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The Regional Effects of the U.S. Drawdown from Afghanistan

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President Obama's June 22 announcement of the start of a U.S. military drawdown is expected to generate significant repercussions and strategy adjustments for Afghanistan's neighbors. However, much as they did in late 2009, when President Obama first announced both a "troop surge" and a planned drawdown to begin in July 2011, there is substantial opportunity for regional countries to misinterpret U.S. intentions and to adopt misguided reactions.

The policy announcement in December 2009 stimulated a perception in the region that the United States was planning, as it did after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, to disengage from the region and allow events to spin out of control. Pakistan, in particular, began positioning itself for an enhanced role in post-U.S. Afghanistan by attempting to ensure that only allies of Pakistan could be part of conflict-ending settlement talks in Afghanistan. India began attempting to shore up its relations with the northern and western minorities who were alarmed at a potential U.S. departure.

What these countries, and their Afghan protégés, quickly learned was that the United States is not vacating the region. Through a combination of cohesive U.S. strategy and effective tactics, insurgent groups were placed on the defensive during 2010 and the first half of 2011. The U.S. raid on bin Laden's compound on May 2, 2011 demonstrated that the U.S. ability to reach anywhere in the region and act effectively is substantial.

Regional countries are likely to be similarly mistaken if they take the 2011 U.S. drawdown announcement as a signal of U.S. withdrawal from regional affairs. Even with the announced reduction of 33,000 U.S. troops by September 2012, the United States will still have 68,000 troops in Afghanistan. Any further reductions from then until the planned completion of transition to Afghan control by the end of 2014 are likely to be gradual. The pace of that drawdown is to be decided at a NATO summit meeting in Chicago in May 2012.

Far from abandoning Afghanistan, the United States has already stated publicly that the United States will still be committed to Afghanistan's integrity and stability even after 2014. In concert with the transition, the United States and Afghanistan are negotiating a long term strategic accord that will almost certainly allow the United States access to multiple Afghan military facilities. Likely included on this list will be Bagram Airfield, from which the United States can project airpower throughout the region. There will be ample facilities in Afghanistan from which the United States can continue to launch unmanned drone strikes on high value targets inside Pakistan, or even manned helicopter raids such as the one that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden.

Even though the United States will still be militarily present in the region for decades or more, Afghanistan's neighbors are likely to try to manipulate Afghan politics to ensure their own security. First and foremost, Pakistan will calculate, probably correctly, that the U.S. drawdown instills urgency into Afghan and U.S. efforts to achieve a political settlement with the Taliban and other insurgent factions. That, in the view of Pakistani planners, will give Pakistan leverage to insist that its Afghan allies, such as the network of Jalaluddin Haqqani, are given a "seat at the table" in settlement negotiations. Pakistan will insist that pro-Pakistan factions obtain significant influence in post-settlement Afghanistan – perches from which they can ensure that Afghanistan does not align too closely with India. To ensure that its position is taken into account, Pakistan can alternately unleash or rein in militant factions operating in Afghanistan from across the border in Pakistan.

India's intentions are the exact opposite of those of Pakistan. India seeks reassurance that post-transition Afghanistan will not become a protégé of Pakistan and a safe haven for Pakistani militants who might want to carry out new terror attacks in India or heat up the Kashmir frontier. India will work through its Afghan allies, mainly the minority communities in the north and west, to try to limit any gains for Taliban elements in a peace settlement.

Unlike Pakistan, India has the additional leverage of funds available for economic assistance and construction projects that build good will for India inside Afghanistan.

The Central Asian states will likely continue to adopt strategies that are relatively passive compared to those of Pakistan and India. The Central Asian states will curry favor with whatever factions are dominant in Afghanistan at a given time, seeking to ensure that Afghanistan can continue to develop as a conduit for trade with South Asia.

The neighboring actor whose reactions and policies are the most difficult to predict are those of Iran. Prior to 2001, Iran's policy in Afghanistan was almost a clone of that of India - supporting the northern and western minorities (and Shiite community in central Afghanistan) - against the Taliban. However, the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 caused Iran's policy to diverge somewhat. Because of the longstanding fear of U.S. power, Iran forged ties with Taliban insurgent groups in an effort to build leverage against the United States. In post-transition Afghanistan, Iran will seek to promote the fortunes of its traditional Persian-speaking allies in the north and west, but it will urge them to try to limit the long-term U.S. military posture in Afghanistan. Iran will also likely work with some of Pakistan's pro-Taliban Afghan allies who are also inclined to want the United States to adopt a small, limited long-term footprint in Afghanistan. Iran is certain to try to urge the Afghan government; however it may be constituted after the transition, not to allow the United States the use of bases and facilities in the West, close to Iran's borders.

Another pre-September 11, 2001 ally of Iran and India in Afghanistan was Russia. Russia fears Islamic militancy inside the Russian federation and in Central Asia, and supported the anti-Taliban northern minorities in Afghanistan during the 1990s. This stance was somewhat counter-intuitive, since it was the northern minorities who caused Soviet troops the most significant embarrassments during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. However, in post-transition Afghanistan, Russia might, like Iran, part company with India in the interests of limiting U.S. regional strategic power. During the years of post-Taliban conflict, Russia has been helpful to the United States by opening up supply routes for NATO forces as an alternative to routes through Pakistan. After the transition, however, Russia is likely to become significantly less helpful and will press Afghan factions not to allow broad, unlimited U.S. access to Afghan military bases. In exactly the same way that it has often pressed the Central Asian states to limit U.S. access to bases there, particularly during downturns in U.S.-Russian relations.

With Iran, Russia, and, to a large extent, Pakistan seeking to limit the long-term U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan, the transition in Afghanistan poses significant challenges for U.S. policy and diplomacy. The United States is likely to want to demonstrate to both its allies and adversaries in the region that it will not, as it did in the past, vacate the region once most of its interests have been secured. Furthermore, the U.S. insistence on continuing to weaken Al Qaeda is strong, and the United States is likely to continue to wield economic and political influence in Afghanistan to ensure that its ability to strike Al Qaeda anywhere in the region, from Afghanistan, is preserved.

** Dr. Katzman's personal capacity, and not in his capacity as an expert for the U.S. Library of Congress*