

From VOA Learning English, welcome to AS IT IS!

AS IT IS our new magazine show in Special English. Today and in the days to come, we will be expanding on major world events and reporting on issues that concern you. We will be talking with newsmakers, experts and VOA’s own reporters to help make sense of this quickly changing world --- AS IT IS.

Hello, I’m your host, Mario Ritter.

Afghanistan continues to be a central issue for the administration of President Barack Obama.

On our show today we look at some of the concerns surrounding the withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014.

Also, VOA Reporter Andre DeNesnera will join us in studio to weigh in on the subject.

Withdrawing from Afghanistan will be a major foreign policy issue for President Obama during his second term. VOA’s Andre DeNesnera spoke with three former United States government officials about America's longest war. Steve Ember has the story.

American military forces have been in Afghanistan for more than 11 years. That is longer than the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s.

About 68,000 American troops are in Afghanistan. The international coalition plans to withdraw all fighting forces by the end of 2014. Afghan forces will then be responsible for the country’s security.

John Bolton served as President George W. Bush’s ambassador to the United Nations in 2005 and 2006. He fears for Afghanistan’s future after American troops withdraw.

“The idea that we would withdraw even though the near certain outcome is a Taliban/al-Qaida return to power and all the risks that that entails for the United States and other countries, I just think is a kind of blindness.”

Afghan and American officials are negotiating the size of the American military presence after combat troops leave in 2014.

Former defense secretary William Cohen says some international troops must also stay.

“There has to be a recognition on the part of many countries that it’s in the world’s interest to see stability remain or be brought to Afghanistan.”

Retired general Brent Scowcroft served as a national security adviser to two presidents. He says the United States had unrealistic expectations in Afghanistan, and in Iraq.

“We cannot step in on a brief timetable and remake society. We’ve tried it several times now and it’s just beyond our capability. So we have to realize, when we are contemplating action in another country, what is realistic for us to accomplish and what isn’t.”

Mr. Scowcroft says Americans are tired of war. Experts say Europeans are also tired of war. And that could make it difficult to create a smaller international military force for Afghanistan after 2014. Reporting from Washington, I’m Steve Ember.

You are listening to “As It Is” in VOA Special English.

I’m your host Mario Ritter.

Joining us in the studio today for more on the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, VOA Reporter Andre DeNesnera. Thanks for joining us Andre.

“My Pleasure.”

In your talks with former United States ambassador John Bolton, he suggested that a return to Taliban rule will be the most likely outcome when the American forces withdraw. Did others that you spoke with have that same position?

“A lot of critics of the Obama administration have stated that to give a final date – 2014 -- when the troops, American troops, withdraw from Afghanistan is a very bad idea because it gives the Taliban enough time to wait out the Americans and start an offensive.

A key issue is how will the Afghan forces -- and that means the army and police who are now being trained and who should be ready to take over responsibility for security -- will they indeed be ready?”

Did the United States achieve what it set out to do in Afghanistan?”

“From the military standpoint, one can argue that right now that yes we have achieved our goal, which was to eliminate the Taliban. And the Taliban is no longer in office, is no longer in power. But again we come back to this date, this fateful date of 2014. What will happen after that?”

Thanks again for joining us Andre.

“My pleasure.”

You are listening to As It Is, a news magazine show in VOA Special English. I’m Mario Ritter, your host.

As international combat troops prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan, officials in neighboring Pakistan are also expressing concern. June Simms reports that Pakistani officials have noted an increase in militant violence, and they are questioning the effectiveness of Afghanistan’s security forces.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar has called for a “responsible transition” as international forces leave Afghanistan. She warned United States and NATO forces against leaving the country “in a rush.” The Pakistani official spoke earlier this month at a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

“One major objective of foreign military presence in Afghanistan was to reduce the ideological space that exists for [an] extremist mindset.”

She said this objective has not yet been met.

“I think if you look in the last 10 years, the space of the extremists – the ideological space for them – has only increased.”

The Pakistani foreign minister said violence has increased on both sides of the border, including suicide bomb attacks in Pakistan. She also expressed concern about attacks by members of the Afghan National Security Forces, or ANSF, against NATO forces.

“The green-on-blue attacks: You, they might scare you as

Americans, but they haunt us as Pakistanis, because what that means is that institutions that we are trying to build – the ANSF, et cetera – are not maybe as professional a military or an army that you ideally would want to think. So these are all signs which are not very confidence-inspiring.”

Afghanistan's Deputy Minister for Trade dismissed concerns about his country's future. Mozammil Shinwari told VOA that Afghanistan has made great progress in areas like the economy, politics, security and human rights.

The American ambassador to Afghanistan, James Cunningham, has called on the Afghan government to start peace talks with the Taliban as soon as possible. In the end, he says, stability and peace in the region will require a peace agreement that all sides support. I'm June Simms.

And that's AS IT IS for today. I'm Mario Ritter.

Tell us what you want to hear about on our new show. We want to cover the issues and ideas that matter to you, in your world, as it is.

Let us know. Send an email to special@voanews.com. Or go our website and learningenglish.voanews.com and click on “Contact Us.”