
THE NEW BATTLE FOR AFGHANISTAN

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Despite questions about the ongoing war in Afghanistan, President Trump has so far chosen silence over substance. But perhaps it doesn't matter, as an illuminating exchange that took place before the Senate Armed Services Committee last week all but guaranteed what his policy will be.

Trump's approach to Afghanistan will no doubt involve more American troops, more aggressive activity on the ground, and a less definite schedule for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces. In other words, don't expect a big shakeup of the status quo. Perhaps the most notable change is that the military won't try to have it both ways, keeping soldiers in the country while telegraphing meaningless timetables for an exit.

This appears to be the result of letting those in uniform [] in the case of new Secretary of Defense James Mattis, the recently retired [] the tough calls. Mattis oversaw Afghanistan from 2010 to 2013 as the leader of U.S. Central Command, and he has already signaled he will not waver on the American commitment. The new homeland-security secretary, retired Marine Corps Gen. John Kelly, commanded forces in Iraq and also lost his son, a Marine who died while serving his third tour in Afghanistan; he, too, obviously feels there is unfinished business there.

As for Congress, most members fall into one of two mindsets [] resolve to increase the U.S. footprint, or resignation that there is no other way. And the president? While at first blush it might look like Trump only has the bandwidth for his oft-stated goal of eradicating radical Islamic terrorism from the face of the earth, his generals [] the help of the most hawkish senators on Capitol Hill—are making sure that Afghanistan is considered part of that fight.

So it did not escape notice when Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, packaged the mission as an urgent priority that ultimately Trump would have to embrace. Speaking to senators last week, Nicholson said staying in Afghanistan is part of our enduring counterterrorism platform (a phrase he repeated several times), which is critically important to our national security and the homeland.

Leaving the country now would be folly, Nicholson argued, because without the U.S. and NATO there to finish the mission, the population would inevitably fall into the hands of extremists, heightening the risk of a domestic terrorist attack. In the words of George W. Bush, we will fight them over there so we do not have to face them in the United States of America.

Indeed, there were reports in January that President-elect Trump had already spoken to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and promised to consider a bump-up in troops. That conversation was never confirmed by Trump's people. Nor was it denied. The White House said Trump spoke to

Ghani last week, the same day as the Nicholson hearing, and promised him continued American support for security but offered no clarity about troop numbers. Many believe its a fait accompli.

According to Nicholson, Afghanistan is a stalemate, with no fewer than 20 different terror groups operating there now. In addition to the well-known Taliban and al-Qaeda, there is also an Islamic State franchise, IS in Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has taken responsibility for a recent spate of ruthless suicide bombings in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Without a trace of irony, the general said that after 15 years of war in Afghanistan, the country now has the greatest concentration of terrorist organizations in the world.

Nicholson suggested a few thousand more troops would be needed to continue training, advising, and filling in where private contractors are now taking up the slack. Currently there are some 8,400 U.S. troops and 26,435 U.S. contractors in Afghanistan, a country of 30 million people. Most of these personnel are in training and advisory roles, while a much smaller number are special forces dedicated to counterterrorism. Nicholson said he believed the administration was open to a discussion of an objectives-based approach.

But the situation is a lot uglier and more complicated than the generals readily admit. Nicholson did not deny nor rebuke senators who raised Afghanistans notorious corruption issues. Other enormous obstacles to progress include Pakistans seeming lack of interest in controlling the flow of terrorists into Afghanistan, the growth of the opium industry feeding the terror groups there, and the total cost to American taxpayers, which has now reached three-quarters of a trillion dollars.

Interestingly, Nicholson also argued that both Iran and Russia were meddling in Afghanistan, deliberately undermining U.S. and NATO efforts there. According to Nicholson, Shia Iran is supporting Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan and recruiting Shia to fight for Bashar Assad (and ultimately against U.S.-backed forces) in Syria. Russia is allegedly legitimizing the Taliban by suggesting they are fighting ISIS in Afghanistan, while the Afghan government is not.

During these kinds of hearings, when faced with big brass with a chest full of medals and ribbons, lawmakers of most stripes appear to have one default setting: agree to a little more time. Victory is surely right around the corner, they reason, if only we hang in there and give the Afghans the tools to fight for their country.

And even if Trump does get cold feet over troop increases, Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham, just itching for a blood-on-the-Senate-floor fight with Trump, are practically begging the generals to ask for more troops.

At the hearing, McCain glowered when talking about President Obamas initial plans for withdrawal (abandoned by the end of his term) and rules of engagement he said tied soldiers and Marines hands when it came to fighting the enemy. Now the need to stay the course is even greater, McCain said, because of the incredible rules of engagement * because of the unwarranted reduction of forces led us on the predictable path today that was predicted [REDACTED]SM [REDACTED] those of us who actually know about warfare.

Critics were disheartened after last weeks hearing. More troops? asked retired Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, now a fellow at Defense Priorities. How would the introduction of a few thousand troops reverse the stalemate that you claim we are under and have been for 16 years? What will these new troops do? How will they reverse the situation on the ground that is currently impossible to do?

Thus far the government of Afghanistan has shown an utter inability to govern, he added. Putting more U.S. troops in to accomplish anything will be like putting a fist in a bucket of water: wherever my fist goes, the water [insurgency] is displaced; as soon as I withdraw my hand, the water comes back.

Every single measurement suggests that the current course is not working, but thanks to the power vacuums and weak leaders pockmarking the landscape, Nicholson is right about one thing: the very worst extremists could overrun Afghanistan if U.S. and NATO abandon it now.

The real issue for president Trump is whether he has the strategic patience to continue U.S. military involvement until you can come up with a negotiated solution, said Lawrence Korb, who was an assistant defense secretary under the Reagan administration. If he doesn't, he is going to have to decide whether he is going to try to win militarily or engage in nation building [] of which are plausible alternatives.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) has in recent weeks rolled out some grim metrics about the lack of progress there. In the meantime, some Democratic senators, including Elizabeth Warren, attempted to draw attention to the price of staying but stopped far short of suggesting they'd stop a mini-surge of fresh troops.

We are now paying \$13 million every day in Afghanistan; more than 2,000 [U.S. soldiers] have made the ultimate sacrifice there; more than 8,400 American servicemembers are there today, Warren reminded Nicholson. Our military could not and should not be there forever.

Beyond that, SIGAR reported in January that Afghan commanders continue to pocket the salaries of ghost soldiers, troops who exist on the books but not in reality and could number in the tens of thousands. Not surprisingly, only 63 percent of the country's districts are under government control today, with 15 percent ceded to the Taliban last year. Afghan soldiers actually on the battlefield suffered 15,000 casualties in 2016, including more than 5,600 deaths.

Meanwhile as much as half of U.S.-purchased fuel for the military is being siphoned off somewhere. Corruption is still rampant in the government, too, with myriad examples of waste, fraud, and abuse associated with the \$117 billion the U.S. has invested for reconstruction there. Even though the U.S. and NATO have promised more than \$15 billion more, who has the confidence it will go where it's needed?

Opium production is up, even though the U.S. has committed \$8 billion to counternarcotics, according to SIGAR. As much as 60 percent of the Taliban's funding is coming from poppy production and cultivation.

And the Afghan people? Some 3,498 civilians were killed in 2016, the highest number recorded since 2009. This included a ten-fold increase in ISIS related deaths and injuries, according to the United Nations.

Korb says asking for more troops is what generals do, even if they have to exaggerate the threat to the homeland. But Congress is falling down on its job to engage more rigorously. Legislators should question how many troops are needed and what exactly the end-game strategy is [] the usual platitudes about destroying the terrorists, helping the Afghans build their government, working with Pakistan, enabling a peace and reconciliation process, and blaming the Iranians and Russians for what doesn't work.

SIGAR official John F. Sopko appeared to say it best, addressing the words of Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford last September. Withdraw and the democratic government may well fall, said Sopko. Stay, and continue to do what we have been doing, and we may be faced with what General Dunford has described as a stalemate.

Obama was willing to risk such a draw in Afghanistan for eight years. But will Trump? Or is something worse than a stalemate on the horizon?

Kaynak/Source: