

The Burning Platform

Afghanistan, the Longest War in American History

Doug Bandow

January 2, 2018

When President Donald Trump announced that he was withdrawing troops from Syria, shock and hysteria filled Washington. The screaming grew louder when it was reported that the president also intended to remove half of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, with the rest likely to come home at the end of 2019.

Afghanistan is the longest war in American history, outlasting the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Korean War *combined*. U.S. soldiers will soon be deploying to a war that started before they were born. Today the Taliban is advancing while the Kabul government is in disarray. Few believe that the latter, irrespective of who is president, can survive absent Washington's support.

Both President Barack Obama's and President Trump's Afghan strategy appeared designed to push the inevitable collapse onto a future administration. Never mind that Americans still die in Afghanistan. No official wants to be the one to declare that thousands of lives and billions of dollars to have been wasted.

Yet going into his presidency Trump stated: "Let's get out of Afghanistan." However, he surrounded himself with conventional thinkers as national security advisers, unwilling to admit the obvious. Then he allowed himself to be talked into temporarily increasing U.S. force levels.

However, the infusion of some 4,000 personnel could only slow the Afghan government's decline. The situation was bad in 2011, when I visited and allied force levels had peaked at 140,000 (110,000 of them American). The insurgency was barely contained and virtually everyone I met outside of official briefings, including U.S. troops, allied personnel, civilian contractors, and Afghan officials, was pessimistic.

Today the totals are down to 30,000 and 14,000, respectively. In theory the allies have trained a large Afghan security force, both military and police, but estimates of the number of "ghost" personnel, existing only for payroll purposes, range up to a third. Casualties, attrition rates, and desertions have soared. Kabul is constantly relying on its limited number of better trained special forces. Moreover, observed Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "U.S. Special Operations troops increasingly [are] being deployed into harm's way to assist their Afghan counterparts."

Is there any prospect of Kabul taking over its own security? "Progress toward peace remains elusive," admitted Glenn A. Fine, the Pentagon's acting inspector general. Gen. Kenneth F.

McKenzie, Jr., Director of the Joint Staff and nominated to head U.S. Central Command, stated: “If we left precipitously right now, I do not believe they [the Afghans] would be able to successfully defend their country. I don’t know how long it’s going to take.” He warned against putting “a timeline on it.”

This is after more than 17 years of war, thousands of dead and tens of thousands of injured allied personnel, a trillion-plus dollars in expenditures, and multitudes of assurances.

Over the last four years the number of Taliban fighters is believed to have trebled or even quadrupled, perhaps nearing 80,000. The insurgents contest control of around 70 percent of the country and hold the most territory since their ouster in 2001. Early last year the BBC reported that Taliban fighters had “pushed beyond their traditional southern stronghold into eastern western and northern parts of the country.”

The insurgents are better equipped and more effective than ever. Reported Al Jazeera: “The scale and intensity of these attacks have not been seen since 2001. The Taliban never had the capability to launch such massive offenses and never succeeded in taking over any major cities.” In 2018 the insurgents briefly seized control of cities such as Farah and Ghazni.

Even Kabul is vulnerable. Terrorist assaults have become common; the Monday before Christmas an attack on the Public Health Ministry killed at least 43 people. American diplomatic personnel have been long barred from walking across the street between the embassy and other civilian offices. Now the U.S. takes personnel to the airport via helicopter, instead of the crowded, chaotic streets used by the military during my visit eight years ago.

Forget propagandistic pronouncements of government spokesmen. Cordesman warned that “official U.S. and Afghan data seem to sharply understate the level of growing threat presence, influence, and control,” and official claims “seem more spin than objective.” In May, the Defense Department inspector general reported “few signs of progress.”

There is little disagreement that the Afghan government is corrupt, fractured, and incompetent. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) continues to catalog the extraordinary failures of aid, with additional cases of fraud and waste joining so many others. Little of lasting benefit has been achieved. Indeed, the foreign money actually has “exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents.”

As for the more than \$8 billion spent to end Afghanistan’s narcotics trade, in October SIGAR’s latest quarterly report explained that the “opium crisis is worse than ever. The country remains the world’s leading producer of opium, with production hitting an all-time high last year.” Washington’s stabilization program, key to creating a stable, self-sufficient Afghan government, fared no better, having “mostly failed.” Concluded SIGAR: “The U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan.” Kabul remains dependent on allied forces: “successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians.”

In short, the future looks dismal. Critics of the president complain about allowing a Taliban victory, but the only way to prevent one is for a U.S. military presence that is both larger and permanent. Earlier this year, the Director of National Intelligence warned that “The overall situation in Afghanistan probably will deteriorate modestly this year.” Cordesman predicted continuing deterioration “even if international support is sustained.”

Negotiations between the U.S. and Taliban have started. Critics complain that withdrawal will reduce Washington’s leverage. But sticking around to prove to the Taliban that Americans will stick around means essentially a permanent presence. And if a peace pact is signed premised on American backing for the Kabul government, Washington can never withdraw, a la Vietnam.

Why fight the forever war in Central Asia? Although Americans would prefer that Afghanistan end up a liberal democracy protecting Western values, it always has been ruled at the village and valley level. Washington’s commitment of lives and wealth to a failing cause cannot be infinite.

The Kabul government confidently asserts that nothing will change if the Americans leave—after all, Afghan security forces are doing most of the fighting (and dying) anyway. However, few officials or analysts are so sanguine privately. Divisions may grow in Kabul. More likely than a Taliban victory is a complicated division among competing factions and warlords. That would be unfortunate for Afghans, but frankly irrelevant to Americans.

Clifford May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, called Afghanistan “one battle in a long, world war to defend the West against the resurgent and dynamic forces of jihadism,” However, before 2001 the Taliban focused on mis-ruling their nation, not attacking anyone else. Most of the movement’s foot soldiers are motivated mostly by antagonism toward outsiders, not a commitment to international jihad. Strategically, Afghanistan just doesn’t matter to Americans.

The country is more important to China, Russia, India, and Pakistan, which should be left to reach a *modus vivendi* to protect their interests. They, not America, should fill any regional power vacuum. The U.S. might have interests everywhere, but few are worth war. Of course, Washington also prefers a stable Pakistan; alas, the ongoing war is deeply destabilizing.

The president’s critics implausibly contend that if we don’t fight terrorists there we will have to fight them here. Outgoing Defense Secretary Jim Mattis claimed that America’s presence was “to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square.” Bombastic Senator Lindsey Graham warned that withdrawal “would be paving the way for a second 9/11.” The president said his experts told him “over and over again” that “if we don’t go there, they’re going to be fighting over here.” Perhaps in the streets of Milwaukee, Dallas, Portland, and Raleigh, not to mention Washington, D.C.

This is nonsense, of course. The Taliban is an insurgency, not a terrorist group. Remnants of al-Qaeda remain, though there is substantial disagreement on the size of al-Qaeda’s following and its relationship with Taliban. But geography matters little: Osama bin Laden spent years operating from Pakistan, while Kalid Sheikh Muhammed, 9/11’s chief planner, avoided

Afghanistan while moving among Bosnia, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Qatar. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the most dangerous “franchise.” Unless Washington intends to occupy every failed and decrepit state, including Pakistan, remaining permanently at war in Afghanistan makes no sense.

No one wants to admit to failure. However, issue is not the lives and wealth invested, and wasted, so far, but whether spending more in the future can be justified. It cannot.

Donald Trump understands this issue. Even before becoming a candidate he said: “Let’s get out of Afghanistan.” As president he found himself under pressure from his gang of establishment defense thinkers. Now he might be ready to do what is right. After 17 years, America should bring its brave men and women home from Afghanistan.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.