

Leaving Afghanistan Won't be Easy

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Getting into Afghanistan was easy. Working with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, US special forces and CIA paramilitaries quickly overcame resistance leading to the fall of the capital Kabul. American Marines and Army units soon followed to finish the job. By the time I arrived in Kabul in late December 2001 both a US Embassy and CIA Station were up and running and fully staffed. Soon thereafter, the country had an interim government to be followed by Hamid Karzai as the new president, reportedly because he was able to speak good English, which made him ipso facto the best qualified candidate.

To be sure, Usama bin Laden and many Taliban escaped to Pakistan due to the pusillanimous decision making of General Tommy Franks at the battle of Tora Bora, but the United States could nevertheless have pulled up stakes at that point and left the country to the Afghans to sort out. The Bush Administration thought otherwise and decided to stick around for a while to stabilize the situation and “build democracy.” More than 100,000 American soldiers eventually wound up in the country supplemented by NATO allies to suppress any Taliban or al-Qaeda resurgence while rebuilding the Afghan Army.

That was nearly seventeen years ago and 14,000 US troops remain in country. More than 2,000 Americans and 90,000 Afghans have died in the process of nation building while more than a million more Afghans are refugees. The Afghan Army continues to struggle with a 30% annual desertion rate and some are beginning to ask how it is that a lightly armed and relatively untrained Taliban is able to engage it with success, in the process reacquiring control over more than a third of the country. And al-Qaeda is still around while ISIS has also appeared, having been largely driven out of Iraq and Syria.

Even though President Donald Trump has taken his generals' advise and increased the number of US soldiers in Afghanistan – yet another surge – many in Washington believe that he is seeking a way out and will order a staged withdrawal before the end of the year, possibly before the November elections. If that is so, the recent talks between US diplomats and Taliban representatives are significant in that they might lead to a political settlement in which the Taliban has some designated role in a new government arrangement. Skeptics, of course, note how such agreements are not worth the paper they are written on and the Taliban will simply bide its time before eliminating its weaker coalition partners.

Those who are arguing for what would appear to be a permanent US military presence backed up by air power believe that there are several good reasons for hanging on. The basic argument is that it is essential to keep the Islamist Taliban out. It is also argued that

the appearance of ISIS and persistence of al-Qaeda suggest that a genuine terrorist threat remains. And then there is the always useful geostrategic issue, namely that the increasing role of China in seeking to develop a “new silk road” through Afghanistan to the West must be monitored lest it bring about a new political alignment in central Asia. China is, of course, the over-the-horizon threat to American military hegemony that the military industrial complex dreams about to keep the money flowing into the coffers of the defense contractors and congressmen.

There are several problems with the thinking behind the permanent garrison in Afghanistan that is being promoted:

- First of all, there are no indications that the Afghan Army will ever become more effective, meaning that whatever happens the Taliban will continue to gain strength and territory until it again becomes the Afghan government. Trying to avert that outcome by way of a money pit training program is futile.
- Second, the terrorist threat is greatly overstated. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS are non-government actors that are in Afghanistan and Pakistan only because it is currently available. They are not friends of the Taliban and any Taliban government would not share power with them with the understanding that the US would bomb Kabul back into the stone age if it were to accommodate them.
- And third, what China does will not be seriously impacted whether it is being watched by Washington or not. Beijing has been successful exploiting its own form of economic imperialism and it is a neighbor to Afghanistan. An empowered US Embassy backed up by a few thousand troops will not change that.

So getting out of Afghanistan is a lot harder than getting in and the US military appears to be mired in a conflict where it is most engaged in avoiding defeat. A continued large US presence in Afghanistan does little more than create a group of hostages to a policy that is not working and which has already cost trillions of borrowed dollars. It is time to end the farce right now and leave. The Afghans are a fiercely independent people who recognize an invasion and occupation by foreign armies when they see it. They successfully resisted Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the Mughal Emperors of India, the British Empire, Soviet Russia and eventually they will also outlast the United States. Time for America to realize all that and pull the plug.

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