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Trump's efforts to end 'forever wars' falls short

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President Trump in early December ordered the withdrawal of the roughly 700 U.S. troops stationed in Somalia to battle the al-Shabaab terror network, a key milestone in his drive to end American military involvement in what he dubbed foreign “endless wars.”

Less than three weeks later, however, the Pentagon dispatched 5,000 fresh sailors and Marines off the coast of the Horn of Africa to act as a deterrent and to provide logistical support while the original 700 troops moved to their ultimate destinations: other military bases in East Africa, where officials say they will continue waging war against extremist groups.

The entire episode — a “withdrawal” that brings virtually no troops home and even spurs a temporary surge of forces in the region — serves as perhaps the clearest example of how Mr. Trump's quest to drastically reduce U.S. entanglement in foreign conflicts he inherited has been, at best, a disappointment.

Most of the troops in question, critics contend, are not coming home but are simply being moved to other locations, often in the same dangerous corners of the world and sometimes with the same mission. The Trump administration has had little if any measurable success in cutting the overall amount of American military commitments around the world, and the president's expectation that waves of battle-weary, victorious troops would finally return home to their families has simply not materialized.

Mr. Trump gets credit, analysts say, for asking tough questions about the purpose and expense of U.S. overseas military missions, many dating to World War II. But a look at the hard numbers finds that Mr. Trump's rhetoric — and even his direct orders — haven't always produced the results he wanted.

“Trump's reputation for ending endless wars, as the slogan goes, is not well earned. He frequently employs these themes in his rhetoric, but it never really showed up in policy,” said John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “He tends to make a big public stink about withdrawals, and then hopes the public doesn't do the homework it actually takes to discover these withdrawals aren't really happening. ... The troops are just being shuffled around the region to continue the endless war from a different location.”

Mr. Trump can point to at least some operations that are pulling back in his final weeks in office.

The Pentagon announced Thursday that more than 5,000 sailors and Marines with the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, which most recently had been providing operational support for forces in Somalia, are now headed home after a 10-month deployment.

“The sacrifices and services of the sailors, Marines, and their families is greatly appreciated by the entire Department of Defense and were in the finest traditions of the U.S. naval service. We

are glad that we can conclude 2020 by announcing these warriors are headed home,” Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said in a statement.

While Somalia is the most recent and glaring instance, a similar situation has unfolded in the Middle East, where American forces have been fighting nonstop for nearly two decades. The overall number of U.S. troops in the region appears larger today than it was when the president came into office.

New approach

The administration has had some successes.

Mr. Trump pushed through plans to reduce the number of combat forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite some strong reservations from some of his military commanders. Further cuts are expected before President-elect Joseph R. Biden assumes office in January. Defense Department officials say the number of troops in each country will be down to 2,500 by Jan. 15.

In Afghanistan, a diplomatic deal between Mr. Trump and the Taliban paves the way for all American forces to eventually leave the country, though there are questions about whether that agreement will hold in light of continued Taliban violence. Just last February, there were more than 12,000 troops in Afghanistan, making the nation the clearest example of the president at least partially fulfilling his promise.

Over the objections of Pentagon leaders, the president also has decreased the number of American forces in Syria from 2,000 to about 500. His personnel moves in Syria led to the resignation of former Defense Secretary James N. Mattis, who has gone on to become one of Mr. Trump’s harshest critics.

For Mr. Trump, reducing America’s military role abroad formed a central pillar in his unconventional political platform, and his policy served as a clear break with the neoconservative thinking that had dominated the Republican Party in the post-9/11 era.

In 2016 and again in 2020, Mr. Trump campaigned hard on the issue. He seemed to never waver in his conviction that the U.S. should have fewer troops overseas, and he routinely clashed with powerful members of his own party who warned his approach would embolden al Qaeda, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups that could threaten national security.

When Mr. Trump sensed that he was running into institutionalized resistance in the Pentagon or in Congress, or suspected that military leadership may be slow-walking his orders, he even resorted to unexpected declarations on Twitter in a brute-force effort to turn his goals into reality.

“We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!” Mr. Trump tweeted in October, which caught the Pentagon leadership by surprise, though ultimately his promise was only partially realized.

Shortly after the November election, the president fired then-Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper, who was privately opposed to many of Mr. Trump’s plans for troop drawdowns. In his place, Mr. Trump installed Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller, who quickly made clear he supported the president’s proposals.

“We are not a people of perpetual war — it is the antithesis of everything for which we stand and for which our ancestors fought,” Mr. Miller said in his inaugural message to the military. “All

wars must end. Ending wars requires compromise and partnership. We met the challenge; we gave it our all. Now, it's time to come home.”

‘Completely pointless’

But Mr. Trump's passion and Mr. Miller's commitment to the big-picture policy won't tangibly shrink America's footprint in the Middle East, which actually appears greater now than it was in January 2017.

Over the past several years, Mr. Trump has deployed or redeployed thousands of troops to American military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and elsewhere, framing those deployments as a warning to an increasingly aggressive Iran and its regional allies. Tensions between Washington and Tehran have been high throughout Mr. Trump's tenure and the Pentagon has repeatedly sent more troops to the region whenever it appeared that conflict might erupt.

The result: a surge of American troops in the Middle East under Mr. Trump's watch. The U.S. now has at least 42,000 troops in the region, according to a recent analysis by Defense Priorities, a Washington based think tank that advocates a more restrained foreign policy. Thousands more are aboard U.S. warships in the same tense theater.

The Pentagon has stopped releasing official troop counts in war zones, so nailing down specific figures is difficult. But all evidence seems to show that the number of new troops sent to the Middle East during Mr. Trump's tenure has greatly outweighed the number of men and women brought home, raising questions about both the intent and effectiveness of the president's approach.

“You can't come to any other honest assessment than to say it's been completely pointless,” said retired Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, now a Defense Priorities senior fellow.

“We've actually increased [troop presence] in the region,” Lt. Col. Davis said. “I actually thought that what President Trump would do would be to make a final push to make good on his campaign promise and actually end some of these forever wars. I thought he would press hard and get it done, and be out of Afghanistan, be out of Iraq, be out of Syria. Instead he just reduced — or didn't do anything.”

Mr. Trump's tenure has seen the reshuffling of troops elsewhere around the world. The Pentagon in 2020 rolled out a long-awaited repositioning of troops in Europe, moving more than 10,000 service members from Germany to other locations — though the majority of those troops remain stationed overseas and have not returned home.

The White House also reportedly considered rethinking the U.S. military commitment along the demilitarized zone separating North Korea and South Korea. While Washington and Seoul have had heated disagreements over how much South Korea should pay to support those deployments, the American military presence has remained and a revised cost-sharing agreement remains in diplomatic limbo.

Specialists say that neither Mr. Trump nor any other president will be capable of changing the broader dynamic until there's a fundamental rethinking of the U.S. role in the world.

“What needs to change is the well-established policy — virtually uncontested in Washington, D.C. — of maintaining a permanent global military presence. It is that presence, the associated

treaty obligations, and the political establishment's commitment to constant interventionism that get us into these endless wars in the first place," Mr. Glaser said. "I don't think Trump's motivation to actually alter American foreign policy in this direction was ever that deep, or even genuine. I think it probably helped him politically to employ these themes in his rhetoric, but that's a separate issue."