



Preparing for the worst: A call for an Afghanistan Contingency Force

By Norine MacDonald QC and Jorrit Kamminga ■ Friday, December 7, 2012 ■
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With all combat troops scheduled to be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the negotiations taking place in Kabul on the presence and role of U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond that point must include a plan for a Contingency Force as part of the troop drawdown. And the United States should take the lead in establishing this Contingency Force, either under the flag of NATO, or as a new coalition concerned with security and stability in Afghanistan in coming years.

The only alternative under discussion within the Obama administration at the moment is the possibility that some Special Forces stay behind in Afghanistan to work in an advisory or training capacity. Similarly, any U.S. residual force that will stay behind following negotiations will likely have a limited role, with additional U.S. military used primarily as force protection: protecting U.S. and international trainers instead of directly assisting ANSF if needed. The residual force options that are currently being discussed are mainly related to

support for training efforts and counter-terrorism operations against transnational terrorist groups. This would not be considered a Contingency Force.

In fact, a counter-terrorism residual force, consisting of Special Forces and other troops, can be much smaller if a proper Contingency Force is in place for Afghanistan. Establishing this contingency capacity means the counter-terrorism officers would not have to deal with the emergency situations described in this article.

A too rapid drawdown?

One might argue that the current NATO troop drawdown calendar (2011-2014) was based more on domestic political agendas than on-the-ground security. The result has been an extremely tight and relatively inflexible transition calendar, which leaves few options to respond to potentially changing security dynamics or attacks by the various 'Taliban' insurgent groups.

Domestic political pressure for a rapid drawdown inside the United States, other NATO countries, and Afghanistan has been reinforced by four key factors. In the U.S. and NATO countries there are calls for 'an end to the war and return of the troops,' combined with a repositioning toward concerns in the Middle East (particularly Iran and Syria, but also Yemen). Simultaneously, officials in the United States and other NATO countries have become increasingly disillusioned with the Karzai government, and concerned about the deeply troubling 'insider attacks' on NATO troops.

These political dynamics have created real pressures for a fast-paced troop withdrawal - [confirmed by the U.S. Senate recently](#) voting in favour of an accelerated withdrawal - and a neglect of a larger consideration of the security risks related to the upcoming fighting seasons.

The deliberations that existed around [contingency planning](#) during the [drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq](#) are almost completely missing in the case of Afghanistan - and [those that do surface](#) are mainly related to safeguarding security during the upcoming presidential elections in 2014 or counter-terrorism in the region. This ignores both the possible threats of the 2013 fighting season, or other security issues that might arise in the years following.

Why do we need a Contingency Force?

Firstly, a Contingency Force would provide an additional guarantee for the safety of foreign interests, infrastructure and staff, such as the diplomats at consulates and embassies, should these come under attack. The recent attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, the [coordinated attack](#) on the U.S. Embassy in Kabul in September 2011 and the Indian Embassy bombings in Kabul [in 2008 and 2009](#) are sufficient cases in point.

Secondly, the Contingency Force would offer a safety valve while Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) grow in numbers, strength and confidence in an environment that will remain uncertain and unstable for the foreseeable future.

Will ANSF be able and willing to respond to serious insurgent attacks before and after the transition end date of 2014? Despite progress in some areas, particularly in terms of handing

over responsibilities to ANSF as planned, there is a risk that increased insurgent activity in the south or elsewhere in Afghanistan could lead to unmanageable situations.

The actual strengths and weaknesses of ANSF are not the essential point. What should be the focus is proper planning to respond to the *possibility* that ANSF could be confronted by a manner or level of insurgent attack in the South that means they cannot hold the country together. Since the build up of ANSF is such a key element of the transition plan (and exit-strategy) 'narrative,' we see a dynamic that any public discussion of possible future failure of ANSF, and planning for that contingency, is considered 'off-message.' This could ultimately lead to a failure of the entire transition project.

The actual current strengths and weaknesses of the insurgency are also not particularly relevant to the calculations that a Contingency Force is needed. Contingency planning does not depend on a complex debate on the current strength of the Taliban and ANSF; one need only acknowledge a *possibility* that the Taliban could produce a new security dynamic, which we argue would most likely be focused in southern Afghanistan.

Possible scenarios of concern could include, for example, blockading the Kandahar-Kabul road or the road between Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, a move into the suburbs of Kandahar City, taking over Lashkar Gah and blocking the bridges over the Helmand River, or gaining control of the Spin Boldak border crossing.

For an example of a new dynamic in the insurgency, look to the complex attack on Camp Bastion in September 2012 that resulted in the destruction of six AV-8B Harriers, the death of two United States Marine Corps service staff and the wounding nine others. This single assault - using 15 insurgents, explosions to enter the base, dividing attackers in three different waves, and making use of U.S. army uniforms - resulted in a four and a half hour fire fight, and caused damages of up to \$200-240 million.

Clearly this type of complex, coordinated attack was not anticipated by U.S./NATO-ISAF forces at Bastion, and it illustrates unmistakably that the evolution of the insurgency must be considered in proper planning for future security threats. The [more recent coordinated attack](#) with explosives laden vehicles on Forward Operating Base Fenty in Jalalabad in December 2012 confirms that the Bastion attack is not an incident.

Geo-political consequences of losing the south

Any serious defeat of ANSF forces or a considerable loss of terrain to the insurgency - before or following the 2014 transition - would not only be a symbolic triumph for the Taliban, it could also completely reconfigure the power structure in Afghanistan and the region.

The geo-political consequences of 'losing the south' or a similar such scenario would be significant, not the least of which would be the destabilising effect on the wider region, particularly Pakistan, where it could provide a boost for the insurgency.

Drawdown Contingency Plan: Size, location, mandate

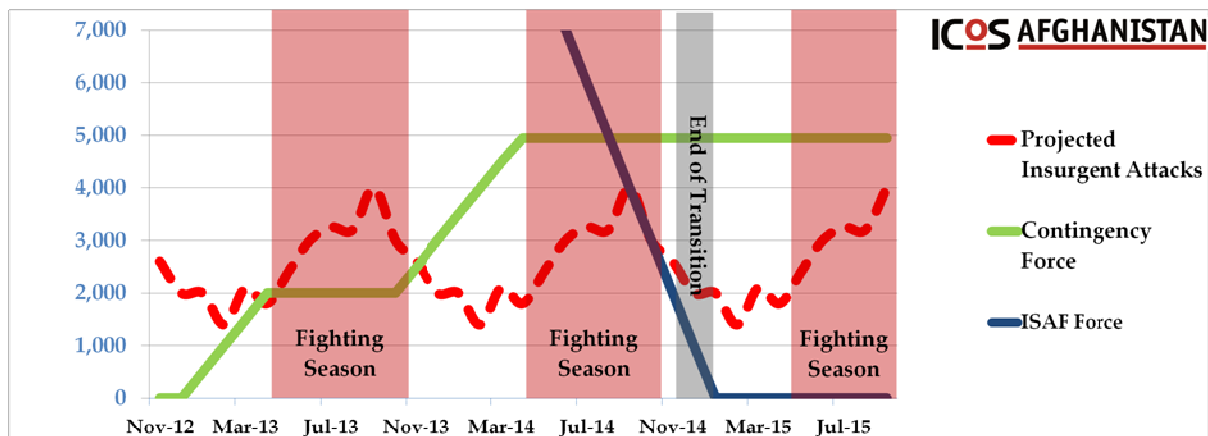
It is important to note that having a Contingency Force on standby is *not* the same as continuing an international military operation in Afghanistan. It would provide Western political leaders with options if a security crisis breaks out in the country.

Size: Given the current levels of ANSF and the continuation of ANP and ANA training and capacity building efforts after 2014, a standby Contingency Force of around 5,000 foreign troops would be sufficient. The Contingency Force would be a standard brigade-size combat team of around 3,500-4,000 soldiers, plus mobility (transport helicopters, but also some attack helicopters) and other support capabilities (intelligence, logistics, medical teams, etc.).

The Contingency Force of 5,000 should be on standby from January 2013 onwards. Given the short time frame before the next fighting season, this means the Contingency Force should initially be included in the calculations of the NATO troop drawdown. Until General John Allen has officially presented his recommendations to the White House, it is not clear how many U.S. forces will be withdrawn in coming months. But at the start of 2013, the United States could start contingency planning by delaying the troop withdrawal of around 2,000 forces until the end of the fighting season of 2013 to complement the transitioning NATO-ISAF forces. These troops would not continue fighting but would convert to contingency troops. Thus, they would still be withdrawn from combat, but would move to a different base to prepare for emergency support operations.

During the six months following the 2013 fighting season, the United States could increase its share of contingency forces to 3,000, and request that its NATO and non-NATO allies contribute a total of 2,000 forces to that group before the end of 2013. This would ensure a total Contingency Force of 5,000 under the flag of NATO before the start of the 2014 fighting season.

The graph below illustrates this scenario, which is of course only one of the many possible outcomes, included here to start a constructive discussion on a contingency system.



* The average numbers of insurgency attacks are based on statistics from previous years (NATO, ISAF Violence Trends Presentation, 30 September 2011).

When deliberating strategic options for a Contingency Force, synergies should be explored - whether in terms of providing a model or in more direct ways - with the NATO Response Force (NRF), a joint force of around 13,000 troops, preparing and training together for about a year, at the disposal of the Atlantic Alliance and with the existing EU Battlegroup (EUBG) structure which has at least 1,500 European troops on standby at any time, currently headquartered in Germany.

The allocation of the 2,000 non-U.S. troops could also be based on a rotating roster, where countries commit a small number of standby forces for a specific period, for example six months to a year (similar to the NATO Response Force which recently extended rotation periods from six to twelve months, and the EU Battlegroup system that rotates every six months). After such a period, other countries will take their place, sharing the burden and making sure a nation's contingency troops are only committed in small numbers and for a limited amount of time.

Location: The foreign Contingency Force could be stationed in or close to Afghanistan. For the latter option, contingency troops stationed in, for example, one of the Central Asian Republics, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait or the UAE, could be logistically more challenging but politically easier to 'sell' than troops stationed in Afghanistan. Another option is to choose several locations, increasing flexibility and linking the Contingency Force to Afghanistan's main geographical areas and the ANSF units operating in these areas.

Mandate: The Contingency Force would safeguard the results of past and present efforts to ensure stability and security in Afghanistan, while guaranteeing the security transition process can be completed in a sustainable and responsible way. The Contingency Force would, in essence, have the same mandate as NATO-ISAF - particularly its current ANSF support role - but it would be subject to a very specific, predefined set of conditions with regards to when and how it could be deployed. The Rules of Engagement need to be specified as soon as possible in full coordination with the Afghan government.

The Contingency Force should remain operational in Afghanistan until at least 2024, in line with the ten-year timetable envisaged during the Chicago Summit in May 2012, unless of course the security situation changes drastically. The mere existence of the Contingency Force would boost the confidence of the ANSF.

Conclusion: the Contingency Planning window is open

The moment to act is now. With the U.S. presidential elections out of the way and only two more years in the tight calendar of the security transition process a Contingency Force should be established as part of the remaining terms of withdrawal. An operational reserve Contingency Force would provide options to western political leaders when faced with a crisis situation in Afghanistan. It also represents a politically viable compromise between the two extremes currently being talked about in Washington: leaving just a few thousand troops in Afghanistan after 2014, or leaving as many as 30,000 troops.

The fewer foreign troops there are in Afghanistan, the greater the need for proper contingency planning, especially given the essentially uncertain nature of the situation before and after transition. Security transition planning should be based on a solid assessment of possible future scenarios of instability and insecurity, rather than on political hopes or aspirations for what the future will hold.

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