
CAN MORE U.S. TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN HELP END THE WAR?

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As part of the Trump administration's review of America's 16-year war in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that the president has given him the authority to decide appropriate troop levels. The U.S. commander in that country has recommended boosting the number by thousands more. William Brangham speaks with retired Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, former U.S. ambassador to NATO.

JUDY WOODRUFF: The Trump administration, as you heard, is taking steps to increasing Americas military presence in Afghanistan, after years of reducing U.S. forces there.

William Brangham has the story.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Since taking office, the Trump administration has been conducting a review of Americas 16-year war in Afghanistan. The current U.S. commander there, General John Nicholson, has recommended sending 3,000 to 5,000 more troops to augment the 10,000 Americans and 3,000 allied forces that are already in the country.

Today, Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that the president had now given him the authority to decide appropriate troop levels.

For more on all of this, we turn to retired Lieutenant General Douglas Lute. He served on the National Security Council staffs in both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, where he focused on Afghanistan, Iraq, and South Asia. For the past four years, he served as U.S. ambassador to NATO, and hes now a senior fellow at Harvard University.

Welcome to the NewsHour.

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE (RET.), Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO: Good to be here.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: So, lets talk first off about this decision by the president to hand General □ or Secretary of Defense James Mattis the decision-making for troop levels. How unusual is that?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, it is unusual, but I think we should first appreciate that we should have confidence in the entire Pentagon chain of command, starting with Secretary Mattis, but all the way down through Central Command, and then ultimately to General Nicholson, Mick Nicholson, who you mentioned, who is our commander, four-star commander in Afghanistan.

So, this is a very experienced team, responsible individuals. Theyre going to take this, this new authority seriously. I also think there is a logic. There is a rationale to providing the Pentagon some

flexibility. It gives them more agility to fit the number of troops to the task in Afghanistan, and that all makes sense.

It does, however, raise one concern, and that's the concern that strategy is made up of a lot more than just the Pentagon piece. And so I would be concerned, or I would be interested in hearing how the administration intends to make sure that the other pieces, the political side of the equation, the diplomatic equation, the economic assistance equation, the intelligence community's role, how all these various pieces are fit together in a coherent hole.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Well, you raise a very good question, because, traditionally, we think of a strategy being set from the top, from the president, with advice from all of the relevant agencies below.

What do you think this does to the decision-making process for a country like Afghanistan?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, I think it's too soon to tell.

The traditional role is that the National Security Council would have this oversight role, this coordinating role, to make sure that the strategy stays aligned over time and that all the pieces relate to one another in a coherent way.

It's not clear whether this move to give additional authorities, additional autonomy to the Pentagon is just the opening step, or whether there will still be a role for the NSC, the National Security Council, led by H.R. McMaster, to oversee the whole process.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: So, we have said Mattis and Nicholson both believe that more U.S. troops to Afghanistan is a good idea. Do you share that belief?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, I think a few more — a few thousand or even 10,000 more U.S. troops...

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Ten thousand more?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: I'm saying that I think that, hypothetically, an increase on that scale, let's say, for example, a doubling of U.S. troops — there are some 8,500 there now — can help sustain the current security stalemate.

But I don't believe that troops alone will actually be decisive in the end. Troops alone can't win this war. Troops alone will not remove the stalemate. The stalemate fundamentally rests on the political side of the equation.

So, alongside any military surge, any — the addition of any number of U.S. troops, I will be very interested to hear the administration's ambitions in terms of how they're going to deal with the politics.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Well, explain what the challenges are there for the politics in Afghanistan.

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, I look at this as a three-part equation on the political side.

So, first of all, inside the Afghan government itself, here you have zero-sum politics among the different national players. You have a high level of corruption. You have the patronage network. You have a long period of time where you have actually had stalemate from the central

government itself.

Second, you have stalemate between Afghanistan and its neighboring states, most prominently Pakistan, but not just Pakistan. We only have to look at the map and see the geographic equation here, which includes Iran to the west, Central Asia, and Russia to the north, and beyond, to the northeast China, and further to the east, India.

So this is a very complex regional diplomatic equation. All those players I have just mentioned have some impact on what happens inside Afghanistan. And then, ultimately, to bring this war to a conclusion, a political end, which the military equation should be in support of, it involves politics between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the opponent.

And so on all three of these fronts, inside Kabul, in the region, and between the government and the insurgents, there's a real need for a political surge.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Among those neighbors, Pakistan obviously looms very large in Afghanistan, and provide a consistent safe haven for the Taliban that are waging this massive insurgency in the country.

How can the U.S. get Pakistan to help us in that fight?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, first of all, I think you have to place our requirements, our demands on Pakistan in this part of the arena, that is, their support for the Taliban, in the context of our other interests in Pakistan.

And we actually have several interests in Pakistan which I think surpass our interest in dealing with the Afghan Taliban. I would label Pakistan's internal stability itself. Here you have more than 180 million Pakistanis in a country where you have not just the Afghan Taliban, but the Pakistani Taliban, remnants of al-Qaida, and other regional terrorist groups, all of which threaten the stability of the state.

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: And a state which has the fastest growing, the fastest expanding nuclear arsenal in the world.

So, that very dangerous cocktail of terrorists, extremists, and nuclear weapons is actually probably more of a vital national interest to us than Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban. So, there's a large array of complex interests here which are at play.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Even if the administration articulates a strategy, do you think that this administration can execute that strategy?

LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE: Well, I think, right now, they're working with a handicap. And that is, while the National Security Council itself, those who set strategy and overwatch the strategy, is largely in place, the implementers of the strategy are largely not in place, because they have a large number of vacancies among those officials who are yet to be nominated and confirmed by the Senate, especially in the Defense Department and the State Department.