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Brussels Mini-Summit: The U.S. and NATO Must Remain Committed to Afghanistan

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During last year's U.S. presidential campaign, the war in Afghanistan was notably absent from the debate. In President Donald Trump's hour-long speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in February, he did not mention the war in Afghanistan once. This is why it is important at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the heads-of-state level in Brussels (commonly referred to as a NATO mini-summit) in May, that the U.S. and the Alliance send a clear message that they remain committed to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to train, advise, and assist the Afghan security forces.

President Trump should announce—before the meeting—his plans for U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. This will show NATO partners that the U.S. remains committed to leading the international effort in Afghanistan. Reinforcing U.S. commitment to Afghanistan will encourage other NATO countries to redouble their own efforts to help to secure the country at a time when the Taliban is making military advances and ISIS is seeking to make inroads.

One proposal under consideration would send approximately 3,000 additional U.S. troops to bolster the training and assistance mission.¹ This welcome move would strengthen the capability of the Afghan security forces.

A Long Commitment

For the past 16 years, the U.S. has been involved in combat operations in Afghanistan. An 18-year-old soldier serving in Afghanistan today was *two years old* on 9/11. NATO has been commanding various aspects of the campaign there since 2003 and, in 2006, assumed command of the entire campaign. At NATO's 2010 Lisbon summit, the Alliance decided that its combat operations would be completed by the end of 2014 and that full security control would be transferred to the Afghans.

These goals were accomplished, but the Afghan security forces still require robust U.S. and NATO assistance—especially funding, air support, intelligence, training, and battlefield mentoring. Today, nearly 13,500 troops are part of the RSM, including 6,950 American forces and 6,550 troops from NATO and partner nations.² Approximately 2,000 U.S. troops are deployed in Afghanistan for counterterrorism missions.

A Need for Continued NATO Support

Now that the Afghans have taken the lead on their own security, the mission in Afghanistan has entered one of the most crucial periods. This was best illustrated last month when 10 Taliban insurgents dressed in Afghan army uniforms entered a major military base in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif and killed more than 135 Afghan soldiers before being killed themselves.

The U.S. has a direct national security interest in ensuring that the Afghans can eventually take control of their own security. This is a deadly region. According to the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson, "Twenty of the 98 U.S.-designated terrorist groups

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in the world were in the Af-Pak region (thirteen in Afghanistan and seven in Pakistan), making it the highest concentration of the terrorist groups anywhere in the world.”³

After entering office, President Trump instructed Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis to propose a new strategy for the campaign in Afghanistan. According to press reports, the proposals include increasing the number of U.S. advisers to the Afghan security forces by approximately 3,000.⁴ Under the proposal, the authority to determine U.S. troop numbers in Afghanistan would be transferred from the White House to the Department of Defense. The new strategy is also expected to give the U.S. military broader authority to use airstrikes to target Taliban militants and lift Obama-era restrictions on where U.S. military advisers can operate on the battlefield.⁵ All of these changes would be welcome.

President Trump must keep the U.S. troops first and foremost focused on training and mentoring the Afghan security forces. While it is important that the U.S. maintain a robust counterterrorism capability in the region to fight al-Qaeda and ISIS, the White House should reject any proposal that involves sending thousands of U.S. troops back into Afghanistan as the lead force for counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. The counterinsurgency campaign must be led by the Afghans. The counterterrorism operations must be led by the Americans.

Defining Success: Security

Afghanistan will never be a Jeffersonian democracy. It is unlikely that Afghanistan’s government will ever control 100 percent of all districts. For the foreseeable future there will be an insurgency in some form in the Pashtun heartland of the country. This does not mean that the U.S. or NATO has failed; it is

simply a reflection of reality in the region. Even India, arguably the world’s largest democracy, is fighting two major insurgencies inside its borders today.

President Trump’s number one goal in Afghanistan should be to keep America and its allies safe. Success is achieved when Afghanistan is “stable enough,” able to manage its own internal and external security to a degree that stops interference from outside powers and allows the country to resist the establishment of terror bases.

The Afghan military is far from perfect, but perfection was never the goal. The goal in Afghanistan is to get the forces to a level where they can handle the insurgency themselves, without tens of thousands of Western troops on the ground. If the West continues to mentor, train, and fund the Afghan military, the Afghans will eventually be able to take on the insurgency themselves. This, in turn, will establish the security conditions necessary for a genuine political process to take place between Afghans.

Staying Focused

The NATO mini-summit provides an opportunity for the international community to demonstrate its commitment to Afghanistan and the RSM there. The U.S. and NATO should:

- **Keep NATO committed to Afghanistan.** Too often, the international community has turned its back on Afghanistan. The failure to keep a residual force presence in Iraq post-2011 has had disastrous results. This meeting is an opportunity to demonstrate that the international community will not make the same mistake in Afghanistan.
- **State very clearly what the goal is in Afghanistan.** The goal is not nation building. This is not

1. Michael R. Gordon, “Trump Advisers Call for More Troops to Break Afghan Deadlock,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/us/politics/donald-trump-afghanistan-troops-taliban-stalemate.html> (accessed May 10, 2017).

2. NATO, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” March 2017, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_03/20170313_2017-03-RSM-Placemat.pdf (accessed May 8, 2017).

3. News transcript, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” U.S. Department of Defense, December 2, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1019029/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/> (accessed May 8, 2017).

4. Luis Martinez, “US Could Send More Troops to Afghanistan Under Pentagon Proposals,” ABC News, May 9, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-send-troops-afghanistan-pentagon-proposals/story?id=47296442> (accessed May 9, 2017).

5. Missy Ryan and Greg Jaffe, “U.S. Poised to Expand Military Effort Against Taliban in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-poised-to-expand-military-effort-against-taliban-in-afghanistan/2017/05/08/356c4930-33fa-11e7-b412-62beef8121f7_story.html (accessed May 10, 2017).

the reason why the U.S. entered Afghanistan in 2001, nor is it the reason why NATO should remain there now. It should be made clear that the goal is to keep America and its allies safe. This means having a “stable enough” Afghanistan, able to manage its own internal and external security to a degree that stops interference from outside powers.

- **Pressure Pakistan to accept and help with a long-term political solution.** As long as certain parts of Pakistan’s government continue to provide relief to the Taliban, the Taliban will never have enough pressure, or incentive, to enter into genuine peace talks with the Afghan government. President Trump and his NATO colleagues should never miss an opportunity to remind Islamabad of this.
- **Refuse to reduce Afghan security forces below 352,000 troops for the foreseeable future.** The Afghan security forces are the key to Afghanistan’s long-term security. The strength of the Afghan security forces should be determined by security conditions on the ground. NATO leaders should resist the temptation to reduce the Afghan security forces’ size and capability for financial reasons.
- **Press international partners to provide their fair share of the funding for the Afghan security forces.** Everyone benefits from a strong Afghan security force. However, maintaining a robust Afghan force will not be cheap. The U.S. should continue to press international partners to commit adequate funding for the Afghan security forces until the Afghan government takes over full responsibility in 2024.
- **Ensure that the Afghan security forces remain capable.** The U.S. should ensure that the Afghan security forces have the equipment and capabilities required to fulfill their mission—especially helicopters and counter-improvised-explosive-device capability.

- **Encourage NATO countries to increase their troop contributions proportional to America’s.** It is expected that the U.S. will increase the number of troops in Afghanistan by as many as 3,000. President Trump should encourage his counterparts to increase troop contributions in Afghanistan proportionally. NATO members need to make public commitments for their future troop numbers. This will send a message to the Afghan people, the insurgents, and the region that NATO is committed to Afghanistan’s future.

- **Ensure that U.S. financial assistance is delivered in a transparent and effective way.** The U.S. has provided more than \$113 billion for Afghan reconstruction since 2002. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has uncovered dozens of cases of U.S. financial aid that never reached its intended recipient, or was used for inappropriate projects.⁶ Since 2002, the lack of accountability of U.S. assistance has played a major role in fueling Afghanistan’s endemic corruption problem. The U.S. must take measures to ensure that every U.S. taxpayer’s dollar is used in the most effective way possible in Afghanistan. While this will not end the cycle of corruption in Afghanistan, it will help reduce it while ensuring proper use of U.S. funding.

Staying Committed

The end-of-2014 deadline for Western-led combat operations was not the end of the war, but simply a continuation of the campaign led by the Afghans and supported by the international community. The upcoming NATO mini-summit should reflect this reality. It is important that the burden is shared equitably within the Alliance, that pressure is put on Pakistan to help facilitate a long-term political solution, and that the international community stays committed to funding, equipping, and training the Afghan security forces for the foreseeable future.

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6. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: DOD Needs to Improve Management and Oversight of Uniforms and Equipment,” SIGAR 17-40 *Audit Report*, April 2017, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-17-40-AR.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2017).