

Better a Stalemate Than Defeat in Afghanistan

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A casual observer of the war in Afghanistan can be forgiven for experiencing déjà vu while watching a U.S. military commander recommend to a new president the dispatch of thousands more troops. That is, after all, what happened in 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal warned President Barack Obama that “[mission failure](#)” was likely unless he sent reinforcements. And now it has happened again, albeit on a smaller scale, with General John W. “Mick” Nicholson Jr. warning President Donald J. Trump, in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, that a “few thousand” more troops are [needed](#) simply to maintain “a stalemate.”



Afghan

security forces keep watch at the site of a suicide attack in Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo: Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

Should the Trump administration grant Nicholson’s request? To answer that question, it is important to understand how we got to this point. Obama did not ignore McChrystal’s recommendation; he tripled U.S. troop strength to a hundred thousand personnel. So why is Afghanistan once again in crisis? There are three answers to that question.

Kabul's Shaky Writ

First, Afghan government corruption and dysfunction are as crippling as ever, serving as a drain on the capabilities of the country's security forces and as a powerful recruiting tool for the Taliban. In particular, the corruption of Afghan courts gives the Taliban an opening to settle disputes in rural areas with its draconian but uncorrupt sharia courts. Symbolic of the government's ineffectuality and disregard for the rule of law is that Afghanistan's vice president, the notorious warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, **prevented** police from arresting his bodyguards after they allegedly kidnapped and assaulted one of his rivals. While President Ashraf Ghani is a well-intentioned, pro-Western reformer, as a result of a U.S.-brokered deal after the hotly contested 2014 election he must share power with Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who represents a powerful northern coalition. The result is that the government is usually unable to address the nation's many woes.

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Second, Pakistani support for the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other insurgent forces remains undiminished. External support is usually the surest indicator of whether an insurgency will succeed. The Taliban continues to enjoy safe havens in Pakistan, making it all but impossible to eradicate its uprising. When hard-pressed in Afghanistan, the insurgents can retreat to Pakistan, retool, and return as strong as ever. The Pakistani army, even while battling homegrown Islamist insurgents, such as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a valuable proxy to project power, and U.S. pressure has not led it to rethink this policy. Iran and, to a lesser extent, Russia have also helped enable the insurgency. The U.S. government has publicly accused Iran of providing material support, including shipments of munitions, to the Taliban, but has kept mum about the nature of Russian support, if any, beyond political outreach.

The third factor—the only one directly under the United States' control—is that the Obama surge was too short. Even while dispatching more troops to Afghanistan in late 2009, the previous administration imposed an ill-advised eighteen-month deadline on their deployment. Obama began bringing the forces home in 2011 even though the security situation remained unsettled and the Taliban was far from defeated. Although Obama shelved plans to pull all U.S. troops out by the time he left office, by January 2017 the U.S. force had been reduced to just 8,400 personnel. A small fraction of them are dedicated to carrying out Special Operations raids against terrorist targets as part of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, with the rest, along with 6,300 allied personnel, focused on advising and assisting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) as part of Operation Resolute Support.

Containing the Taliban

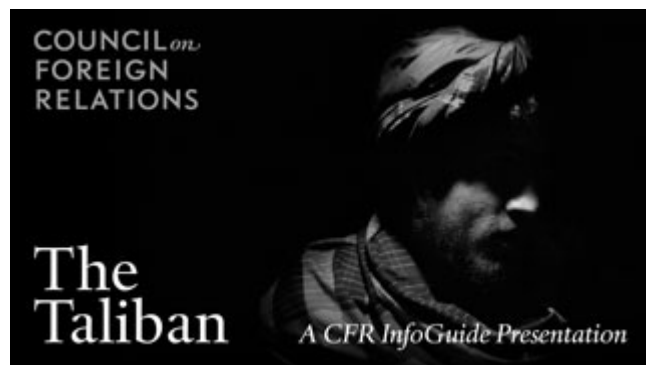
The problem, as Nicholson admitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee, is that current U.S. force levels are insufficient to keep the Taliban from regaining lost ground, particularly in the south, which has long been the Taliban's heartland. Nicholson **noted** that the government is in control of "roughly two-thirds" of the population while the Taliban is in control "of approximately 10 percent," with "the rest contested." The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a U.S. government watchdog, **estimates** that uncontested government control has declined from 72 percent of the country in November 2015 to 57 percent in November 2016. The United Nations, meanwhile, found a 9 percent increase in "security incidents"—armed clashes and bombings—between 2015 and 2016, and an 18 percent increase from 2014. The UN estimates that **8,397 civilians** were killed or injured in this fighting in the first eight months of 2016.

With the help of U.S. advisors and airpower—operating under rules of engagement relaxed by Obama before leaving office—Afghan security forces were able to prevent the Taliban from overrunning the provincial capitals of Lashkar Gah in the south and Kunduz in the north, but could not prevent the Taliban from gaining more control of rural areas. In the process, moreover, the ANDSF have taken heavy casualties: between January 1 and November 12, 2016, they **lost** 6,785 service members and an additional 11,777 were wounded. That is nearly three times as many fatalities in less than year as U.S. forces have suffered in Afghanistan in the last fifteen-and-a-half years.

ANDSF "recruitment has generally kept pace with losses and attrition," Nicholson argues, but there is no doubt that the losses severely strain Afghan forces and raise doubts about whether they can maintain the current tempo of operations. As it is, Nicholson acknowledges that 70 percent of all offensive operations by the Afghan National Army are carried out by its Special Operations Command, which numbers only 17,000 men out of a total force of 195,000. (The ANSDF's total manpower, including police, is 360,000.)

These alarming trends have caused Nicholson to say that he needs several thousand more advisors to bolster the ANSDF. The Afghan air force is in particular need of help. While its capabilities are expanding to include flying A-29 Super Tucano light-attack aircraft that can provide close-air support to troops in combat, Nicholson assesses that the force is still "some years away" from being fully functional. That puts a premium on the United States providing air support for hard-pressed Afghan troops in combat, which in turns means that in most instances there will need to be U.S. personnel on the ground to call in air strikes.

Terrorist Havens



Is it worth maintaining and even expanding the U.S. commitment to what is already the longest war in American history? The answer is yes, for the reasons laid out by Nicholson. He noted that “of the ninety-eight U.S.-designated terrorist organizations globally, twenty are located in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region,” making it “the highest

concentration of terrorist groups anywhere in the world.” If U.S. forces were simply to pull out, it would likely result in a victory not only for local groups, such as the Taliban and the Haqqani network, but also for transnational groups, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which has established a branch in Afghanistan. Washington would thereby squander all that it has sought to achieve in the region since the 9/11 attacks and put not only the Afghan government, but also the Pakistani government, in jeopardy.

If the United States is to maintain a minimal level of security in Afghanistan, it will have to send more forces. Significantly rolling back the Taliban would probably require a deployment of at least a hundred thousand troops, similar to the surge that Obama undertook but without an attached timeline. Even then destroying the Taliban would not be possible as long as Pakistan continued to provide them a lifeline. It is doubtful that either President Trump or the U.S. public would approve of such a massive commitment, which would amount to starting from scratch after Obama squandered the gains of the previous surge. Nicholson’s recommendation, to send a few thousand more troops to maintain a stalemate, is not as satisfying as seeking total victory, but is likely to be more sustainable. It is, however, important that Trump and Secretary of Defense James Mattis not impose the kind of rigid numerical caps that Obama favored. They should defer to commanders in the field, and if Nicholson finds that even more troops are necessary, they should be provided. Indeed, it may well make sense to expand U.S. forces to twenty or thirty thousand troops, about the pre-surge level, in 2009.

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Even with that elevated troop level, the United States will have to reconcile itself to the Taliban maintaining control of a significant portion of the countryside in the south and the east. Washington will need to set a more manageable goal of helping Afghan forces maintain control of all the provincial capitals and especially major population centers such as Kandahar City, Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, as well as preventing the establishment of sanctuaries for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. In the meantime, the United States should continue to expand the ANDSF’s capabilities while helping President Ghani reduce corruption and increase governmental effectiveness and

increasing diplomatic and economic pressure on Pakistan that would force the Taliban to end its armed struggle.

Henry Kissinger would quote the maxim, “the guerrilla wins if he does not lose.” The truth, however, is nearly the reverse: the government wins as long as it stays in power, even if the guerrillas remain undefeated in parts of the countryside. Colombia serves as a model: it battled the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for forty years until finally, in 2016, the guerrillas gave up their struggle and acquiesced to a peace deal. The best that the United States can hope for in Afghanistan is that in the distant future the Taliban too will tire of the struggle and sue for peace. That day, unfortunately, is not likely to come anytime soon. In the meantime, costly as the U.S. commitment remains, it makes sense to continue on at a slightly ramped-up level rather than risk incurring the far higher costs of a victory in Afghanistan by the forces of what President Trump calls “radical Islamic terrorism.”