

Afghanistan

The June 2013 announcement of 'Milestone 13' saw Afghan forces assume military leadership of the campaign against the Taliban. Drawdown of international forces continued, and by mid-year ISAF comprised 87,000 troops, 60,000 of them from the US. Plans for ISAF's combat mission to cease at the end of 2014 were on track, although some forces could remain on training and counter-terrorism duties if the US and Afghanistan finalise a bilateral security agreement.

Well-planned insurgent attacks continued against ISAF bases and prestige targets in Kabul. The Taliban attacked outlying Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) posts, some of which were temporarily overrun. These attacks were all successfully counter-attacked by the ANSF, usually with few or no NATO ground troops. However, the fighting season saw heavy ANSF casualties, with deaths peaking at 100 per week, double the peak of 2012's fighting season. This reflects both Afghan forces' lead role in the fighting and their lower counter-IED capability and skills. Insider attacks greatly reduced, however.

The ANSF almost reached their planned strength of 352,000, except for a small shortfall in police numbers. There was still reliance on NATO for artillery and air strikes

and airborne intelligence gathering, and for help in logistics and administration. NATO's training mission concentrated on building these areas and medical, counter-IED, and intelligence capabilities.

The Afghan Army is probably capable enough to continue to hold the main cities and the key rural areas largely cleared of insurgents. ISAF commander General Joseph Dunford assessed, however, that NATO is 'lagging some years in developing the police', while improvements in the whole machinery of justice, including courts, lawyers and prisons, was further behind. The Afghan Air Force is unlikely to achieve full capability before 2018, due to a shortage of sufficiently educated and literate personnel to fill technical and engineering posts. The service also suffers from corruption.

Once US and NATO troops depart, it is unclear if the Taliban will still be able to rely on the notion that they are fighting to expel 'infidels' from Afghanistan. The Afghan endgame will be greatly influenced by the results of the 2014 Afghan presidential election. The new president will have a key role in endorsing US plans for a residual counter-terrorism mission and NATO's follow-on training and advisory mission, *Operation Resolute Support*.

Map 5 **Afghan Forces Assume Security Lead**

Afghan forces are gradually assuming the lead responsibility for security in Afghanistan. According to NATO, the aim is for them to have full responsibility, across the country, by the end of 2014. This has been undertaken in tranches of cities, districts and provinces, 'drawing on the assessment and recommendations of the Afghan government and NATO/ISAF'. With tranche 5 in June 2013, the last remaining provinces and districts have entered the transition process.

