

## **Afghanistan: 'US will probably leave some forces behind'**

Saturday 6 April 2013, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#), [WILKENS Ann](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2013).

**The extent of these forces seems to be debated in Washington right now. Whether the talks with Taliban are 'successful' or not, women's rights are likely to be affected. In fact, they already are.**

***'Not all Afghan problems can be blamed on Pakistan (or other foreigners, for that matter), quite a few of them are home-grown,' says Ann Wilkens in an interview with Viewpoint.***

**Ann Wilkens has served as Swedish ambassador to Pakistan and Afghanistan (2003-07). Before embarking upon a diplomatic career, Ann Wilkens worked as editor at the leading Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet's* foreign desk. As a prominent expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan, she is frequently quoted in Swedish media. Read on:**

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**Farooq Sulehria - Afghanistan remains as instable as 12 years ago. Don't you think the US invasion of Afghanistan was a blunder from the beginning?**

Ann Wilkens - We need some more shades here than just black and white. First of all, we tend to forget that, as a regime, the Taliban were somehow heading for the wall. The costs that would have been involved in the prolongation of that regime are unknown (so we do not calculate them). Secondly, there wasn't just the US-led invasion in 2001 - there was also ISAF, a massive commitment by a wide range of countries to turn the situation in Afghanistan around. Like many Afghans, I was hopeful then, thinking that such a well-resourced intervention had to be able to do its job. But we can see now - and it has been clear for some years - that it was, indeed, possible to fail. Too many mistakes were made along the road. Let us at least hope that something will be learned from them.

**Will the USA really draw down? Or is it the case that Washington will maintain a tactical presence?**

The US will probably leave some forces behind, a number of Special Forces and a larger number of non-combat forces as trainers and advisers. The extent of these forces seems to be debated in Washington right now. On an overall level, it is my impression that the appetite for sizeable engagements in difficult and distant countries is rapidly declining. So we may end up with something that looks quite small in relation to the problems to be handled.

**Do you expect Taliban to over run Kabul yet again post-2014?**

No, I do not think that will be possible. It would not have the support of many Afghans. I think the Taliban themselves are likely to realise this.

## **Do you think the talks between Taliban and the USA, even if 'successful', will yield negative consequences for women rights?**

Whether the talks are 'successful' or not, women's rights are likely to be affected. In fact, they already are. Girls and women are the first groups to be affected by deteriorating security - their mobility is restricted which makes it more difficult, for instance, for girls to go to school. If power-sharing deals are made with the insurgents, they are likely to entail a backlash on women's rights. If there is no settlement and the conflict continues, girls and women will be negatively affected as well. The best alternative for women would have been a broad-based, inclusive political process in which they would have participated on an equal basis with other representatives - I am afraid that this alternative is already bypassed.

## **How do Afghan people view Pakistan's role in Afghanistan?**

Pakistan seems to be the number one scapegoat in Afghanistan right now, not only for the Afghan governments but for some other players as well. While there are quite a few understandable reasons for this, it seems to have gone out of proportion. Not all Afghan problems can be blamed on Pakistan (or other foreigners, for that matter), quite a few of them are home-grown. It should be remembered that Pakistan also has legitimate rights in the regional context, e.g. concerning the Durand Line. Furthermore, Pakistan has been and remains the largest host country for Afghan refugees. (Recognising this, Afghans delivering the usual scathing criticism against Pakistan, sometimes try to make the distinction between the Pakistani establishment, which they blame, and the Pakistani people, which they consider to be their brothers.) But above all, no problems are solved through blame games - in Afghanistan or elsewhere. It is high time for all the regional players to concentrate on constructive cooperation.

## **What about India and Iran? Will they continue supporting Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban factions?**

Unless the benefits of regional cooperation are put at centre-stage - and, at the moment, there is not much pointing in this direction - both India and Iran will pursue their national interests in Afghanistan. These interests will not be identical and be governed partly by aspects beyond the immediate regional context. For Iran, its conflict with the United States and Israel over its nuclear programme is more immediately challenging than its relation to Afghanistan and if that relation can be instrumentalised in the wider conflict, that is probably what will happen. For India, there are several aspects beyond the rivalry with Pakistan, such as competition with China and growing cooperation with the United States, which are likely to influence what it does in Afghanistan.

## **Will China side with Pakistan in post-2014 scramble in Afghanistan?**

China is likely to prioritise its economic interests and act cautiously in whatever political conflicts may come up. But ultimately, China will also protect its friendship with Pakistan.

## **Will Russia and Central Asian Republics (CARs) be more assertive this time unlike 1997?**

The CARs are fragile, some more than others. If Afghanistan continues to be unstable, possible export of religious militancy will remain an important concern for the CARs. Russia will also be anxious to keep such tendencies at bay. The negative fallout of the drug industry has been another growing problem for these countries. But it will probably take more than that for Russia to get to a stage where military muscle would again be applied to Afghanistan - the Russians have learned the lessons of the 1980s in a hard way (and displayed some Schadenfreude at seeing the US repeat some of its mistakes).

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