

The "good war" winds down

Robert Guest

America's war in Afghanistan will end, and the country will totter towards stability

The first part was easy. American forces started bombing Afghanistan on October 7th 2001, after the Taliban regime refused to hand over Osama bin Laden. Within six weeks Kabul, the capital, had fallen. Taliban and al-Qaeda forces were fleeing to the caves of Tora Bora. At this point, not a single American soldier had been killed.

Fast forward to today, and the picture looks far gloomier. Vanquishing a primitive army with laser-guided missiles is not difficult. Pacifying a backward and brutalised country is. So far, the insurgency that followed the invasion has cost the lives of more than 3,000 Americans and their non-Afghan allies. The number of Afghans killed is less accurately recorded, but much higher.

The American public has lost interest in what Barack Obama once called the "good war". Syria, Egypt, Iran and North Korea seem to present more urgent problems for the superpower. But America's legacy in Afghanistan will matter immensely. If the country reverts to chaos when coalition forces withdraw in 2014, it may once again become a breeding-ground for terrorists with global ambitions. It will certainly destabilise its already terrifyingly unstable neighbour, Pakistan.

But the chances are that the worst will not come to pass. Afghanistan will hold a presidential election in April 2014. It will be dirty, disorderly and occasionally bloody. The election commission will be packed with cronies of Hamid Karzai, the incumbent, who is barred from standing again but would like to follow Vladimir Putin's example of putting a yes-man in the top job while pulling the strings. Worries about the risk of civil war if things go badly wrong will hang over the poll.

Despite all these flaws, the election will appear legitimate enough—just—to persuade the main opposition groups not to take up arms against the victor. Mr Obama will resist the temptation to back any particular candidate, realising that his blessing would be a curse.

America will pull its troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014, but not quite all of them. Although Mr Obama has toyed with the "zero option" of removing every last pair of American boots on the ground, he will leave behind a residual force of 10,000 or so.

That is a drastic reduction from the peak of 100,000 American troops (out of a NATO force of 140,000) in 2011. Yet it will be enough to ensure the country does not fall apart. Already the Afghan army and police are taking on the main responsibility for keeping insurgents at bay. They are not the world's most disciplined force, but so long as America offers them training and logistical help, and subsidises their salaries, they will cope.



Over to you, kid

The Taliban will not disappear. They will kill many Afghan soldiers and police during 2014, and even more civilians. But they will not take over the country again. Afghans will complain that their elected government is corrupt, incompetent and often unjust, but relatively few will want to see the zealots return to power.

The American withdrawal will not create a power vacuum, as the Russians did when they left in 1989. Unlike the Russians, the Americans will leave behind a regime with a measure of popular legitimacy. The next Afghan president will not end up like Mohammad Najibullah, the last Soviet puppet, who was eventually castrated and murdered by the Taliban.

It takes two to play

Some observers predict that India and Pakistan will fight a new proxy war in Afghanistan, like the Great Game between Russia and Victorian Britain. Pakistan has long stirred up trouble in Afghanistan, supporting the Taliban and various jihadist groups. India has been friendly with Pakistan's enemies, such as Mr Karzai. The rivalry between South Asia's two nuclear powers will be "particularly flammable as they vie for influence over Afghanistan", writes William Dalrymple, a historian.

Others think this unlikely. "For the most part, India doesn't care that much about Afghanistan," says Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank. It is too small, poor and distant to keep Indian politicians up at night. "Pakistan is playing the Great Game on its own," says Mr O'Hanlon.

Afghanistan in 2014 will be backward, ill-governed and violent. But it will also be reasonably stable and no longer a threat to the West. ■

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Just possibly...

North Korea opens the 105-storey pyramid-shaped Ryugyong hotel, under construction for 27 years.

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Rahul Gandhi so underwhelms during India's election that his sister, Priyanka, is made leader of the Congress party.

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