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## Analysis: Bad news bares reality of Afghan war

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Rising death tolls, military timetables slowed. Infighting in the partner government. War-weary allies packing up to leave — and others eyeing an exit.

Events this spring — from the battlefields of Helmand and Kandahar to the halls of Congress — have served as a reality check on the Afghan war, a grueling fight in a remote, inhospitable land that once harbored the masterminds of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The Taliban have proven resilient and won't be easily routed. Good Afghan government won't blossom any faster than flowers in the bleak Afghan deserts. Phrases like "transition to Afghan control" mask the enormous challenge ahead to make those words reality.

President Barack Obama may face a difficult choice next year: slow the withdrawal of U.S. troops that he promised would start in July 2011 or risk an Afghanistan where the Taliban have a significant political role.

This week's hearings on Capitol Hill revealed deep concern within Congress over Pentagon assurances of progress in the nearly nine-year war. Members of Congress complained of mounting casualties — at least 52 foreign troop deaths this month including 34 Americans.

That prompted Defense Secretary Robert Gates to complain about negative perceptions in Washington about the war, even though his top military officer, Adm. Mike Mullen, acknowledged "we all have angst" about the course of the conflict.

Truth lies in both camps. Bombs and battles are far less frequent in Kabul than in Baghdad during the height of the Iraq war. The major Afghan cities of Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and Herat in the west are relatively quiet.

In the countryside, however, where three-quarters of Afghanistan's nearly 30 million people live, the insurgents still wield power, moving freely among the population, operating their own Islamic courts and intimidating those who support the government.

Progress is real but scattered and incremental. All parties here predict a tough summer. July 2011 may be too soon to ensure success — even though the top NATO commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal acknowledges he's under pressure to show progress by the end of the year.

Instead of spurring the Afghans to step up to the plate, the July 2011 date has encouraged President Hamid Karzai to seek a deal with the Taliban despite U.S. misgivings that the time is right for a settlement.

"Two critical questions dominate any realistic discussion of the conflict. The first is whether the war is worth fighting. The second is whether it can be won. The answers to both questions are uncertain," former Pentagon analyst Anthony Cordesman wrote this week.

A few months ago, things seemed to have been going better. For the first time in years the tide appeared to have been turning. In February, the U.S. and its allies seized the insurgents' southern stronghold of Marjah, rushing in a local administration and promising development aid to win the loyalty of the people.

NATO and Afghan troops also delivered blows to the militants in the north and west. After Marjah, the alliance shifted attention to Kandahar, promising to ramp up security in the largest city in the south and the former Taliban headquarters.

Within weeks, however, the Taliban were back in Marjah, threatening and assassinating those who cooperated with the Americans and their Afghan partners. The security effort in Kandahar slowed to a crawl, in large part because of public opposition to the campaign for fear it would lead to more bloodshed.

The Taliban responded by planting more of their signature weapon — roadside bombs that the military calls improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.

Those hidden bombs not only account for most of the deaths among international troops but they reduce their effectiveness in controlling territory where the Taliban operate.

With so many bombs along roads and footpaths, troops on patrol can cover only a limited area since they must move slowly searching for hidden IEDs.

In April, gunmen assassinated the deputy mayor of Kandahar as he knelt for evening prayers in a mosque. This month, a car bomb killed the chief of the Kandahar district of Arghandab. Days before, a suicide bomber killed 56 people at a wedding party in the same district.

Those setbacks came as no surprise to commanders in Afghanistan, many of whom cautioned privately after Marjah that major challenges lay ahead. In the brutal calculus of war, more casualties are inevitable as the U.S. pours more troops into Afghanistan — from about 30,000 in 2008 to more than 94,000 now. About 10,000 more are due in August.

But in a war without front lines, fought in scores of small engagements scattered throughout this stark, mountainous country, it becomes difficult to quantify progress. Cities don't fall to victorious forces. Real estate doesn't change hands as in conventional wars.

Instead, the Afghan war is a battle for public support — a challenge for a foreign power absent a reliable local partner. NATO's policy of working alongside the Afghan government means each suffers a loss of prestige from the other's mistakes.

"They should leave Afghanistan because they didn't come to protect this country," Maulvi Sarajuddin, a leading cleric in Baghlan province, said of the international troops. "They came here and insecurity continues. Nothing has changed. In the past eight years, the country is more unstable and corruption has seized the throats of the Afghan people."

Securing a reliable local partner turned the tide of the Iraq war when Sunni insurgents abandoned al-Qaida and joined with the Americans just as the U.S. troop surge of 2006 and 2007 was under way.

U.S. allies gained little reassurance about the reliability of the Afghan government when Karzai — a key pillar of Obama's war strategy — this month let go two respected members of his national security team, one of whom had questioned overtures to the Taliban.

The lack of solid local allies lies at the heart of the delays in Kandahar. The local government is weak and underfunded, held hostage to tribal leaders and politically connected businessmen whose wheeling and dealing have undercut support for the central government.

Cultivating and empowering new partners takes time — a resource the U.S.-led force may not have. Support for the war in the U.S. and Europe is fading.

The Dutch plan to pull their 1,600 troops from Afghanistan by August. Canada, with about 2,800 soldiers, plans to end its combat role here next year. The Poles are pressing for NATO to draw up an exit strategy. Britain's new prime minister has expressed its support for the war but has ruled out sending more troops. The Pentagon has been pleading for months for its European allies to send more people to train Afghan forces.

Despite assurances to the contrary, many pro-government Afghans fear they may be abandoned by the U.S. after Obama's July 2011 date to start the withdrawal. They fear that time is too short for the coalition to train and equip an effective Afghan force to protect the country.

"It is better for foreign forces to stay," said Aziza Misami, a member of the provincial council in Ghazni. "Unfortunately, when the foreign troops leave, the first victim will be Afghan women because the Taliban don't like women. The second victim will be the Afghan nation."