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The case for a US withdrawal from Afghanistan

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America remains at war in Afghanistan. After almost 15 years it's time to bring the last troops home.

In October 2001 George W. Bush sent US forces to destroy Osama bin-Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization and oust the Taliban government which hosted him. Washington then shifted to nation building. Despite the efforts of some 150,000 foreign troops, the Taliban continues to fight.

Only about 12,000 coalition personnel remain. The 9800-man American contingent was to have been cut in half this year and reduced to 1000 early next year. But last October, the administration decided to slow the planned withdrawal. The total now will drop to 5500 in 2017.

Although US participation in combat has formally ended, American troops remain on call. Last fall, Special Forces helped the Afghan military recapture the city of Kunduz.

Proposals are abound for reviving the war. For instance, Gen. John F. Campbell, then-US commander in Afghanistan, urged the administration to allow American troops to attack the Taliban even if it did not threaten allied forces and use air support on behalf of Afghan forces until Kabul established its own air force.

His successor, Gen. John Nicholson, is preparing a report which might make similar recommendations. Former commander David Petraeus and the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon urged taking "the gloves off" allied forces by "waging the Afghanistan air-power campaign with the vigor we are employing in Iraq and Syria."

Moreover, a group of retired generals and diplomats, including Petraeus, wrote an open letter urging the president to maintain force levels. Such a freeze "would be seen as a positive reaffirmation of America's commitment to that nation, its people and its security."

In 2012 Afghanistan became America's longest military conflict, passing the Vietnam War. What is Washington doing there?

After nearly 15 years of support, there's an air of desperation about Kabul. The "national unity" government remains badly divided. James R. Clapper, director of National Intelligence, cited the "serious risk of a political breakdown" in Afghanistan.

The authorities remain generally incompetent, ineffective, and "fantastically corrupt," in the words of British Prime Minister David Cameron. Transparency International ranks the country as 166 out of 168 in corruption. There is little tangible to show for the more than \$100 billion in aid provided over the last decade.

The economy is crashing as the flow of foreign money ebbs. According to NPR's Philip Reeves, "Several hundred thousand Afghans, many of whom are young and middle-class, have left for Europe in search of jobs, education and security." Only poppy production remains a growth industry.

Since the bulk of foreign troops came home in 2014 fighting has surged. Government forces are on the defensive and the Taliban is believed to hold more territory than at any other time since America's intervention. Areas once safe for travel now are under Taliban control. Even in Kabul Westerners rarely leave their secure compounds as attacks have become common. Blast walls and barricades are multiplying.

Civilian casualties are way up, with more than 11,000 harmed last year, and the number of Afghans displaced within their own land has doubled since 2013, to 1.2 million. All this while US troops remained in the country.

Unfortunately, hope for a political settlement has gone a glimmering. Washington's decision to take out Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour suggested it saw little hope for negotiations. The Taliban chose a successor who rejected any revival of talks.

The chief threat probably is not a complete Taliban triumph-even Mohammad Najibullah's regime survived three years after Moscow's 1989 military withdrawal. More likely is a fractured land with a multi-sided conflict continuing for years. That would be a tragedy, but wouldn't be much different than today.

Petraeus and O'Hanlon claimed that a continued military presence is necessary because Afghanistan is "effectively the eastern bulwark in our broader Middle East fight against extremist forces." Yet America's Afghan presence has not deterred Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State from operating in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban has found sanctuary in Pakistan, and the Islamic State could do so as well.

Moreover, al-Qaeda has metastasized in Yemen and ISIL has grabbed sections of Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Some bulwark! Who rules Afghanistan and whether Afghanistan remains united are not important, certainly not enough to warrant a well-nigh permanent military commitment to Central Asia.

Afghanistan is a tragedy. Its people have suffered through decades of devastating war. Peace remains far away.

But Washington cannot fix Afghanistan. The US cannot afford the human and financial cost of endless war. It's well past time to bring home America's military personnel.

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