U.S., NATO Afghanistan withdrawal impacts counterterrorism operations, progress for Afghan women

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By ERIKA SIMPSON  APRIL 21, 2021

NATO’s mission in Afghanistan will need to remain committed to training and funding the Afghan security forces and institutions to adapt to the new circumstances.

The drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was expected in November, so it came as a surprise when the United States and all 30 NATO allies abruptly announced in a joint press conference last week that all troops would vacate the country before Sept.11, on the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center that led the U.S. into its longest war.

The U.S. withdrawal is portrayed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken as an accomplishment of America’s goals. However, those goals were from the outset ambiguous, and now their clarity is lost in the annals of time. What is certain now is President Joe Biden’s insistence that U.S. troops will completely withdraw from the quagmire, and the NATO allies immediately followed that lead.
NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said, following a virtual meeting of Allied foreign and defence ministers, “our drawdown will be orderly, coordinated, and deliberate.” He added: “we went into Afghanistan together, we have adjusted our posture together, and we are united in leaving together.”

War-weary and with coffers bare after more than US$778-billion in military spending and another $44-billion on reconstruction projects—and facing catastrophic costs from COVID-related health and safety concerns—who could blame our neighbours for wanting to get out of Afghanistan after 20 tumultuous, painful years? The country has suffered thousands of combat-related deaths, while PTSD injuries, and costs for 970,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans’ disability claims—exponentially larger—stretch for decades into the future.

Meanwhile, in the presidential palace, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani is holed up, seeing no one but junior aides who allow him to think completing a second term would cement his legacy. And former president Hamid Karzai is waiting in the wings, ready to assume power in the hope that it would lead to a sea change in Afghanistan’s fortunes, such that Americans might choose instead to stay, with other NATO allies, like Germany and Italy, not far behind.

However, the moving chess pieces will not change the fundamentals of Afghanistan’s strategic situation, caught in the vast plains and mountains of moving hordes, men intent on grabbing resources and usurping authority, such that the Taliban’s sons will be replaced by grandsons, raised in a culture of war, unable to countenance even the prospect of concessions.

The women suffer the most, and in this summer’s bloodbath—and make no mistake it will be an under-reported mess of atrocities committed by desperate sides. The women and children, especially in the rural areas outside the Ghani-captured cities of Kabul and Kandahar, will suffer the most from gender inequality. Global Affairs Canada reported in June 2020 that 51 per cent of Afghan women surveyed (aged 15 to 49) reported lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence; the rate of child-marriage was 35 per cent; and over 70 per cent of women aged 15 and over are illiterate, compared to 44 per cent of males.

We may never hear from them again, as the Taliban captures more ground from the incompetent and corrupt Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, commandeered by old men, who have given up
any prospect of winning. It will be left up to the next generation—nay, three generations from now—to agree upon some kind of solution that involves disarmament, arms monitoring, and local and multilateral negotiations. There will have to be an enforced and legislated end to indiscriminate bombing and a renewed openness to electoral power sharing, even to Taliban ideology, mixed with secular principles.

All related pillars of security could collapse, ramshackle, and abandoned, in a country with the world’s lowest per capita, GDP, and literacy ratings.

NATO’s Resolute Support Mission was committed to training and funding the Afghan security forces and institutions and it might have stayed with a conditions-based approach, but once Biden rejected such thinking this month, the preferred alliance option became total withdrawal.

From the very beginning, the entire enterprise was doomed to failure because al-Qaeda is nimble, and its nefarious cells can jump from one desperate countryside to another conflicted area. The best way to defeat al-Qaeda back in 2001 would have been to set up counter-intelligence spying and secret surveillance systems.

According to U.S. intelligence officials that is still possible, indeed easier, after building a network of informers and spies in Afghanistan for the last 20 years. Nevertheless for the Pentagon and the intelligence community, a key debate is now how easily counterterrorism operations can be maintained from outside Afghanistan.

In the context of a different brewing war in Central Europe, Russia’s mounting troop deployment at the Ukraine border and fears Russia could potentially store nuclear weapons in Crimea, Afghanistan’s troubles are no longer a central concern. NATO allies France and Germany turned to urge Russia to withdraw its troops at the Ukraine border, while the United Kingdom announced on Sunday that Royal Navy warships will sail for the Black Sea in May. In that context, news coverage of the U.S. Secretary of State’s visit to Afghanistan, signalling a “new chapter” in the countries’ relationship was limited.

However, it is sad to contemplate what will happen once the U.S. and NATO withdraw, and we could see an increasing stream of Afghans and civilians from the West reminiscent of Saigon in 1975 before it fell to the North Vietnamese Army.
Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at Western University; the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association; the author of NATO and the Bomb; and a peer reviewer for the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health College of Peer Reviewers.