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## A 'Zero Option' for Afghanistan

By David W. Barno

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Yes, President Karzai, we might pull out completely.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit this week to Washington marks one of the final big decision points in America's 11-year Afghanistan war. This week's meetings are likely to determine the final U.S. footprint in Afghanistan after 2014, when all international combat operations are slated to end. And that residual number of U.S. forces could well be zero.

Recent reports suggest that the White House is looking at troop options ranging from 3,000 to as many as 15,000 stay-behind troops. Many think that the final figure will be well under 10,000. These numbers are much diminished from proposals seriously considered even 12 to 24 months ago of a long-term presence in the range of 20,000 to 35,000 troops. The realities of shrinking budgets and crumpled public support for the war have dramatically trimmed those expectations. In recent weeks, vigorous debate has been under way inside the administration in advance of Karzai's visit to sort out a minimalist approach that will protect long-term U.S. interests in the region, but do so with the absolute leanest outlay of dollars and troops.

Karzai comes to this week's discussions convinced that the United States desperately needs long-term military bases in Afghanistan. He sees an America without other viable options to maintain its regional influence, cajole Pakistan, threaten Iran, or launch raids against nearby terrorists. Because of this, Karzai thinks that he holds all the cards in the upcoming negotiations. He is

absolutely convinced that the United States has no workable strategic choice but to station substantial U.S. troops in Afghanistan after 2014.

But Karzai has it wrong. There is strong sentiment in the United States to look at all the options. Here are five reasons why:

Iraq. The outcome of America's war in Iraq sets a strong precedent for a similar "zero" U.S. military posture in Central Asia. Iraq has not become an Iranian puppet state nor descended into chaos since the United States withdrew all its military forces at the end of 2011. The United States maintains a robust diplomatic presence there -- and presumably conducts intelligence activities -- to protect its interests. Iraqi political decisions are often at odds with U.S. preferences; few think that a U.S. troop presence would change that reality. Iraq's failure to grant remaining U.S. soldiers legal immunity from Iraqi law doomed any possibility of a residual force there; the same could happen in Afghanistan, and withdrawal could be seen as an equally viable outcome by many Americans.

Budgetary pressure. With a debt crisis and crumbling infrastructure at home, enthusiasm on Capitol Hill for spending taxpayer dollars on foreign adventures is at an all-time low. The recent action to avert the fiscal cliff has delayed, but not fixed, the substantial imbalance between U.S. spending and revenue. A perpetual flow of billions of aid dollars to Afghanistan after 2014 -- for U.S. troops or for Afghans -- will be a much tougher sell two years from now than it is today. And it is very tough today.

War weariness. By 2014, the United States will have been at war in Afghanistan for over 12 years. The connection between Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks has frayed deeply since Osama bin Laden's death at the hands of U.S. forces in 2011. With over 2,000 Americans killed and another 17,000 wounded in over a decade of inconclusive fighting, most Americans are looking for an exit from a seemingly interminable war. Maintaining congressional and popular support for an unending deployment of thousands of U.S. troops after 12 years at war will be supremely difficult, even more so if casualties continue.

Stand-off capabilities. The United States has powerful remote intelligence, surveillance, and strike capabilities that could only be dreamed of in the 1990s. These capabilities increasingly can be employed from "stand-off" distances, with a few flying from as far as the United States. Some of these capabilities require regional basing, but Afghanistan is not the only country that can provide low-visibility basing options. Drones have changed the face of warfare, and used in concert with U.S. intelligence into remote areas, they are increasingly lethal to terrorists.

U.S. intelligence networks. Eleven years of extensive quiet intelligence efforts partnered with Afghans (and Pakistanis) have created a deep web of friendly contacts that will be maintained long after 2014. In some ways, the post-2014 environment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area could evolve into a prolonged "intelligence war," with hundreds of U.S. operatives and billions of covert dollars invested in preventing further terrorist attacks on the United States. Given its vital importance, this undertaking will endure -- regardless of the size of the residual U.S. military presence.

U.S. President Barack Obama will have to weigh the substantial risks inherent in a "Zero Option" for Afghanistan. Absent the stabilizing influence of some numbers of U.S. troops, Afghanistan could slip back into chaos, experiencing a new version of the devastating civil war that rent the country in the 1990s. The ability to see and strike terrorist groups that aim to attack the United States or its allies from within the region would be degraded. Al Qaeda could surge into growing ungoverned spaces and perhaps re-establish a more prominent foothold. U.S. influence on a nuclear-armed Pakistan would undoubtedly lessen if U.S. troops were no longer stationed next door. And the potential for the United States to put pressure on Iran from U.S. forces posted near its eastern border would vanish. By any measure, it is a suboptimal posture for the United States in the region, but not necessarily an untenable one.

Obama must consider all these risks as he sits down with Karzai to hammer out this last chapter of the war. Karzai would be wise to avoid overplaying his hand. Even though the Zero Option is not the best choice to protect American long-term regional interests, it certainly remains on the table. Overreach on Karzai's part could easily sour prospects for any sort of enduring U.S. military presence.

For Americans, the Afghanistan war is entering its final phase. Obama knows that this war will end on his watch. His legacy as president will inevitably be shaped by its outcome. Whether U.S. troops ultimately stay or leave Afghanistan after 2014 may now come down to just one week of tough bargaining. Each nation has a great deal at stake.