

Why the Senate rebuked the president on Afghanistan

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If President Donald Trump has been consistent on any policy front, it's been in his "America first" approach to foreign policy. With trade, this has meant renegotiating or tearing up multilateral agreements like NAFTA and using tariffs and other hardball tactics to get "a better deal" for American workers. With national security, it has meant decrying the costs and questioning the need for longstanding, post-World War II alliances like NATO.

Nowhere has this America first ideology been more on display than in Trump's views on the war in Afghanistan. As a candidate for president, he called the war "a total disaster" and claimed the Afghan people were "robbing us blind." In a 2013 tweet, he said, "We should leave Afghanistan immediately. No more wasted lives. If we have to go back in, we go in hard & quick. Rebuild the US first."

Indeed, Trump's promises to "rebuild" the U.S. and pull our young men and women out of what is now the longest war in American history —longer, as the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow recently wrote, "than the Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War I and World War II combined" —were central to the "Make America Great Again" campaign that unexpectedly put Trump at the top at the GOP ticket in 2016 and eventually in the White House.

But once he became commander in chief, Trump charted a different course, increasing the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan from about 8,500 to roughly 14,000 today. Along with the increase in troop numbers —the great majority of whom are there to train Afghan military and security personnel —came an intensified bombardment campaign of Taliban and Islamic State strongholds.

Last August, we praised that increase in U.S. military commitment and shift in strategy, calling it "focused" and "productive." And, like most military analysts, we believe it forced the Taliban to the negotiating table to achieve what former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis called the ultimate goal in this long, bloody conflict: "a political reconciliation, not a military victory."

In December, however, Mattis resigned his post as Pentagon chief after Trump promised to pull all U.S. forces out of Syria. In his resignation letter, Mattis made clear that he was at odds with the president on the importance of strategic alliances and partnerships. "While the U.S. remains the indispensable nation in the free world," he wrote, "we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances."

Such an alliance has been crucial from day one in Afghanistan, where a NATO coalition of over 16,000 troops from 39 countries is helping to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces. U.S. forces make up the great majority of these forces, but the NATO presence is indispensable to the legitimacy and sustainability of our mission there.

Yet by unilaterally engaging in "peace talks" with the Taliban that exclude both the democratically elected Afghan government and NATO allies, the Trump administration has undermined the U.S. mission there and quite possibly the chances for the "political reconciliation" necessary for a lasting peace.

Last week the administration said it had reached a "preliminary framework" for a peace deal that would include full withdrawal of U.S. troops in exchange for Taliban commitments to do what is necessary to "prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals."

To proceed, Afghan officials would have to be included in future talks, a condition the Taliban has refused in the past. But even with such conditions, the announcement has caused widespread concern among Afghan leaders and the general public who fear a Taliban resurgence once U.S. troops withdraw. Understandably, NATO allies (including Germany, with some 1,300 troops in Afghanistan and Italy with nearly 900) are reportedly discussing pulling out.

None of this bodes well for the people of Afghanistan, where the Taliban remains in control of large swaths of the countryside. Any U.S. withdrawal to less than 8,500 troops would send the wrong message to our NATO and Afghan allies, as well as to the Taliban. While any death of our men and women in uniform is a tragedy, and we would like nothing more than to see a lasting peace in Afghanistan, U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan have averaged about 17 a year since 2015 —down from nearly 500 in 2010.

That's not to diminish the great cost of this war, which has claimed the lives of 2,419 U.S. military personnel since October 2001, most recently a brave U.S. Army Ranger from Texas, Sgt. Cameron A. Meddock. At the same time, tens of thousands of Afghans have given their lives defending their young democracy from Taliban, Islamic State terrorists, and other extremists who would roll back dramatic advances in childhood and adult education, women's rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion —not to mention economic progress resulting from new trading partners and foreign investment.

As Eliot A. Cohen, a counselor to the State Department under President George W. Bush and professor at Johns Hopkins University, told us recently, "betraying" our Afghan allies with a precipitous pull out would "have repercussions not just in the region, but beyond." This, says Cohen, would contribute to "the general sense that the United States is simply not a reliable partner."

Is that sense of America's wavering reliability stemming from Trump's America first ideology? "You bet," says Cohen. "And what staggers me is that so many people seem to have forgotten that the last iteration of America first ended at Pearl Harbor. Which is worth thinking about."

We know the U.S. Senate is thinking about it. Last Thursday, 68 senators —in a rare supermajority and a clear rebuke to the president —voted in favor of a resolution warning that "a precipitous withdrawal" of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and Syria could "allow terrorists to regroup, destabilize critical regions and create vacuums that could be filled by Iran or Russia."

That wouldn't put America first, or make our post-9/11 world any safer.