Judging the Impact of U.S. Force Reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

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The U.S. has said remarkably little about how conditional its future plans to withdraw all forces in Afghanistan are on the success of the peace process, whether it will provide adequate support for Afghan military forces if the peace effort fails, or whether the U.S. plans to provide any security guarantees and military aid if a peace agreement is reached. So far, all that is clear is that the official total of U.S. military personnel has dropped from around 12,000 at the start of 2020 to 8,600 in July 2020, will now drop to some 5,000 personnel, and all U.S. troops will leave by May 2021 if a successful peace agreement is reached.

The U.S. has said even less about the possible details of any new security agreement with Iraq. About all that the U.S. has announced is that it will now cut its present total military personnel in Iraq from some 5,200 to around 3,000 – which does not indicate any clear picture of what the U.S. plans to keep in Iraq or in Syria for the future.

There also is no indication of the size of U.S. forces that will remain elsewhere in the Gulf region or at sea, of any U.S. effort to preserve a redeployment capability in a crisis, of the level of U.S. allied forces that will remain, or of the trends in hostile outside forces like those of Russia, Syria, Iran, the Hezbollah, or other outside non-state actors – as well as powers that have different goals from the U.S. like Turkey and Pakistan.

Numbers that May or May Not be Accurate

None of these gross numbers say anything about what kind of forces are involved in each series of cuts, what kind of support the remaining forces will provide to the host country, what the impact of cuts have been on the effectiveness of the remaining U.S. forces, and what has been done to keep local forces effective.

Moreover, a variety of media reports indicate that such gross numbers are far from reliable. At least some numbers only seem to have counted troops that were deployed and that had permanent change of station (PCS) orders. They seem to have excluded significant numbers of key additional personnel deployed on a covert or temporary duty basis, and they have failed to count additional civilian intelligence and special forces personnel. These unreported or “temporary” personnel assignments sometimes were highly specialized and supported key local combat, intelligence, and security missions.

At the same time, these numbers do not count U.S.-supported contractors. They include additional U.S., other foreign, and local personnel. It is also clear from past Department of Defense unclassified reporting that such contractors sometimes totaled as many or more personnel as the number of U.S. troops. Many perform roles that have been performed by uniformed personnel in the past. These contractors also have provided critical technical and maintenance support, and they have been essential to the functioning of the logistic and support systems used by local forces.

The data on the numbers of U.S. military personnel also exclude allied military forces – which have been particularly critical in Afghanistan – and U.S. civilians. It is clear that major cuts have taken place in the State Department, USAID, and to other civilians that provided the civil side of U.S. assistance to the host country and that also once provided substantial situational awareness of what was happening in the field and outside the capital.
Crippling Afghan Forces and Undercutting Iraqi Capabilities?

These cuts in U.S. forces are occurring in war zones where the bulk of Afghan and Iraqi combat forces still have key weaknesses in many key areas, and those forces have relied heavily on forward deployed U.S. and allied train and assist forces to support a relatively limited number of effective local combat units.

It seems all too likely that such cuts will seriously weaken the development of Iraqi forces and potentially cripple Afghan forces. Although the U.S. has steadily classified – or ceased to report on – many aspects of the U.S. effort to create effective local security forces, the reports that the Lead Inspector Generals (LIG) and the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) provide to Congress still show that Afghan, Iraqi, and U.S.-backed forces in Syria are far from ready to stand on their own.

Moreover, the number of both U.S. military and civilian facilities in each country is also being steadily cut back – along with the mobility and security forces that allow U.S. personnel to travel throughout the country, maintain human intelligence access, evaluate the impact of aid, and build personal relationships with local officials and units.

These cuts in deployment locations have inevitably empowered the Taliban and Iranian-backed militias in some areas – as well as local power brokers and the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal factions.

They make it harder to track corruption and waste, real world progress in the rule of law, and the competence of local security forces and police. They also raise serious questions about the progress being reported in education, health, and key human rights areas, such as the rights of women.

Losing a Forward Presence and Situational Awareness

Taking U.S. train and assist personnel out of the field and away from active combat forces has a high cost. Virtually all of our experience in working with foreign forces in wars, ranging from Korea to Vietnam, to the first Gulf War in 1991, and then to the present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has shown the need to keep providing train and assist capabilities at the forward level.

This means continuing assistance in using and supporting complex combat systems and weapons, carrying out efforts to deal with weak commanders and high levels of corruption, and persuading local forces to provide civil-military efforts that win popular support. It is the quality and focus of the overall U.S. effort that counts, not the total military Manning – even if one can actually trust the numbers being provided.

Failing to Address Key Cuts in U.S. Air Support

And finally, it is worth pointing out that the U.S. has not only ceased reporting on many of the details of Afghan and Iraqi force developments, it ceased to report on the levels of air support the U.S. provides to Afghan and Iraqi forces at the end of February 2020. This is critical because total military personnel numbers say absolutely nothing about the impact of the cuts in air capability on the continued dependence of Afghan and Iraqi forces on U.S. combat airstrikes and on the information gained from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions.

In practice, the U.S. has boosted air strikes in both countries as a substitute for its previous withdrawals of most U.S. land combat forces, and it has created one of the most sophisticated manned and unmanned airborne intelligence efforts in history. It seems doubtful that Iraq could have defeated ISIS without such efforts, or that the Afghan central government could have kept the Taliban from conquering whole provinces.
In the case of Afghanistan, for example, it raised the number of weapons released in air strikes from a low of 914 in 2015 to 7,423 in 2019. In the case of Iraq, the U.S. supported the recovery of Iraqi ground forces after their defeats from ISIS by rushing airpower back into the country as it helped Iraq rebuild its ground forces. The number of munitions used in air strikes rose from 6,292 in 2014 to 28,696 in 2015; to 30,743 in 2016; and to 39,5767 in 2017 – and then tapered off to 8,713 in 2018; and to 4,729 in 2019 as reconstructed Iraqi forces concentrated on driving ISIS out of populated areas like Mosul.

Ending “Long Wars” with No Clear Strategy

Using these force cuts to leave America’s “long wars” also creates broader uncertainties. Claiming lasting victory against ISIS in Iraq, ignoring Syria, and claiming Afghan forces can survive some kind of peace agreement with the Taliban ignores all of these realities. So does the lack of any clear plan for the future development of a U.S. forward presence in USCENTCOM and AFRICOM.

It says nothing about what the U.S. will now do to deter and potentially defeat Iran; the impact of a Turkey that steadily distances itself from NATO and U.S. goals in the Middle East; the impact of Russia and China’s efforts in the region; the lack of any Arab unity in the Gulf; or how the U.S. will deal with the wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. There is no link to the fact that if one also considers U.S. tensions with Pakistan, withdrawal from Afghanistan will leave the U.S. with no role in Central Asia, no tangible military ties to India, in addition to no clear role in North Africa or the Red Sea Area.