Possible Scenarios for Afghanistan and Security in Central Asia

Over the 4-5 years that have passed since the United States and NATO announced their decision to withdraw the bulk of their forces from Afghanistan, uncertainty has become a major challenge for the countries in the region. However, although early on in the withdrawal process there were logical reasons to believe that the United States would leave significant numbers of troops in Afghanistan after 2014, it now appears that the US will only leave a small force there. The following developments point towards that.

The accelerated training of Afghan law enforcement agencies during 2012;

The phased transfer of control over certain areas of the country to Afghan forces followed by a reduction in the number of combat operations involving NATO forces;

Energized negotiations with countries in the region for transiting weapons and hardware during the withdrawal;

The effort to find common ground with the armed opposition in order to reduce tensions after 2014.

Press reports appearing in early March 2013 gave the possible size of the US military force Washington intended to leave in Afghanistan after 2014 — between 6000 and 13,600 troops. It is unlikely that a force that size will be capable of conducting active combat operations against the extremists. That means the mission of containing the radical forces will fall on Afghanistan’s law enforcement bodies.

Meanwhile, most experts, including experts in Afghanistan, are skeptical that Afghanistan’s security forces will be capable of resisting the extremists by themselves. That increases the danger that radical forces will take power.

Official Kabul is pinning a great deal of hope on negotiations with the Taliban. Given that both President Hamid Karzai and his American partners want to find common ground in negotiations with the Taliban, 2014 may become a year of concessions by both parties in the Afghan conflict: The Taliban, along with Karzai and the United States, are displaying a willingness to make some concessions. The outcome of mutual concessions will obviously be the “soft Islamization” of Afghanistan.

However, not all political forces in Afghanistan are willing to accept that. A stronger Taliban position in Kabul could split Afghan society and both spark ethnic tensions and lead to a reform of the public administration system.

Afghanistan’s political future

Afghanistan’s political future after 2014 is being hotly discussed by the political, media and expert communities within and beyond Afghanistan as the final withdrawal date for US and NATO forces draws near. Afghan and Western experts have identified at least three possible scenarios for the country’s political future — Plan A, Plan B and Plan C.

Under plan A, the status quo would prevail in Afghanistan after 2014: The country would continue to exist within its state borders as a presidential republic with a central government and a relatively weak parliament.

The hypothetical Plan B proposed by American experts assumes things would change radically in Afghanistan, including the actual partitioning of the country into a North and a South along a line separating the provinces predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns from the regions with a predominantly non-Pashtun population. Plan B
envisages establishing an Islamic Emirate of Pashtunistan that would encompass 11 Pashtun provinces. These provinces would be ruled by the Taliban under Kabul’s supervision. The central Afghan government would probably exist in name only, and the actual resources and authority would reside with local government. If Plan B is implemented, southern Afghanistan, which is inhabited by Pashtuns, would inevitably be ruled by leaders of the Taliban, the Haqqani group and other radical religious movements. Then it would only be a matter of time before civil war breaks out between the Pashtun-Taliban south and the Tajik-Uzbek-Hazara north.

The news surfaced in late December 2012 that British experts had offered a Plan C for discussion. According to some reports, Plan C had been discussed at a closed conference in Paris attended by emissaries from the Taliban, leaders of the former Northern Alliance and representatives of official Kabul.

Available information indicates that Plan C envisages a “controlled decentralization of Afghanistan” by forming eight administrative districts in the north and the south that would subsequently be united into three national administrative regions to be densely inhabited by Pashtuns. That plan does not provide for the unification of all Pashtuns because it would spread the Pashtuns across three districts.

In contrast to Plan B, the British plan for Afghanistan’s future does not assume that the country would break apart immediately, only that it would federalize. Plan C’s authors also agree that the Taliban would rule the Pashtun administrative regions.

I should point out that Plan C received the support of the former Northern Alliance’s leaders, who are counting on it both to limit Taliban activities to the Pashtun provinces and to weaken the influence exerted by the scattered Pashtun groups on Afghan politics overall.

It is possible that the United States and Great Britain made acceptance of Plan C by members of the former Northern Alliance a condition for supporting them during Afghanistan’s upcoming presidential election. If Afghanistan’s minorities support Plan C, it could disrupt the historical tradition of rule in Afghanistan for the first time and push Washington and London to support a non-Pashtun presidential candidate.

The 2014 election

The end of the NATO mission in Afghanistan is not the only thing that will happen during 2014. A presidential election will also be held that year, and it will have a significant impact on developments in this Central Asian country after 2014. The lack of security in the southern and eastern areas of Afghanistan and the low level of interest their populace has in the election could give the 2014 election to a candidate from the non-Pashtun north. That would increase the role played by individual armed opposition groups with influence in the south and the east.

In any event, the first pool of candidates who aspire to become head of state is already forming among Afghan politicians. More than 10 politicians have announced their candidacy for the post in 2014.

Considering the dynamic nature of the Afghan political process, we should anticipate that the makeup of the “presidential pool” will change substantially.

Afghanistan’s future and security in Central Asia

The withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan has begun against a backdrop of severe extremist threats, and that has put a number of countries in the region, including those in Central Asia, in a difficult position. The situation is also complicated by the fact that the environment in northern Afghanistan has deteriorated dramatically. It is obvious that the upcoming withdrawal of most of the Western coalition’s combat forces from Afghanistan after 2014 will force the leaders of the Central Asian countries to look for new ways of cooperating in the fight against terrorist organizations and seek mechanisms for supporting regional security without NATO and US resources.

However, some experts are convinced that major political changes will take place in the countries of Central Asia over the next 5-10 years regardless of how things play out in Afghanistan. Among other associations, these transformations will be linked to leadership turnovers in the post-Soviet republics and the credible threat of social and political upheavals that will increase the threat from armed radical Islamist groups and movements.