

Afghanistan: It's Too Late

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When Donald Trump's secretary of defense, James Mattis, was called before the Senate Armed Services Committee this week to testify about the conflict in Afghanistan, he was unusually blunt: "We are not winning in Afghanistan right now," he said. The Taliban have been on a dramatic offensive, he acknowledged, the security situation continues to deteriorate, and the Afghan government holds considerably less territory than it did a year ago. In other words, prospects for any sort of positive outcome are as remote as they have been in this sixteen-year war—the longest war in American history.

Yet Trump—and Mattis's—solution to this unwinnable war seems to be once again to send more troops. On Tuesday, Trump announced that the military itself would be given full authority to decide how many troops it needs. (By leaving all decisions in the hands of the military, he has abandoned the usual inter-agency consultations, especially with the State Department.) And Mattis is talking about a review to be completed in July that could add as many as 5,000 troops. It may be too late.

Afghanistan now faces a far deeper crisis than many seem to understand. Warlords and politicians—including cabinet members—are calling for the resignation of President Ashraf Ghani and his security ministers, accusing them of incompetence, arrogance, and stirring up ethnic hatred. There are as many as ten public demonstrations a day in the streets of Kabul, carried out by young people and by relatives of those killed in recent bomb attacks.

In early June multiple suicide bombings in Kabul killed over 170 people and wounded some 500. Terrorists managed to get a massive truck bomb into the heavily guarded diplomatic quarter, where it exploded, killing mainly civilians—a clear indication of collusion with security officers. Neither the Taliban nor the Islamic State claimed responsibility. The Taliban have now launched ground offensives to take more territory and to capture the northern city of Kunduz, a city of almost 300,000 that they tried twice last year to seize. If it falls now to the Taliban it would be the first major city they have re-occupied.

Afghanistan's neighbors, meanwhile, are becoming increasingly restive about the US-led counterinsurgency: Pakistan continues to give sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, including the Haqqani group—the most vicious arm of the Taliban—while Iran and Russia are also providing support (the exact amount is unknown) to the Taliban. These regional powers believe that the Taliban could provide a bulwark against the spread of ISIS into their territories and do not want Pakistan to monopolize influence over the Taliban. They want to limit US power in the region. The influence of ISIS in Afghanistan, which was once relegated to the single eastern province of Nangarhar, is now expanding, and the group claimed responsibility for a horrendous early March attack on Kabul's military hospital in which fifty patients and doctors were killed and ninety wounded.

Still, even more dangerous than the deteriorating security situation is the political crisis now unfolding in Kabul. The lack of trust between president Ashraf Ghani and his CEO or prime minister, Abdullah Abdullah, has led to a paralysis in governance and social services. Senior officials in the army and bureaucracy are choosing sides. Many bureaucrats and teachers have not been paid for months due to the lack of funds. Prominent warlords now turned politicians are increasingly siding with the opposition and demanding that Ghani resign and fresh elections be held.

Ghani is deeply unpopular. Many Afghans now regard the government as illegitimate, a regime that would not survive at all if it were not propped up by the US and NATO, who jointly have some 13,000 troops in the country. Two years ago the US brokered a coalition government between Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah in order to paper over a heavily rigged election. (It was rigged by both candidates and the two candidates bickered for months about who actually won, before the Americans stepped in.)

But Ghani, a Pashtun, has never fully shared power with Abdullah, a Tajik, and has been accused of stuffing the government with his fellow Pashtuns. Cabinet members such as the foreign minister and a special representative of the president, and warlords such as the influential Ismail Khan from Herat—all once loyal to the coalition—are now demanding Ghani's resignation and fresh elections because they are fed up with his seeming incompetence, his arrogance, and his unwillingness to work with the coalition.

Until now, Western forces have been able to keep the government in power by financing the budget and paying salaries and maintaining the Afghan army in the field. But it has become increasingly difficult, with the Taliban advancing in many parts of the country making US and NATO forces look increasingly irrelevant. Opposition politicians have been willing to contradict the Americans, but that may be changing.

In view of the growing brazenness of Taliban attacks, there are now deep fissures in the US National Security Council between those, including Mattis, who want to send thousands more US troops in a last-ditch effort to save the regime from collapse and those, such as adviser Steve Bannon, who want the US to walk away from what is clearly a failing military endeavor and a failed state. But Trump's decision this week to hand over the troop decision to the military itself suggests that those arguing for a new troop surge will get the upper hand. This is a hopeless strategy.

No matter how many troops Mattis decides to send this summer, it will not rectify the political crisis in Kabul. In the absence of clear engagement with the Afghan government, or demands that Ghani create a more inclusive coalition government and yield some of his powers, more US troops will only make things worse.

Nobody in Washington appears interested in exerting more political pressure on the Kabul regime, Pakistan, and the Taliban to begin negotiations that could lead to a ceasefire and a political agreement. To continue seeing the conflict only through the prism of war and troop numbers as the US does will only lead to continuing erosion of the government's legitimacy, and loss of territory. Taliban attacks will increase, there will be continued loss of territory, and the government may collapse. This is a recipe for failure.