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Don't Repeat the Mistakes of Iraq: U.S. Should Continue Training Mission in Afghanistan

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There have been recent reports that the U.S. might pull out around 7,000 U.S. troops—half of the total—from Afghanistan.¹ A capable Afghanistan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF) and a genuine political settlement led by the Afghans is the country's best ticket to for security, and America's best hope for regional stability. It is in America's interest to continue the training, advising, and assisting mission for the ANDSF. Now is not the time to abandon the Afghans and repeat the mistakes of the Obama Administration when it abruptly removed all trainers from Iraq in 2011, paving the way for the invasion by the Islamic State.

Strategic Interests

Afghanistan is located in an important part of the world and is geographically divided between two key regions: South Asia and Central Asia. This is why policymakers need to look more broadly at the U.S. role there. America's interests are not just localized to Afghanistan, they are strategic. There are three main U.S. interests in the region:

1. Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for transnational terrorism like it was before 2001. According to the former command-

er of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson, "Twenty of the 98 U.S.-designated terrorist groups 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."²

2. A stable South Asia. Afghanistan falling into chaos could create even more instability between India and Pakistan. Pakistani-backed groups have already launched numerous terrorist attacks against Indian interests in Afghanistan. That would undoubtedly increase if the country further destabilizes. India would likely revert to supporting friendly militias in Afghanistan, which could sharpen the rivalry with Pakistan and motivate Islamabad to increase tensions in Kashmir.

3. A stable Central Asia. Culturally, linguistically, and historically, much of Afghanistan is closely connected to Central Asia. What happens in Afghanistan affects the countries of Central Asia. Central Asia is a region where many of America's challenges converge, such as an emboldened Russia, a rising China, and transnational terrorism. The diplomatic and military presence in Afghanistan gives the U.S. added influence in Central Asia.

Realistic Goals

In order to achieve its interests, the U.S. should narrowly focus on four long-term goals that stay away from the lofty nation-building rhetoric of the past. These goals can be summed up with four "s" descriptions:

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- 1. A stable Afghanistan.** The number one goal of the U.S. in Afghanistan, if nothing else is achieved there, should be to create a stable-enough Afghanistan that is able to maintain its own internal security, in order to prevent the country from becoming a 1990s-style safe haven for terrorists, without the help of thousands of foreign troops.
- 2. A sovereign Afghanistan.** In South and Central Asia, sovereignty equals stability and peace. This means respecting the sovereignty of others while begin able to defend and enforce one's own sovereignty. Today, Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and China are eroding the sovereignty of Afghanistan by meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs.
- 3. A self-reliant Afghanistan.** Afghanistan has been the recipient of hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in aid. Providing the current levels of support for Afghanistan is unsustainable in the long term. Be it with security or the economy, the international community must find ways to help Afghanistan become more self-reliant.
- 4. A settled Afghanistan.** President Donald Trump has alluded to an eventual political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.³ This is a realistic and reasonable outcome to expect. The goal of counterinsurgencies is generally to allow those who have legitimate political grievances to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan ever ends, it will be through a political settlement.

Train, Advise, and Assist

After more than 17 years of a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, it is right and natural to question the value of the mission. However, most of the

criticism of the mission today comes from failing to see the mission for what it now is (a training, advising, and assisting mission for the ANDSF) instead of for what it used to be (a major U.S.-led combat operation).

The situation today in Afghanistan is not the same as in 2001 when the U.S. invaded and ousted the Taliban. It is also not the same as in 2009 when President Barack Obama announced his surge policy and increased U.S. troops to its peak of 100,000 leading day-to-day combat operations.

Today, there is a relatively small contingent of about 14,000 U.S. troops—the vast majority of whom are training and mentoring the ANDSF. A small number of these troops conduct high-end special operations missions to target senior Taliban leadership, remnants of al-Qaeda, and the nascent Islamic State of the Khorasan Province, and these missions are the exception rather than the rule.

Not Losing

In addition to misunderstanding what kind of mission the U.S. is performing in Afghanistan, there is often an extreme pessimism regarding what has been accomplished in Afghanistan.

The New York Times recently claimed that “the Taliban are stronger than ever.”⁴ This is simply untrue. The Taliban today is nothing like the Taliban in 1996 when it rolled into Kandahar and Kabul and operated tanks and flew planes.

On September 10, 2001, the Taliban controlled 90 percent of the entire country outside a small rump in northeastern Afghanistan controlled by the opposition Northern Alliance. During this time, all major road networks, all of the major population centers, and the capital city Kabul were under Taliban control. The situation could not be more different today.

According to the most recent report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction—known for its harsh criticism of U.S. policy in

1. For example, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. to Withdraw About 7,000 Troops from Afghanistan, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal.html> (accessed January 4, 2018).

2. News release (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/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/> (accessed January 4, 2019).

3. News release, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” The White House, August 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/> (accessed January 4, 2019).

4. Daniel Victor, “Need a Refresher on the War in Afghanistan? Here Are the Basics,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/world/asia/afghanistan-war-explainer.html?smid=tw-nytimesatwar&smtyp=cur> (accessed January 4, 2019).

Afghanistan—the Taliban “controls or influences” areas where only 10.5 percent of Afghanistan’s population lives (a 1.2 percent decrease from the previous quarter’s report).⁵

Conversely, the Afghan government “controls or influences” areas where 65 percent of the Afghanistan population resides.⁶ The Taliban has not come close to retaking Kabul. In recent years, the Taliban has only been able to hold parts of a district center on two occasions (Kunduz in 2015 and Ghazni in 2018) and only for several days at a time before being expelled.

As with any war, each side has tactical victories. Commentators need to stop treating every tactical victory of the Taliban’s as America’s strategic defeat.

While the situation in Afghanistan is far from perfect, there is a huge space between victory and defeat. This is where the U.S. is today in Afghanistan and this is where the U.S. will likely remain for the foreseeable future. Until there is a genuine peace settlement among all Afghans, and until Pakistan stops providing succor to the Taliban, perhaps this is as good as it is going to get. This is not defeat. This is reality.

U.S. Must Stay Committed

In the 1990s, the international community turned its back on Afghanistan, which allowed the country to become a hub for international terrorism. The failure to keep a residual force presence in Iraq post-2011 also had disastrous results. The U.S. can avoid repeating the same mistakes today by:

- **Maintaining adequate force levels for the training mission.** The ANDSF is Afghanistan’s ticket to security, and the U.S. and its allies should continue to support this relatively modest mission.
- **Doing a better job explaining the mission.** Today, the Afghans are leading combat operations. The U.S. is leading the training mission. It is through the lens of a training mission that policymakers should recognize the U.S. presence in Afghanistan today, not as an extension of the war that has been raging since 2001.
- **Stating very clearly what the number one goal is in Afghanistan.** It should be made clear that the number one goal is to keep America and its allies safe. This means having a “stable enough” Afghanistan, able to manage its own internal security so the country does not become a hub for transnational terrorism again.
- **Continuing to pressure Pakistan to accept and help with a long-term political solution.** The Trump Administration has suspended nearly all aid to Pakistan and adopted a much tougher line toward Islamabad at the International Monetary Fund and in international forums dealing with terrorism financing. Whether this ultimately changes Pakistan’s calculus about backing the Taliban is unclear, but 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.
- **Supporting Afghanistan’s connection to the outside world.** The best way for Afghanistan to stand on its own feet is connecting itself to the outside world. A quick glance at the map shows how landlocked Afghanistan suffers from a lack of connectivity with its neighbors. Thankfully, this is slowly changing with initiatives like the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and India’s involvement connecting Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar.
- **Supporting talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.** The news coming out of the latest rounds of talks in Abu Dhabi is welcome.⁷ The U.S. should support this process along the way but remain skeptical of the Taliban’s motives. The Taliban needs to prove that it is serious about talks because nothing in the past has shown it is a trustworthy actor. Withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan—unless it was part of a broader confidence-building measure connected to the peace talks and coordinated with the Afghan government—could derail the talks before they get off to a meaningful start.

5. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” October 30, 2018, p. 71, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2018).

6. Ibid.

7. Alex Ward, “After 17 Years of War, Afghan Government and Taliban May Meet for Peace Talks,” Vox, December 18, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/12/18/18146333/afghanistan-taliban-usa-talks-uae> (accessed January 4, 2018).

Conclusion

A capable ANDSF and a genuine political settlement led by the Afghans is the country's best hope for security and rising from poverty, and America's best hope for regional stability. This is why it is in America's interest to continue the training, advising, and assisting mission in Afghanistan. Now is not the time to repeat the mistakes of Iraq.

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