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"It's unfortunate that the strategy review has taken so long and now has become involved in a political debate over what America's role in the world should be."

KRISHNADEV CALAMUR AUG 18, 2017



President Trump and his national-security team are meeting Friday at Camp David, Maryland, to discuss the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. The results of that meeting could have long-term consequences not only for both countries, but also for many regional powers engaged in a new “great game” in Afghanistan. At the heart of the deliberations lies one question: What more can the U.S. do in a country where it has been present for 16 years?

The answer isn't straightforward—if it were, there'd be an effective plan in place—and nor are experts on Afghanistan in agreement over what to do. General John Nicholson, the commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, has argued for a “few thousand” more troops who would train and assist their Afghan counterparts. Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater, wants private contractors to do the job being done by the U.S. military. Experts such as Barry Posen, who wrote in *The Atlantic* this morning, say it's time for the U.S. to leave. Others such as Senator John McCain want more troops to secure the country; still others point out that U.S. troops will not make a difference unless the Afghan state begins to function better and its security forces performs better on the battlefield.

Trump, who campaigned for president criticizing U.S. involvement in overseas conflicts, has made his views known, reportedly telling his top advisers he thinks the U.S. is “losing” the war; that if it stays it should find a way to benefit from Afghanistan's vast mineral reserves; and that he wants “to find out why we've been there for 17 years, how it's going, and what we should do in terms of additional ideas.” (The U.S. has been at war in Afghanistan for 16 year.) Those additional ideas include, Defense Secretary James Mattis said this week, a full U.S. withdrawal and the use of private contractors.

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James Cunningham, who served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2012 to 2014, told me that “it’s unfortunate ... that the strategy review has taken so long and now has become involved in a political debate over what America’s role in the world should be, and particularly in that part of the world.”

Cunningham, who is now a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council, told me part of the reason there are so many

different viewpoints on what to do in Afghanistan is because people have “the mistaken impression that we’ve been doing the same thing for 16 years and it hasn’t worked when, in fact, we’ve been doing very different things in Afghanistan over the last 16 years, trying different strategies, including a period when we ignored what was going on there and then realized when it was too late that there were serious problems that were returning, and then trying to fix that.”

Those problems included a resurgent Taliban and Afghan government infighting and corruption. While the militant group is nowhere close to being in control of the country as it was prior to the U.S. invasion, it holds enough of Afghanistan now to provide a disincentive to negotiate with the government. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Taliban controls or influences about 11 percent of Afghanistan’s 407 districts, the Afghan government controls or influences about 60 percent, and 29 percent of the districts remain contested. Some analysts say they believe those numbers are far too optimistic.

Christopher Kolenda, who served as the senior adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Department of Defense from 2009-2014, described the situation with the Taliban as “a teetering stalemate,” comparing it to a teeter-totter that is canted at roughly 65 degrees on one side and 35 degrees on the other.

“The teeter-totter has only got so much tolerance, so the Taliban are only going to gain so much more territory. Maybe 5 percent more,” Kolenda, who is now an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, told me. “The Afghan government has proven itself unable to retake territory that’s contested or under Taliban control. That’s unlikely to change appreciably as long as both sides have international support.”

Trump’s dilemma over Afghanistan reflects that of his predecessor, Barack Obama. As I’ve previously reported, Obama campaigned for president vowing to win the war in Afghanistan, but by the end of his term dramatically reduced the number of U.S. troops there. At one point, he reluctantly sent 30,000 troops to bolster security in the country on the advice of his military counselors. Obama’s goal in Afghanistan was to stand up the Afghan security forces to the point at which the Afghan government could take care of its own security. But critics point out that while Obama’s strategy for Afghanistan was realistic, its implementation was poor.

“We didn’t implement it very attractively at all,” Cunningham told me, “including by setting deadlines for withdrawal that just encouraged our adversaries to wait out the situation and discouraged our friends and partners who were afraid of what was going to happen when we did finally withdraw.”

Ronald Neumann, who served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, said Obama put timelines on

the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, but did not “resource those timelines.”

“The strategy is bringing means and actions together with goals,” Neumann, who is now president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, told me. “A lot of Washington discussions goes around as if you could separate those things. Obama separated them.”

None of the experts I spoke to said they believed that the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan be open-ended or that it should involve a large surge of troops. What they did say, however, was that any solution should result in an Afghan government capable of governing the country and security forces capable of fighting militants—or as Cunningham put it: “to ... move onto a strategy that involves heavy political and diplomatic focus on trying to find a way to bring the conflict ultimately to an end.” (They also commended Afghanistan’s U.S.-trained special forces, and said it was untouched by the dysfunction and corruption seen in other parts of the government.) Where they did disagree was what would happen if the U.S. withdrew.

“We don’t need to turn it into a model state,” Neumann said, but added that if Afghanistan fails there’s the danger of terrorist attacks in the U.S. and elsewhere. That’s a belief shared by many experts who see Afghanistan’s symbolic value for Islamist extremists: It is, after all, the place where the mujahedin defeated the Soviet Union, one of two global superpowers during the Cold War. If the U.S. leaves, they

argue, the Islamist fighters will believe they have defeated the world's remaining superpower, as well.

Kolenda disagreed. He said it would be a concern if Afghanistan descended into another civil war like it did in the 1990s, making groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS stronger. "At the same time, today is not September 12, 2001, and the situation in Afghanistan is very different, too," he said. "The U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities are very different. We need to bring our thinking to 2017—and not be trapped in 2001 or 2011."

That, ultimately, is what Trump's military advisers will likely be telling him. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is now at 8,500 personnel who remain in the country to train and advise Afghan troops and support counterterrorism operations, down from a peak of about 100,000. Trump had previously approved the deployment of 3,900 additional troops to Afghanistan, but Mattis hasn't yet sent those troops over, apparently because of Trump's reported reluctance on the issue. Whatever strategy the president chooses, he will be aware of the cost in dollars of the operations—about \$25 billion annually at their current level.

"If we just simply put this on autopilot, we're going to find ourselves four years from now, having spent over \$100 billion, and who knows the cost in American, not to mention Afghan, lives," Kolenda said. "With no appreciable difference."

Neumann, however, said additional U.S. troops could make a difference if one understands what their job is. “They are not there to fight an immediate war,” he told me. “They are there to take up the training and advising role that we left undone when we began to rush out of the country.” He said their presence “can make a difference in the performance of the Afghan army, but you will probably not see that difference for at least a couple of years on the battlefield.”

Ultimately, it’s almost impossible to answer what the correct U.S. strategy in the U.S. should be, just as it’s nearly impossible to say how many troops—if any—Trump should deploy as part of his strategic rethinking of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Cunningham told me the U.S. presence should be based on what is required to secure Afghan success in stabilizing their own security situation—something that could mean a low-level U.S. presence for sometime to come.

“We need to re-establish the foundation on which we’re operating and then draw down based on the conditions on which the Afghans are taking over the last bits of responsibility and capability,” he said. “That’s the hole we can fill. And how long we can do that, I don’t know, but failing to do that will produce a result that’s very predictable and it’s a very bad result.”