# 70. U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan

**Policymakers should**

- understand that escalating U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan is unlikely to decisively defeat the Taliban or its allies and may impede the creation of a durable and capable government there;
- realize that when the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, there is a risk that the Taliban or other organizations that we don't like could seize control of territory; and
- consider maintaining 5,000–10,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces but negotiate a time-table for the withdrawal of those troops by the end of 2020.

Since President Barack Obama announced the end of the United States' combat mission in Afghanistan at the close of 2014, U.S. troops in Afghanistan have assumed two, more limited, responsibilities: counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and now the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP); and a mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Although Obama had pledged to withdraw the United States' remaining troops by the end of his presidency, the resurgence of the Taliban prompted him to announce in October 2015 that at least 5,500 U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan through 2016. By July 2016, he had decided to leave 8,400 troops in Afghanistan through the end of his presidency. In essence, Obama ceded responsibility for the ongoing Afghanistan challenge to his successor. Under the Trump administration, the United States will therefore have to choose among three broad options: (1) escalate U.S. involvement in the ongoing Afghan conflict, (2) maintain a small force of U.S. troops in a train-advise-and-assist role for some period, or (3) complete the military withdrawal that Obama halted.

## Escalation

Some observers have suggested that, rather than withdrawing, the United States should reinforce Afghan forces. That could be accomplished in two different ways. The Pentagon could either deploy additional ground troops to resume combat operations in Afghanistan or ease restrictions that currently limit U.S. airstrikes in support of Afghan forces.

Deploying more U.S. troops to Afghanistan would be extremely unpopular. The announcement of the end of the United States' combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014 led most Americans to believe that our longest war would soon be at an end. Given that expectation, in conjunction with the bitter experience of the Iraq war, the resumption of combat operations would meet with considerable public resistance. Americans are understandably wary of seeing U.S. troops sucked into another foreign quagmire.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether another infusion of U.S. troops would do much good. After all, the troop surge that Obama launched in 2009 proved at best a temporary success. Though U.S. forces successfully suppressed the Taliban insurgency throughout much of southern Afghanistan, insurgents reasserted themselves following the U.S. withdrawal. There is no reason to expect that additional U.S. troops would now be able to impose a more durable peace. History shows that poor, ethnically fragmented societies recovering from foreign-imposed regime change typically struggle for years to establish peace and stability—and rarely institute sustainable democracy.

Rather than deploying more ground troops, policymakers might be tempted to expand U.S. airstrikes in support of Afghan forces instead. In addition to striking validated al Qaeda targets, U.S. air assets could target Taliban fighters—a practice that President Obama had for long stringently circumscribed. An escalation of airpower could seriously hamper the Taliban's ability to seize government-controlled territory and could prevent the Taliban from launching massed attacks against Afghan cities. But airstrikes are not a long-term solution. They would merely enable Afghan forces to keep the Taliban at bay for as long as the United States remains willing to provide air support.

Moreover, airstrikes cannot eliminate the root causes of terrorism. In fact, expanding the use of U.S. airpower in Afghanistan might actually undermine counterterrorism efforts by engendering greater anti-American resentment—within Afghanistan as well as in marginalized communities in the West. It is thus important to consider whether forestalling Taliban

expansion is worth the risk of fueling the recruitment of more anti-American terrorists.

## Maintenance of a Residual Force

A strong case can be made for maintaining a residual force of 5,000–10,000 troops in Afghanistan. Although the United States could attempt to deny al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan by prosecuting an ongoing drone campaign, maintaining a residual force in Afghanistan might help Afghan forces build the capacity to eventually keep the Taliban, ISKP, and al Qaeda at bay without continuing U.S. assistance. However, the continued presence of U.S. military advisers in Afghanistan might undermine confidence in the Afghan government, engender local resistance, or impede the move to self-sufficiency.

Over the past few years, in particular, Afghan government forces have struggled to suppress a resurgent Taliban. In 2015, the Taliban was able to concentrate large forces over more territory than at any time since 2001. Most ominously, in September 2015, Taliban fighters temporarily seized control of Kunduz, Afghanistan's fifth-largest city. Thus, it appears that Afghan forces are currently incapable of preventing the Taliban from reasserting its authority over at least some of the country. Although Afghan forces have gained tactical competency, a number of key capability shortfalls continue to undermine their overall effectiveness. Most notably, they lack the full range of airpower capabilities: mobility; resupply; aerial fire; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. In addition, because they have relied on the United States for supplies for so long, Afghan forces have failed to gain competency in logistics and sustainment. By helping Afghan forces build capacity in those key areas, the United States can improve Afghan forces' ability to execute combined arms operations and hold territory that has been cleared of insurgent fighters.

Even with U.S. assistance, however, Afghan security forces are unlikely to be able to secure the country as long as Pakistan continues to provide sanctuary and support to Taliban fighters. Although Pakistan has conducted limited military offensives in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), there is no indication that Islamabad is prepared to stop supporting Afghan insurgents. Pakistani officials remain fearful that Afghanistan might align with India, leaving Pakistan sandwiched between hostile states to the northwest and southeast. Given those fears, many Pakistani officials regard ongoing instability within Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghani state. The United States and Pakistan

thus continue to work at cross-purposes in Afghanistan. By continuing to support the Taliban, Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence are likely to counterbalance the limited training and assistance that a small residual U.S. force is able to provide Afghanistan.

Given that reality, the repeated extension of the U.S. mission to train, advise, and assist risks establishing a de facto permanent commitment to Afghanistan. Since Afghan forces will in all likelihood remain incapable of decisively defeating the Taliban insurgency, reasons not to withdraw will inevitably present themselves to U.S. policymakers again and again. After all, the Taliban's resurgence convinced President Obama to abandon his withdrawal plan.

## Withdrawal

Even though Afghan forces will likely remain incapable of securing their country, there are good reasons for U.S. forces to withdraw. Most important, there is essentially no significant al Qaeda threat emanating from Afghanistan. That is not to say al Qaeda has been defeated everywhere, but the threat the organization poses to the international community now comes primarily from outside Afghanistan. In the wake of the U.S.-led invasion, al Qaeda has sought refuge in Pakistan's FATA region. Meanwhile, numerous affiliated groups have sprung up throughout the greater Middle East, primarily in opposition to the so-called near enemy—apostate regimes in the Muslim world. Afghanistan is not a central front in the global war on terror.

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan is essentially a civil war whose outcome is inconsequential to the United States. After all, the Taliban has been actively combating the emergence of ISKP, a group composed largely of disaffected former members of the Taliban. And the Taliban's focus is on imposing an extreme version of Shari'a law within Afghanistan, not striking foreign enemies abroad. The organization thus does not pose a direct threat to the United States.

The continuing resurgence of the Taliban could present an indirect threat to the United States, if the group were to permit al Qaeda to ensconce and revitalize itself in Taliban-controlled areas. That is already happening, to a degree; as U.S. troops have gradually withdrawn from Afghanistan, al Qaeda has moved back into territory beyond central government control. In late 2014, a Pakistani military offensive prompted al Qaeda militants to migrate from sanctuaries in North Waziristan into Afghanistan's Helmand and Kandahar provinces. In both southern and

eastern Afghanistan, al Qaeda is reconstituting the type of training camps that it operated with impunity prior to 2001. In October 2014, the United States discovered and then destroyed a training camp in southern Afghanistan, which military officials described as one of the largest they had ever encountered. Unfortunately, although the Taliban has actively (and quite successfully) fought the spread of ISKP, it has evinced much more willingness to tolerate and even support al Qaeda—perhaps because al Qaeda has shown little interest in contesting control of Afghanistan.

Although the U.S.-led coalition clearly degraded al Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan, there are signs that the organization is poised to reconstruct its support networks and infrastructure in the country. A phased withdrawal of U.S. troops will consequently entail a risk that the Taliban could regain control over parts of Afghanistan and could once again make the country a safe haven for anti-American terrorists.

The prospect of al Qaeda, ISKP, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or any other terrorist organizations establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan, however, does not warrant leaving a large U.S. force in Afghanistan indefinitely. The most effective counterterrorism operations of the past 15 years have not depended upon large numbers of troops stationed on foreign soil. U.S. efforts should focus on helping the Afghan government establish its authority by providing security for its people.

It therefore makes sense to resume withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan. If U.S. policymakers choose to extend the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan past 2017, they should negotiate with Ashraf Ghani's government in Kabul to establish a clear timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces by 2020—an agreement that can be ratified by Congress. The virtue of such an agreement is that U.S. policymakers, by tying their hands, would inoculate themselves from the temptation to extend the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan in response to events on the battlefield— whether the situation has improved or not. Moreover, by signaling to Afghan forces that they will not be able to depend on U.S. advisers indefinitely, a timetable would provide a much-needed impetus to address key deficiencies in their forces. The United States could thus augment the ability of native Afghan forces to keep the Taliban at bay while finally extricating itself from Afghanistan.

### Suggested Readings

Dobbins, James, and Carter Malkasian. "Time to Negotiate in Afghanistan: How to Talk to the Taliban," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (July–August 2015): 53–64.

Jones, Seth G., and Keith Crane. "Afghanistan after the Drawdown," Council Special Report no. 67, Council on Foreign Relations, November 2013.

Stapleton, Bradford Ian. "The Problem with the Light Footprint: Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 792, June 7, 2016.

U.S. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, December 2015.

*—Prepared by Christopher Preble and Brad Stapleton*