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Afghanistan's future is not Iraq's present

By Brian M Downing

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Western ground combat forces in Afghanistan will be gone by the end of this year. British and United States units are furling their guidons and boarding transport planes for the journey home. Concern over the ability of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to stand up against the Taliban after the withdrawal has deepened after the dismal showing of the Iraqi army, portions of which showed their heels last June in the face of an Islamic State offensive.

The armies of Afghanistan and Iraq share uncomfortable similarities. Both are composed of peoples with long histories of mistrust. Both were rapidly put together, which saw the promotion of unqualified NCOs and officers - a process where connections and graft were at least as important as professional accomplishment.

Both have the now dubious certificate of Western training, which can only teach marksmanship and close-order drill. Holding ground is of course unteachable. However, the Afghan army is more reliable than Iraq's, and the Taliban are less fearsome than IS. Regional allies and airpower figure too.

Afghan forces

A Central Asian myth holds that at the creation of the world, people who didn't fit elsewhere were swept into what became Afghanistan. Most Afghans relish the myth. The Pashtuns

compose about 42% of the population, Tajiks 27%, Hazaras 9%, Uzbeks 9%, and add to that an assortment of Turkomens, Aimaqs, and Balochs.

Although many groups fought the Russians in the 1980s, and prided themselves on ousting them, they did so under rivalrous warlords, not as part of a unified opposition. Victory brought no spirit of reconciliation and unity, only another period of feuding and warring.

The ANA is at present deeply divided over ethnic lines. The rank and file is disproportionately Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara (northerners); the officer corps is disproportionately Pashtun (southerners). In that the Taliban is a Pashtun movement, there have been numerous incidents of Pashtun ANA soldiers shooting northern troops and Western advisers. Ethnic mistrust is prevalent, perhaps even worse than in Iraq. Nonetheless, there is reason for optimism.

The Iraqi army had little combat experience in the 11 years from Saddam's downfall to IS's rude intrusion on garrison life last June. The ANA, however, has been engaged in fighting for several years, initially in conjunction with Western troops but increasingly on its own. Though hardly a formidable army, most units have developed a measure of confidence, especially among northern troops, whose enmity toward the Taliban is two decades old now.

The Taliban face other enemies beside the ANA. Several Pashtun tribes have formed militias to oppose the Taliban's return. Angered by the Taliban's assassinations and destruction of schools, some Pashtuns have formed independent fighting forces opposed to the insurgents as well as the Kabul government. This augurs unfavorably for the Taliban, but also for postwar harmony. There are further advantages enjoyed by the ANA, as will be presently noted.

The Taliban

A legendary status has been conferred upon Pashtun guerrillas, at least since they annihilated a British army in 1842. The defeat of the Russians almost a century and a half later greatly enhanced the legend. However, advisers to the Pashtun fighters of the 1980s lamented that though the mujahideen were tenacious fighters and knew the terrain well, they were resistant to guidance on combat tactics and given to predictable movement routes. They had an overweening and parochial confidence in traditional methods - and no defeat undermined it.

The same is said of Taliban fighters today. They have not exhibited the tactical adroitness or adaptability or cohesion of, say, IS. This limits the insurgents' effectiveness and raises the question of their sustainability in a war of attrition.

IS fighters are schooled in Salafist dogma, which binds them together in the cause of avenging Islam's honor and uniting its people once again. This gives them extraordinary unit cohesion and determination. Taliban leaders have parallel beliefs, but the rank and file are far less dogmatic. Fighting groups are composed of farmers and herders, called up and allocated by tribal elders, who wish to rid their district of foreigners. They care little of any higher goal, let alone one as grandiose as IS's. Taliban fighters think of home valleys, not mythic empires.

Following the Russian withdrawal in 1989, many fighters declared victory and went home. Justly so. This may happen once again when the next fighting season begins and tribal elders and

prospective troops look about their district and see no more foreigners, only ANA troops with whom they can engage in the venerable Afghan practice of bargaining - a practice greatly preferred by most to the wearisome one of endless fighting.

Airpower

If the Taliban wish to retake control over southern Afghanistan and other parts of the country, they will have to seize and hold scores of ANA fortifications and cities. This will require massing hundreds if not thousands of fighters who will then be vulnerable to massive firepower - mortars, artillery, but especially air power.

In recent months, US and allied airstrikes have blunted the IS offensive in Iraq and allowed for a counteroffensive by Kurdish and Iraqi troops, albeit a painfully slow one. In northern Syria, around the beleaguered town of Kobane, allied air power has punished IS fighters and lifted the spirits of Kurdish militias. The outcome of the battle for Kobane is uncertain, but an encouraging template is emerging.

Similar engagements have taken place in this year's fighting season in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been able to concentrate several hundred troops around ANA positions. The ensuing assaults have often been successful; however, the ANA has retaken lost positions - with the help of Western airpower. Taliban losses have been high, as have the ANA's.

The present US administration would dearly love to leave Iraq and Afghanistan, but recent events show that looming defeat, even in distant lands, bodes ill for the president. Approval ratings fall, as do his party's prospects in upcoming elections. The US will keep sizable detachments of drones, fighters, and helicopter gunships to deter or decimate Taliban assaults. The same can be said for a number of theaters, from Mali to Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan. The US will use disciplined indigenous ground troops to encourage Islamist troops concentrations, then hit them relentlessly from the sky. Several such wars of attrition loom or are already underway.

Regional support

The IS advance into Iraq intensified sectarian hostilities in the Gulf, which greatly limited the ability of countries in the region to intervene. Iranian intervention in Iraq would lead to outrage and perhaps to a rash response from Sunni states. And of course Sunni intervention would run the same risks with Iran. Hence the need for outside intervention - chiefly American.

Though sectarian tensions aren't wholly absent in Afghanistan, they are far weaker. Northern peoples, Shi'ite and Sunni alike, cooperate with Iran, with whom they have cultural affinities such as language and literature. They also share strategic interests.

The Hazaras of the central region are Shi'ite. Their mullahs respect the teachings and leanings of Iranian ayatollahs. The Hazaras were massacred in the thousands by the Taliban, and a number of Iranian diplomats were killed when the Taliban seized the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. Iran backed the northern peoples in the war with the Soviet Union, backed them after

the withdrawal, and continued with aid and advisers during the long war with the Taliban - a period of American disinterest, as northerners readily note.

Iran views the Taliban as a rabid Sunni cult, backed by mercurial Pakistani generals and indirectly by hostile Saudi princes. It will not allow the Taliban to retake the large portion of the country it conquered in the '90s any more than it will allow IS to move into districts along the Iranian border. Iran would intervene with ground troops and airpower in the event of a Taliban drive into northern Afghanistan - a highly unlikely event as long as the US remains involved.

Northerners also can rely on the support of India and Russia. The former wishes to block the expansion of Pakistani commerce and interest into Central Asia and to secure its own position there. Moscow views the rise of radical Islam as a direct threat to former Soviet republics such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and an indirect one to restive Muslim parts of Russia itself. India and Russia, like Iran, backed the northerners against the Taliban. China, the biggest winner in the Afghan resource bonanza, will seek stability - more through subsidy and diplomacy than through force of arms, however.

Over the past few years, the Taliban has seized many parts of the south and east. It will seize more parcels in coming months and years, but a reconquest of much of the country, as took place in the '90s, is out of reach. The ANA, though not a professional fighting force, has a measure of fighting spirit. It also has allied local forces, US air power, and regional support.

The ANA will not engage the Taliban in a decisive battle; there isn't likely to be one. Nor will the Kabul government win over the population with counterinsurgency techniques; COIN doctrines have not fared well on the Afghan mountains and plains.

They will engage the Taliban in scores of small and medium-sized engagements, mostly from fortified positions surrounded by razor wire, land mines, and areas pre-targeted by ANA mortars. Taliban assaults have proved costly to both sides, but a war of attrition does not favor the Taliban, who are greatly outnumbered by the ANA and its cohorts.