

NATO Agrees on Afghan Security Transition in 2013

Doug Mills/The New York Times

CHICAGO — President Obama and the leaders of America's [NATO](#) allies on Monday agreed to end their guiding role in the decade-long war in [Afghanistan](#) next summer, saying it is time for the Afghan people to take responsibility for their own security and for the United States-led international troops to go home.

Hina Rabbani Khar, the Pakistani foreign minister, left, with Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai at the NATO Summit in Chicago, on Monday.

Declaring that "our forces broke the Taliban's momentum," Mr. Obama used the summit meeting of NATO leaders here in his adopted hometown to begin an exit from a conflict he embraced during his first campaign for president as America's good war.

"We're now unified behind a plan to responsibly wind down the war in Afghanistan," Mr. Obama said during a news conference after the meeting. He called the decision a "major step" toward the end of the war.

But Mr. Obama acknowledged that "real challenges" remained in dealing with the problems across the border in Pakistan, and that the conference had not resolved the impasse over reopening supply lines or the other tensions about the fight against insurgents operating from safe havens there.

"We think that Pakistan has to be part of the solution in Afghanistan," he said. "Neither country is going to have the kind of security, stability and prosperity that it needs unless they can resolve some of these outstanding issues."

Pakistan closed supply lines to Afghanistan after an American airstrike in November that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Mr. Obama has refused to apologize for the strike, as Pakistan has demanded in negotiations with the Americans, and he pointedly exchanged only a few words with the country's president, Asif Ali Zardari, during the two-day summit meeting — "very brief, as we were walking into the summit," he said. The two men also stood and spoke briefly with the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, before all three joined the other leaders for a group photograph.

The plans to withdraw from Afghanistan are "irreversible," Mr. Obama and the world leaders said in their communiqué, a deliberate word choice that underscored the political reality in America and in Europe. After 10 years of war and with the global economy reeling, the nations of the West no longer want to pay, either in treasure or in lives, the costs of their efforts in a place that for centuries has resisted foreign attempts to tame it.

"The Taliban is still a robust enemy, and the gains are still fragile," Mr. Obama conceded.

"But think about it. We've been there now 10 years," he said. "Ten years in a country that's very different, that's a strain, not only on our folks but also on that country, which at a point is going to be very sensitive about its own sovereignty."

Mr. Obama and his fellow leaders said they were not abandoning Afghanistan. "Afghanistan will not stand alone," they declared in their formal statement. "We affirm our close partnership will continue beyond the end of the transition period."

That period begins now. Afghan national security forces will soon be in the lead role keeping the peace for around 75 percent of the population, NATO and Afghan officials said. But significantly, Afghan forces are not in the lead in many heavily contested areas in the south and the east of the country, where Taliban and Pakistan-based insurgents continue to engage NATO troops in day-by-day battles for control.

By next summer, the Afghan forces will have to assume those lead roles even in the heavily contested areas.

How that will come to pass remains to be seen. American military officials, as recently as Sunday, said they fully expected that American troops would continue fighting after next summer. In fact, the American presence in Afghanistan will continue even after 2014. The strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Afghanistan calls for a residual troop presence after 2014 to act in an advisory role.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban released their own statement on the NATO conference. The Taliban commended President François Hollande of France for saying he would bring troops home early, adding that “the mujahedeen of the Islamic emirate will keep proceeding with their ongoing jihad until it attains its goal.”

For Mr. Obama, the NATO agreement is a turning point in an evolving position on how to manage America’s longest war. Mr. Obama staked his first campaign for president in part on his opposition to the war in Iraq; the war in Afghanistan, by contrast, was the one he had said needed American troops and attention. But Mr. Obama forever tied his own legacy to Afghanistan as Americans and his NATO allies were suffering from combat fatigue.

NATO says it will cost about \$4.1 billion a year to finance the Afghan forces. Officials at the summit meeting were looking for ways to come up with the money; it is expected that the United States and other donor countries will finance the training and support.

While officials at the summit meeting sought to highlight the progress made in the past two years by Afghan forces, especially the army, many conceded privately that the shift still represented a significant gamble on Afghanistan’s future stability. It is far from certain that the Afghans can hold areas that coalition troops have wrested from the Taliban in recent years, even with close support from Western allies.

The Afghan Army has become a more effective fighting force and less of a threat to its own people — there are far fewer reports these days of soldiers getting high on patrol, for instance. But the force remains “a work in progress,” one American official said, and it lacks almost all the support functions needed to fight the war.

The ranks of the police, meanwhile, are filled with drug users, thieves and “shakedown artists,” said the official, who asked not to be identified because he works with the Afghans. If the hand-over strategy is going to work, “it’s going to be on” the Afghan Army, which is going to need a lot of hands-on American support well past the end of the NATO combat mission in 2014, the official said.

American field commanders say they are already pushing Afghan forces to the forefront. Their reasoning: Better to have the Afghans make mistakes while American forces are still thick on the ground rather than a year from now, when there may not be enough backup for the Afghans to recover from battlefield stumbles.

Maj. Gen. James L. Huggins of the Army, the top coalition commander in southern Afghanistan, said in an interview that he was telling his Afghan counterparts: "If you will step forward now, we'll help back you up. You may learn what you don't know and stumble somewhere, but it won't be a catastrophic failure, because we have your back."

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