germany	4,318	PTW*	-400/500	-1,018 ¹²	-3,300	NCT
Italy	4,000	PTW	PTW	PTW	NCT	NCT
Poland	1,770	-100	-730	PTW	PTW	NCT
Spain	1,606		PTW	-642 ¹³	-964	NCT
Australia	1,094		-550	-1,094 ¹⁴	PTW	Perhaps some special forces ¹⁵
Romania	1,549		-106	PTW	PTW	NCT**/ Perhaps training support
Turkey	998	NCT	NCT	NCT	NCT	NCT
Canada	950	-2000	NCT	NCT	NCT	Perhaps special forces ¹⁶
Hungary	582			Significant		NCT
Bulgaria	581	+165	-186	PTW	PTW	NCT
Denmark	650	-30	-70	-350	PTW	NCT
The Netherlands	545	NCT	NCT	NCT	NCT	NCT
France	543	PTW	-1000 /NCT	-543 /NCT	NCT	NCT
Czech Republic	416	-100	-100	PTW	PTW	NCT
Sweden	413		+355	PTW	PTW	NCT
Belgium	265		-300	PTW	PTW	NCT

Source: Current troop numbers are taken from the latest available NATO data (3 December 2012) or corrected with later sources such as the troop numbers of the United Kingdom and the United States. Withdrawal data is based on several news stories and government reports. *PTW means the country Planned To Withdraw troops during that particular year, but it is not clear (yet) whether they actually did (will do) so and with what number. **NCT means No Combat Troops left.

What the table shows above all is that most countries will use the end of the security transition process (2011–14) within the military framework of ISAF as the end of their respective military contributions. Where there are possibilities for troops beyond 2014, these are expected to be 1) relatively small compared with previous ISAF commitments; 2) mainly related to special forces/counter-terrorism operations to support the US-led strategy; or 3) related to the training role that is already part of the security transition, but with trainers and other personnel possibly working in Afghanistan beyond 2014 (provided national parliaments are convinced that effective force protection is guaranteed by a third country). The table confirms that few countries are currently willing to leave military troops behind in Afghanistan, which further increases the relevance of the US military presence after 2014. At the same time, it can be argued that the United States would need at least a small number of third countries to contribute to the military part of its three-pillar strategy, especially its counter-terrorism component. That way, this strategy could be presented as a mission carried out by an international coalition, similar to Operation Enduring Freedom.

The three options for a US military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014

At the moment the US administration is still negotiating an extension of US military presence in Afghanistan with the Karzai government. Three main options and supporting arguments have surfaced in the past few months with regard to a post-2014 presence of US forces.

Option 1: A light military footprint

In November 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the United States planned to keep 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, referring to and reflecting more or less the average of General John Allen's earlier recommendation of between 6,000 and 15,000.¹⁸ Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was also believed to favour an option of around 9,000 troops, dedicated to both counter-terrorism and training of Afghan security forces.¹⁹ In an article in *The Washington Post*, David Barno and Matthew Irvine again stated that 10,000 US troops or fewer would be sufficient to protect US interests in the region after 2014.²⁰ The main argument used was that counter-terrorism operations in or around Afghanistan would

require fewer troops in general, but would entail in particular the use of drones, special forces and precision ammunition strikes, similar to operations in Yemen or the Horn of Africa.

Option 2: The medium-heavy military footprint

Analysts Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan responded to the 10,000 number by saying that such a 'light footprint' strategy would be dangerous and irresponsible. Instead, they called for a US military force of over 30,000 troops for counter-terrorism operations after 2014.²¹ They based this call on two arguments in particular. First, on the strategic front, Kagan and Kagan argued that the US military presence in Afghanistan would be the only way to continue counter-terrorism operations (e.g. against Al-Qaeda) in Pakistan and the wider region. Second, on a more technical-operational level, they argued that the higher troop number (over 30,000) was required because of the size of Afghanistan, and because counter-terrorism combat units needed to be supplemented by additional 'advise and assist brigades' and logistical and other support units.

Option 3: The zero option: no military footprint at all

Early in 2013 a third option was floated by the Obama administration: having zero US military forces in Afghanistan after 2014.²² That option is probably based predominantly on political arguments (and potential outcomes) related to the bilateral negotiations with Kabul. Anthony Cordesman, security analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said he thought it was not the preferred option of the US government. He commented further that: "[...] *we didn't have a zero option in Iraq until we had a zero reality.*"²³ The comparison with Iraq is interesting. The US administration tried to negotiate a similar security agreement with the Iraqi government to keep a US residual force in the country beyond 2011 to train Iraqi security forces. But negotiations failed. The main obstacle was the refusal of the Iraqi government to grant US forces legal immunity in Iraqi courts.²⁴ That could also be an impediment in the case of Afghanistan, in addition to other domestic concerns such as the Taliban insurgency's strong opposition to the presence of US troops on Afghan soil. If the Taliban insurgents were to slowly become part of a political (peace) process, this would also change the dynamics of US counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan.

What is left in Iraq is a strong American diplomatic presence to protect its interests, but the question is whether that option would be enough, given Afghanistan's strategic importance and the US counter-terrorism objectives in the region.²⁵

Latest developments

At the time of writing, the latest development is the US decision to withdraw 34,000 troops in 2013.²⁶ While that decision gives some clarity for this year, it still does not shed any light on the number of US troops that will stay behind. The final number that everybody is waiting for will depend on both military and political factors, and above all on the bilateral security arrangement that the United States and Afghanistan need to agree on.

On the political front, President Karzai has already stated that a final decision on this agreement has to be made by the *loya jirga*, the national assembly of elders, a process that could last up to about nine months.²⁷ On the US side, the words of President Obama during the 2013 State of the Union speech also cast new doubt on the presence of US military troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014: “[O]ur brave men and women in uniform are coming home. [...] by the end of next year [2014] our war in Afghanistan will be over.”²⁸ That suggests that the option of a medium-heavy US military footprint in Afghanistan is unlikely to be chosen. What remains is therefore the choice between the zero option and the light military footprint of a maximum of around 8,000 soldiers.

It is clear that countries with an interest in Afghanistan's stability and role in (counter-) terrorism will pay close attention to the ongoing negotiations between Washington and Kabul. While understanding the importance of the outcome for the entire international community, they should also start exploring ways to build on a possible US military presence with their own indirect or direct civil or military presence in Afghanistan. The risk of leaving it entirely up to the United States could result in a double 'zero-option' for the rest of the international community: no meaningful military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, and total dependence on the United States, with zero influence on strategy, military means and military outcomes when things go completely wrong in Afghanistan.

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1. In March 2013, the Dutch government effectively decided to end its police training mission in Kunduz on 1 July 2013, one year earlier than originally planned. The withdrawal of German forces from Kunduz province at the end of this year was mentioned as one of the reasons for this decision.
 2. Within the framework of a long-term partnership between NATO and Afghanistan, established by the Declaration on Enduring Partnership, NATO will negotiate a follow-on mission in Afghanistan for after 2014, but this mission is expected to focus exclusively on training and capacity building of ANSF.
 3. In this context, the author of this Policy Brief has argued in a Foreign Policy's AFPAK Channel contribution that an international contingency force of around 5,000 troops would be sufficient to back-up the ANSF in critical situations. See: Jorrit Kamminga and Norine MacDonald QC, 'Preparing for the worst: A call for an Afghanistan Contingency Force', Foreign Policy's The AFPAK Channel (7 December 2012).
 4. NATO Summit held in Chicago on the 20-21 May 2012.
 5. Tokyo International Conference on Afghanistan, held on the 8th of July, 2012.
 6. Force protection is an odd concept as it seems to be carried out exclusively by foreign troops in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that the security transition process is reaching its final stages and Afghan security forces have been trained for many years now, no suggestion has been made that Afghan troops could take care of some of the necessary force protection.
 7. These countries were: Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, Poland, Denmark, Czech Republic, Norway, Romania, Spain and Belgium. See: C.J. Radin, 'ISAF nations follow US lead, announce early troop draw-downs', The Long War Journal (8 July 2011).
 8. Laura Smith-Spark, 'France pulls last troops from combat roles in Afghanistan', CNN (20 December 2012).
 9. This number is based on the assumption that 34,000 US troops will be pulled out in 2013 and that around 8,000 will be left in Afghanistan after 2014. See: Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'In Afghanistan pullout, Pentagon favors phased reduction over 3 years', The Washington Post (12 February 2013).
 10. See: 'UK to withdraw 3,800 troops from Afghanistan during 2013', BBC News (19 December 2012).
 11. The United Kingdom will probably only leave up to 200 special forces behind in Afghanistan after 2014. See: James Kirkup, 'NATO sets 'irreversible' roadmap to withdrawing troops from Afghanistan', The Telegraph (22 May 2012).
 12. Germany has announced that by the end of February 2014, troop numbers are to be reduced to a total of 3,300. See the official website of the Federal Govern-

- ment: 'Fewer German troops in Afghanistan' (28 November 2012).
13. For Spain, the 2013 and 2014 drawdown numbers are based on the official plan to withdraw 40 percent of its forces in 2013 and the remaining forces in 2014. See: Miguel González, 'España completará en un mes el recorte de tropas en Afganistán', *El País* (17 October 2012).
 14. Although a small number of Australian troops may remain in 2014, the objective is to withdraw most troops by the end of 2013. See: 'Australia to withdraw troops from Afghanistan earlier than expected', *CNN* (17 April 2012).
 15. Greg Ansley, 'Special forces to stay past 2014 despite latest death', *The New Zealand Herald* (23 October 2012).
 16. Murray Brewster, 'Canadian special forces may remain in Afghanistan after 2014: Harper', *The Canadian Press* (25 April 2012).
 17. In 2012, significant reductions of Hungarian troops were announced by the Ministry of Defence. See: 'Hungary plans to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan', Ministry of Defence Official website (11 October 2012).
 18. Julian E. Barnes and Adam Entous, 'U.S. Looks to Set Size of Afghan Presence After 2014', *The Wall Street Journal* (25 November 2012).
 19. 'US considering 'zero' option for Afghanistan in 2014. The Obama administration has signalled that it might leave no troops in Afghanistan after December 2014', *AP* (8 January 2013).
 20. David Barno and Matthew Irvine, 'How to fight in Afghanistan with fewer U.S. troops', *The Washington Post* (1 December 2012).
 21. Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, 'Why U.S. troops must stay in Afghanistan', *The Washington Post* (24 November 2012).
 22. Dion Nissenbaum, 'U.S. Floats an Afghan 'Zero Option'', *The Wall Street Journal* (8 January 2013).
 23. Quoted in: 'U.S. Floats an Afghan 'Zero Option'', op. cit.
 24. David Jackson, 'Obama announces full withdrawal from Iraq', *USA Today* (21 October 2011).
 25. David W. Barno, 'A 'Zero Option' for Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy* (7 January 2013).
 26. Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, 'President to Halve Afghan Force in Next Year', *The Wall Street Journal* (12 February 2013).
 27. Scott Peterson, 'Back in Afghanistan, Karzai shifts tone on US troop immunity', *The Christian Science Monitor* (14 January 2013).
 28. President Barack Obama about the drawdown process in Afghanistan, State of the Union speech (12 February 2013).

About Clingendael

Clingendael is the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. We operate as a think-tank, as well as a diplomatic academy, and always maintain a strong international perspective. Our objective is to explore the continuously changing global environment in order to identify and analyse emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

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