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Ambling Blindly Back Into the Mountains: 5 Hard

Questions for the Next Phase of Afghanistan

February 23, 2017

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Gen. John Nicholson, who commands the American-led international military force in Afghanistan, recently made headlines when he called for “[a few thousand](#)” more troops and a deeper American commitment to the fight in Afghanistan in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this month.

This echoes the calls from a number of [other analysts](#), as well as from senior government officials. The recently departed national security advisor, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn – who once served as the senior intelligence officer for the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan – seemed to [support](#) greater commitment to the region. As they say, personnel is policy: Flynn appointed [senior National Security Council staffers](#) who called for engagement in Afghanistan to potentially continue another five to ten years. There’s good reason to think these beliefs might be shared by incoming national security advisor, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, given his [substantial investment](#) in Afghanistan.

Questions will obviously be raised about allied contributions and the domestic political appetite for intensifying America’s longest war, but a more fundamental question deserves serious scrutiny: Could a renewed U.S. commitment of additional troops help turn a corner in Afghanistan?

Proponents support such an effort to [demonstrate our resoluteness](#), extend the Afghan state’s control, and to sustain an effective [counter-terrorism mission](#). The impact of new investments hinges on a number of moving parts: the coherence of the Afghan state writ large, the capacity of Afghan security forces, Taliban resilience, countermoves by major regional powers, and, most importantly,

the strategic behavior of Pakistan. These variables have long plagued U.S. war aims and remain likely to prevent success, despite expanded U.S. commitments.

1. Can the Afghan government capitalize on military gains and become coherent and sustainable?

Recommendations about troop levels are effectively tactical. More U.S. troops could alter the military conditions on the ground, just as they did earlier in the war, but they do nothing to shape the more consequential political dynamics. Even congressional leaders arguing for expanding military freedom of action recognize the Afghanistan problem is essentially “[political in nature](#).” Even when military operations pressured the Taliban, the Afghan government has been unable to seize on this momentum and govern effectively because it has been too divided, incoherent, and corrupt.

The extra-constitutional National Unity Government is [teetering on the brink](#), and its legitimacy [hangs in the balance](#). By a two to one ratio, Afghans overwhelmingly believe the country is going in the [wrong direction](#) – the lowest level of optimism surveyed since 2004. A year ago, U.N. officials warned that discord and dysfunction threatened national government [survival](#). Today, Kabul is mired in yet another [contentious battle of fractious elites](#). The disarray is punctuated by political infighting, competing factions, “[ethnic politics and opportunism](#),” and a former president [maneuvering](#) behind the scenes for power. Afghan politics is war by other means. The unity government parties remain deadlocked for the same reason that parties go to and remain at war: a [miscalculation of each other's relative strength](#).

Against this dire backdrop, the legitimacy of Afghan national institutions continues to wane. [Confidence](#) in national institutions and satisfaction with democracy are at their lowest ebb in ten years. For the first time, a majority of Afghans do not express confidence in the national government. Perceptions of high national corruption have roughly remained constant for a decade, but perceptions of local corruption experienced in daily life have jumped by 10 to 20 percent.

With outright military victory increasingly rare in modern counter-insurgency campaigns, Afghanistan's endgame likely requires a negotiated settlement. Yet the government's political disarray erodes its bargaining power and encourages the Taliban to fight on in hopes of an outright victory.

2. What effect would this have on Afghan security force capabilities?

Nicholson implied that Afghan-led military pressure would serve as the principal strategy to “incentivize reconciliation” over a five-year period. While increasing the number of U.S. train-and-advise forces conducting this mission might conceivably help at the margins, a number of enduring structural flaws and gaps in the Afghan security forces remain. These issues could continue to

hamper their battlefield effectiveness.

After [over \\$70 billion](#) and almost a decade and a half of new training regimens and professionalization paradigms, Afghan security forces – army, police, and local forces – remain deeply dysfunctional. The [pathologies](#) of patronage, divided political loyalties, and corruption have trickled down into the security forces and contribute to [several problems](#) with Afghan state military effectiveness. These shortfalls are most evident in their fighting capacity, logistics and procurement, leadership, morale, trust, recruitment, and internal cooperation. Corruption also leaks resources that [directly fuel the insurgency](#).

The legitimacy of Afghan security forces is also declining, which poses a problem for counter-insurgency. The most recent [Asia Society survey](#) in Afghanistan from September 2016 found that perceptions of security force capability, honesty, and fairness are all on a downward trajectory toward their lowest ratings in a decade. If the Afghan army improved by leaps and bounds, the police are still not capable of being much of a holding force. Even in this capacity, the police often find themselves crippled by internal defections and outgunned by the insurgency. One exception to these trends is Afghan special forces, but the operational tempo for these limited forces does not appear to be [sustainable](#).

The pathologies of Afghan security forces may intensify calls for additional advisors to improve their professionalism and legitimacy, but this may be getting the order wrong. One major [study](#) of the Afghan army suggests the opposite – that professionalization of such institutions cannot facilitate a political settlement, but can instead only follow from a process or deal that “removes incentives to political players to wreck the processes and sabotage the institutions.” Without such a settlement on the horizon, the United States needs to evaluate whether it is simply throwing good money after bad.

3. Would more troops degrade Taliban capabilities?

Nicholson projected that added support would allow the Afghan security forces to break out of the current military “stalemate” and reach a “tipping point” by the end of 2019, when Kabul would be in a position to secure most of the population and isolate the insurgents to remote zones. This seems overly optimistic given the experience of the last 15 years, which witnessed high, sustained levels of foreign support.

First, the government’s military position appears to be on the decline rather than locked in a stalemate. It has continuously lost ground to the Taliban. In fact, its [territorial control](#) has dropped from 72 percent to 57 percent of all districts since 2015. Despite two insurgent [leadership decapitations](#) in less than a year, a 3.5 percent [growth](#) in Afghan army forces to 175,000 in spite of high attrition rates, and [expanded U.S. authorities](#), the Taliban continues to [gain ground](#).

Second, the Taliban possesses many sources of resilience. Among these are safe havens across borders, the option to disperse among the Pashtun population, and a “[home team discount](#)” when it comes to public attribution of responsibility for civilian casualties. The Taliban is also adapting politically using “[localization](#)” initiatives that increasingly attract [non-Pashtun elements](#) to as much as one quarter of its leadership posts. This means ethnic demography and geography could impose even fewer constraints on the Taliban’s expansion.

Third, the strategy of military pressure to degrade the Taliban insurgency appears to be going nowhere, as the group’s combat power continues to regenerate. In 2008, commanders estimated peak Taliban strength to be [11,000](#) combatants. Yet [recent](#) estimates identify Taliban strength at 30,000 even though [news accounts estimate](#) that 50,000 Taliban fighters have been killed from 2014 to 2016. Something is not adding up. If this degree of attrition continues to encourage new recruitment and revitalization, a strategic rethink is necessary.

Finally, despite a substantial decline in popular sympathy for the Taliban, war is not a popularity contest. The Taliban can still draw on reservoirs of support to stay in the field and perhaps even win outright, especially in its southern and eastern heartlands. The Asia Society survey reveals that in nine of the thirteen provinces in Afghanistan’s South and East, at least 25 percent of the population still harbors sympathy for the Taliban. In Uruzgan, Zabul, and Wardak, more people express positive views of the Taliban than negative views.

4. Would other regional actors support and complement U.S. efforts?

Numerous [analysts](#), [studies](#), and [officials](#) have long asserted that cooperation from regional stakeholders was vital for Afghan stability. Today, Nicholson and [others](#) characterize major regional powers – including Russia, Iran, and China – as interfering with U.S. efforts by providing material support and legitimacy to the Taliban, as well as convening with each other to chart Afghanistan’s future. Washington is proceeding based on the assumption that signaling commitment would [assure](#) the region, solve a coordination problem, deter malign behavior, and incentivize cooperation. But there is little in the last 15 years to give us hope in this assumption. Instead, a new American commitment might fuel threat perceptions that motivate competition.

There are several potential reasons for America’s geopolitical adversaries to do this. One is a tactical tit-for-tat maneuver to counter U.S. pressures applied to them over other regions or interests. A second reason is to counterbalance U.S. counter-terrorism intelligence and strike assets, which constitute a significant offensive capability and can serve a dual purpose of threatening other regional actors and states. Finally, China, Iran, and Russia might conclude that the Taliban’s nationalist ambitions pose less of a threat than transnational groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which could gain ground from a multi-party civil war.

If the regional powers have increased stakes in Afghanistan and genuinely believe a political settlement with the Taliban is the best path forward, they can continue to counteract augmented U.S. efforts through expanded support for the Taliban. The United States could attempt to dissuade, coopt, or confront these regional stakeholders, but these approaches are unlikely to work without paying high costs or making sacrifices in deference to their strategic interests.

5. Whither Pakistan?

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to any turnaround in Afghanistan is that there is the absence of a realistic strategy to deal with Pakistan. [Many assessments of Afghanistan policy failure](#) identify Pakistan as the chief culprit, owing to the material support and especially the safe havens it affords the Afghan Taliban. If there is no realistic strategy to change Pakistan's behavior to deny Taliban sanctuaries – whether through coercion, inducement, or brute force – we cannot expect substantive improvements in Afghanistan.

[Neither](#) economic incentives nor coercion have convinced Pakistan to reassess its security calculus in Afghanistan. This is not surprising, considering Pakistan has a much greater national interest in Afghanistan and a much higher capacity for influencing events than any outside actor because of its geography, longstanding intelligence networks, and assets. It also has developed a certain path dependence to its approach in Afghanistan in terms of tremendous sunk costs, bureaucratic interests, and public commitments.

The inability of the United States to convince Pakistan to cease its military support to the Taliban and other insurgent groups has led to [calls](#) from some quarters to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism. Such threats might be satisfying, but they would not change Pakistani behavior and would further undermine rather than advance U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and the region. Indeed, the United States still depends on Pakistan for the ground and air lines of communication into Afghanistan – particularly for transport of lethal supplies – and alternative routes are no longer viable given the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations. In retaliation for designation, Pakistan might also unleash its asymmetric assets directly against U.S. forces deployed in Afghanistan in a much more substantial manner.

In the long term, major punitive actions could jeopardize existing intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism efforts. They also could jeopardize U.S. influence over Pakistani nuclear security and safety, limit South Asia crisis management options, and undermine Pakistan's general stability. Just because the argument of Pakistan being “too nuclear” or “[too big to fail](#)” feels like blackmail does not make it any less threatening to U.S. interests. This is to say nothing of the fact that militarized confrontation with Pakistan would certainly divert from efforts to confront more serious challenges elsewhere.

The risks of trying to coerce favorable Pakistani behavior in Afghanistan outweigh the benefits. At the end of the day, relations with Pakistan matter more than relations with Afghanistan.

Now What?

There are no simple options in Afghanistan, but the United States should learn from past mistakes. Instead of a single-mindedness on military pressure, Washington might instead attempt new approaches to other parts of the equation – pressuring Kabul, genuine reconciliation, and cooperating with regional powers – while simultaneously preparing a set of lighter footprint alternative options.

First, the United States could try applying carrots and sticks to Afghan elites to induce compromises among themselves and crackdowns on the more egregious predation. Threats of conditionality, negotiating *without* Kabul, or even a full-scale American exit might make Afghan elites less reckless and more earnest.

Second, the United States might more explicitly commit to a genuine reconciliation process that does not precondition negotiations. After a [decade](#), the United States still does not appear to have accepted that a political solution will likely require power sharing and certain concessions to the Taliban, such as asymmetric federalism. Recent [work](#) by Theo Farrell and Michael Semple suggests this might be an opportune moment.

Third, the United States might also begin to collaborate with adversarial regional powers with significant stakes in their own backyard. If our primary interest in Afghanistan is to counter transnational terrorism, we should be able to find interested if unsavory partners, just as we have in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Pursuing the second and third moves might also add further credibility to pressure on Kabul.

Finally, it would behoove the United States to resist the tyranny of sunk costs and ready some serious alternative options. One rarely discussed option is some variant of [“de facto partition”](#) that cedes ground in the Taliban’s home turf to bolster partners in Afghanistan’s north and west, from which counter-terrorism operations are run. Another option might include covertly developing deeper intelligence cooperation and strike assets with existing regional partners, such as Pakistan or India (or both), and coupling this with over-the-horizon strike and special operations forces capabilities out of [Diego Garcia](#). These would not be perfect substitutes for current U.S. counter-terrorism capabilities throughout Afghanistan, but those are simply unsustainable given Afghanistan’s current trajectory.

A deeper commitment and higher troop levels cannot overcome the challenges of Kabul's political dysfunction, Afghan security force pathologies, Taliban regenerative capacity, regional meddling, and Pakistan's pursuit of self-interest. If the United States wants an alternative to [indefinite force presence](#) in Afghanistan, it might just have to accept a reconciled government in which all warring parties can be included and held at risk, while preparing for less than ideal scenarios. This approach would allow the United States to manage risk in the region while it reapportions efforts to places where there's a better chance of success.

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