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Afghanistan war in new phase -- with no decisive end in sight

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- A new chapter of the war in Afghanistan is opening with a slimmed-down Western force doing more advising than fighting, a resilient Taliban showing little interest in peace talks, and Americans tempted to pull the plug on a conflict now in its 12th year.

A decisive end seems nowhere in sight.

The allied offensive that just ended, spearheaded by an influx of 30,000 U.S. troops, hammered the Taliban in its southern strongholds. Yet the insurgency persists as the American-led international military coalition hands off security responsibilities to the Afghans before exiting in two years.

"We are probably headed for stalemate in 2014," said Stephen Biddle, a George Washington University political science professor who has advised U.S. commanders in Afghanistan and Iraq.

If that is the case, the U.S. will have to pump billions of dollars a year into Afghanistan for decades to prevent its collapse, Biddle said.

What began in October 2001 under the Pentagon's banner of Operation Enduring Freedom has hardened into enduring resistance. The Taliban take heavy losses but regenerate as fast as they fall. They also maintain links to a range of other extremist groups, including al-Qaida and the Pakistan-based Haqqani network.

U.S. commanders say with confidence that their war campaign is on track, and President Barack Obama seemed to agree in his final debate Monday with Republican challenger Mitt Romney.

"There's no reason why Americans should die when Afghans are perfectly capable of defending their own country," Obama said.

Some concerns

Yet the path forward is dotted with question marks:

- Will Afghanistan's security forces be capable of holding off the Taliban on their own? Afghan forces outnumber the Taliban by more than 10 to 1, but currently not a single Afghan army battalion is capable of operating in the field without American advisers.
- If the Afghan forces falter, will the U.S. extend its stay or send in reinforcements to avoid a Taliban takeover?
- Will the U.S.-led military coalition hold together even as France and others dash for the exits in coming months?
- Will enough Afghans come to embrace the corrupt government in Kabul as a preferred alternative to the militant Taliban?
- Will the Afghans manage a peaceful transfer of power after a presidential election scheduled for 2014, in which President Hamid Karzai cannot run again?

The independent International Crisis Group warned this month of a "precipitous slide toward state collapse" unless steps are taken soon to prevent a repeat of the "chaos and chicanery" of the 2009 presidential election and the 2010 parliamentary vote.

Some optimism

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who championed the additional American troops, remains optimistic.

"We've come too far, we've fought too many battles, we have spilled too much blood not to finish the job that we are all about," Panetta said in Brussels, Belgium, this month after meeting with his counterparts from NATO nations.

The "job" Panetta referenced is no longer to defeat the Taliban before 2015 or to eradicate al-Qaida in its Afghan redoubts, but to create an Afghan security force that can at least hold the substantial gains achieved by the U.S.-led international alliance.

It's not even clear whether the U.S. still expects to get peace negotiations with them started by 2015.

U.S. officials have said for years that the Taliban were unlikely to talk peace unless they felt their battlefield chances were slipping away. Those chances did take a heavy hit when the fresh American forces came on, yet the Taliban still show no appetite for negotiations.

The U.S. now has 66,000 troops in Afghanistan, joined by about 37,000 from allied countries. Decisions on how many more U.S. troops to withdraw next year won't come before the presidential election, but there are abundant signs that additional reductions will be ordered at some stage in 2013.

Some U.S. commanders express worry that no matter how much better the Afghan forces get before most Western forces go home in 2014, it could all be for naught if the Afghan government fails to strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Afghans.

Adding to a sense of unease is anger over a rising number of killings of U.S. and coalition troops by Afghan soldiers and police out of personal pique or in apparent sympathy with the Taliban.

At least 57 coalition personnel, mostly Americans, have been killed so far this year in 40 insider attacks.

The latest was Thursday, when two U.S. servicemen were killed by a gunman in an Afghan police uniform.