

How the Trump Administration is Losing Afghanistan

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There is a case for a deliberate U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Afghan government remains divided and weak, its security forces will take years of expensive U.S. and allied support to become fully effective and they may still lose even with such support. Afghanistan is no more likely to become a future center of terrorist attacks outside its borders than many other weak and unstable countries.

Both Afghanistan and a troublesome Pakistan have only marginal strategic interest to the U.S. relative to many other areas where the U.S. can use its resources. Moreover, leaving the region places the security and aid burden on Russia, China, and local states -- forcing the countries that do have major strategic interests in the region to take on the burden or live with the consequences.

The U.S. should not stay in Afghanistan without considering these risks and liabilities, or out of sheer strategic momentum. But, it should also not let the situation steadily deteriorate and lose the war by negligence and default. There is a case for continuing military assistance and there may be a case for action on the civil side if the State Department and USAID are pressed hard to address it. Pakistan may remain problematic, but it may well not be so much of a problem that some form of victory is not possible.

The Trump Administration should evaluate the merits of a prolonged commitment in detail, make any commitment clearly conditional and set clear requirements for Afghan action. It should consult with Congress, seek a clear legislative mandate for staying if it decides this is the proper course, and openly and transparently explain its decisions to the American people. But, it cannot simply sit and wait, take token action, and issue more empty words without losing the war.

The Military Side of Strategy

The military side of strategy is the most urgent. So far, the Trump Administration has talked vaguely about possible measures to support Afghanistan and increasing the train and assist and combat support missions by 3,000 to 5,000 troops. However, the Administration has made no decisions about creating a credible presence in Afghanistan and has not defined any clear strategy or plans for actually trying to win the war. It is doing just what it should not do. It is letting the situation steadily deteriorate and is losing by negligence and default.

There has been one area where some real action has been taken. The Administration has stepped up the use of U.S. airpower in support of Afghan forces. The latest unclassified summary issue by the U.S. Air Force branch of Central Command (AFCENT) covers the first six months of 2017. AFCENT does not show an increase in total sorties per month over 2016. However, it does show that the U.S. flew an average of 86 strike sorties per month that released a munition in the first six months of 2017, versus 51 such sorties per month in 2016. Average actual munitions released against an enemy target per month have gone from 340 in 2012 to 197 in 2014, to only 79 in 2015, but has since risen to 111 in 2016, and 272 in 2017.

At the same time, the Coalition flew 165 active strike sorties per month to support its forces in 2012, and 95 sorties in 2014, when U.S. and other combat forces were leaving. There is negligible airlift and casualty evacuation support for Afghan forces, and the average number of intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sorties has dropped from 2,911 in 2012 to 2,750 in 2014, to 1,640 in 2016, to 1,482 in 2017.

These air numbers also have to be kept in careful perspective. In 2012-2014, the Coalition was on the offensive with far better armed troops fighting far fewer battles against a far less active mix of Taliban, Haqqani and other enemies. Half-formed Afghan security forces are fighting far more battles that are virtually all defensive, with far less ground mobility and far less capable weapons. Air power is no substitute for ground power and presence. Without them, it cannot win, only sometimes rescue Afghan ground forces that are already in deep trouble.

Building Effective Afghan Ground Forces

When the U.S. withdrew combat forces in 2014, senior commanders realized all too clearly that the Afghan force was hollow with many units having little more than basic training and limited combat experience. This was due to rushed efforts to mix Afghan forces with police and army to take on the entire military mission of defeating the Taliban and other insurgents. That effort had only really begun to be fully funded in 2011, and many of the required advisors were only present in 2012-2013.

It was clear that the Afghan Air Force was years away from having the strike, lift, and medevac capabilities it needed, and the Afghan government -- including the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior -- lacked core competence and were deeply corrupt. Senior U.S. commanders recommended a train and assist and combat support mission of some 20,000 troops -- a mission that could aid the Afghan security forces down to the combat unit level and help it go from a force with basic training to one that could actually fight.

The Obama Administration and NATO made very different decisions. President Obama first decided to withdraw U.S. combat forces by the end of 2014, and did so without serious regard to how weak Afghan forces still were in 2011 and the probable conditions on the ground. In May 2014, the President decided to limit U.S. troops to 9,800 personnel, and later decided to cut this number in half by 2016.

The total authorized NATO force at the beginning 2015 was some 13,000 troops with 9,800 American in advisory and counter insurgency roles -- plus large numbers of contractors and some additional counterinsurgency forces. U.S. advisors were not formally assigned below the corps level and where they could directly assist Afghan forces in combat, and combat support activity was very limited. In spite of adjustments in 2015 and 2016, that reflected the weaknesses in Afghan forces and rise of the Taliban and other threats, the US. now formally deploys 8,400 troops -- many in in four major garrisons (Kabul, Kandahar, Bagram and Jalalabad) -- plus a limited Marine component in Helmand.

This situation could (and should) have been corrected soon after the Trump inauguration. The Trump Administration has given Secretary of Defense Mattis the theoretical authority to deploy several thousand more U.S. troops -- with figures like 3,000-5,000 being quoted publically. In practice, however, it is now more than half way into the 2017 campaign season in Afghanistan, and the Secretary is still waiting on a White House decision as to the future U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.

No decision has been implemented to actually deploy the train and assist and combat support troops the Afghan forces desperately need at the major combat unit level, and even if a decision is taken this week, the end result of the delay will ensure that added personnel can only have a major impact on the 2018 campaign season, and that Afghan forces have already taken serious losses of personnel and territory.

The Cost of Not Having a Credible Military Strategy

The latest quarterly report by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has just been issued, and SIGAR's summary provides a clear warning that the situation is so serious that more delays and indecision may lead to defeat in Afghanistan by default:

- From March 1 through May 31, 2017, the UN recorded 6,252 security incidents, a 21% increase from last quarter.
- From January 1, 2017, through May 8, 2017, there were 2,531 ANDSF service members killed in action and an additional 4,238 wounded in action.
- SIGAR is concerned that U.S. officials, whether at State, USAID, Justice, Treasury, Commerce, or elsewhere, cannot oversee the billions of dollars the United States is dedicating to Afghan reconstruction if, for the most part, they cannot leave the U.S. embassy compound. Hunkering down behind blast walls damages not only the U.S. civilian mission but also handicaps the U.S. military mission.
- In the long run, such extreme risk aversion and avoidance may even contribute to greater insecurity, since it limits U.S. diplomatic reach to the very Afghans necessary to foster stability, rule of law, and economic growth, while sending an unintended but dangerous message to friend and foe alike that the terrorists should be feared and may actually be winning.
- As of May 15, 2017, the struggle between the Afghan government and insurgents remains a stalemate, with the number of districts and the portion of the population under Afghan government and insurgent control unchanged since last quarter's February 15 assessment.
- USFOR-A reported 12,073 MOD personnel had been identified as "unaccounted for" in the Afghan Human Resources Information Management System (AHRIMS) as of May 11, 2017, some of whom could be ghosts.
- In the first six months of FY 1396 (which began December 22, 2016), Afghanistan's domestic revenues declined nearly 25% year-on-year and covered about 40% of total government expenditures.
- The estimated value of opiates produced in Afghanistan increased to \$3.02 billion in 2016 from \$1.56 billion in 2015. The value of opiates is worth more than two-thirds of the country's entire illicit agricultural sector.
- According to SIGAR analysis, the United States has obligated an estimated \$714 billion for all spending-including war fighting and reconstruction-in Afghanistan over more than 15 years.

The situation is grim, but scarcely hopeless *if* the U.S. acts decisively to give the Afghan forces the same kind of intense air support, forward deployed train and assist effort, and combat support that has worked well with Iraqi forces against ISIS and with the Kurdish and Arab forces the U.S. is supporting in northwest Syria. Polls also show that the Taliban and other insurgents lack any form of broad popularity and the SIGAR report notes that the official estimate is that insurgent gains are still limited:

According to USFOR-A, as of May 15, 2017, the struggle between the Afghan government and insurgents remains a stalemate, with the number of districts and the portion of the population under Afghan government and insurgent control unchanged since last quarter's February 15 assessment...USFOR-A reported that approximately 59.7% of the country's 407 districts are under Afghan government control or influence as of May 15, 2017, the same as last quarter, but a six-point decline from the same period last year.

As of May 2017, there were 45 districts (in 15 provinces) under insurgent control (11 districts) or influence (34 districts). Therefore, 11.1% of the country's total districts are still under insurgent control or influence, more than a two percentage-point increase from the same period in 2016...USFOR-A attributes the loss of government control or influence over territory to the ANDSF's strategic approach to security prioritization, which involves identifying the most important areas that the ANDSF must hold to prevent defeat, and placing less emphasis on less vital areas...

The number of contested districts (119) remains the same and represents 29.2% of all districts. It was not clear whether these districts are at risk or if, neither the insurgency nor the Afghan government exercises any significant control over these areas, as USFOR-A previously described.

...of the 407 districts of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, 243 districts were under government control (97 districts) or influence (146 districts)...USFOR-A reports again this quarter that there are three million Afghans living under insurgent control or influence...of, the 32.6 million people living in Afghanistan, USFOR-A determined that the majority, 21.4 million (65.6%), live in areas controlled or influenced by the government, while another 8.2 million people (25.2%) live in areas that are contested...

The real world situation may, however, have been even more urgent than the SIGAR report indicates. There seems to be a strong element of the public relations exaggerations and lies that were all too common in the Vietnam follies in the official reporting of Taliban and insurgent gains. As a result, the need for immediate White House decisions and action may be even greater than the earlier data imply.

An article by Bill Roggio -- one of the most respected analysts of war -- in the August 1, 2017 edition of the *Long War Journal* notes that,

The battle between the Afghan government and the Taliban "remains a stalemate" and the number of districts under Taliban control or influence is "unchanged" since the last assessment by the US military was made more than five months ago. The Afghan government continue to cede "less vital areas" in order to "prevent defeat."

That assessment, provided by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in its most recent quarterly report to United States Congress, is likely the best possible scenario provided by the US military. SIGAR's evaluation is based on data provided by US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and Resolute Support, NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

The only problem is both USFOR-A and Resolute Support have significantly underestimated and understated the Taliban's control of districts in the past...According to the report, the Taliban continues to control 11 districts and influences 34 of Afghanistan's 407 districts (11 percent), while the Afghan government controls 97 districts and influences 146 (60 percent). Twenty-nine percent of Afghanistan's districts remain contested.

According to SIGAR, Kunduz province has the largest percentage of districts under Taliban control or influence (five of seven). Uruzgan (four of six Taliban controlled or influenced) and Helmand (nine of 14) round out the top three.

USFOR-A's assessment of Helmand, for example, demonstrates that the US military is painting the rosiest picture possible when it comes to determining the extent of Taliban control. USFOR-A claims that only nine of 14 districts are Taliban controlled or influenced, however the situation is far more dire than that. The Taliban now controls six of the province's 14 districts (Baghran, Dishu, Khanashin, Now Zad, Musa Qala, and Sangin) and contests another seven, including the provincial capital (Lashkar Gah, Nahr-i-Sarraj, Nawa, Kajaki, Nad Ali, Marjah, and Garmsir), according to data compiled by *FDD's Long War Journal*...In other words, 13 of Helmand's 14 districts are at the very least contested -- much more than the assessment of nine by USFOR-A.

Al Qaeda has taken advantage of the security situation in Helmand and is known to operate in southern Helmand. Fighters from al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent have reportedly trained at camps located in Helmand's Dishu and Khanashin districts as recently as 2014. The town of Baramacha in Dishu is a known hub of jihadist activity. The camps are believed to be operational to this day. [See *FDD's Long War Journal* report, Al Qaeda operates in southern Helmand province.]

Another key indicator that USFOR-A's data is skewed to present a more positive picture of the security situation is the identification of a problem area in southern Afghanistan. This region was previously described by *FDD's Long War Journal* as a belt of bases in the south that stretches across the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, and Ghazni which are used to attack nearby provincial capitals and districts. According to SIGAR:

The region with the most districts under insurgent control or influence is centered on northeastern Helmand Province and northwestern Kandahar Province, and includes the Helmand/Kandahar border area, Uruzgan Province, and northwestern Zabul. This region alone accounts for one-third of the 45 districts currently under insurgent control or influence.

While USFOR-A does not provide data on Taliban control or influence on a province by province basis, it did identify the Taliban threat in two provinces: Helmand and Uruzgan. According to USFOR-A, there are 13 districts controlled or influenced in Helmand and Uruzgan combined. If one-third of the 45 districts (15) controlled or influenced by the Taliban reside in the region, then this means only two districts in Zabul and Kandahar are Taliban controlled or influenced. The data clearly shows otherwise.

The Taliban clearly controls three districts in northern Kandahar (Miya Nishin, Khakrez, and Ghorak) and two more in Zabul (Khak-e-Afghan and Arghandab). Several others, including Arghastan, Khakrez, Maruf, Maiwand, and Shah Wali Kot in Kandahar, are contested.

Like in Helmand, al Qaeda has taken advantage of the security situation in Kandahar province to establish bases. Up until Oct. 2015, al Qaeda ran two large training camps in Shorabak district. US forces killed more than 150 al Qaeda fighters while raiding the camps.

Moreover, U.S. advisors and troops -- and tying U.S. military aid to actually enhance Afghan performance -- are critical to help counter the mix of corruption and incompetence that permeates the Afghan security forces at every other level -- corruption and incompetence clearly recognized in the semi-annual reports on the war by the Department of Defense and the more regular quarterly reports by SIGAR. Transparency International ranks the Afghan government as the 7th most corrupt government in the world out of the 176 countries it evaluates and the World Bank governance indicators are equally terrible.

The Civil Side of Strategy

This raises the broader issue of the White House's failure to date in addressing any aspect of the civil side of the war. Every U.S. commander that has addressed the broader nature of the Afghan conflict has made it clear that no purely military victory is possible. As is the case in every insurgency -- including Iraq and Syria -- a lasting victory requires a civil structure whose politics, governance, and economics serve the people and bring lasting stability.

As is the case in Iraq and Syria, however, the Trump Administration has not given any indication that it has a credible strategy -- or any strategy -- to deal with the critical problems in Afghan politics, governance, and economics that make it a "failed state." There not only is a policy and intellectual vacuum, there is a total vacuum.

The U.S. cannot reshape Afghanistan, but it can make aid conditional on Afghan willingness to govern effectively by Afghan standards, and carry out a long series of Afghan pledges to make Afghan economic reforms. No U.S. strategy can afford to continue to ignore the near paralyzing political divisions between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah, the country's power broker and warlord problems, the miserable rating of Afghan governance by the World Bank, and the warnings on the IMF and World Bank web pages of the seriousness of Afghanistan's poverty, employment, and other critical economic problems that affect the life of well over half of its population.

No amount of denial, exaggeration, and obfuscation by State and USAID can substitute for a concerted effort to deal with the civil side of the war. Put bluntly, half a strategy is not better than none. In practice, this means making it clear that every form of U.S. support in terms of aid, visas, and day-to-day interaction between governments will become steadily more dependent on real world Afghan performance, that any given flow of aid will be dependent on removing the corrupt and incompetent, and Afghanistan will have to live up to its own commitments and standards or the U.S. can and will leave. The U.S. has many other equally high priorities, and it cannot afford "normal diplomacy" in a nation where it is fighting a war.

Pakistan

Finally, U.S. strategy must accept the fact that there is no clear solution to the fact that Pakistan, a supposed ally receiving massive U.S. aid, never stopped from providing a de facto sanctuary to the Taliban, Haqqani network, and key elements of Al Qaeda central. Pakistan is not only a real ally; it so far has not been a state where U.S. aid could make the Pakistani military fully support the U.S. on even a transactional basis. Words and meetings have also done little so far to change Pakistan's behavior.

The U.S. has two real world strategic options. The first is to simply go on dealing with Pakistan on the present basis. This does not mean ignoring Pakistan's real world actions, but adding some level of pressure -- although a series of explicit public white papers on Pakistan's actions and the role of ISIS in supporting terrorism might add to U.S. leverage. The other is to try to force the issue by making it clear that unless Pakistan acts decisively, U.S. aid will be suspended indefinitely and U.S. economic sanctions will be applied.

Quite frankly, a somewhat harder line U.S. approach -- coupled to more transparently handle Pakistan's actions -- seems far more practical than creating a major crisis that could drive Pakistan into reliance on China. There are times where there are no good options, but some options are worse than others.