



Nearly 16 years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States is nearing a seminal moment in its involvement in Afghanistan, as President Donald Trump gathers at Camp David today with his national-security team to determine what to do about the deteriorating stalemate he inherited in South Asia.

The Trump administration is reportedly weighing several competing proposals for Afghanistan. While military commanders have recommended an increase of several thousand U.S. troops to enable increased support for the Afghan military and counterterrorism operations, the White House is also considering alternative approaches that could entail the reduction or even the complete exit of American conventional forces—relying instead on special operations forces, paramilitaries, and contractors.

To an unusual degree, the debate over the future of the Afghan war is really about its past: specifically, why a decade and a half of military operations has failed to turn the tide. It is a fair question, and President Trump has been correct to press for answers before deciding on a way ahead.

Some argue the problem has been America's unrealistic ambitions in Afghanistan—undertaking a costly nation-building campaign in the hopes of

transforming a broken country—and that the best course, therefore, is to scale back military involvement and minimize further entanglement in this graveyard of empires.

The problem with this argument is that it inverts the history of what has actually happened in Afghanistan since 2001. In fact, the consistent theme of U.S. Afghan policy for 15 years has not been nation-building, but exit-seeking. From nearly the moment the first U.S. forces arrived in the wake of 9/11, Washington has been trying to hand off responsibility for the country and draw down its military presence. In doing so, it has inadvertently thrown a lifeline to the enemies it went to Afghanistan to defeat, encouraged regional powers to hedge against it, and needlessly compounded the difficulty of this mission. The key question now is whether Trump recognizes this mistake, or repeats it.

The story of U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan begins in late 2001 with the Bush administration, which fiercely resisted any kind of large-scale military commitment to stabilize the country after the Taliban regime retreated from Kabul and Kandahar. In addition to its interest in keeping forces in reserve for its anticipated showdown with Iraq, the Bush administration's embrace of a "modest footprint" for Afghanistan, as then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called it, was rationalized as a repudiation of the Clinton administration's peacekeeping interventions in the Balkans during the 1990s. A large U.S. presence in Afghanistan, it was argued, would spur Afghan xenophobia and foster unnatural "dependency" on foreigners, while its absence would encourage a quicker transition to Afghan self-sufficiency.

In fact, as a consequence of this initial "hands off" approach in Afghanistan, the country soon found itself in a kind of political and security free fall. To his credit, President Bush changed course in 2003, initiating a U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaign that closely integrated military and political lines of effort, and began to yield hopeful results. But with Iraq itself melting down by 2005 and the White House eager to show it was bringing troops home from somewhere, the White House dropped this brief experiment in favor of transitioning ownership of Afghanistan to NATO. In doing so, the Bush administration argued the Taliban was a spent force, that NATO allies were up to the task of shouldering responsibility for vital terrain like southern Afghanistan, and the United States therefore could look to reduce its own military presence.

All three assumptions were disastrously wrong. NATO lacked the command structure, authorities, and capabilities, to wage the nationwide counterinsurgency campaign required to keep pressure on the Taliban, which quickly came roaring back. In his

eagerness to extricate his administration from Afghanistan, Bush paved the way for an even bigger quagmire.

The Obama administration entered office pledging to reverse Bush's failures in Afghanistan, only to replicate the most fundamental of them in arguably even more spectacular fashion. While Obama reluctantly backed a surge of U.S. forces at the urging of his commanders, he coupled this with a fixed date for their withdrawal. In an ironic echo of Rumsfeld, Obama justified this move by arguing that it would incentivize the Afghans to take responsibility for their country. Instead, it discouraged a wary populace from siding with a U.S. military presence designed to be fleeting, while signaling to the Taliban (and its Pakistani backers) that time was on their side.

Obama then redoubled this unforced error by announcing an even more draconian drawdown of U.S. troops in 2014, not on the basis of on-the-ground military conditions, but with the political timetable of getting all troops out by the end of his own tenure. The predictable result was that security conditions deteriorated, eventually forcing the White House to stop short of the complete withdrawal it had promised, but only after U.S. forces had been severely pared back, the Taliban had reclaimed momentum, and regional powers had stepped up their support for insurgents in anticipation of a post-American Afghanistan.

What Washington has never attempted in Afghanistan, over the course of more than 15 years there, is the one policy that has been necessary from the outset: an explicit commitment to a sustainable, sustained U.S. military presence in the country.

Making such a commitment would send the unequivocal message to the Taliban that it cannot hope to prevail on the battlefield and must therefore pursue political reconciliation seriously. It would also position America for the tough diplomacy to convince Afghanistan's neighbors, foremost Pakistan, to stop backing insurgent groups in preparation for an American exit.

The strategic paradox of Afghanistan is that the more the United States has sought to leave, the more it has fostered the conditions that have forced it to stay. By contrast, the sooner Washington can convince all parties to the conflict of its long-term intent to remain, the sooner it can set the conditions to drive the conflict towards an end game.

To be clear, a sustained U.S. military presence in Afghanistan alone is no guarantee of success. But repeating the mistakes of the past by trying to withdraw troops from the country is a surefire recipe for more failure.

Can Americans stomach an open-ended military commitment to Afghanistan? Didn't they, after all, elect Trump—and for that matter, Obama—in part because they promised to diminish America's overseas burdens? Won't they demand a date by which all of U.S. forces come home?

This is, in some respects, a strange argument. More than 60 years after the end of the Korean War, tens of thousands of American troops are still deployed there—in the shadow of Kim Jong Un's arsenal—without any hint of domestic controversy, because Americans long ago accepted that this was in the national interest. So too with the enduring U.S. military presence in Europe and Japan after World War II, and across the Middle East since the early 1990s.

In truth, the foremost responsibility of any president is to keep Americans safe. Preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a terrorist sanctuary from which attacks on America can be launched is as clear-cut a vital national interest as any in the world. If the price for this is a sustained military presence there—and the alternative, withdrawal, is more likely to result in a terrorist victory along the lines of what happened in Iraq after America left—that is not seemingly a prohibitively difficult case to make to the American people. On the contrary, it is telling that, almost 16 years after 9/11, there is no great groundswell of public protest or opposition to America's current operations in Afghanistan. In a perfect world, of course, U.S. forces wouldn't be required to stay in Afghanistan—or anywhere else for that matter—but as Americans long ago internalized, that is not the world they live in.

To his admirers and detractors alike, Donald Trump has promised to be a revolutionary force in U.S. foreign policy, prepared to overturn longstanding practices if they do not advance America's interests, and to deliver tough truths to the American people. That is precisely the opportunity, and the imperative, that now exists in Afghanistan. Rather than following the example of his predecessors in searching for an exit from the outset of his presidency, he can learn from their experience and commit to stay. In addition to being the only plausible path to a decent outcome in Afghanistan, it also has the virtue of never before having been tried.

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