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Donald Trump Recycles Failed Strategy In Afghanistan

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The Afghanistan war now belongs to President Donald Trump. His “path forward” with more troops and fighting will take America more deeply into a conflict it should have exited years ago. Indeed, the president recently complained: “we’ve been there for now close to 17 years, and I want to find out why we’ve been there for 17 years.” But if he learned the answer, he didn’t share it with the American people. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis admitted to Congress in June that “We’re not winning Afghanistan right now.” A policy of escalation will do no better.

The news in Afghanistan continues worsen. Civilian casualties rose to record levels in the first half of the year. Afghan soldiers and police also are dying in increasing numbers. The Taliban is fighting to control the most territory since America first intervened. As of February the Kabul government controlled or influenced just 60 percent of the country, down from 72 percent more than a year before. And Shashank Joshi of the Royal United Services Institute in London noted that “a lot of [Kabul’s] control is pretty tenuous.”

The issue is more than territory: the Taliban gained influence over an additional 3.4 million people. The insurgents operate openly an hour away from U.S. bases. As yet the Taliban cannot conquer and hold cities, but even Kabul is insecure. Reported Susanne Koebl for Spiegel online, the capital “resembles a fortress. It is currently undergoing its bloodiest period since the beginning of the U.S.-led invasion.”

When I visited six years ago caution was necessary but there was life beyond the walls of expatriate compounds. Alas, departing *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jessica Donati detailed how the city has become a war zone, where “The U.S. embassy deems the five-minute drive to the airport so risky that it shuttles staff there by helicopter.”

The Afghan government is frantic. Reported the *Washington Post*, the Afghans “said a clear signal of continued support from Washington is urgently needed to keep the fragile Kabul government on its feet amid an explosion of public unrest and organized opposition from a variety of groups.” Yet American support is not the answer. Argued Abdul Bari Barakzai of the High Peace Council: “people have lost trust in the government. No matter how many troops you bring now, it will have no lasting impact unless there is real reform and good governance.” Which no one expects.

U.S. military personnel are among the most cynical critics of the mission. Journalist Douglas Wissing observed: “Soldiers I met in Afghanistan complained about billions being spent on often-spurious development projects, while their own families back home were struggling. I encountered many offices desperately trying to reconcile their sense of duty with contempt for the extravagant U.S. support for the predatory Afghan government.”

Washington intervened in 2001 to destroy al-Qaeda, which organized the 9/11 attacks, and oust the Taliban government, which hosted the terrorist organization. These objectives were achieved within months, but the Bush administration shifted from counter-terrorism to nation-building, attempting to create a government in America’s image.

President Barack Obama initiated a double escalation, and U.S./allied troops levels peaked at 100,000/140,000, backed by almost 120,000 civilian contractors. Although the U.S. won any number of individual firefights, Washington could not resolve the larger political struggle. The central government survived only at foreign sufferance. President Barack Obama slowed his planned withdrawal, leaving the issue to President Trump.

So far the U.S. has sacrificed some 6000 lives (roughly 2400 military and 3500 contractor) and spent almost a trillion dollars—plus 1100 more lives and billions more dollars lost by allied nations. Yet most Afghans want neither foreign nor national rule: their world is the village and the valley. The U.S.-created central government is noted primarily for incompetence and corruption. The economy is largely based on opium and war. Kabul’s effective writ runs little beyond the capital city’s limits. The likelihood of the Afghan government sustaining itself without continuing allied support is nil.

The U.S. still has around 8400 troops, along with 5000 more allied personnel and 26,000 contractors, in Afghanistan. Americans continue to die. Earlier this year Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, called the situation a “stalemate.” When asked whether America was winning or losing, he responded neither.

What to do now? Before his election President Donald Trump called the war “a complete and total disaster” that had “wasted billion and billions of dollars and more importantly thousands of

thousands of lives.” He wanted America to “get out of Afghanistan.” He added that “We made a terrible mistake getting involved there in the first place” and wondered if “at some point, are they going to be there for the next 200 years.”

After the election he shifted position, suggesting that the U.S. might have to stay because of “Pakistan, which has nuclear weapons.” Last December he told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that he “would certainly continue to support Afghanistan security.” Earlier this year the president authorized the Pentagon to send another 3900 troops, but his obvious reluctance to back continued military involvement in Afghanistan caused Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to withhold the additional forces.

Administration officials struggled over strategy. Now, the president declared, the U.S. will do more of the same, only without specifics. Apparently more military forces with fewer restrictions. More demands on allies to contribute. More pressure on Pakistan to abandon the Taliban. More requests for assistance from neighboring states. And a commitment to “victory,” which in this case mostly means goals, such as defeating al-Qaeda and ISIS and preventing terrorist attacks, beyond Afghanistan. There the president merely proposes “preventing the Taliban from taking over,” which sounds like something decidedly short of what most people would consider to be “victory.”

National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster apparently backed an expanded and open-ended commitment, buttressed by a 3000 to 5000 personnel increase. One objective was to build up Afghan security forces which must, declared the Pentagon in its June report on Afghanistan, “weather the storm from the insurgency and deny the Taliban strategic victories on the battlefield, fight ISIS-[Khorasan], grow and train the [Afghan Special Security Forces], conduct planning to realign forces within the [Ministries of Defense and Interior], and posture itself to become a more offensive force in 2018.”

That would be a daunting agenda at any time, despite substantial U.S. backing for the Afghan army and police alike. For instance, Marines returning to Helmand Province noted the need for a robust Afghan police force to hold the territory they retook from the Taliban. However, explained the *New York Times*, “Despite years of Western training, the police forces, crucial to establishing government rule, are still seen as corrupt, tangled in tribal rivalries and the opium economy. They have little presence beyond the provincial capital.” The army, though performing better, suffers from similar defects. Additional U.S. trainers aren’t likely to remedy the underlying problems.

McMaster also argued that a troop increase would show resolve and help pressure the Taliban into talks. Similarly, explained Gen. Patrick J. Donahoe, “The end state is reconciliation with the Taliban, not a return to an ISAF and American combat role against the Taliban.” Vance Serchuk of the KKR Global Institute claimed that “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.” Afghan officials have made similar assertions.

Yet there's no evidence the administration has any plan for negotiations. Nor any means to manage brutally complicated Afghan politics, including: Pashtuns versus smaller ethnic groups, Pashtun ties over the "Durand line" into Pakistan, divisions among Pashtuns (particularly Durrani versus Ghilzais), rural religious conservatives versus urban religious liberals, and sundry regional warlords battling for money and control. Beyond Afghanistan other nations, especially Pakistan, treat the nation as a covert battleground. The State Department said that it is pursuing "a new, integrated regional strategy," but Pakistan will continue to promote its interest despite U.S. promises and threats.

Moreover, the modest troop increases apparently contemplated by the president would only marginally enhance the Ghani government's capabilities. If a fighting force of 140,000 couldn't achieve "victory," how would 20,000 do so? Indeed, Aaron O'Connell at the University of Texas argued that "an increase in troop levels might make things worse, because the Taliban has historically responded to American surges with escalations of its own." More foreign troops fighting in more areas likely would enhance Taliban recruiting, he warned.

Even the military appears to have but limited expectations. The most recent Pentagon report said America's objectives were to defeat al-Qaeda's threats, support Afghan security forces, and "give the Afghan people the opportunity to succeed and stand on their own." Secretary Mattis hoped that Kabul could contain the fighting with limited America aid despite "frequent skirmishing."

Gen. Nicholson spoke of breaking the "stalemate" which has developed in the Afghan war. Former U.S. commander David Petraeus and the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon hoped "an intensified military effort could arrest the gradual loss of territory held by the government in recent years" and "regain battlefield momentum." Finally, the president called for a "victory" in nothing but name: "preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan."

Although the force increase would be small, in practice the aid would be unconditional. True, the president declared that "our commitment is not unlimited, and our support is not a blank check," but who believes that having put his credibility on the line he is prepared to leave if the Afghans and others fail to play the roles assigned to them? Imagine the dire warnings of America's lost credibility and respect.

Some observers advocate dropping the pretense of relying on the Afghan government and returning U.S. forces to a combat role. For instance, retired Army Gen. Jack Keane proposed sending in units to fight with Afghan government forces—for "maybe two fighting seasons at the most," though recent experience suggests that limitation is unrealistic. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain forthrightly advocated permanent war, demanding "a strategy to win," which would "require more troops, thousands more. It's going to require more effort, it's going to require more money." And more lives.

Of course, officials routinely develop impressive-sounding plans with the usual imperatives: improve the number and training of Afghan security personnel, reduce corruption, promote political stability, defang warlords, convince the Taliban victory is unattainable, end Pakistani sanctuary and support for the Taliban and Haqqani Network, persuade average Afghans (and

Americans) that the government in Kabul is worth dying for, and more. But these all have been objectives for years. The claim that the latest in a long line of grand schemes will deliver the desired success seems particularly fantastic. Like many other advocates of increased action, the president doesn't bother to specify how he would, finally, overcome the many past barriers to success.

Most important, even if real success beckoned, why should Washington go to such effort? What U.S. interest would be served?

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, who lost a son in Afghanistan in 2010, contended: "If you think this war against our way of life is over because some of the self-appointed opinion-makers and chattering class grow war-weary, because they want to be out of Iraq or Afghanistan, you are mistaken. This enemy is dedicated to our destruction."

Yet his assumptions are completely wrong. The opinion-makers and chattering classes in Washington are overwhelmingly pro-war, led by the same ivory tower warriors who so often plot grand crusades with other people's lives. Average folks who saw their family members and friends die in Afghanistan for no reason are most dissatisfied with the endless war. Only rarely do Washington elites, such as Kelly, bear the costs.

Moreover, America's real enemy in 2001 was not the Taliban but al-Qaeda, which since has been scattered, only to find sanctuary elsewhere. Washington had to strike in *neighboring Pakistan, a nominal U.S. ally* to kill the group's leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban is a national Islamic insurgency, not a transnational terrorist organization, and would not likely invite back a group which previously misused its hospitality, triggering a foreign invasion. The Taliban wants to kill Americans fighting against it in Afghanistan, not those living across an ocean thousands of miles away.

Central Asia intrinsically has little importance for Washington. Of course, as a superpower America has "interests" everywhere, but few much matter, and especially enough to warrant going to war. The U.S. worried about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 because of its impact on the larger Cold War struggle and the possibility that Moscow might advance further in an attempt to dominate the Persian Gulf. Today an invasion by Martians is about as likely.

Even more so, the U.S. has little interest in who governs Afghanistan. The kind of government and degree of central control didn't matter to the U.S. until a specific terrorist attack in a world which no longer exists. Al-Qaeda remains a threat, but no longer is tied to Afghanistan. The Taliban does not threaten America. The Islamic State has arrived in Afghanistan, but should be left to the Taliban, which has battled the new organization. Of course, it would be best if Afghanistan developed in a humane, liberal direction, but sympathy cannot justify years of military intervention.

President Trump claimed that "the security threats we face in Afghanistan and the broader region are immense," pointing to the "20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations ... active in Afghanistan and Pakistan," which are there *despite* 16 years of war in Afghanistan. He cited chaos and violence in Pakistan, which is exacerbated by the conflict in its neighbor.

The president also worried about “tense relations” between India and Pakistan, which go back to the two nations’ joint founding and about which Washington can do little. Indeed, the U.S. has fueled anger in Islamabad by essentially taking India’s side in Afghanistan. The president compounded that problem by insisting that Pakistan change its behavior while talking up America’s “strategic partnership with India.”

The president presented escalation as an attempt to redeem the lives of those who have already died: “our nation must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifice of lives.” Making a similar plea was Ahmad Shah Katawazai, a defense liaison at the Afghan embassy in Washington,: “We need to send a message to the families of the fallen that the mission their loved ones gave their valuable lives for has been accomplished.”

Economists call this the fallacy of sunk costs. What has been spent is gone. Those who have died cannot be resurrected. The president’s overriding responsibility is to the living. The best way to honor the dead is to send no more to die needlessly. Only future gains could justify sacrificing more lives, and Afghanistan promises few of those.

What of American credibility? The ever-hawkish *Wall Street Journal* announced: “U.S. Presidents can’t withdraw from national commitments without consequences.” However, commitments should be tied to American security and are not immutable. A stubborn refusal to adjust to changing circumstances creates its own credibility problems.

Without America’s heavy presence, could Afghanistan draw surrounding nations into the conflict? Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran all have significant interests in Afghanistan’s orientation and future. Which ensures that all will remain involved irrespective of Washington’s wishes since all have far more at stake in Afghanistan than does America. As the president noted, nuclear-armed Pakistan is a particular concern, but the ongoing conflict, highlighted by Washington’s pressure on Islamabad to act against its perceived interest, increases the danger. Barnett Rubin of the Center on International Cooperation argued that “a sustained diplomatic effort, coordinated with military and economic aid, might be able to deescalate” regional tensions. But Washington has not been inactive over the last 16 years. And the hope seems wildly overoptimistic, given America’s role as a combatant and difficult relations with most of the surrounding states. Better for American troops to be out of the conflict.

Finally, most advocates of continued intervention, including the president, point to the threat of terrorism. In his televised speech he warned that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum” that could be filled anew by terrorists. Secretary Mattis told the Senate Appropriations Committee that “Our primary national interest and the international interest in Afghanistan is ensuring it does not become an ungoverned space from which attacks can be launched against the U.S., other nation, or the Afghan people.” Petraeus and O’Hanlon similarly warned against allowing the country to become “once again a sanctuary for transnational extremists.”

These, at least, are mature presentations of the argument. Unsurprisingly, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) offered a simpleton’s version: “Every soldier over there is an insurance policy against our homeland being attacked.” Katawazai turned the claim into pure parody: “If the streets in

Kabul are not secure, we cannot secure the streets of New York, Washington, London or Paris.” With a similar mindset Petraeus and O’Hanlon argued that casualties in Afghanistan “would likely remain far fewer than the losses from another major terrorist attack in the U.S.”

Such claims ignore reality. Gen. Nicholson missed the obvious connection when he told Congress that after years of conflict Afghanistan “has the greatest concentration of terrorist organizations in the world.” Unsurprisingly, *war has fostered terrorism*. Expanding the conflict will do more of the same. And there currently is plenty of Afghan territory beyond Kabul’s (and America’s) reach available for terrorists.

Ironically, a Taliban victory would close off some of those so-called havens since the movement would not likely want a repeat of its previous ouster because of al-Qaeda’s activities. Of course, a peaceful, stable, liberal, pro-Western Afghanistan also is possible—in an alternate universe. But even then Afghanistan would contain substantial remote and inhospitable terrain.

Moreover, there also are plenty of ungoverned spaces elsewhere, including within U.S. allies, such as Pakistan. Afghanistan is largely irrelevant to the problem of terrorism. Better for America to employ a targeted counter-terrorism operation when needed than impose an endless occupation when it is not. Washington also should emphasize making fewer foreign enemies and improving domestic security.

Proposals to turn the war over to military contractors wouldn’t relieve the U.S. government of having to decide how many fighters and how much money for how long and for what purpose. It is more difficult for the Pentagon to oversee contractors than its own personnel. Nevertheless, Afghans would see contractors as representing Washington and hold the U.S. government responsible for their actions. Worse, Americans still would be paying and dying in a mistaken war.

Afghanistan is a great tragedy. But the question of who will govern that nation is of little concern to America. Neither is the country itself. Unlike other, uglier times, there are no hegemonic, totalitarian states with malign intent ready to fill the proverbial vacuum. Today few problems in other nations require Washington’s attention, let alone intervention.

Yet Washington’s involvement in the Afghan is rapidly approaching the 16-year mark. U.S. military forces long ago fulfilled their initial objectives of wrecking al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban. In contrast, nation-building has been a failure. The Taliban is gaining, the Islamic State is threatening, and the Kabul government is faltering. American forces can’t even trust the Afghan troops they train.

Americans have been fighting in Afghanistan almost five times longer than in World War II. It is time to end Washington’s longest war.

Four years ago Donald Trump tweeted: “We should leave Afghanistan immediately. No more wasted lives.” He was right then. That should be his administration’s policy today.