



Plans for the withdrawal from Afghanistan remain sketchy and the logistics are hellish

By Nigel Chamberlain, NATO Watch

Key points

- An exit plan remains elusive;
- Troop withdrawals continue;
- Bagram handed to ANSF;
- Logistical nightmare ahead;
- Equipment abandoned; and
- Fighting will continue into 2015

Introduction

In [NATOWatch Briefing paper 29](#) (posted in January 2013), we reported that NATO's withdrawal process from Afghanistan would be an enormous logistical challenge and one likely to be dogged by uncertainties that could impact on the post-2014 security transition. We also indicated that we would return to this subject as the United States and NATO released more information about their plans for withdrawal.

After the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in February this year, [Secretary General Rasmussen](#) told reporters that: "We are in the process of planning and I would expect final decisions on the size and scope of the future NATO-led training mission to be taken within the coming months". While there have been some developments since then, details of the Afghan exit plan remain elusive.

(Construction of Afghan National Security Forces facilities at Camp Shorabak, Helmand Province, 10 April 2013 – photo credit: USACE Afghanistan Engineer District – South/ flickr)



Australian and New Zealand forces home in 2013

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has confirmed [that Australia's](#) main base in Uruzgan Province, Tarin Kot, will be closed. Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith has announced the withdrawal of most of Australia's troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year and said: "We've been there for over a decade and that's far too long".

The Defence Minister said there were currently 1,650 Australian personnel in Afghanistan, including more than 150 people who are working on the withdrawal. About 1,300 Australian Defence Force personnel are based in Uruzgan and the rest are in the major centres of Kandahar and Kabul. He said there was still some uncertainty about whether Australian Special Forces would stay in Afghanistan into next year and that a decision will be made following discussions on the transition by the United States, Afghanistan, ISAF and NATO.

Australian officials are aware that the future security of Afghanistan is far from secured and there is real concern about the Taliban filling the security vacuum left once troops withdraw. The

Minister accepted that Afghanistan would not be a "perfect society" but added:

The capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces, in particular the Afghan National Army, the infantry kandaks of the Fourth Brigade are in a much better state, and the circumstances and conditions on the ground for the people of Uruzgan are much better.

Chief of the Australian Defence Force David Hurley said that:

But in the end, on January 1, 2015, we remain confident that, with the continuing support of the international community, the Afghan institutions of state, including the army and the police will be able to maintain security and allow a newly elected Afghan president and government to start do the things that they want to do for their people.

[New Zealand](#) troops began their withdrawal from Afghanistan on 5 April, eighteen months earlier than originally planned. New Zealand Governor-General and former Chief of Defence Force Jerry Mateparae said: "This has always been the case with us I think. We have gone in, done our job and then left. I think our job in Bamiyan is at about the right state".

Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman said that the 145 New Zealand troops working on provincial reconstruction in Bamiyan had made a significant impact on the region and that: "The hospital has been rebuilt and new health centres have opened in all seven districts. Mortality rates for children have plummeted, and the same has happened to maternal death rates".

In February, Prime Minister John Key announced that a group of 27 troops would remain for about a year as part of New Zealand's commitment to the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan.

Kerry in Kabul

[US Secretary of State John Kerry](#)

made an unannounced visit to Kabul for talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai on 25 March. His visit coincided with the handover of Bagram jail, now renamed the Afghan National Detention Facility at Parwan, thus resolving one of the issues concerning national sovereignty and thought to be holding back negotiations about a post-2014 military presence in the country. Another thorny issue, the withdrawal of US special operations teams from Wardak Province, also seems to have been resolved.

[In a joint press conference](#) after the handover ceremony, Karzai said: "Today was a good day. This is the way to treat the national sovereignty of Afghanistan". Kerry added: "Today, Afghanistan is managing three very significant transitions. A security transition, a political transition, and an economic transition. And America will continue to support the Afghan people through all three of these transitions".

Logistical nightmare

Writing in [Time Magazine](#) after travelling to Afghanistan, Nate Rawlings says the country has

been called a 'logistician's nightmare' as it is landlocked and mountainous with poor roads. He adds that "the easiest way in and out of the country is a geopolitical minefield and the other two routes are three times as expensive". ... "Yet, for twelve years, logisticians have supplied troops with the equipment necessary to fight a war".

He cites a December 2012 report to Congress by the Government Accountability Office which states that there is the equivalent of more than 90,000 twenty-foot containers of equipment in Afghanistan worth \$36 billion which will cost an estimated \$5.7 billion to return to the United States.

Bagram Airfield is the central depot which is packed with twenty and forty foot container stacked two high with \$570,000 vehicles lined up by the hundreds. He says that most of the equipment will go back to the US for repairs and refitting for use in future training and much of it will be moved to bases around the world, waiting at the ready for the next unseen war.



(US Army General Martin E. Dempsey, 18th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Army Maj. Gen. James C. McConville, commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division in an aircraft fly through Afghanistan on 7 April 2013 – photo credit: US DoD/flickr)

Writing in [Foreign Policy](#), Gordon Lubold cites [Situation Report](#) estimates of the US Army preparing to "divest itself" of about \$6 billion worth of equipment out of a total of around \$28 billion currently in

Afghanistan, according to a Pentagon spokesperson. This will include equipment considered obsolete, does not meet criteria to return home, or is not "cost effective to return". [Brigadier General Steve Shapiro](#), the deputy commander of the unit overseeing the removal, sale or destruction of about \$26-billion worth of US equipment currently in Afghanistan, known to the military as a 'retrograde', said: "Our workload will at least double by the beginning of the fall. We're hearing about \$6-billion in transportation costs".

The problem of withdrawing the relatively small German force from Afghanistan was highlighted in [Spiegel Online](#) in October 2012. A significant portion of the NATO withdrawal goes through the northern city of Masar-i-Scharif which is coordinated by Germany and has become a vital traffic junction. As Germany reduces its troop levels to below 4,000 over the course of 2013, the administrative and security pressure will increase.

Writing in [the Spectator](#), the Telegraph's Defence Editor, Con Coughlin, predicts that the attempt to

extricate the British army from Afghanistan “will be one of the most daunting challenges ever undertaken by the British military” and the plan “depends on trusting Afghan troops who have already shown a worrying ability to switch sides”.

Britain has an estimated £4 billion worth of equipment in Afghanistan, including 3,000 armoured vehicles. The latest generation of armoured vehicles and communications equipment is being flown out in the RAF’s giant C-17 transporter aircraft but more basic equipment will be abandoned. Everything else must be brought out overland.

Couglin states that Pakistan has “demanded the payment of hefty bribes to guarantee the safe passage of NATO men and equipment” but “there is still no real guarantee of safe transit”.

Canadian officials estimate around a quarter of their equipment went missing while in transit through Pakistan when they withdrew in 2011 and the Taliban has already made targeting NATO convoys one of its main priorities. He goes on to explain why attention has turned to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which will result in shipments been moved 4,000 miles overland to the Baltic port of Riga.

In January, [NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu admitted](#) that NATO faced “an enormous logistics challenge”. It was estimated that 125,000 shipping containers and 80,000 vehicles would be needed to transport equipment out of Afghanistan, not including transport aircraft for tanks and helicopters.

Exit routes

Writing for [International Relations and Security Network](#) (ISN) Security Watch, Sonia Rothwell says that as ISAF prepares to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, the instability of transport routes out of the country through Pakistan has opened up a window of opportunity for Uzbekistan. Relations between NATO and Uzbekistan are said to have improved, presumably not unrelated to the pressures of withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As a result of Pakistan closing its supply routes in late 2011, NATO was forced to look at moving more of its equipment out of Afghanistan via the more expensive central Asian land route. An internal research report says the [way out](#) of landlocked Afghanistan through central Asia is “indispensable” while the concerns about human rights issues will be overridden by the short-term logistical needs of the armed forces:

The withdrawal of cargo will coincide with the withdrawal of criticism, as concerns about poor human rights records move into the background and transit agreements to the fore.

An exit north would be via the NDN established in 2008. Uzbekistan constructed a railway in order to improve access of supplies for ISAF thus completing a strategic transport corridor from the Baltic states via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, over the Hairaton Bridge and into northern Afghanistan. A [report by the US Congressional Research Service](#) noted, however, that: “Although Uzbekistan’s rail network to Afghanistan has been relied upon to ship most of the fuel used by ISAF, corruption and bureaucracy in Uzbekistan have reportedly posed challenges to the use of the NDN routes through the country”.

The [Moscow Times](#) reported in December 2012 that “five months after Moscow finalized an agreement with NATO to use Ulyanovsk’s airport for transporting military equipment from Afghanistan, not a single flight has been carried out”.

NATO Watch also reported that the US and Pakistan signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MoU) on 31 July 2012 which, theoretically, reopened the transit route through Pakistan and exempted the US from paying customs duty and taxes, effective until 2015, but transit costs were unclear. The first shipment of containers into Pakistan occurred in early February 2013.



(A coalition forces member provides security near an overwatch position as Afghan National Army special forces soldiers help Afghan Local Police members build a checkpoint, 3 April 2013, in Helmand province – photo credit: US DoD/ flickr)

Already gone

Adding to the concerns about moving equipment out of Afghanistan is a report that shows, more

than a year after [Canada's withdrawal](#) was declared complete, nearly 400 shipping containers full of military supplies remain stuck in Kandahar. The delay, brought on by the extended closure of the Afghan border with Pakistan, has turned into a long, costly logistics nightmare for the military, which was counting on having everything home and in good order to fully re-equip and refurbish the Canadian army.

The last vehicles of Task Force La Fayette (TFLF), France's principal force structure in Afghanistan [departed Kabul on 25 March](#) on board an Antonov An-124 'Condor' strategic transport aircraft. [French President Francois Hollande](#) was in Moscow for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in late February.

Hollande reportedly asked the Russian authorities to assist the French in the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

A little more clarity....

A [New York Times editorial](#) in October 2012 called for a timetable for United States forces to leave Afghanistan and that it should not take more than a year, but the Pentagon and NATO refused to discuss it. [President Obama](#) did indicate in January this year that he was bringing forward the schedules for pulling American forces out of Afghan villages and for ending most unilateral combat operations. He said that some of the 66,000 American troops could leave the country starting this spring and summer and that he would make an announcement on the pace of troop drawdown in coming months. As indicated earlier, John Kerry's discussions and agreements with Hamid Karzai may help President Obama's decision making.

[Retiring ISAF Commander General Allen](#) said in a speech at the Brookings Institution, "sometimes this comes as a surprise when I say this, that on January 1st, 2015 there's still going to be fighting in Afghanistan", but added that the Afghan security forces "turned out to be better than we thought, and they turned out to be better than they thought".

(A U.S. Marine fires an AK-47 rifle during night-fire sustainment training in Helmand province, Afghanistan, 28 March 2013. Special operations Marines were deployed to the province to train and mentor Afghan National Security Forces members – photo credit: US DoD/ flickr)



The UK Defence Select Committee said in a report released on 10 April that the UK had a responsibility to "make Afghanistan work" after 2014. Committee chairman James Arbuthnot MP said that some of the witnesses who gave evidence "thought there was a 50-50 chance of Afghanistan descending into civil war". In a [BBC interview](#) he said: "It's only partly in the hands of the international community to stave that off. It's largely within the hands of the Afghan people themselves". He added that a degree of reconciliation is needed at the end of any conflict and it was necessary to bring in the Taliban and all sections of society, such as women and tribal groupings. [The Committee concluded](#) that they had received:

- Very little information from the MoD and the FCO as to how they plan to be involved in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Given there are less than two years before the end of 2014, the report calls on the Government to set out how it sees its future role in Afghanistan; and

- UK Armed Forces face many challenges in the withdrawal of the military equipment in Afghanistan. As the plans for withdrawal mature, the Committee calls on the MoD to provide detailed plans and costs, in particular, to show that the force protection of personnel is at the forefront of its planning.

....but US military leaders remain reluctant to withdraw?

[ISAF Commander General Dunford](#) told the US Senate Armed Services Committee on 16 April that the US should not make an assessment of troop withdrawal before November and called for the signing of a security agreement, which is currently being negotiated, as a way of ensuring long-term US support and providing a legal basis for a continued US troop presence.

Dunford argued that the US should remain in Afghanistan post-2014 to train Afghan forces. If that does not happen, "it would be a question of time" before Afghan security would deteriorate, he said. In his prepared opening statement to the committee, the General said:

There is a growing sense that December 2014 is a cliff for the Afghan people. That dynamic must be addressed with a credible, compelling narrative of US commitment. Absent confidence in the hope for a brighter future, Afghan leaders, the Afghan people and regional actors will continue to hedge and plan for the worst case. The behaviour associated with

that mindset has the very real potential to undermine the campaign.

[He suggested](#) that the United States and its allies should keep troops in Kabul and the "four corners" of the country after 2014, warning about growing uncertainty across the region as the withdrawal begins. He added that he had seen evidence that US efforts to get the Taliban to reconcile with the Afghan government and join the political process are not bearing fruit. "I don't have any insight today that would lead me to believe the Taliban will be part of the political process in 2014".