



THE US military will spend the next year walking a fine line between the ongoing mission in Afghanistan and the need to meet President Obama's December 2014 deadline for withdrawing US combat forces from theater.

As a means of meeting that goal, Obama announced during his State of the Union address plans to withdraw 34,000 troops from Afghanistan by Jan. 31, 2014, giving the US military roughly one year to cut its footprint essentially in half. That's no easy task after more than a decade of war.

If you look past the bunkers and T-walls intended to protect personnel from incoming rocket attacks, Afghanistan's main bases are a little piece of home plopped in the middle of the desert. Kandahar's famed boardwalk has everything from a TGI Friday's restaurant to souvenir shops that sell Afghan rugs, scarves, and even glass enclosed camel spider paperweights for the truly brave. The unique recreation area wraps around a jogging track, soccer field, and a Canadian-built roller rink. Posters hanging on bulletin boards along

the boardwalk advertise recreational sports leagues and weekly salsa dancing nights.

Kandahar Staying Put

Six dining facilities feed the roughly 26,000 military personnel and civilian contractors who call the sprawling NATO base home. A state-of-the-art water bottling facility, which is controlled by computer from Germany, ensures everyone stays safely hydrated during Afghanistan's brutally hot summer months.

In addition, there are dormitories, a burn pit, and the infamous Kandahar "poo pond" to dispose of before the base can be handed back to the Afghans.

"From 2001, when we first arrived, it's been an amazing story," said British Group Capt. Jamie Johnston, Kandahar's deputy commander for support. "I visited [Kandahar] in 2006, 2009, and now. I thought it was big in 2006. I couldn't believe it in 2009, and I didn't even recognize it when I came back in 2013."

Unlike most of the smaller, more austere forward operating bases (FOBs), Kandahar will not close. The Afghans

have expressed an interest in expanding the existing Kandahar Airport, which is visible from the flight line on the NATO side of the base, as a means of boosting their economy after coalition forces leave. In addition, the Afghan Ministry of Defense sees Kandahar as a future Afghan Air Force base, said Johnston.

The US and coalition forces also will have a presence in Afghanistan post-2014, though the exact numbers and makeup of the force were still being worked out in July. Maj. Gen. Kenneth S. Wilsbach, commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan, said roughly 500 coalition air advisors will remain in theater through 2017, at which point the Afghan Air Force is expected to have at least a foundational capability and, in some cases, will be up to full operational capability.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance will remain important as long as coalition forces continue to operate in Afghanistan, Wilsbach told *Air Force Magazine*. MQ-1 Predators and MQ-9 Reapers are assigned to Kandahar and

THE MASSIVE DRAWDOWN EFFORT IS ALREADY UNDERWAY.

USAF and Slovak explosive ordnance disposal personnel prepare for a controlled detonation near Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, in June.



USAF photo by S/A Scott Saldukas

AFGHANISTAN in Retrograde

By Amy McCullough, News Editor



Dozens of mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles sit in the Army's redistribution property assistance team lot at Kandahar. The vehicles are stripped of all weapons, radios, and other military equipment, then cleaned and prepared for shipment back to the US.

likely will remain in some capacity after the 2014 deadline expires, said officials.

Wilsbach said there also will be “some sort of rescue capability,” in addition to air refueling, and airlift support in Afghanistan.

“The big question will be what, if anything, we will have for close air support,” he noted.

That enduring presence means coalition forces still will need access to some of the facilities at Kandahar after 2014. Of the remaining buildings, some will be transferred to the Afghans, but most will be torn down, said Johnston. The operation and maintenance cost of maintaining the buildings here is more than Afghanistan’s entire budget, he added.

“We just have to be very mindful that they may not be able to maintain some of the buildings and it may not be safe in other cases,” said Johnston.

Despite the two looming withdrawal deadlines, brand-new buildings continue to pop up across the base, including a roughly 37,000-square-foot warehouse for the 451st Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron. The building, slated to open in late July, will house its Transportation Management Office (TMO) and special handling personnel. Its location next to the aerial port’s cargo yard is expected to speed up the massive retrograde and redeployment efforts, said officials.

In some respects, Kandahar will have to get bigger so everyone else can get smaller, Johnston said. The base population is expected to grow to 30,000 personnel to accommodate the extra work—up 4,000 from the numbers in mid-July.

Kandahar also is one of three hubs—in addition to Bagram Airfield in the Parwan province and Camp Bastion in Helmand—for US equipment to flow through as it leaves the country via a spoke-and-hub system. Although the numbers could change, about 40 percent of US materiel is expected to move through Kandahar,



USAF photo by SSGT. Krystle Martinez

TSgt. Dequan Barthell, a loadmaster evaluator, counts passengers boarding a C-17 in July. The aircraft carried 137 service members out of Afghanistan.



USAF photo by Capt. Joshua Daniels

40 percent through Bagram, and the remaining 20 percent through Bastion, said Capt. Christopher Kaighen, aerial port flight commander at Kandahar.

As a result, the 451st ELRS is among those that will be growing. The squadron is expected to double in size, adding 110 personnel by the end of August, said 451st ELRS Commander Lt. Col. Paul Cornwell.

Bringing Home Materiel

“They understand the surge requirement that’s going to arrive,” said Cornwell. In fact, the squadron is scheduled to remain at Kandahar through 2015 to get all the retrograde materiel out. After 2015, Cornwell said, the Air Force will downsize the squadron to a flight.

The aerial port already is one of the busiest in the world. Last year, it moved 168,000 short tons of cargo—nearly equal to short tons airmen handled at Ramstein AB, Germany; Travis AFB, Calif.; and Dover AFB, Del., combined over the same time period, said Kaighen. In addition, 243,000 passengers moved through its passenger terminal last year.

The vast majority of that cargo was dedicated to supporting troops still engaged in combat, but with the largest logistical drawdown in US history just getting underway, that workload will only increase.

As of July, the Army was pretty much on schedule with the drawdown of its forward operating bases, but just like in Iraq, soldiers were having a hard time parting with their gear before combat operations officially end. That’s creating a “little bit of a bow wave of actual versus projected retrograde,” Cornwell said, although it’s “nothing that’s causing a great amount of alarm.”

To get ahead of the problem, US Central Command is sending small teams to the FOBs to help with the drawdown. The CENTCOM Materiel Recovery Element, or CMRE, is tasked with determining what materiel should be sent home, what equipment can be transferred or sold, and what is better off just being destroyed.

“We’re reducing the overall amount of materiel required to be retrograded and redeployed by making commonsense

Below: US soldiers dismantle a tent at Kandahar in July as part of the footprint reduction already going on in Afghanistan.



USAF photo by Capt. Brian Maguire

decisions in the field and disposing of it in the field. That's where you get into [mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles] being cut up," said Cornwell. "While that makes for good shock media, nobody has asked the question, 'OK, they are worth \$5 billion, how much is it going to cost for me to move them back to the States?' It's more than \$5 billion."

Cornwell said military planners really are paying attention to the minutia as they attempt to balance cost against the need to quickly get materiel elsewhere, but while cost is certainly important, especially in the era of sequestration, it's not the only thing to consider. Items that must be reset back in the US can be moved more slowly via ship—a significant savings over the cost of airlift. However, assets that must quickly be transported home are more likely to move by air.

For example, maintenance readiness spares package kits—basically an aircraft parts store—is something a unit back home will need fairly quickly in order to maintain its combat readiness status. However, the Army has significantly more vehicles, such as Strykers and MRAPs, in Afghanistan than it needs in the US to remain effective.

Rocket Attacks at Kandahar

Continued on p. 46

Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan—Security has improved dramatically in Afghanistan since the war's bloodiest days, but hostile acts are still a regular part of life here. As such, force protection will remain a top priority as US and coalition forces look to wrap up the current combat mission, officials said.

Take Kandahar, for example, where insurgents launched back-to-back rocket attacks during *Air Force Magazine's* visit in July.

The first attack occurred around 9:40 p.m. local time on Sunday, July 14. The second rocket struck roughly 10 hours later.

Sunday evening, I was sitting in my bunk working on a story when I heard a whoosh followed by a loud bang. Seconds later, a British female voice over the loudspeaker confirmed what I had feared: I had just experienced my first rocket attack.

As instructed on my arrival, I hit the deck and started counting to 200. Then I grabbed my boots, notebook, pen, and flashlight—which thankfully I had laid out right beside the bed in the event of an attack. A minute or so later, I headed to the bunker, a heavily fortified cave of thick, reinforced concrete.

Rocket attacks here remain sporadic, said my bunker mates. Sometimes, there will be weeks without an attack and then there may be some that happen back-to-back. Fortunately, the insurgents have notoriously bad aim and rarely does anyone get hurt.

Army Maj. Brooks Little, commander of the 102nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment—one of my bunker mates—said the insurgents can have different objectives. They may carry out an attack in the evening for no other reason than to harass coalition troops, many of whom are preparing to go to sleep around that time.

As the loudspeaker came back on declaring that "the situation is ongoing"—an update given roughly every 20 minutes—the other members of the Media Support Center, where I was based, made themselves comfortable in dusty old office chairs stashed inside the bunker. Some fired up their iPads and passed the time with games of Monopoly. Others cracked open a book while the rest just chatted. Clearly they'd been through this before.

"We're all concerned. It's just something we have to deal with here," said Little. "It's easy to get relaxed about events like this, but you have to be mindful about it. You can't get

"We really do balance that out pennies to the pound," he said.

Afghanistan is a mountainous, landlocked country with extremely poor road conditions and this terrain poses a complicated set of logistical challenges. The drawdown from Iraq was much simpler logistically, thanks to the road network and access to the port in Kuwait. Still, there are lessons that can be gleaned from the 2011 withdrawal.

"Iraq was very elementary. Here, you almost have to have a master's [degree] in logistics," said Army Capt. Michael P. Zinnecker, commander of the 831st Transportation Company Detachment at Kandahar.

Zinnecker's job is to manage transportation for all Army redeployment, retrograde, and sustainment operations. Ninety-five percent of cargo that moves through the Kandahar aerial port.

"As far as [USAF's] footprint here, if Afghanistan is a beach, we are a speck of sand ... compared to the Army," said Kaighen.

From December through mid-July, Zinnecker's detachment assisted in the movement of 3,500 pieces of Army redeployment and retrograde cargo. Of that, more than 1,000 pieces moved

comfortable with where you're at. You're in a war zone and hostile acts are routine. It only takes one time."

About an hour after the siren first sounded, the female voice came back over the loudspeaker declaring, "All clear. All clear. All clear."

The next morning, on July 15, a second rocket attack occurred—a rare occurrence in daylight. The Luxembourg, one of six dining facilities on base, was packed as coalition troops, civilians, and contractors tried to catch the tail end of breakfast. I had just finished my scrambled eggs and bacon when the same trusty British voice came over the loudspeaker once again declaring an attack.

Immediately, everyone dropped their forks, set down their trays, and hit the deck. Some troops posed for pictures under the dining tables; others patiently waited for the two minutes to pass before getting up and resuming their breakfast. Since the dining facility is a hardened shelter, a bunker run was not necessary. Twenty minutes later, the "all clear" sounded and the DFAC emptied as everyone went off to start their day.

The back-to-back rocket attacks took place less than a week after an Afghan National Security Forces member opened fire on Slovak troops, killing one and wounding several others. At the time, there were conflicting reports as to whether the incident was a "green-on-blue" attack, where Afghan forces intentionally turn their guns on coalition troops, or a negligent weapon discharge.

Either way, officials have said the Afghan was standing watch in a guard tower on the Afghan side of the base when he shot his 240B machine gun at the Slovaks who were on the coalition side of the base.

Afghan troops secured the scene and took the suspect into custody immediately following the July 9 incident, according to an ISAF release. However, a sign hanging on the famed boardwalk here warned passersby that the suspect, whose name is Lambar, escaped from Camp Hero where the Afghans were holding him pending his transfer to Kabul for further investigation.

"It was reported that Lambar, with the assistance of co-conspirators utilizing forged documents, walked out the Camp Hero jail," states the wanted sign. "Lambar and his co-conspirators have not been seen since exiting Camp Hero," it states.



Air Force Magazine News Editor Amy McCullough (c) walks through the aerial port at Kandahar with Capt. Christopher Kaighen (l), Lt. Col. Paul Cornwell (foreground), and other members of the 451st Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron. Below right: The “wanted” poster for an alleged gunman in a “green-on-blue” shooting. The prisoner, Lambar, escaped from custody with the help of an Afghan military member.

USAF photo by Capt. Joshua Daniels

In an emailed response to questions, an International Security Assistance Force official confirmed that this detainee escaped the detention facility “aided by an Afghan military member in southern Afghanistan.”

The incident, said the ISAF official, remained under investigation by Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF as of late July.

Immediately following the attack, the Air Force suspended all advise-and-assist missions with the Afghans for at least a week, as Air Force officials continued to assess the situation. The base also increased its force protection posture, said Capt. Brian Maguire, a spokesman with the 451st Air Expeditionary Wing here.

“We do what we can to make sure our people are safe,” he said.

Curbing the green-on-blue attacks has become a top priority for coalition forces. Although the number of insider attacks has dropped significantly, Maguire said it’s “always a concern because you never know what someone is going to decide to do.”

There were 48 green-on-blue attacks in 2012, said the ISAF official. However, as of July there have been just six confirmed insider attacks since January 2013. Nine ISAF personnel were killed in those attacks and 28 wounded. By comparison, during the same time last year, there were 20 confirmed insider attacks resulting in 27 ISAF deaths and 57 wounded, according to ISAF figures.

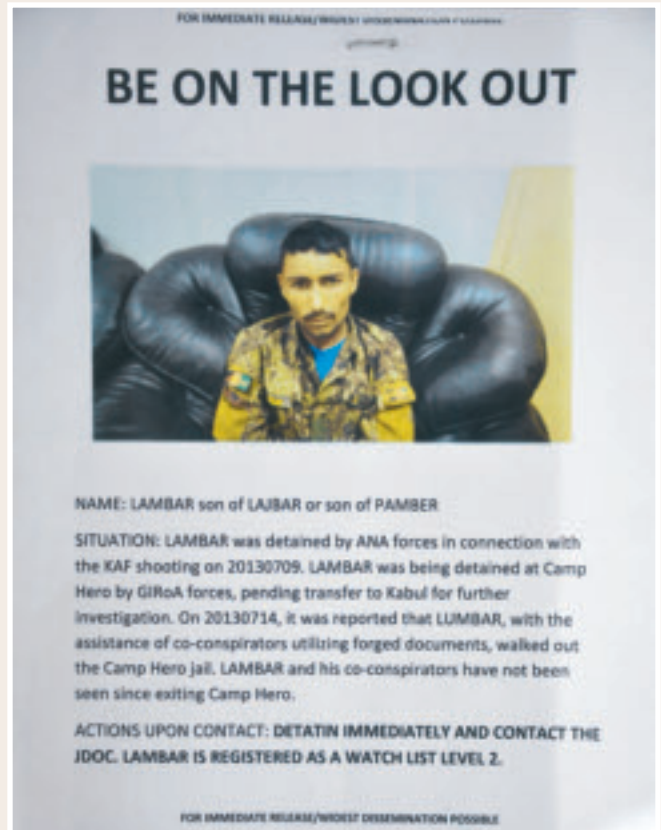
Maj. Gen. Kenneth S. Wilsbach, commander of the expeditionary task force, acknowledged that air advisors are at a higher risk of insider attacks because they work with the Afghans every day.

“We do take precautions to vet the Afghans and we do many other measures to make sure that we don’t interact with folks that potentially could bring harm,” he said via a telephone interview from his office in Kabul.

Wilsbach said it’s the coalition’s responsibility to train the fledgling Afghan Air Force and immerse them in the airmen culture, but that “means spending a great deal of time with them.”

Maj. Rich Zeigler, commander of the 451st Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron here, said despite the recent attacks, the security situation is actually “stronger than I figured it might be coming in.”

Zeigler’s unit has a diverse mission; its members are tasked with protecting US assets on base, which requires regular trips



outside the wire, including both ground patrols with Afghan partners and escorts of US aircraft.

Although the frequency of trips outside the wire has temporarily come down, that has more to do with Ramadan than the July 9 attack, said Zeigler.

Some members of the 451st ESFS also served as a quick reaction force during the July 9 incident, he noted. Although he couldn’t offer many details on the incident, he attributed the overall decline in insider attacks to the “awareness of our folks.”

He added, “We are able to pick up on things that just don’t feel right and stop something or intervene before that point.”

SrA. Nate Hall conducts a postflight inspection of an F-16. It makes sense to bring home equipment such as maintainer readiness spares kits, which USAF will likely use in the near future. Other equipment, not so much.



USAF photo by SrA. Scott Saldukas

through the Pakistan ground lines of communication route straight to the Karachi port. Seven hundred pieces were multimodal (meaning more than one means of transportation was used), and more than 500 pieces moved solely through the Air Force, he said.

There are several options for shipping materiel home, but none of them are great. In Iraq, convoys could literally just drive across the border and park in Kuwait for several months until the military figured out what to do with them. Though Kuwait is still used somewhat to move equipment out of Afghanistan, it certainly is not a primary hub.

Moving equipment through Pakistan directly to Karachi is the most cost-efficient means of transporting goods out of Afghanistan. It costs about \$10,000 per 20-foot equivalent unit (TEU) to move through Pakistan. A TEU can be anything from a single container to a larger vehicle—typically any cargo exiting the country. However, that cost doubles to an estimated \$20,000 per TEU for multimodal shipments, said Zinnecker. It climbs even higher if airlift is the sole means of transportation.

But the ground lines communication route is also vulnerable to political instability. Pakistan closed the route in November 2011 after the US mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani border troops in an

air strike. It reopened several months later allowing goods once again to flow through, but not before the US racked up a hefty bill moving materiel via air or through the massive Northern Distribution Network (NDN).

Ground cargo stagnated once again this summer following escalating tensions between the US and Afghan customs officials. The dispute centered on the Afghan government's insistence on taxing US

shipping containers leaving the country. According to various media reports, the Afghans claimed the United States owed \$70 million in exit taxes—a point which US officials disputed.

Wilsbach said equipment had begun to freely flow across the border by late July after a series of “high-level” discussions. The delay, however, forced the United States to temporarily increase the amount of cargo airlifted out of theater. Though



USAF photo by Capt. Joshua Daniels

A contractor washes an MRAP vehicle after it arrives at Kandahar. All vehicles must be thoroughly cleaned to pass through customs.

potentially costly if implemented over an extended period of time, Wilsbach said it was “a slight amount in the big scheme of things.”

The NDN is another option, though it too poses challenges.

Activated in 2009 as an alternative to moving goods through Pakistan into Afghanistan, the route winds through ports in the Baltic nations of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and then over land through the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It is one of the longest military supply lines ever created.

“The Northern Distribution Network is not used as much because it’s such a long and complex network,” said Cornwell. “This stuff literally goes over the road, [by] the rail, twice the distance of the US, to Riga, Latvia, to a ship, [where] it flows somewhere. It’s slow and there are a lot of issues with that. It doesn’t have the throughput that Karachi has.”

The vast majority of troops exiting the country will go through the Transit Center at Manas in Kyrgyzstan. In late June, however, the Kyrgyzstan parliament voted to close the base when its contract expires in 2014. As of July, the decision did not seem to be affecting the withdrawal efforts, but Cornwell acknowledged it could.

He said he doesn’t expect passenger movement levels to top off at Kandahar until November or December. Cargo movement, on the other hand, is expected to spike between April and June 2014.

“The difference between here and Iraq is we have time to do it right versus having to run out the door,” said Cornwell, who closed down Combat Outpost Adder in Iraq, once the largest US base in the southern part of the country and the last to close in 2011.

Although the timeline will make withdrawal easier in Afghanistan, just like in Iraq there is still the challenge of accounting for millions of pieces of equipment accumulated over the years—much of it piecemeal. After 12 years of continual six-month deployments, the Air Force is suffering from a case of what Cornwell called “rotational amnesia.” He said over the years commanders were forced to rely on the “little turnover” of information received as crews rotate in and out. The repeated handoffs resulted in “a lot of data loss,” he said.

In Iraq, it was not uncommon to open a long-forgotten container for the first time, just months before the withdrawal



Staff photo by Amy McCullough

Kandahar’s storied “boardwalk” wraps around a jogging track, roller rink, and soccer field. It boasts familiar US restaurants and local shopping opportunities.

deadline, only to find a bunch of brand-new AK-47s sitting in the cargo yard. Extended exposure to the sun faded the paperwork, making it extremely difficult to figure out where the weapons came from or where they were supposed to go.

“That was a research game and when you’re up against that time frame it’s just one of those ankle biters that’s going to make you bleed,” Cornwell said.

A Work in Progress

That’s exactly what he is trying to prevent from happening in Afghanistan, which is why accountability has become Cornwell’s No. 1 priority. Once he figures out exactly what the “Air Force wedge” is in the retrograde and redeployment puzzle, he will know what he has to move, when he has to move it, and where it is going.

“You have equipment we came into Afghanistan with to fight the war, then you have the 12 years of, ‘I need this, I need this,’” said Cornwell. “As things have changed, as the combat ops have worn various pieces of equipment out, we’ve adjusted fire to continue to be able to drop bombs and launch aircraft. The accountability is a huge issue I’m pushing right now.”

Once he has a better grasp of exactly what the Air Force has in theater, he’ll have a better idea of what needs to move out. That’s when the 451st ELRS will go on the offensive.

“I’m not going to wait for the customer to come to me. I’m going to go out to the customer with my [traffic management order], my supply accountability, my aerial porters, to help them figure

out how to best build up their pallets,” he said. “I have to be in their chili way before they want me there so I can set them up for success.”

Cornwell said Iraq also taught him it’s OK to accept some risks—a lesson he tries to impart to his customers. He said it’s critical that units start getting light as quickly as possible, rather than hoarding all their equipment to the very end. Otherwise, they are just setting logisticians up for failure.

He already has pushed all of his unit’s vehicle maintenance parts out of theater, saying he would just call them back in as needed.

“That enabled me to completely reduce my footprint,” Cornwell said.

As the drawdown efforts continue, the expeditionary standard is going to have to be adjusted.

“Truly, you are supposed to go out of the war the way you came into the war,” said Cornwell. “When we came into the war you didn’t have an aircraft parts store or all this excess. You had the bare necessities to make it happen. Getting people [out of] that comfort zone of having all these excess items is just a culture shock to them.”

Despite the emphasis on drawing down US forces, Wilsbach said it’s important to remember that 2014 really isn’t the end of operations in Afghanistan.

“We’re still kind of in the middle. For us, it’s 2017. We’ve got at least that much time ... to work with the Afghans to build their air force,” he said. “When I come to work every day, I don’t think, ‘We’re almost at the end.’ I kind of feel like we have a work in progress.” ■