

The Afghan Endgame

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President Obama's decision to withdraw another 34,000 troops from Afghanistan over the course of the next year is unwise. It greatly increases the risk of mission failure in that important conflict, jeopardizing gains already made in the Taliban heartland in the south and compromising the ability of Afghan and coalition forces to finish the fight against the Haqqani Network in the east. It also increases the risk that al Qaeda will be able to reestablish itself in limited safe havens in Afghanistan over time. Removing troops and capabilities before Afghanistan's next presidential election, scheduled for April 2014, further exacerbates the danger that Afghanistan might collapse into renewed ethnic civil war.

It was not as bad as it might have been, however, and prospects for success in this conflict remain, although the odds grow ever longer. The president appears to have yielded to military realities and the laws of physics on a number of important points. The drawdown itself is paced to keep a significant number of American troops in Afghanistan through most of this coming fighting season: Around 6,000 troops are to be withdrawn between now and this spring; another 8,000 by November; and the final 20,000 by February 2014.

Senior administration officials explained on background that the first stage of this withdrawal is already underway and results largely from the deployment of brigades configured to conduct training and advising missions rather than combat. General Joe Dunford, the new commander in Afghanistan, will therefore have to redeploy only another 8,000 troops while fighting the enemy this summer—a far more manageable challenge than if he had had to redeploy the full 28,000 while still trying to accomplish his primary mission of helping the Afghans defeat our common enemies and consolidate gains. Administration officials also said that a sizable contingent of planners and logisticians now in Afghanistan to design and execute the drawdown are not counted against the total troop numbers—a vital fact, since writing and implementing such a plan is a massive undertaking that could well otherwise consume the staffs and commanders who must focus on continuing progress against the enemy and training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The president has also postponed an announcement—and, according to administration officials, even the decision—on the size of the post-2014 U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. That postponement is very wise. The discussion of the long-term presence is premature at this stage of the campaign. It is impossible to describe the security situation in 2015 before the 2013 fighting season has even begun. And considering that administration officials were floating the idea of keeping no troops at all in Afghanistan after 2014 when President Hamid Karzai came to Washington in January, the deferral of a decision on this matter is a relief.

Perhaps the most encouraging part of the change in the White House decision-making is that—according to senior administration briefers—plans to cut the ANSF by more than 100,000 troops starting in 2015 are not final. It appears that the president is considering supporting the current force of 352,000 ANSF troops through 2017 instead. Maintaining a large ANSF is absolutely vital. It is almost impossible to imagine a security situation in 2015 in which dismissing more than 100,000 trained Afghan soldiers and police (meaning unemployment for many of them) makes any sense. It is equally important to wait until we have seen how Afghan forces perform after the American and international mission changes in 2015 before deciding on the future size and composition of those forces.

It is still possible, therefore, that coalition and Afghan troops may be able to hold onto gains already made and even expand them over the course of this fighting season. That hope justifies continued support for an important mission, as well as continued

pressure on the White House to reduce the enormous risks it is assuming in Afghanistan in pursuit of extremely small rhetorical, political, and economic benefits.

The cost of keeping 14,000 troops in Afghanistan until next February rather than bringing them out by November is budget dust in the context of overall defense spending, let alone the national debt, the deficit, or any major social program. Even the cost of keeping all 34,000 troops now scheduled to come out over the next year in Afghanistan for another six or eight months would hardly register compared with other budget items. Administration officials accurately and honestly insisted that withdrawing those forces increases the risk of failure in Afghanistan. Accepting that increased risk—on top of the enormous risks the administration has already accepted by previous premature troops withdrawals—is difficult to justify.

The president's decision on Afghanistan was not as bad as it might have been—indeed, it was not as bad as it seemed certain to be at the start of this year. It leaves a glimmer of hope for success, which our commanders, troops, and diplomats in the field will exert all their powers to keep alive. But it was still a mistake that puts our nation's security in greater jeopardy. We hope that the president will continue to reevaluate his own willingness to accept risk in light of the rapidly diminishing economic and political returns he will receive from lowering force levels.

The war in Afghanistan is not yet lost. We are not yet losing, in fact, and success remains possible. But it is absolutely vital that the White House give General Dunford some flexibility to adjust the withdrawal timelines, and even to ask for temporary reinforcements, as the situation on the ground evolves.

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