

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Administration Should Speed, Not Slow, Military Withdrawal From Afghanistan

By Doug Bandow

April 5, 2015

America has been at war in Afghanistan for more than 13 years, as long as the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II and Korean War combined. U.S. troop levels peaked at 140,000 in 2010. More than 2,200 Americans died in a conflict reflecting little more than purposeless inertia.

The U.S. is leaving, but not entirely and maybe not soon. Warned NATO commander Gen. Philip Breedlove in January, "We are going to continue to have casualties." The formal combat mission might be over, but combat is not.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said the administration hopes to strengthen its relationship with Kabul. The president, said Carter, "Is considering a number of options to reinforce our support for [Afghan] President [Ashraf] Ghani's security strategy."

Roughly half of the 10,600 American troops were supposed to leave by the end of the year, with the rest scheduled to depart in 2016. But the administration has cancelled this year's withdrawal. Carter said he wanted to "make sure this progress sticks." Alas, by that standard American forces might never leave.

Washington intervened in Afghanistan with two overriding objectives: Destroy al-Qaeda and oust its Taliban hosts. The U.S. quickly fulfilled both goals. But then the Bush administration lost interest, using terrorism as an excuse to oust Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

America's best opportunity to create a stable and peaceful Afghanistan was in 2002 and 2003, after the Taliban had been largely dispersed. But the Bush administration fixated on Iraq even though Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11. The administration quickly withdrew military resources from Afghanistan, allowing Osama bin-Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders to escape and the Taliban to regroup.

Instead of ending Washington's half-hearted misadventure at nation-building, the Obama administration twice doubled down in a desperate attempt to recoup lost ground. Some progress was made, but when I visited I found only limited confidence in private.

Washington and its allies built a large government bureaucracy and security force in Kabul, but on a potential foundation of sand. The Afghan government is noted for venality, incompetence and corruption. The military's performance has improved but remains uneven at best; police behavior is much worse.

Despite high international expectations the Kabul government was unable to hold a fair and free election last year. The Obama administration negotiated an extra-constitutional power-sharing agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and "Chief Executive" Abdullah Abdullah.

Unsurprisingly, it proved difficult to implement and public dissatisfaction has grown. The government still could outshine its predecessor, admittedly a low standard, but even that will require extraordinary statesmanship -- a virtue never in high supply in Kabul.

Nor does the Ghani government rule the country. Wrote John Sifton of Human Rights Watch: "In many parts of Afghanistan, governors or members of parliament run their own militias under the banner of [Afghan Local Police], using the pretext of fighting insurgents to terrorize the local population." The role of warlords, especially old Mujahideen leaders, bedevils Afghanistan. Indeed, First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum is loathed by Pashtuns for allegedly massacring 2,000 Taliban fighters in 2001.

Nevertheless, the administration celebrated Ghani's election since he signed the (U.S.) Bilateral Security Agreement and (NATO) Status of Forces Agreement which Hamid Karzai had rejected. Ghani's approval allowed Washington to retain around 10,000 Americans (joined by roughly 3,000 Europeans) in the Afghan muddle. President Obama proclaimed a "historic day" when the Kabul authorities signed the accords, which would "strengthen sovereignty, stability, unity and prosperity, and contribute to our shared goal of defeating al-Qaeda and its extremist affiliates."

Alas, virtually none of these are true. The good economic times were fleeting: Departing Westerners are taking their hard currencies with them. Opium helps keep the economy afloat. Afghanistan's restored sovereignty will survive only so long as the Ghani government keeps the Taliban at bay. Domestic political comity is largely a mirage. Alas, growing pressure from a reenergized insurgency is as likely to divide as unify.

Washington has much at stake in claiming success in Afghanistan. In fact, the U.S. defeated al-Qaeda. The few operatives who remain in Afghanistan are of little account. Affiliate organizations active in Pakistan, Syria and Yemen are far more significant. Little likely would change if the Taliban again dominated the country: Pashtuns interested only in governing themselves learned that misbehaving foreign guests bring down the wrath of a superpower. It's not an experience they likely would repeat.

The U.S. still has an interest in preserving an intelligence presence in Afghanistan. Embassy security will remain a challenge. Small training missions could prove useful. However, these functions do not require thousands of military personnel authorized to engage in combat if "mutually agreed."

Some policymakers hope to leave a liberal, democratic outpost in Central Asia. Afghanistan today is a much more advanced, enlightened, and engaged nation than under the Taliban. But the gains are fragile and failures are significant. The central government has proved unable to serve and protect its people or hold their loyalty. The fraud and waste in international aid programs are epic. Kabul acts as a recruiter for the Taliban when it tortures detainees and fails to deliver justice. So long as the Afghan government remains corrupt and incompetent, the Afghan people remain divided and tribal, the Taliban remains determined and violent, and Pakistan remains hostile and unhelpful, the vision of a stable, peaceful and Westernized Afghanistan will remain a chimera.

Maintaining a U.S. military presence is unlikely to change that. Tens of thousands of troops, thousands of lives, hundreds of billions of dollars, and thousands of aid projects from America failed to fix the country. A much smaller U.S. troop presence won't remedy the system's deep deficiencies. The diminished garrison will be too small to defend the government but too large to remain uninvolved, especially if engaged in broadly defined "antiterrorism" activities.

Nation-building in Central Asia never was going to be easy. Afghanistan is not a slightly less developed version of America or Europe. The deep differences were highlighted by deadly riots after Koran burnings by U.S. troops and in America. The Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris triggered Afghan protests in favor of the killers; thousands more people protested cartoons published in the next issue.

Afghanistan still could eventually end up with a reasonably liberal society, but only on its own terms. Many Afghans desire liberty and equality. However, the U.S. cannot turn Afghanistan into a modern nation state, at least at reasonable cost in reasonable time. And no one should expect a strong central government along Western principles.

Thankfully, what emerges won't be matter much to America so long as Afghanistan does not host terrorists bent on striking the U.S. The conflict has regional impacts, but not of significant consequence to America. Conflict in Afghanistan destabilizes Pakistan. However, that was the case before Washington intervened. Indeed, America's involvement has resulted in frequent confrontations between Washington and Islamabad.

India, Iran, China and Russia might intervene absent a robust American presence. The surrounding Central Asian states also are interested in Afghanistan; Saudi Arabia and Turkey pay attention at a greater distance. The Great Game inevitably will be played as Washington's force levels drop. But better they do so without America than the U.S. try to block them through a permanent occupation.

American security is not dependent on Central Asian stability. Washington should engage surrounding powers as it leaves to encourage them to cooperate over broadly shared objectives: that no hostile power, whether internal or external, dominates Afghanistan and uses the territory against other states. The best solution would be Afghan nonalignment and foreign noninterference.

There is much more Washington should do as it accelerates its troop withdrawal. The U.S. should offer sanctuary to Afghans who have helped the allies, such as interpreters and liberal-minded Afghans who would be at risk in the new order. The administration also should press discussions with the Taliban warning of America's red lines (primarily al-Qaeda's return) should the movement regain power.

America's most important task may be to use its remaining time to encourage resumption of talks between the Afghan government and Taliban. There should be no illusions about the prospect of success. Attempts to reach peaceful agreement go back more than 40 years, to the 1973 coup which destabilized the country, triggering endless fighting and multiple foreign interventions.

Of course, Washington hopes to forestall a Taliban victory. And one is not preordained. Even the Soviets' much-hated client, Mohammed Najibullah, survived more than three years against the Mujahedeen after Moscow's withdrawal.

Nevertheless, the warning signs are clear: last year was the costliest for the Afghan National Security Forces since the conflict began in 2001. (Civilian casualties also jumped by a fifth, to the highest level since 2009.) The Diplomat's Franz-Stefan Gady reported: "The ANSF still cannot move freely in the country. There are areas that are a no-go for the ANSF, others where they will only go with U.S. air support, and others where they will go on their own," mostly major urban areas.

The costly Afghan National Army faces a high and rising attrition rate and badly missed its end strength goal last year. Last August's level of 169,000 was "the lowest assigned ANA force strength since August 2011," warned the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The former deputy U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, called these attrition rates unsustainable. Are enough young Afghan men prepared to die for the Ghani government without direct U.S. support? The Independent Institute's Ivan Eland worried that the ongoing tendency of the Afghan security forces to give way "will undoubtedly accelerate -- that is, if the Afghan security forces don't collapse altogether, as did similarly U.S. trained Iraqi forces in that country."

Kabul's main hope is Taliban weakness. The movement's brutality and misrule have cost support. The United Nations noted "divisions driven primarily by differences over political strategy" as well as factions behaving "with increasing autonomy." In some regions local Taliban act more like criminal gangs. In others, such as northern Badakhshan province, the movement's leaders

proved to be surprisingly liberal. The Taliban also faces violent competition from groups claiming allegiance to the Islamic State.

Moreover, the end of active allied combat involvement undercuts the group's mission to oust foreign troops and restore self-rule. Militarily the Taliban also appears to have weakened. As foreign forces have withdrawn the movement has staged spectacular suicide attacks in Kabul, instigated insider shootings, including one which killed an American general last August, and gained ground in Helmand, Kunar and Kunduz provinces, but has captured no city of note. Much of the country remains safer than a few years ago.

Afghanistan is more likely to end up with multiple "governments" than under whoever happens to dominate Kabul. Which gives everyone an incentive to reach a modus vivendi to end the fighting. Polls indicate that a large majority of Afghans favor a negotiated agreement with inclusion of the Taliban in the political system. Reaching an agreement should be easier once the issues are primarily about Afghanistan, not the objectives of America and others.

In fact, the Ghani government appears more diplomatically adept than its predecessor. President Ghani has worked to improve relations with Pakistan. After long backing the Taliban, Islamabad may be ready to encourage negotiations. The murderous December attack on the school for children of military parents in Peshawar may help explain Islamabad's apparent change of heart. Most of Pakistan's objectives could be achieved without a new Taliban government in Kabul. Even China, with an eye to Afghanistan's mineral wealth, is encouraging a diplomatic settlement.

The administration should live up to its promise to leave Afghanistan. Before the last presidential election Vice President Joe Biden stated: "We are leaving. We are leaving in 2014. Period." Now, said Secretary Carter, the president is considering "possible changes to the timeline for our drawdown of U.S. troops." But thirteen years of combat is more than enough.

Equally important, Washington should abandon its attempts at global social engineering. As the U.S. discovered in Iraq, the Balkans, Yemen, Somalia and Libya, as well as Afghanistan, droning, bombing, invading, and occupying other nations rarely delivers peace or stability. Indeed, Afghanistan forever has been characterized by local control punctuated by persistent violence. Washington's overriding objective should be to prevent creation of a new terrorist sanctuary. Beyond that America's interests fall off sharply in importance. None are worth or likely achievable via military means.

Afghanistan is a tragedy. Unfortunately, that isn't about to change. It is time for America to leave. Some day Afghanistan must stand on its own. That day should be today. Only Afghans can decide Afghanistan's destiny.

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