ZERO OPTION ON TABLE AS KARZAI COMES TO WASHINGTON

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is in Washington this week for a visit that culminates on Friday in a meeting with President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He also meets with outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on Thursday. As I described in November, the US and Afghanistan are negotiating a Status of Forces Agreement that lays out the ground rules for any US troops that remain in Afghanistan beyond the planned withdrawal of combat troops by the end of 2014. As was the case with the SOFA for Iraq, the key sticking point will be whether US troops are given full criminal immunity. When Iraq refused to grant immunity, the US abruptly withdrew the forces that had been meant to stay behind.

Both the Washington Post and New York Times have prominently placed articles this morning couching the options on the number of troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014 in terms of strategy for achieving US "goals" there, but the options described now include the "zero option" of leaving no troops behind after 2014. Unlike the case in negotiating the SOFA with Iraq, it appears that at least some of the folks in Washington understand this time that the US is not likely to get full immunity for its troops with Afghanistan, and so there should be some planning for that outcome. Both articles openly discuss the real possibility of a zero option with no troops remaining in the country, although the Times actually suggests full withdrawal in the article's title ("U.S. Is Open to Withdraw Afghan Force After 2014") and the Post hangs onto hope of several thousand troops remaining with its title ("Some in administration push for only a few thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan after 2014").

After describing the possibility of a zero

option, the Times article then suggests that it is merely a negotiating tool to be used on Karzai, failing to note anywhere in the article that the zero option would be driven by Afghanistan refusing to confer immunity:

> While President Obama has made no secret of his desire to withdraw American troops as rapidly as possible, the plans for a postwar American presence in Afghanistan have generally envisioned a residual force of thousands of troops to carry out counterterrorism operations and to help train and equip Afghan soldiers.
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> In a conference call with reporters, the deputy national security adviser, Benjamin J. Rhodes, said that leaving no troops "would be an option that we would consider," adding that "the president does not view these negotiations as having a goal of keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan."
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> Military analysts have said it is difficult to conceive of how the United States might achieve even its limited post-2014 goals in Afghanistan without any kind of troop presence. That suggests the White House is staking out a negotiating position with both the Pentagon and with Mr. Karzai, as he and Mr. Obama begin to work out an agreement covering the post-2014 American role in Afghanistan.

That oblique reference to an "agreement covering the post-2014 American role in Afghanistan" is as close as the Times article gets to describing the SOFA as the true determinant of whether US troops remain past 2014. At least the Post understands this point and that it hinges on immunity:

> Determining the size of a possible post-2014 force is the first step to

> charting out the timeline for withdrawing the remaining 66,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, according to the Pentagon. Keeping troops there after 2014 would require a bilateral agreement stipulating the authority of the contingent and the legal protections its members would enjoy — thorny questions that Obama and Karzai are expected to tackle this week.
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> Among the issues are whether the U.S. troops can conduct counterterrorism operations on their own and whether they would be immune from Afghan law.

The other controlling issue on withdrawal plans is the status of Afghan security forces. I have maintained since the interruption last fall in training activity in response to the proliferation of green on blue killings that it is no longer feasible for the US to speak in terms of a total Afghan National Security Force numbering 350,000. Discussions of ANSF size have dropped out of Pentagon statements since the training disruption and I think it likely that a new, and smaller, number will come out of the SOFA negotiations. The Times article does hit on the issue of ANSF capabilities and their current reliance on a US presence:

> According to a recent Pentagon report, only one of the Afghan National Army's 23 brigades is capable of operating without support from the United States and other NATO nations.
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> To help the Afghan military become more self-sufficient, the United States and its NATO allies have been discussing plans to advise Afghan troops after 2014. Gen. John R. Allen, the American commander in Kabul, initially outlined a series of options that ranged from 6,000 to 20,000 troops to carry out such missions.

The Post even opens its article by noting the effect of a very small US presence on ANSF capabilities:

> Groups within the Obama administration are pushing to keep no more than a few thousand troops in Afghanistan after 2014, U.S. officials said, raising the prospect that the United States will be unable to keep its promise to fully train and equip Afghan security forces.

Given the likelihood of Afghanistan not agreeing to immunity and the disruption in ANSF training—and the inability to make up for the disruption due to the ongoing drawdown of US troops—it seems likely to me that once the zero option is seen as the only outcome, the timeframe also will have to be moved up in order to maximize an ANSF force size that will only continue to decrease due to the high rate of ANSF attrition and low rate of new training.