



## Time for a (different kind of) change in Afghanistan

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With the dust still settling from Wednesday's horrific car bombing in Kabul, the plan for America's new strategy in Afghanistan now sits on Trump's desk. The National Security Council has proposed a plan that calls for more troops, who will operate with fewer restrictions, accompanied by an expanded drone campaign and increased support for Afghanistan's police and military forces. The goals for the new strategy include driving the Taliban to the negotiating table, eliminating the terror threat and getting America to "start winning" again.

Unfortunately, the past 16 years strongly suggest these changes will fail to accomplish any of the administration's goals. From August 2009 through August 2013, the U.S. had between 60,000 and 100,000 service members fighting in Afghanistan as part of President Obama's "surge."

Unfortunately, the surge neither defeated the Taliban nor led to a peace deal. Exploratory peace talks in 2013 soon stalled. In 2015, Afghan and Pakistani officials said Taliban leadership had "signaled they were willing to open peace talks with Kabul." In late 2016, "informal talks" reportedly took place.

Moreover, despite U.S. efforts, the security situation in Afghanistan has become even bleaker. As of this past February, the Afghan government controlled or influenced 60 percent of all districts, down from 72 percent a year and a half earlier. This deterioration occurred despite the Afghan National Army and Police reportedly totaling 330,000 troops, a level they have sustained since 2012. Meanwhile, the Taliban only numbers approximately 25,000, although their end-strength has apparently quadrupled over the past decade.

Today, with only 9,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, American citizens may soon be told that an additional five to ten thousand will be sufficient to coerce the Taliban to the negotiation table. But given the failure of the previous surge and the situation on the ground, there is simply no reason to think additional troops will drive the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Nor will a few thousand more troops materially reduce the terror threat. Some observers argue that continued effort in Afghanistan is necessary to eliminate possible terrorist safe havens, but the reality is that the majority of ISIS, al Qaeda, and fighters from its affiliates operate in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, and other nations in North Africa and the Middle East.

As energetically as the Taliban have fought the United States and the Afghan government, the United States has not labeled the group a terrorist organization. And although the threat of terrorism does exist in Afghanistan, illustrated by the recent killing of an ISIS leader there, Department of State testimony in September 2016 indicated that only the “remnants” of al Qaeda and its affiliates are still operating in Afghanistan.

There is also little evidence to suggest that military operations are the right tool for confronting terrorism. Since the U.S. initiated the war on terror, the threat posed by Islamist terror groups has risen substantially. The number of groups, based on the Department of State’s Country Reports on Terrorism, has more than tripled. Additionally, the number of fighters comprising those groups has spiked from 32,000 to nearly 110,000. Over the past 16 years, America has invaded two countries, toppled three regimes, and conducted military operations in seven nations, yet the Islamist-inspired global terror situation has worsened.

Clearly, Afghanistan is not going to be a quick win for the Trump administration.

But debate over American plans to save Afghanistan miss a larger point: Only Afghans can assure enduring change in their country. For 16 years, U.S. officials have acknowledged that point while simultaneously arguing that Afghans need just a little more outside assistance before becoming self-sufficient. But the data again point to the inadequacy of such arguments. Last year Transparency International ranked the Afghan government as more corrupt than 96 percent of all other countries.

That assessment has actually worsened from the first rating, done in 2005, when the government ranked as more corrupt than 74 percent of other nations. Additionally, the Afghan defense and security forces continue to be incapable (or unwilling) to secure the population despite being 13 times larger, better equipped and better trained than the Taliban.

Well-intentioned American efforts since 2001 have failed to produce peace and stability. Continued intervention will not achieve U.S. goals, and it may actually slow the development of Afghanistan’s capacity to manage its own affairs. It is time for Afghans to take responsibility for their own future.

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