



## In White House's 'Zero Option,' Experts Wonder What Obama Is Up To

*For a war the president said should be an American priority, analysts ponder full pullout logic*

By: Paul D. Shinkman - January 9, 2013

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News that the White House is considering withdrawing all troops from Afghanistan by 2014 surprised many who have been following American progress there.

Some experts who have endorsed pulling out of Afghanistan were thrilled by the prospect, while others maintain it still requires tens of thousands of troops to get the job done. Still others think this is a bargaining chip for President Barack Obama to get what he wants before heading into meetings with Afghan President Karzai on Friday.

Whatever the outcome, discussion of the so-called "Zero Option" has redefined how experts see the conclusion of the United States' longest war.

Military historian Fred Kagan of the America Enterprise Institute and his wife Kimberly Kagan penned an op/ed in the *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday, decrying any withdrawal of U.S. troops that they say would eliminate the military's ability to maintain security in Afghanistan.

He tells *U.S. News* that the Zero Option—or even leaving fewer than the 30,000 troops as some commanders have asked for—would amount to throwing away everything the United States has fought for in the last 10 years. It would also undercut counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda in South Asia and allow the terrorist group to reestablish safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"Based on the message coming out the White House, the president has decided he doesn't care about winning this war," Kagan says. "It would be valuable if he would explain to the American people why he's decided the objectives he laid out in 2009 are no longer important to American national security."

Just announcing a zero option would generate fear throughout Afghanistan, he says, particularly among power brokers in the north who would assume the Taliban would regain power and continue the ethnic civil war that plagued the country in the 1990s. And coalition troops would likely have to forgo much of the 2013 fighting season to begin the drawdown.

"Various elements of the Taliban will launch usual counterattacks this year in attempts to regain their territory," Kagan says. "They are likely to launch those attacks with particular vigor. And since we will be pulling out, rather than fighting, they'll have much more success than they have in the past."

Afghan National Security Forces are designed to work with international forces, he says, just as the United States still supports French military operations, for example. Afghan forces wouldn't hold together without U.S. support, he says.

But other experts believe the Zero Option discussion is an important part of negotiating the U.S. presence in Afghanistan for the next few years.

"It's a debate that needs to happen. Committing manpower with no decisive end date really just detaches conditionalities on the performances of Afghan security forces," says Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst with the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute.

Coalition forces largely see the Afghan military as unmotivated, highly dependent and making too little progress, she says. The longer America remains, the more it turns into Afghanistan's "perpetual crutch."

"Sadly, it may revert back to the 1990s," she says. "I think for myself and many Americans and many analysts in Washington—aside from the Kagans—it's sort of a recognition that it's not that we should commit America's limited resources indefinitely, but it shows that it's problematic for the United States to try and repair failed states that are emerging from civil conflict."

This discussion is also important for Afghan leadership to hear, says Larry Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

"They have to basically put Karzai in this place," he says. "He's been talking about 'You guys are causing me problems, we don't want you here.'"

Floating the Zero Option may be a way for the White House to gain concessions from Karzai.

"I think the president is saying, 'Look, if you don't go along with what I want—providing us with immunity and giving us control over operations—we're not going to stay there.'"

American troops withdrew from Iraq after President Nouri al-Maliki denied them immunity for combat operations, he adds.

"People thought, 'Gee, we would never do that.' I think Maliki himself probably thought that. It's important to keep in mind, it takes two to tango here," Korb says.

Omar Samad served as Afghanistan's ambassador to France and Canada in the last decade. He tells *U.S. News* he is surprised by the news in the last 48 hours, particularly given the U.S. and NATO's previous commitments.

"Not having that in place would not only jeopardize all the gains achieved over the last decade, but also would leave Afghanistan in a very precarious situation," says Samad, now an Afghanistan analyst with the U.S. Institute of Peace.

This instability could boil over into the region, he says, and may cause more global security issues.

He also points to the second critical role of the allied forces in Afghanistan: funding. Security forces in the volatile country are not yet mature enough, well trained or equipped to do the job themselves by 2014.

"It would be dramatic, and probably not very well received by the Afghan people in general," he says, adding, "that option can be viable only if we have a political settlement

of the Afghan problem, meaning some kind of reconciliation with the Taliban that leads to a peaceful end."

This component, not training Afghans, is key to ending the war, says Korb.

"You don't have to train the Afghans to fight. They know how to fight," he says. "The real question is whether they'll fight for whatever the government may be."

The U.S. has already won the war, he says, pointing to the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Innocent adds the withdrawal will be left to how the White House handles its portrayal, and whether it can depict it as an "honorable exit."