



With Trump's Afghanistan strategy murky, experts divided on future

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Approaching two decades of fighting, it's become clear there's no silver bullet to solving — or winning — America's longest ground war, but there's also no sign of the conflict dwindling under President Donald Trump.

There's been little consistency in defining what winning the war looks like. With Trump now in office, military leaders are still laying out a fresh strategy, which could become more clear this month.

Sen. Bob Corker has asked Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis to appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this month, Corker spokesman Micah Johnson said.

Corker wants to look at "updating the current authorization for the use of military force in the fight against ISIS," a policy that's not been updated in years, Johnson said.

That would essentially re-up on America's war efforts and re-authorize Trump to use military force in Afghanistan, a combat theater that has seen numerous changes since the initial declaration more than 15 years ago.

Initially, the U.S. declared war on parties responsible for the 9/11 attacks, which didn't include ISIS; its roots date back only to 2004.

Experts and the Pentagon say opposition groups have reclaimed territory lost after the draw-down laid out by President Barack Obama, particularly in rural areas where Afghan forces are thin.

A recent report from the Defense Department said there are more than 20 known extremist groups in Afghanistan.

News reports have indicated the proposed troop surge could be between 4,000 and 8,000, which at the higher end would nearly double the current U.S. presence.

"We are not winning in Afghanistan right now," Mattis told Congress during a round of contentious testimonies before Congress last month.

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis confirmed that President Donald Trump gave him the authority to set troop levels in Afghanistan. Video provided by Newsy Newslook

Experts differ on ideas for success

Some experts argue that an increase in troop strength should be coupled with a political effort to build a stable government — one area where there's near unanimous consent in that the country is failing.

That diplomatic solution will be even more difficult without a permanent ambassador in Kabul, which the Trump administration has yet to appoint.

Others say the war is unwinnable and America should rethink the entire focus and the national security goals it has in the region, and all but pull out of Afghanistan.

"The strategy to increase troops by about 4,000 is not a plan to win the war," said John Glaser, associate director of foreign policy studies at the conservative Cato Institute.

Marines in Afghanistan in 2010. (*Photo: Kevin Frayer, AP*)

Rebecca Zimmerman, a national security and foreign policy researcher at the nonpartisan RAND Corporation, said a troop increase is not a terrible strategy, but the more immediate need is a leading diplomat to help ensure the political stability of the country.

"When I look at Afghanistan, the primary threat that I see is government collapse, So it's not the Taliban, it's not ISIS, it's the collapse of the government," Zimmerman said, which under the right conditions could lead to "multi-party civil war."

"And then every terrorist group could come in and kind of do what they want."

Others say another surge is critical to success. Michael O'Hanlon, an Afghanistan policy expert with the Brookings Institution, wrote recently that a strength of 8,500 troops, which is what the U.S. currently has in Afghanistan, is only a bare minimum to maintain its half-dozen major bases.

"What we do not have today is the capacity to mentor Afghan forces in the field," he wrote.

U.S. Army special operation forces in Kabul province in Afghanistan. (Connor Mendez/Defense Department/TNS) (*Photo: Connor Mendez/Defense Department, TNS*)

What's a 'victory' in Afghanistan?

O'Hanlon also co-authored a piece in the Wall Street Journal with former CIA Director and four-star general David Petraeus that takes aim at most of the opposing views of continuing the war

and argues that the U.S. must consider Afghanistan the center of a generation-long fight against extremism with no definition of "victory."

All that's clear right now is that there is expected to be an increase in troop strength.

What branch would make up that additional force is unclear. What their specific mission and goals would be are also unclear, but it seems unlikely there would be a dramatic shift from the "train, advise, assist" relationship American soldiers have with the Afghan military.

"It could be that (troop surge) allows us to do the soldier-level advising," Zimmerman said, which she called a "good use" of additional troop numbers.

It also could be elements that can help bolster the Afghan military's aerial capabilities, an area where it's been limited, according to a recent report by the Defense Department.

U.S. soldiers with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) silhouetted as they walk during a patrol outside Bagram Airbase, some 50 km north of Kabul. (*Photo: Shah Marai, AFP/Getty Images*)

Mattis, who toured Europe meeting with counterparts to discuss the developing strategy, recently described it and the idea of increasing troop numbers as looking at "all sorts of lines of effort" and "you simply fill in the gaps at that point."

"The gaps may be intellectual, they may be numeric, they may be changes of — of tactics — just pure military tactics," he said.

He also told reporters during his trip he "did not want" more troops.

Mattis said the strategy he's developing with the European partners would be finalized with Tillerson and intelligence agencies, and then given to Trump. He said the strategy "is regional in nature and focuses on how we end this war."

Congress has been critical of the lack of a strategy from the administration, highlighted by the exchange between Mattis and Sen. John McCain in June in the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Trump has been all but silent about his goals in Afghanistan and delegated almost all decisions to Mattis.

"Given what (Trump's) done so far — given carte blanche to military leaders — that leads me to believe the most likely approach for the foreseeable future is to use the strategy (of) sustain the stalemate and not appear to lose," Glaser said.

A broader solution

The war in Afghanistan is likely the most complicated conflict in which the U.S. has ever been involved. The Afghan government, seen as a linchpin to any measured definition of success, has been accused of corruption and fleeting allegiance to whatever tribal group has power at the moment.

Those tribes exchange allegiance with each other almost weekly, presenting difficulties for the troops who are at the ground level trying to build lasting relationships with local tribal elders.

"For years, the most common word I heard by Afghans to describe their government was 'mafia,'" Zimmerman said.

O'Hanlon has called Afghan Vice President Rashid Dostum a "corrupt warlord," and President Ashraf Ghani is overseeing the selection of government contracts.

There's almost unanimous consent among the experts that Obama took the troop presence far too low to maintain the gains in territory and stability in the country, but boosting numbers also doesn't address the larger issues like corruption and the nearest neighbor, Pakistan.

"Just getting more numbers of soldiers doesn't necessarily equate to more fighting power," Zimmerman said.

Zimmerman said a regional focus is a better approach than pouring resources into only Afghanistan.

"It's news to no one that ... Pakistan plays a big role," Zimmerman said.

O'Hanlon also points to Pakistan as a key focus for future strategy and one area where the Trump administration could direct more diplomatic and military attention.

But Glaser said the 50,000 U.S. soldiers scattered from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pak border should be enough, and actually could be a bad strategy itself.

Glaser said keeping thousands of troops in the region tempts generals to invade for "bad reasons." He differs from others who say Afghanistan is strategic geographically. Glaser says that advantage is minimal when military power can be flexed from thousands of miles away through air power and ballistic missiles, for example.

One point Zimmerman agrees with is the focus on building a political foundation to maintain long-term success.

"Politics and some political goal has to be behind the application of military force," Glaser said.