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The US can't fix Afghanistan, and it should stop trying

by Bonnie Kristian
6/4/2017

Months have passed since we first heard the Trump administration is considering a new surge of United States forces in Afghanistan, and if the president is any closer to a decision than he was in February, mark that down as the one secret the White House has yet to leak to the press.

Trump's unpredictability makes it impossible to define what this delay might mean, but perhaps the wait can offer opportunity for more prudent and realistic counsel to prevail. Sending more U.S. soldiers to Afghanistan cannot and will not produce anything resembling a win—it will only protract the failed status quo of the country's longest war.

The surge proposal is lousy with the sort of familiarity that should breed contempt, because it is a reiteration of debates we've had at least four times before. Whether it's sending the oft-cited 5,000 or an ambitious 50,000 new troops, the basic logic is that more boots on the ground will serve to shore up an increasingly messy situation.

As Brookings' Michael O'Hanlon writes at USA Today in a representative argument for escalation, if "we want a robust eastern pillar in our broader counterterrorism network to take on foes ranging from the Taliban to al Qaeda to ISIS, an increase of several thousand U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan has a sound logic behind it."

Sure, O'Hanlon concedes, this is likely to further guarantee permanent U.S. occupation, with U.S. forces serving as Afghanistan's surrogate military forever. But in his telling, the 15 years of U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan since 2002—bought at a price of tens of thousands of U.S. and Afghan casualties, trillions of U.S. tax dollars, and a shambolic nation-building debacle—was just too passive, too half-hearted. These 5,000 more troops will finally do the trick.

Except, of course, they won't, and the "passivity" narrative of post-Sept. 11 foreign policy is so absurd it'd grow Pinocchio a skyscraper

The first point, the suggestion that a surge is all we need to build a "robust eastern pillar in our broader counterterrorism network," easily breaks down under scrutiny. At the height of the intervention, there were 140,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan. This was in 2011, and about 100,000 of that number were American.

Six years later, Afghanistan remains in utter turmoil. Basic institutions of civil society are nonfunctional. Corruption and insecurity are rampant, and it is no surprise the Afghan refugee crisis continues. The Taliban controls at least 40 percent of the country—and that's the conservative estimate. Some analysts suggest it's more like 90 percent, excluding cities. Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. has spent more on Afghanistan than the Marshall Plan which re-built Europe, and we've fought there for four times as long as U.S. combat participation in World War II.

The results of that investment are dismal.

In the context of this recent history, the surge case unravels.

What can 5,000 troops possibly accomplish that 100,000 could not? What will be different this time? What positive outcome is remotely plausible?

Wishing that a new surge will produce peace or even basic stability is not enough to make it so, and it certainly isn't enough to justify sending more Americans into harm's way. (The price, by the way, of maintaining a single U.S. soldier in Afghanistan for a year is nearly \$4 million. Even if a strategic case for escalation could somehow be mustered, the cost alone would require serious justification.)

The second point—that the flaw in recent U.S. foreign policy is inactivity—is almost too bizarre to countenance, and yet it is a favorite theme of the bipartisan foreign policy establishment. Unfortunately, this imaginative assessment seems to be persuasive to Trump, whose nascent foreign policy mainly consists of doing the same thing as his predecessors, only more. If he maintains that streak in Afghanistan, some surge seems likely to garner his blessing.

That would be a grave mistake. There is no reason to believe this escalation will make any security gains for the U.S. or even for the Afghan people. (It is telling no one bothers to argue a surge will make the U.S. safer, because the American public long ago realized occupying Afghanistan does not protect us.)

There is no definition of success, let alone a chance it will lead to victory, and it will not end the chaotic status quo.

The difficult but plain truth is that no amount of U.S. military intervention can impose an exterior stability on Afghanistan, however much Washington denies this fact. It is futile and dangerous to continue to try.

Bonnie Kristian (@bonniekristian) is a fellow at Defense Priorities. She's also a weekend editor at The Week and a columnist at Rare.

If you would like to write an op-ed for the Washington Examiner

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