

Trump Ponders Renewing America's Longest War in Afghanistan

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After being mum on Afghanistan during its first three months in office, President Donald Trump's Administration has been reinvigorating its activities and leverage in the country during the past few weeks. On April 13, US forces dropped what the Pentagon called the "Mother of All Bombs" in Nangarhar province, targeting an Islamic State tunnel complex. The bombing was followed by two consecutive high level US visits to Kabul by Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, as the White House continues to mull over the Pentagon's request to deploy additional troops on the ground. The Taliban's deadly attack on unarmed Afghan soldiers on April 22 and the subsequent resignation of the top defense officials in Kabul illustrated the weakness of the security establishment and could settle the debate in Washington on sending US reinforcements. However, with Russia and Iran expanding their influence, the Trump Administration will most likely face new constraints in Afghanistan and a potentially growing Afghan opposition to additional US forces.

America's Longest War

In October 2001, the United States went into Afghanistan with two stated goals: to dismantle al-Qaeda and deny it a safe base of operations, and to remove the Taliban from power. More than 15 years after the American invasion, al-Qaeda remains "very active" in Afghanistan, the Taliban have persisted as a potent force, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) emerged in 2014 with active bases in Afghanistan.

Between 2003 and 2008, Afghanistan became known as the "forgotten war." Under former President Barack Obama's Administration, US forces in Afghanistan significantly increased

from 30,000 soldiers in 2009 to a peak of 100,000 in 2011. The objective of that spike was to deal a blow to the Taliban, train the Afghan military, and stabilize the government in Kabul—measures that were intended to pave the way for a withdrawal of US forces. By December 2014, US and allied forces formally handed over security operations to the Afghan National Security Forces and Obama announced in July 2016 that he would be leaving 8,400 American troops in non-combat mode there by the end of his term.

The Afghan military has been faltering since last year and has taken a defensive stance on multiple fronts: in the provinces of Kunduz, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Farah. The Taliban's deadly attack on April 22 was symbolic in its location, targeting Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, once considered the country's most secure city. Indeed, 10 Taliban militants dressed in military uniform drove two army trucks into seven checkpoints as hundreds of unarmed Afghan soldiers were emerging from Friday prayers. The deadliest attack on an Afghan military base ended up killing at least 140 soldiers and officers. It was a reminder of the Taliban's ability to infiltrate the Afghan military, which is creating mistrust between commanders and their officers.

Because of this massacre, and under public pressure, Afghan Defense Minister Abdullah Habibi and Army Chief of Staff Qadam Shah Shahim resigned on April 24. Furthermore, four army corps commanders were replaced and eight army personnel were arrested. On the same day, Mattis visited Kabul predicting that "2017 is going to be another tough year." US soldiers are now engaged in training and advising Afghan forces, providing close air support to Afghan troops, and forming a separate unit to hit al-Qaeda, ISIL, and other

groups. In May 2016, US forces killed Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in an airstrike, which left the Taliban in temporary disarray.

ISIL has been active in Afghanistan since 2014, mostly in the eastern part of the country. After failing to have an impact, a new group emerged near the Afghan-Pakistani border in July 2016 calling itself the Islamic State Khorasan Province. In March 2017, ISIL claimed responsibility for an attack by gunmen dressed up as health workers on the main military hospital in Kabul, killing more than 30 people. The Pentagon's decision to drop the 21,000-pound Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb was disproportional to the ISIL threat in Afghanistan and it did not alter the balance of power on the ground since most of the attacks have been led by the Taliban; indeed, the United Nations has attributed 85 percent of deaths and injuries in Afghanistan to the Taliban and the remaining 15 percent to ISIL.

Russia, Iran Join Efforts in Afghanistan

While the Pentagon describes the use of MOAB as a tactical move to target ISIL militants hiding underground, this attack, on the eve of a regional conference on Afghanistan hosted by Russia, was largely seen as a display of force. For years Moscow has been critical of how the United States addresses the Afghan conflict, but there have been recent concerted efforts by Russia and Iran to work together against US influence in the country.

The Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, told Congress in February that Russia has "begun to publicly legitimize the Taliban" and said that Russian and Iranian activities in Afghanistan are meant "to undermine the United States and NATO."

He also believes that Moscow and Tehran are coordinating these efforts. Iran, notes Nicholson, is providing support to the Taliban via western Afghanistan. This would be a clear shift in Iranian policy, which initially supported the 2001 US attempt to oust the Taliban from power. Recently, the commander of the US Central Command, General Joseph Votel, called Iran "the greatest long-term threat to US interests" in Central Asia and that it is seeking "to hinder achievement of US objectives in Afghanistan." A Taliban spokesperson denied receiving aid from Moscow, saying that "our contacts with Russia are for political and diplomatic purposes only." Afghan lawmakers have launched a probe into a possible connection between Russia and the Taliban.

Russia conceded on March 31 that it has contacts with the Taliban for two main reasons: to protect Russian citizens in Afghanistan and to persuade the Taliban to participate in the peace talks. However, the most crucial Russian interest in expanding influence in Afghanistan is to avoid any spillover of ISIL to neighboring countries that were once part of the former Soviet Union (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). Moscow, which has been questioning the Afghan government's capability to fight ISIL, has deployed forces along the Afghan border with Tajikistan, looking for another bargaining card in its relations with Washington. On the other hand, the Iranian approach has been to warn that ISIL militants could be transferred from Afghanistan to join the fight in Iraq and Syria.

Washington has also begun the process of deterring Moscow's limited influence on the Afghan military. Russia's military aid to the Afghan forces has been restricted to selling Mi-17 helicopters paid for by the United States; however, the Pentagon is now reconsidering

that program to balance Russia's growing influence. The US military is hoping to transition the Afghan military from Russian to American helicopters. The Afghan air fleet currently relies on the Russian-made Mi-17, which, US forces argue, is undersized, difficult to sustain, and expensive. Shifting to US-made airframes, notes the Pentagon, would make the Afghan air system interoperable in the American system and, down the road, less dependent on US forces.

The divide among the major players in Afghanistan has been crystallizing in recent months with Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and the Taliban on one side, and the US, India, and the Afghan government on the other. On April 14, Russia hosted a regional conference on Afghanistan to discuss ways to resolve the conflict and contain the spillover of ISIL. This was the second of its kind hosted by Moscow after last February's conference and the tripartite meeting last December between Russia, China, and Pakistan. The Afghan government, India, and Iran were invited to the conference on February 7; however, the US was sidelined.

The Trump Administration was invited to the April 14 conference but declined to attend. In a press briefing on April 13, US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner described the conference as "a unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region that we felt wasn't constructive at this time." However, he added that Washington hopes to work with Moscow and other regional players "to enhance dialogue" between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Last year, Afghanistan joined the United States and China to push for reconciliation through the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). However, in March 2016 Taliban Emir Mullah Mansour

rejected taking part in the process before announcing on April 12, the following month, the start of a new offensive against the Afghan government. The United States might be reluctant to cede that leadership role to Russia.

The United States will also have to address two other major players that are seeking to expand their influence in Afghanistan, namely China and Pakistan. Chinese troops have been operating inside Afghanistan and conducting joint patrols with Afghan forces. A Pentagon spokesperson acknowledged that presence without objection: "We know that they are present." The United States' difficult relations with Pakistan are also reflected in Afghanistan, with Washington continuing its subtle criticism and diplomatic pressure to have Islamabad contain the Taliban and other extremist groups and prevent them from operating along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

On the domestic level, there are indications that the United States might face growing opposition down the road. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who ruled the country between 2004 and 2014, is gradually becoming the dissenting voice. Once Karzai's relations with Washington became strained, he drew closer to Moscow. He described the MOAB bomb as an "inhuman act, a brutal act against an innocent country" and said that the United States should refrain from using Afghanistan as a "testing ground, working instead toward a peaceful solution." If these preconditions are met, Karzai asserted, the United States "can stay on—if the Afghan people agree to it. If they continue this heavy-handed militant approach in Afghanistan, then, of course, I want them out of the country."

Challenges for US policy in Afghanistan

The main challenge for US policy in Afghanistan is that the government is plagued by poor leadership and corruption, which hinders its ability to implement an effective security strategy and stabilize the areas liberated from the Taliban. The Afghan military is run by patronage and has yet to achieve the level of a professional military able to secure the country on its own. Further, it has not been decisive in taking action, and reported to have been involved in torture and mistreatment of detainees, as noted by the United Nations.

Both the Pentagon and Afghan officials are requesting to deploy additional US troops on the ground. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani told US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster that if serious measures are not taken, this would have impact on “generations” of people. Unlike the complex relationship with Karzai, Washington sees Ghani as a “reliable partner.”

Although the Afghan security forces have been struggling to recover the territorial gains made by the Taliban in the north and south of the country, both sides remain in a stalemate. The Pentagon hopes to tip the scales of the Afghan forces by enhancing their aviation power and their casualty evacuation capabilities, among other crucial needs. Additional US troops will help complete the required training as well as assist and advise Afghan security forces. The current Afghan military strategy that the US helped to develop is to “Fight, Hold, and Disrupt” the Taliban across the country. Under this strategy, Afghan forces will fight to retain controlled areas and seek to disrupt areas held by the enemy.

There is an ongoing interagency review inside the Trump Administration to set a clear US approach for Afghanistan. Mattis, who previously served in Afghanistan and was also the head of the US Central Command, is set to make his final recommendation to the White House soon. There are currently 9,000 US soldiers in Afghanistan in addition to nearly 5,000 international coalition forces. The internal discussion is revolving around 3,000 to 5,000 additional US troops. The Trump Administration is trying to learn from the lessons of the Obama Administration by not setting milestones and deadlines for deployment. The US strategy is focusing on protecting major cities and urban centers at a time when the Afghan military is deserting rural areas, leaving the government with control of 57 percent of the country. Meanwhile, the Taliban currently control 43 percent of the country, representing a 15 percent increase from last year.

The political challenge facing the US strategy in Afghanistan is to avoid a political crisis in the government that would impact the Afghan forces’ momentum against the Taliban. President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah have been struggling to coexist in power, and there are no guarantees their relations will not hit yet another new low.

Lessons of Afghanistan

In the past decade, most of the milestones and deadlines set by Washington were not met. The effort to rout the Taliban and dismantle al-Qaeda has cost the United States nearly \$1 trillion in the past sixteen years, along with a death toll of 2,183 US soldiers. More than 6,700 Afghan security forces were killed last year alone as well as 3,498 Afghan civilians.

If the history of US involvement is a lesson, there are no easy fixes in Afghanistan. Neither the use of MOAB bombs nor an increase in US forces can guarantee deterring the Taliban or stabilizing Afghanistan. While defeating ISIL in Afghanistan is probable, there is no end in sight for the fight against the Taliban. The choice the United States will make in the coming weeks about deploying additional US troops will only help in preventing the collapse of the status quo. US forces have a limited window to act; otherwise, the Afghan government is under pressure and cannot continue defending the stalemate.

While the Pentagon sees continuing the US commitment in Afghanistan as an integral part of protecting “the US homeland,” questions arise about the value of deploying thousands of additional troops – military personnel who are mostly concerned with training and advising the Afghan military. Afghan officials are

expecting a tougher US stance not only against the Taliban but, most importantly, against Pakistan.

However, the most crucial added value of the new US strategy is that it should address the growing influence of Iran and Russia. With Syria, Iraq, and North Korea topping Washington's priorities in recent months, Afghanistan has been striving to get US attention. If eliminating the Taliban is not a winning strategy, will forcing them to the negotiation table work? If Russia continues to support the Taliban, should the reaction be a new Cold War in Afghanistan by increasing US support to the Afghan government, or engaging both Moscow and Islamabad to pressure the Taliban? Indeed, US failures have allowed a Russian return to Afghanistan. The Trump Administration will soon have to answer the question, is Afghanistan still worth fighting for, after 16 years of war?

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