



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Four Ways Forward in Afghanistan

What the United States Could Do With More Troops

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After a five-month-long interagency review process, senior officials have recommended that U.S. President Donald Trump send several thousand more troops to Afghanistan. The request is in line with proposals from General John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and makes the consensus recommendation of about 3,000-5,000 more troops. But troop increases alone do not a strategy make. Scholars as varied as Stephen Walt and Michael O'Hanlon have argued that, to arrest rapid deterioration on the ground, the United States needs to situate the troops in a coherent strategy.

At present, at least four plausible strategies can be distilled: state building, reconciliation, containment, and basing. Each strategy contains distinct goals, its own theory of victory, and unique costs and risks. The George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations muddled or vacillated among all four

options, which generated incoherence and sometimes worked at cross-purposes. The Trump administration must weigh each strategy individually and make a hard choice based on achievable ends and acceptable tradeoffs. And it must do so before it puts more American and NATO troops in harm's way.

STATEBUILDING

A strategy of “trying to win” against the Taliban, as Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham have urged, demands at least some state building so that Kabul can withstand the insurgency and compete for public support. This strategy will involve building up core Afghan state capabilities, principally the security forces and governing institutions, so that they might be “capable of standing on their own” and defeating the Taliban. The broader, debatable assumption is that only a capable Afghan state excluding the Taliban can prevent international terrorist organizations from posing a threat to the United States or expanding across South and Central Asia.

The state-building strategy would deploy U.S. troops down to the brigade or battalion level to guide and mentor Afghan units and to signal an enduring commitment to the Afghan state. Retired officials have also argued that keeping troops in the fight will better ensure political support for aid to Afghanistan.

Of course, the costs of this strategy emerge in lives lost, time, and strategic focus. Seeing results could take a decade or two. And there is no guarantee that the American people and future administrations will exhibit the patience required to see this strategy through to its potential yields. Furthermore,

estimates of annual U.S. spending in Afghanistan range between \$25 and \$50 billion, and increasing the current troop levels will only add to the price tag.



Afghans exercising in an empty pool, Kabul, December 2008.

Ahmad Masood / REUTERS

Further, if the United States commits to a state-building strategy without requiring concessions from the Afghan government, it would do little to redress the massive moral hazard problem in

Afghanistan. Kabul elites continue to avoid hard choices about rampant corruption and political infighting, and they run high risks with a politicized, patronage-ridden, ineffective security force, knowing that they are protected by a United States always ready to bail them out.

Outside of these practical costs, continuing the war in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future implies significant strategic opportunity costs. Attention and resources would be siphoned from other regions, such as East Asia and Eastern Europe. A commitment to Afghanistan would reduce U.S. flexibility to cultivate its strategic relationship with India, considering Pakistan's leverage over outcomes in Afghanistan.

Another concern with this strategy is that it risks a costlier collision with a number of regional actors that do not believe military defeat of the Taliban is the only path to stability. China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, for example, could counter U.S. efforts with greater financial, material, and territorial support of the Taliban to further bleed American forces and their Afghan allies.

Some proponents of the state-building strategy still hope that U.S. resolve alone will trigger Pakistan's cooperation, while others call for coercive or even kinetic action to pressure Pakistan to alter its strategic calculus in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan has significant leverage to counter such a strategy. It can cut off the American ground and air lines of communication into Afghanistan, which remain vital components of the American presence in the country. It could also cancel robust intelligence cooperation with the United States and NATO and abandon dialogues on nuclear safety, export controls, and crisis management, which have bolstered nuclear risk reduction in South Asia.

RECONCILIATION

The reconciliation strategy intensifies military training and kinetic efforts to secure a negotiated peace settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The United States and Afghanistan would use gains on the battlefield to ensure that the Afghan government can negotiate from a position of strength.

Reconciliation can encompass a wide range of strategies. Deep reconciliation could involve substantive concessions, such as a power-sharing agreement with the Taliban or a commitment to an eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops. Others—potentially including U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster—seem to think that a shallow reconciliation will suffice, one where the Taliban is so degraded militarily that it capitulates to any terms of surrender and is allowed to reintegrate back into the Afghan political fold (and perhaps even the security forces).

The downside of this strategy is that, given conditions on the ground, it may not be feasible. The mission could easily creep into a heavily kinetic long war with all the responsibilities of state building. And given that the Afghan government has labeled the Taliban as terrorists with whom there can be no room for negotiation, the Afghan government does not seem likely to enter into any talks. Furthermore, there is no clear reason to expect that a few thousand additional troops will enable Afghan and NATO forces to quickly gain a position of strength. The Taliban have hemorrhaged troops even faster than the Afghan national security forces, but they have still been able to capture territory at alarming rates. Hardened positions combined with increasing Taliban cohesion, command and control, resilience, access to safe havens and materiel, and support from regional rivals will make bargaining from a position of strength even less likely.

Further, even if both sides could reach some form of reconciliation agreement, local and regional dynamics would threaten its durability. Fear of one side rearming could lead to the other side preemptively re-arming as a defensive measure, triggering a new conflict spiral. Afghanistan seems particularly prone to conflict recurrence and resumption of all-out war considering its weak political institutions, maze of competitive alliances, and history of (and incentives for) defections from their alliances.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the costs of either a shallow or deep reconciliation strategy. Shallow reconciliation strategies could risk marginalizing rural Pashtuns, who could be encouraged to form a common cause with the Taliban or even the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Deeper reconciliation could come with a serious rollback of political gains in Afghanistan, such as rights for women and minority groups, and create opportunities for the Taliban to draw on state resources to renege on an agreement and expand its power.



Afghan forces near the site of a U.S. airstrike, April 2017.

Parwiz / REUTERS

CONTAINMENT

A containment strategy could use an influx of forces to escalate in order to soon de-escalate. New troop deployments with expanded authority could quickly clear the Taliban from key areas and provide political and reputational cover for a substantial drawdown. The United States would then

revert to a strategy designed purely for the purposes of containing terrorist organizations from expanding beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater while financially supporting Afghanistan for a modicum of stability.

From this perspective, a combination of lethal precision strikes, local intelligence cooperation, and strengthened homeland security defenses could obviate a long-term American troop presence. Although the United States would not command fine-grained intelligence on all Afghan politics and militant networks (elusive even with over 100,000 troops), it would possess far better situational awareness and contingency options for deterrence than it did in the 1990s. It could even find new intelligence partners among adversaries such as China, Iran, and Russia that also fear the top-tier threats to the United States, such as al Qaeda and ISIS. Even the Taliban are already fighting ISIS and are potentially willing to formally break with al Qaeda.

The advantage of the containment strategy is that it would not depend as heavily on local Afghan or Pakistani cooperation as other strategies, and it would free the United States to concentrate on more pressing concerns, such as Asian balance of power and nuclear security. Such a move would also directly expose regional actors (including some adversaries) to the consequences of conflict spillover and terrorism. This could compel them to invest their time, energy, and resources in solutions rather than in spoiling.

Finally, a drawdown that exposes Afghanistan to existential risk—especially combined with credible U.S. threats to withdraw crucial security funding—could catalyze critical reforms to tackle corruption and military professionalization, enhancing military effectiveness. Even under the Obama drawdown

plan, Afghan leaders never doubted that U.S. military and economic aid would remain steadfast and so never felt compelled to change course.

The downside to this strategy is that, because containment narrowly focuses on a few core threats to the homeland, the United States would forfeit influence to other regional powers. Doing so would weaken the United States' ability to shape Afghan governance and potentially undermine the civil institutions the United States and NATO have tried to build over the past 15 years. Furthermore, the risk of Afghan state collapse and resumption of multi-party civil war could create yet another vacuum for transnational extremist groups and draw the United States back into the fray.



Afghan policemen at the Kart-e-Sakhi shrine in Kabul, October 2016.

Mohammad Ismail / REUTERS

BASING

The basing strategy with an open-ended American military presence would ensure sufficient forces to defend important population centers, retain bases critical for counterterrorism, and maintain a U.S.

foothold in Central Asia. Although little has been explicitly written, a range of arguments imply that some strategists are thinking seriously about a semi-permanent Central Asian foothold from which to counter terrorism, monitor developments ranging from increased influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and potentially pressure the more vulnerable flanks in any future contingency with China, Iran, or Russia.

The downside, of course, is that the United States would necessarily accept a state of long-term instability in Afghanistan because a permanent U.S. presence in Afghanistan will incentivize regional actors to competitively back proxies. For example, they could support new militant groups and inject new capabilities into the conflict, similar to what the United States did in the 1980s against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Afghan government's acquiescence to a permanent foreign occupier could very well weaken its own legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan public. Finally, without alternative lines of communication, a sustained American presence in Afghanistan would only deepen its dependence upon Pakistan, frustrating U.S. cooperation with India as a balance against China.

A TIME FOR HARD CHOICES

It might be tempting to stitch together a strategy with elements from each of these options that minimizes costs and maximizes interests. This is not possible. Good strategy requires an honest appraisal of costs, risks, and priorities. The four options all incur tradeoffs with one another, so combining two of the approaches would only weaken the overall strategy.

As the political scientist Barnett Rubin has noted, Afghan stability—whether through state building or reconciliation—and permanent basing are fundamentally incompatible. State building and

reconciliation seek stability through an end to conflict, while the containment and basing options prepare the United States to simply cope with semi-permanent instability. State building and shallow reconciliation assume that the Taliban remain a fundamental threat to American homeland security, whereas the other strategies do not. Basing and reconciliation consider regional powers—China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia—as central to their strategy, whereas state building and containment minimize the importance of regional competition. State building, reconciliation, and basing all put the United States on course to potentially commit hundreds of billions to the Afghanistan project over the next decade. Only containment would substantially reduce costs, although it could incur increased future costs if the United States returned to the conflict.

Thus, even if Trump approves of the increased American military presence in Afghanistan, there remains plenty of debate to be had over the strategy for which these troops are used.

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