



Afghanistan Is President Trump's War Now: Fighting Without Purpose Or End

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The Afghanistan war now belongs to President Donald Trump. His “path forward” with more troops and fighting will take America more deeply into a conflict it should have exited years ago.

The news in Afghanistan continues worsen. Civilian casualties rose to record levels in the first half of the year. The Taliban is fighting to control the most territory since America first intervened. As yet the Taliban cannot conquer and hold cities, but even Kabul is insecure.

Washington intervened in 2001 to destroy al-Qaeda, which organized the 9/11 attacks, and oust the Taliban government, which hosted the terrorist organization. These objectives were achieved within months, but the Bush administration shifted from counter-terrorism to nation-building, attempting to create a government in America's image.

President Barack Obama initiated a double escalation, and U.S./allied troops levels peaked at 100,000/140,000, backed by almost 120,000 civilian contractors.

So far the U.S. has sacrificed some 6000 lives (roughly 2400 military and 3500 contractor) and spent almost a trillion dollars—plus 1100 more lives and billions more dollars lost by allied nations. Yet the likelihood of the Afghan government sustaining itself without continuing allied support is nil.

The U.S. still has around 8400 troops, along with 5000 more allied personnel and 26,000 contractors, in Afghanistan. Americans continue to die. Earlier this year Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, called the situation a “stalemate.”

What to do? Before his election President Donald Trump called the war “a complete and total disaster” that had “wasted billion and billions of dollars and more importantly thousands of thousands of lives.”

Administration officials struggled over strategy. Now, the president declared, the U.S. will do more of the same, only without specifics.

Some advocates argued that a troop increase would show resolve and help pressure the Taliban into talks. But if a fighting force of 140,000 couldn't do even this, let alone achieve “victory,” how would 20,000 do so?

Even the military appears to have but limited expectations. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis hoped that Kabul could contain the fighting with limited America aid despite “frequent skirmishing.” The president called for something that sounds decidedly less than victory: “preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan.”

Some observers advocate returning U.S. forces to a combat role. For instance, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain forthrightly advocated permanent war, which would “require more troops, thousands more. It’s going to require more effort, it’s going to require more money.” And more lives.

However, even if real success beckoned, why should Washington go to such effort?

America’s real enemy in 2001 was not the Taliban but al-Qaeda, which since has been scattered, only to find sanctuary elsewhere. Osama bin Laden took refuge in neighboring Pakistan, a nominal U.S. ally. The Taliban is a national Islamic insurgency, not a transnational terrorist organization, and would not likely invite back a group which previously misused its hospitality, triggering a foreign invasion.

Central Asia intrinsically has little importance for Washington. The U.S. worried about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 because of its impact on the larger Cold War. That’s over.

The U.S. has little interest in who governs Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is no longer tied to Afghanistan and the Taliban does not threaten America. A desire for Afghanistan to develop in a humane, liberal direction cannot justify years of military intervention.

President Trump pointed to the “20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations ... active in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” which are there despite 16 years of war in Afghanistan. He cited chaos and violence in Pakistan, which is exacerbated by the conflict in its neighbor.

The president presented escalation as a means to redeem the lives of those who have already died. Economists call this the fallacy of sunk costs. Those who have died cannot be resurrected. The best way to honor the dead is to send no more to die needlessly.

Finally, President Trump warned that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum” that could be filled anew by terrorists. But the war has fostered terrorism.

Anyway, there currently is plenty of territory in Afghanistan already and beyond, starting with Pakistan, to provide sanctuary for terrorists. Better for America to employ a targeted counter-terrorism operation when needed than impose an endless occupation when it is not. Washington also should emphasize making fewer foreign enemies and improving domestic security.

Four years ago, Donald Trump tweeted: “We should leave Afghanistan immediately. No more wasted lives.”

He was right then. That should be his administration’s policy today. It is time to end Washington’s longest war.

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