PREPARATIONS UNDERWAY FOR ZERO OPTION IN AFGHANISTAN

As I posited yesterday, Pakistan appears to be putting together a US-style counterterrorism structure. This morning, we see even stronger hints that a full-blown military offensive against the Taliban may soon be launched by Pakistan. Although we have not seen any evidence that they have done so yet, I fully expect Pakistan to include both the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network among their targets in this operation. In fact, the Washington Post article mentions that Pakistan "would 'not discriminate' among the TTP, the Haqqani network and other militant groups in North Waziristan, including al-Qaeda". In return for this offensive, look for Pakistan to get a massive amount of US financial and intelligence assistance. The US also appears to be making a renewed push against the Haqqani network inside Afghanistan and this report from Missy Ryan and Phil Stewart describes that effort while noting that the US wants Pakistan to take on the Haqqanis and any other groups that use Pakistan as a sanctuary from which to launch attacks in Afghanistan.

These moves by Pakistan and the US make more sense when we see that the US has come to the realization that an ongoing troop presence in Afghanistan is increasingly unlikely. There was significant movement on that front yesterday, with President Obama speaking to Afghan President Hamid Karzai on the telephone. From the White House readout of the call:

> President Obama called President Karzai today to discuss preparations for Afghanistan's coming elections, Afghan-led peace and reconciliation efforts, and the Bilateral Security Agreement.

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> With regard to the Bilateral Security Agreement, in advance of the NATO Defense Ministerial, President Obama told President Karzai that because he has demonstrated that it is unlikely that he will sign the BSA, the United States is moving forward with additional contingency planning. Specifically, President Obama has asked the Pentagon to ensure that it has adequate plans in place to accomplish an orderly withdrawal by the end of the year should the United States not keep any troops in Afghanistan after 2014. At the same time, should we have a BSA and a willing and committed partner in the Afghan government, a limited post-2014 mission focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces and going after the remnants of core Al Qaeda could be in the interests of the United States and Afghanistan. Therefore, we will leave open the possibility of concluding a BSA with Afghanistan later this year. However, the longer we go without a BSA, the more challenging it will be to plan and execute any U.S. mission. Furthermore, the longer we go without a BSA, the more likely it will be that any post-2014 U.S. mission will be smaller in scale and ambition.
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> The United States continues to support a sovereign, stable, unified, and democratic Afghanistan, and will continue our partnership based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual accountability. We remain fully supportive of our partners in the Afghan security forces, and we continue to proudly work side by side with the many Afghans who continue to work to ensure the stability and prosperity of their fellow citizens.

Although there is no clear deadline date, this phone call has the hallmarks of a “final warning” to Karzai. If the US doesn’t see movement from him on the BSA soon, look for the zero option of a full US withdrawal from Afghanistan to take place. As noted in the readout, the lack of a signed BSA is causing trouble for NATO, as well. A NATO gathering (called a Defense Ministerial) opened today, but with no BSA in place, Afghanistan planning can’t be done, prompting a very uncomfortable opening press conference for Secretary General Rasmussen.

Adam Goldman brings us another strong indicator that the US is moving toward a full withdrawal from Afghanistan:

> The United States has quietly begun to whittle down the population of detainees it holds at a military prison in Afghanistan, but it is struggling over what to do with less than a dozen of these non-Afghan nationals who are regarded as particularly dangerous, U.S. officials said.

Those non-Afghan “permanent” detainees at Bagram have been hoarded by the US for years. Goldman notes that several were recently transferred to other countries, but the US is still considering “trial” in military commissions for a number of others. But there is a problem for many of these detainees:

> The inmates’ home countries either do not want them or cannot provide security guarantees about their future behavior that satisfy the United States. And bringing some of them to the United States for trial in a military commission, an option being considered by the Obama administration, could run into political opposition or may be stymied by a lack of court-ready evidence.

Gosh, what a nuisance it is that there must actually be evidence before trying someone that the US military has "known" all along is guilty. But if the Afghans won't hold them and we can't put more people in Gitmo, just where will the military put their precious prisoners?

Olivier Knox brings us more details on how the zero option plans are coming together:

> Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel hammered home the message in a statement of his own released after the Obama/Karzai call, calling plans for a total pullout "a prudent step."
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> "At President Obama's direction, and with my strong support, the Department of Defense will move ahead with additional contingency planning to ensure adequate plans are in place to accomplish an orderly withdrawal by the end of the year should the United States not keep any troops in Afghanistan after 2014," Hagel announced.

It is looking more and more likely to me that the US has decided that there will be no US presence in Afghanistan beyond the end of this year, and so the best bet is to get Pakistan to take on terrorists under a counterterrorism program that the US supports.