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Afghanistan: Renewed Resolve is Needed

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Overview

Afghanistan poses a problem whose complexity precludes a 'quick win,' an unpopular reality for a war-weary public. Perhaps for this reason it rarely arose as a campaign issue. Regardless, it will need to be a top national security priority for the incoming Trump team. The region is home to the "[highest concentration of terrorist groups in the world](#)," and to a fragile, nuclear-armed Pakistan whose tensions with India drive instability in the region. Afghan state collapse, almost inevitable should the U.S. withdraw forces, would create a vacuum with unpredictable consequences for terrorist regeneration, regional instability, and longer-term geopolitical effects vis-à-vis Russia and China. However, sustained U.S. engagement implies high costs that may be challenging given other U.S. priorities, foreign and domestic. It is just this such opportunity cost conundrum that has undermined the sustainability of U.S. strategy to date.

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if it seeks to avoid past U.S. mistakes.*

Over the coming months, as the Trump team reviews the state of the campaign in Afghanistan and formulates its policy, it should do so with an eye toward correcting some of the disconnects that have emerged under the current strategy.

Issue

When President Obama took office, Afghanistan was the '[forgotten war](#)' and lacked a strategic framework with a clear set of objectives or desired end-state. In late 2009, he announced a revitalized whole of government strategy aimed at achieving the core goal to "[disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda \(AQ\) in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent its capacity from to threaten America and our allies in the future](#)." A concerted counterterrorism (CT) campaign against core

AQ leadership was launched, and an 18-month 'quick surge' of 30,000 U.S. forces (on top of the 68,000 already there) reversed Taliban momentum to create time and space for the Afghan government and security forces to increase capacity, the latter being necessary for Afghanistan to ["achieve a level of internal stability that will ensure it no longer represents a threat to regional stability or international security."](#)

In the seven-plus years since the surge was announced, U.S. progress against these stated objectives is mixed. Osama bin Laden is dead and core AQ's ability to conduct external operations is severely degraded; however, the likelihood of a regenerated threat in the absence of sustained CT pressure is high. The Afghan government marked an historic achievement with its first ever democratic transfer of power, but the resultant national unity government is still fragile, and parliamentary elections have been indefinitely delayed. The U.S. troop surge did push the Taliban back from its strongholds and allowed the NATO mission to rapidly expand the size and basic warfighting capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), but the subsequent rapid drawdown and transition of security responsibility strained Afghan capacity. The Taliban are resurgent in rural areas and are testing ANDSF ability to sustain operations country-wide by conducting opportunistic attacks against provincial capitals in the North and Southwest. And while the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin faction of the insurgency recently entered a peace process with the Afghan government, efforts toward broader reconciliation are unlikely in the near-term.

Throughout this seven-year period, but particularly during President Obama's second term, fundamental disagreements regarding the appropriate 'ways' (methods) and 'means' (resources) necessary to reach desired 'ends' hampered implementation and threatened consolidation of gains. Specifically, the military mission and design for developing the ANDSF, a core line of effort upon which multiple key assumptions of the strategy rested, came into tension with the Administration's desire to reduce and transition the U.S. role in Afghanistan.

Following the surge in late 2012, the Administration gradually viewed Afghanistan as being comparatively over-resourced in the global context, and within two years, it reduced U.S. force levels from 68,000 to just 9,800. This precipitous drawdown contributed to systematic challenges in ANDSF force development and sustainability that the U.S./NATO mission is still trying to address and stabilize today. By 2014, U.S./NATO forces had largely ceased tactical-level training of ANDSF

personnel (Air Force and Special Forces excepted), and were quickly transferring infrastructure, command roles, and key functions (e.g., logistics and maintenance) at a pace faster than Afghan capacity could absorb. The resulting uneven levels of proficiency and readiness across the force have created a mode of operations characterized by an overreliance on and constant rotation of a finite number of strong leaders and units, particularly the Afghan Special Forces, around the country to counter Taliban offensives. Using this approach, and buoyed by Coalition advisers and air support, the Afghans have managed to maintain control of all major population centers and fend off attacks. But long term sustainability is a concern. The in-theater command has been implementing force optimization measures to improve employment of both army and police, but these will take time and sustained training to fully implement.

In addition to the evolution in means, there was a fundamental shift in ‘ways’ with the change in mission that occurred at the end of 2014. Under the new Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, the U.S. [“combat mission was over”](#) and the Afghans took responsibility for the counterinsurgency effort. Security conditions had not changed, but from 2015 forward, the U.S. distinguished between direct CT interests (AQ and ISIS) and countering local insurgency, which became the responsibility of the Afghans. While encouraging Afghan ownership of internal security challenges is the right principle, this shift away from counterinsurgency, coupled with the reduction in resources, was harmful. Programs supporting the Afghan peace and reintegration effort simply faded away. Authorities for military activities—direct action, combat support, and tactical-level training—against the Taliban became more constrained, although greater latitude was recently authorized by President Obama. If the U.S. strategy continues to hinge on the prospects of eventual reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the next administration should take a look at what more can be done to re-energize whole of government ‘ways’ to increase the position and leverage of the Afghan government vis-à-vis the Taliban, while also maintaining the principle that the U.S. is in a support role.

Recommended Changes

President Obama’s willingness over the past year to reverse plans to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan reflects a recognition of the strategic importance of a viable, stable Afghan partner. This has been reinvigorated by President Ghani’s cooperative partnership and the ANDSF’s demonstrated cohesion and will to fight despite heavy casualties. It has also been bolstered by an acknowledgement of tough realities, including that extremism is a long-term problem in the

region. This policy adjustment preserved decision space for the incoming U.S. Administration. It is now up to the Trump team to decide how it wants to re-group and proceed. Below are five recommendations.

Accept that there are no expedient solutions. The Afghan government and the Taliban-led insurgency are locked in a stalemate. The Taliban will continue to leverage freedom of movement in rural areas to launch attacks on large urban centers to erode public confidence (domestic and international). However, they have not shown an ability to 'hold' major populated areas, and are unlikely to do so as long as Coalition advisers and combat power assist the ANDSF. Under these conditions, the Afghan effort is essentially a war of attrition. The Taliban will watch closely the next Administration's decisions but is unlikely to welcome an immediate invitation to talks, as they still see opportunity to increase their leverage and negotiating position by waiting. If the Trump team chooses to sustain engagement, the bet will have to be that long-term U.S. support, at fiscally sustainable levels, will be enough to shore up the Afghan government position until a political agreement between the two sides is reached. The path to that end-state is long and could take any number of routes, including some devolution of power from the central government. The Trump team should solicit interagency input on estimates for what a sustainable long-term presence would look like as well as the bounds of an acceptable agreement. To date, the primary U.S. condition has been a renunciation of ties to AQ. This should not change.

Leverage the Administration change for renewed messaging to the Taliban and regional actors, adjusting the U.S. strategic narrative from one of U.S. withdrawal to one of long-term partnership with the Afghan government against extremism. Mixed signals—a feature of current policy—perpetuates hedging behavior and reduces both U.S. and Afghan leverage. The Trump team should seize on the change in administration to put forth an unequivocal message to the region's state and non-state actors: emphasize that the U.S. supports a peaceful conclusion to the conflict but will not back down against armed groups that threaten the Afghan government, regional stability and international security. Renewed pressure on Pakistan should be a primary order of business.

Sustain at least current levels of U.S. forces, emphasizing continuity, and transition to longer-term planning horizons. This year, President Obama authorized sustaining 8,400 troops beyond 2016. This force level preserves critical enabling capabilities, intelligence infrastructure, and a regional

posture that can conduct necessary training, expeditionary advising, partnered CT operations, and contractor support for equipment sustainment. These activities have been critical to sustain CT pressure, to help the Afghans plug gaps and re-group in highly contested areas, and should be drawn down only on a conditions-based basis. For the past four years, the mission has had to adjust to new resource levels or changes in mission parameters. Some level of continuity—versus year-to-year decision cycles—is needed and will allow for a more sustainable and effective training mission. The Trump team should encourage the training command to identify the most effective operational design and sustainable employment of the ANDSF (army and police), within the means of a force structure that balances capability needs against a realistic assessment of capacity.

Fix the 'ways' problem; review and re-energize the whole of government approach against the Taliban. Shifting U.S. emphasis and government programs away from the counterinsurgency effort—and threats that pose the greatest existential challenge to Afghan state stability and long-term regional and international security—only serves to undermine a sustainable strategy. As part of its review process, the Trump team should seek interagency input on resource-neutral alternatives and low-cost, longer-term whole of government programs to shore up counterinsurgency efforts and to ensure the U.S. mission is conducting a continuous unified effort, effectively leveraging all tools within reasonable means.

Don't fall into the CT vs. COIN trap—the two are inherently linked. There is a school of thought that the United States should abandon the broader capacity-building mission in Afghanistan, and shift to a 'less costly' CT-only containment strategy. This is risky, short-sighted, and likely unsustainable from a number of different perspectives. Whether it would reduce cost over the long-run is debatable. An in-theater presence that does not provide sufficient support to counter the insurgency (i.e., something close to status quo) would be at high risk as the broader security environment deteriorates. The suggestion that the United States could stage operations from over-the-horizon, utilizing some combination of kinetic strikes and proxy forces, overestimates the U.S. ability to conduct an effective CT campaign without a reliable local partner and the necessary intelligence infrastructure. Finally, in the absence of military and financial aid, there is a fair chance that a Syrian-like civil war scenario would emerge, but with even greater access challenges given Afghanistan's land-locked status.

If the Trump team focuses its strategy review on seeking cheaper and/or expedient solutions, it risks repeating mistakes that blunted the effect of U.S. strategy to date, and perpetuating half-measures that would prolong U.S. involvement with limited sustained effect. Ultimately, the Trump team should confront (and accept) tough realities at the outset, leverage political white space to correct errors, and proceed from a position of strength.

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