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## America in Afghanistan

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SPEAKING on February 1st shortly before a meeting of NATO ministers in Brussels, Leon Panetta, America's defence secretary, dropped a bombshell. He said that he now hoped American troops in Afghanistan would be able to withdraw from a combat to an "enabling" role soon after the middle of next year—ie, about 18 months earlier than an existing plan agreed on in late 2010 at a NATO summit in Lisbon. The timing of Mr Panetta's remarks about accelerating the pace of the transition to Afghan national security forces (ANSF) owes more to the Obama administration's electoral calculations than to the situation in Afghanistan. There, everything argues against a rush for the exit.

Although Mr Panetta paid lip service to Lisbon, stressing that his proposal did not mean early withdrawal and adding "we've got to stick to the Lisbon strategy", he was, in fact, carefully undermining what had previously been agreed on. Mid-to-late 2013 rather than end-2014 will almost certainly now become the date when most of the ISAF forces (that is, those in the NATO-led international coalition in Afghanistan) will start packing their bags. (Today, those forces stand at 130,000.) Mr Panetta knows, too, that his suggestion will hardly be resisted by America's NATO allies, most of whom will be only too happy to head for an early bath if they think they can do so with America's blessing.

The war is unpopular with Western voters for its expense (it cost American taxpayers \$119 billion in 2011), the steady drip of casualties, the widespread impression that little has been accomplished, and what is seen, particularly since the killing of Osama bin Laden last year, as

the tenuous connection between what happens in Afghanistan and safety at home. Nor does it help sentiment when rogue Afghan army soldiers turn on their NATO trainers, as happened last month when four French soldiers were killed, and this week when an American marine met a similar fate.

Mr Panetta cast further doubt on America's commitment to what Mr Obama once called the "good war", by hinting that the West might not be able to afford the planned expansion of the ANSF (the army and the police) to about 350,000 from their 305,000 today, unless non-fighting NATO allies, such as Japan, South Korea and the Gulf Arabs open their wallets. Revealingly, he said that "in many ways, the funding is going to determine what kind of force we can sustain for the future."

Even the end-2014 deadline for withdrawing Western combat troops was tight, but at least it was based on a phased transition and a staged ISAF drawdown that everyone understood and was working towards. The second phase of the transition, which started last year, has already put the security of about half the country in Afghan hands. Over the next two years, the plan was for Afghan forces increasingly to fill in for Western troops as they either withdrew or were deployed elsewhere, holding what General John Allen, ISAF's American commander, calls the "human terrain". In a recent interview, General Allen described the ANSF as the "defeat mechanism" of the Taliban insurgency.

Accelerating the pace of the transition and cutting the numbers of the Afghan forces inevitably risks eroding the real security gains that have been made in the south (particularly in Helmand and Kandahar provinces) since America's "surge" in 2010. It also places in jeopardy the aim of a concentrated effort to peg back the insurgency in the still-violent east during the next two fighting seasons. Before Mr Panetta's announcement, General Allen's job looked difficult but doable. Now it just looks difficult.

What makes all this so unfortunate is that there has recently been some progress in coaxing the leadership of the Taliban towards the negotiating table—a tribute of sorts to the potential success of the previous (as it must now be regarded) transition plan. However, a secret NATO report, leaked this week, called "The State of the Taliban", based on interrogations with more than 4,000 Taliban and al-Qaeda detainees, painted a picture of an insurgency that is resilient and likely to remain so for as long as Pakistan believes it is in its strategic interests to give it material and moral support. The confidence undoubtedly owed something to the bravado of some of the interviewees. The Taliban's senior leadership, better informed, may well be less optimistic about their prospects—although most Afghans yearn for peace, few want to see the return of the Taliban to Kabul. But Mr Panetta's words, intended primarily to pander to opinion at home, can only have given them encouragement and stiffened their resolve.