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On Afghanistan, There's No Way Out

Bret Stephens AUG. 24, 2017

When it comes to Afghanistan, we've tried everything. The lesson is: Nothing works.

We've tried "light footprint." From the initial defeat of the Taliban in 2001 until 2007, monthly U.S. troop numbers never exceeded 25,000. Result: a reconstituted Taliban, their leadership secure in Pakistan, made inroads into more than half of Afghanistan.

We've tried big footprint. Barack Obama ran for the presidency calling Afghanistan "a war that we have to win." After he came to office, he ordered a surge that brought force levels to 100,000, along with tens of thousands of NATO troops.

Result: The Taliban were pushed out of many of their strongholds, which were brought under government control. But because the surge had a predetermined deadline, the Taliban knew they could wait us out. "NATO has all the watches, but we have all the time," went their refrain.

We've tried nation building. At least as of 2014, the United States had spent $104 billion on Afghan relief and reconstruction funds, most of it for security but also nearly $30 billion for "governance and development" and $7.5 billion on counternarcotics.

Result: As of 2015, more than three in five Afghans remained illiterate. Afghan

security forces lost 4,000 members a month — less to the Taliban than to simple desertion. The country ranks 169th out of 176 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, ahead of only Somalia, South Sudan, North Korea, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Libya. Opium production is surging.

We've tried killing terrorists. Lots and lots of them. As many as 42,000 Taliban and other insurgents have been killed and another 19,000 wounded in fighting since 2001, according to one rough 2016 estimate. The United States has also carried out more than 400 drone strikes in Pakistan, decimating Al Qaeda's core leadership. Last year a drone took out the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour.

Result: The Taliban's numbers in 2005 were estimated at anywhere between 2,000 and 10,000 fighters. Within a decade, those numbers had grown to an estimated 60,000 fighters.

We've tried carrots and sticks with Pakistan. In 2011, Washington gave $3.5 billion in aid to Islamabad. That same year we killed Osama bin Laden in the garrison city of Abbottabad. Then the aid plunged.

Result: Last month, James Mattis withheld another $50 million in aid because the Defense Department could not certify that Pakistan had "taken sufficient action against the Haqqani network," though Islamabad claims otherwise. American leverage with Pakistan has declined as Chinese investment in the country has surged, reaching $62 billion this year.

We've tried diplomacy. Getting the Taliban to the table was one of John Kerry's core ambitions as secretary of state. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, both made clear they were eager to reach an accommodation.

Result: The Taliban launched a rocket attack aimed at Kerry during his visit to the country last year. The group's insistence that all foreign troops withdraw before it enters talks gives away its game, which isn't to share power with the elected government, but to seize power from it.

What about two supposedly "untried" options: another surge, exceeding what Obama did in troop numbers but not limited by deadlines or restrictive rules of engagement; or, alternatively, a complete withdrawal of our troops?

But that's been tried, too. Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s practiced a "bomb-the-stuff-out-of-them" approach to warfare, likely including the use of chemical weapons. They devoted a decade to the effort and lost. America effectively abandoned the region, too, as we imagined life in a supposedly post-historical world.

We know what happened next. Between 1990 and 2000, tens of thousands of Afghans — as many as a million people, according to one estimate — died in three waves of civil war. The Taliban took Kabul in 1996; Osama bin Laden returned that same year. Pakistan and India tested nuclear weapons two years later. Then came Sept. 11, 2001.

President Trump may think he's trying something new with his Afghan policy. He isn't. Obama killed a lot of terrorists. George W. Bush pursued what amounted to a "conditions-based" approach, without target dates for withdrawal. Both were often stern with Pakistan. Both conducted intensive policy reviews.

Trump may also think he's going to "win" in Afghanistan. That's not happening either, not in our lifetimes. Even if we could kill every insurgent tomorrow, they would return, as long as they can draw on the religious fanaticism of the madrasas, the ethnic ambitions of the Pashtun, and the profits of the heroin trade.

A more forthright president might have leveled with the American people. We won't "win," at least as most of us imagine winning. But we can't leave, not least because it would create the kind of vacuum in Afghanistan that the Islamic State so swiftly filled, to such devastating local and international effect, in Syria and Iraq.

What can we do? With relatively modest troop increases, we can provide the elected Afghan government with sufficient military support to reverse some of the Taliban's recent gains and ensure that it cannot seize Afghan cities or control entire

provinces. With relatively modest troop numbers, we can also try to keep U.S. casualties relatively low over time, avoiding the political race to the exits when combat fatalities rise.

Bottom line: We need an approach that's Afghan-sufficient, from a military point of view, and America-sustainable, from a political one, for the sake of an open-ended commitment to an ill-starred country from which there is no way out.

Trump, incredibly, may have alighted on the best of a bad set of Afghan options.

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