

AFGHANISTAN AFTER MATTIS: A REVISED STRATEGY TO FOCUS ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND THE AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The center of gravity in the U.S.-led NATO mission in Afghanistan should be modified. The focus should not be on nation-building writ large. Nor should it be on helping the Afghan government extend its control over more of the country's territory—a desirable, but nonessential, objective. Rather, the emphasis should be squarely on making the Afghan security forces more resilient and capable. Doing so will likely keep the country's cities and main roads in government hands, allowing the United States to preserve counterterrorism capacities in South Asia for the long haul. This goal would be more readily achieved by keeping U.S. force totals near their current 14,000 troop level for some time to come. But it can also be attempted, with reasonable prospects, at smaller deployment figures if necessary, given President Trump's potential interest in reducing the American military presence in Afghanistan by perhaps a quarter to half soon. To pursue these objectives, Washington should support Afghan policies like the following:

- Take the Afghan National Army Territorial Force concept to scale in 2019-2020, ultimately building dozens or even hundreds of company-sized formations of perhaps 200 soldiers or so each. Since many Afghans prefer to defend their home territories rather than distant parts of the nation, this concept should help greatly with army recruiting and retention.
- Emulate the rotation and rest policies of the Afghan special forces within the regular army and police, who at present rarely get leave time or down time—even at the cost of temporarily giving up protection of some remote regions of the country.
- Consolidate police checkpoints into fewer, better defended outposts so they are less vulnerable to being overrun by Taliban ambush. In some cases, remote sensing with technology can partially replace the role of the closed checkpoints.
- Help the Afghan government acquire more battlefield medical evacuation capacity (including with helicopters) as a top priority, so that it can keep more of its wounded forces alive.
- Provide members of the Afghan parliament and other officials modest funds to hire small personal security details so they will make fewer demands on the regular police to protect them.

INTRODUCTION AND CORE PROPOSAL

Seventeen years after the fall of the Taliban, why are we still at it in Afghanistan, and what can the United States with its allies realistically expect to achieve there? The first question is not hard to answer: preventing terrorists operating from that nation from again attacking the West (or trying to destabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan or spark Indo-Pakistani war). The second is, however, a conundrum. Battle against today's Taliban appears stalemated, at best, even after President Trump's mini-surge of U.S. troops from about 10,000 to 14,000 last year, together with more U.S. bombs dropped in 2018 than in any other year for at least a decade.¹ There is much hope for the new round of peace talks. But we cannot assume peace as the basis for our strategy, since it may not happen soon, and since doing so may encourage the Taliban just to wait us out rather than deal.

A recent research trip to Afghanistan impressed upon me some hopeful signs. They include: a larger and tougher Afghan special forces community numbering around 20,000 troops that knows how to fight, especially when teamed with American advisors; a fledgling but improving Afghan air force that just conducted its first night attack; a new concept for a "territorial force" within the Afghan army that would be recruited, trained, and operated locally in key parts of the country; a U.S./NATO command that feels energized under its new leader, General Scotty Miller, one of the finest officers of America's forever-war generation.

And Afghans in the police force and army continue to fight and die for their country to the tune of 7,000 to 8,000 killed in action per year—figures confirmed to me in conversation during the trip

to Kabul (the actual numbers remain classified). While such loss rates are tragic, they also show the patriotism of a force that is proud to protect its fellow Afghan citizens. And Afghan citizens tend to appreciate their security forces, especially the army, as the latest Asia Foundation "Survey of the Afghan Population" again underscores—despite concerns about corruption and uneven professional performance in the field.² Indeed, by the standards of war zones, Afghan civilian casualties in this fight, while obviously deeply regrettable, are not astronomically high.³ Afghan soldiers and police, as well as the Taliban, are doing most of the dying. My point here is not to trivialize the human or strategic consequences of any type of violence, but only to counter the impression that Afghanistan is a failed state beset by rampant and constant violence.

Moreover, while the government only controls some of the country—corresponding to about 55 percent of all administrative districts, where about 65 percent of all Afghans live, according to CIA estimates—it does hold all the major cities and most roads.⁴ For narrow American counterterrorism purposes, that is probably good enough. Working with Afghan allies, it allows us to monitor, strike, and thus contain groups like al-Qaida and the potent ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan known as "ISIS-Korasan." The latter group, which has sworn allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is growing, and attempting to ensconce itself in the hinterlands of eastern Afghanistan where it can patiently build an infrastructure out of which a large future caliphate could gradually emerge. We cannot know just how grave a threat to Western security "ISIS-K" could become. But nor should we wish to find out. The United States has other strongholds from which to conduct counterterrorism in the broader Middle

1 Phillip Walter Wellman, "The U.S. Has Dropped More Munitions in 2018 in Afghanistan than It Has in any Year in Over a Decade," *Stars and Stripes*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/the-us-has-dropped-more-munitions-in-2018-in-afghanistan-than-it-has-in-any-year-in-over-a-decade-1.558577>.

2 Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People, Afghanistan in 2018* (San Francisco: Asia Foundation, 2018), pp. 1-13, 58-61, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018_Afghan-Survey_fullReport-12.4.18.pdf.

3 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2018" Kabul, Afghanistan, February 2018, <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-10000-civilian-casualties-2017-un-report-suicide-attacks-and-ieds-caused-high-number>.

4 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," Washington, D.C., October 2018, pp. 65-71, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf>.

East: Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Djibouti, and ships in the Mediterranean. Afghanistan, however, provides the only platform for such efforts in South Asia.

To be sure, for good political reasons, the Afghan government needs to sustain a narrative of how it wishes to extend control, protection, infrastructure, and government benefits to all of its people over time. But it need not be in a rush to achieve such goals, and the United States need not emphasize them in its own depiction of the NATO mission or in its own planning. Most of all, it is important to counter the common perception that because much of rural Afghanistan is not firmly controlled by the government, the war is somehow already being lost. That is the implicit message many deduce from official American assessments of the war's course that focus on district-by-district security trends. But it is not true.

The casualty rates of Afghan forces, however, are dire. They represent an existential threat to the Afghan nation—and thus ultimately to the U.S. counterterrorism capability in South Asia. Already, together with ongoing cronyism in the leadership of the army and police, those losses lead to high AWOL rates and challenges in meeting recruiting targets. (President Ashraf Ghani has made some headway on the corruption and cronyism matters—for example, retiring 4,000 unproductive senior officers—but there is lots more to do.) Afghan national security forces are 10 to 20 percent below authorized strength as a result.⁵ Greater shortfalls could result, if for example the Afghan presidential elections now scheduled for 2019 worsen political or ethnic fissures.

For all our frustrations in the longest war in American history, there is no reason to abandon the effort. President Trump reportedly intends to cut the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan by roughly

half within months.⁶ That would be regrettable, but likely not fatal to the mission. It would be better not to rush these cuts from 14,000 U.S. troops (and other 10,000+ contractors and Department of Defense civilians) down to 7,000 or 8,000. Doing so would likely require an end to the U.S. and NATO mentoring operations with Afghan special forces and the major Afghan regional commands or corps—the 201st, 203rd, 205th, 215th, 207th, 209th, and Kabul district. It could easily also lead to less airpower support (from any source) for those forces when they find themselves in battle. It was such changes, made prematurely in the latter years of the Obama administration, that led to substantial setbacks such as the loss of much of Helmand province and associated collapse (since largely repaired) of the Afghan Army 215th Corps. It would weaken the trust between Washington and Kabul, since Afghans cannot themselves be expected to endorse an Afghanistan policy emphasizing only counterterrorism.⁷ In a worst case, it could also increase the chances of a catastrophic failure of the Afghan army and police, or its fracturing along lines of ethnicity and patronage, during a future political or security crisis. The fate of the Iraqi army in 2014, faced with a new ISIS threat, should be instructive here.

Still, barring such a worst-cast catastrophe, not all would be lost by a halving of the U.S. (and presumably NATO) presence. While regrettable, and premature, such a drawdown is not necessarily incompatible with an acceptable outcome, provided that the United States retains its remaining forces in Afghanistan for some time. They could still allow some degree of military support, accompanied by a continuation of very generous U.S./NATO financial assistance, for Afghan forces. Afghans would still potentially get a lot out of the bargain. This approach would also preserve core American

5 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," October, 2018, pp. 66-67.

6 Nancy A. Youssef and Rebecca Ballhaus, "James Mattis to Depart as Defense Chief Over Troop Withdrawals from Syria, Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-mattis-retiring-at-end-of-february-11545344800>.

7 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "President Trump's Afghanistan Policy: Hopes and Pitfalls," Brookings Institution, September 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/president-trumps-afghanistan-policy-hopes-and-pitfalls>.

counterterrorism capabilities (in the form of some airpower, special forces, and intelligence capabilities). There is no reason to consider a presence of 7,000 or so U.S. troops in Afghanistan (plus a roughly comparable number of American contractors/civilians) unsustainable. Sure, it would be nice to bring all our forces home soon. But it is more important to protect the homeland from extremist violence by retaining US intelligence and counterterrorism capability against al-Qaida, ISIS, and affiliates in South Asia for as long as needed.

However, for the strategy to succeed, we need to work with the Afghan government to make its army and police more survivable and sustainable. That requires ideas like these, to reduce casualties and improve recruiting and retention:

- Try to take the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF) concept to scale in 2019-2020. Since many Afghans prefer to defend their home territories rather than distant parts of the nation, this concept should help greatly with recruiting and retention. The force might not grow to the 60,000 size once envisioned for the Afghan Local Police or ALP (a much less well regulated and trained construct associated with the surge of U.S./NATO forces in Afghanistan in the early Obama years), but it could reach the low tens of thousands, perhaps. These ANATF units are to be trained, equipped, and supervised as full-fledged members of the army, a wise distinction from past efforts. Past efforts with initiatives like the ALP should make us sober about the prospects for quick success with the ANATF. But even gradual progress could help the mission a good deal.
- Emulate the rotation and rest policies of the Afghan special forces within the regular army and police. Today, most soldiers and police rarely get leave time or down time. To make such changes possible, the Afghan government will have to give up protection of some remote regions of the country at least temporarily. That is suboptimal but acceptable—and indeed prudent, since without strong and sustainable Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), no part of the country will ultimately be safe. Such a policy would have the regular army and police follow the “amber, yellow, green” cycles of the special forces, with explicit and well-planned periods for home leave, training, and then deployment or operations.
- Consolidate police checkpoints into fewer, better defended outposts so they are less vulnerable to being overrun by Taliban ambush. Taliban forces are often capable of marshaling many dozen or even a few hundred irregulars in one place for surprise attack, so even with the advantages of firepower and protection, it would seem that any fixed location for the army and police should typically have at least dozens of personnel located within its perimeter (and quick response forces within reasonable range for reinforcement). In some cases, remote sensing with technology can partially replace the role of the shuttered checkpoints, but again this approach will necessitate giving up government presence or control of some remote areas. That is okay from an American perspective, if we bear in mind the core objectives of the United States. Someday, the Afghan government could still aspire to reassert its control and influence of these areas, and it should tell its people and its voters that it has such intentions. But they cannot and need not be an immediate priority.
- Help the Afghan government acquire more battlefield medical evacuation capacity as a top priority, so that it can keep more of its wounded forces alive. Perhaps this could be achieved in the first instance with private security contractors, equipped with helicopters, if Afghan forces do not yet have the requisite mobility.
- Provide members of the Afghan parliament and other officials modest funds to hire small personal security details so they will make fewer demands on the regular police to protect them.

Although some of these ideas are not entirely new, they should be given a new urgency as part of a redefinition of the center of gravity of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan to focus on the well-being, capability, and most of all sustainability of the Afghan police and army. Precise trends in how much of the country the government does or does not hold matter less than questions about whether the army and police, presently adequate to secure major cities and most roads, can continue to do so.

THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

As noted, many are pinning their primary hopes for the Afghanistan mission on a negotiated settlement to the war. This seems sensible, after so many years of fighting, that has left every major party to the conflict bloodied and fatigued.

Why, then, be wary of the peace process, as I am? The core problem as I see it is that both main Afghan parties to any deal, the government and the Taliban, would expect to come out ahead in the overall distribution and balance of power in any agreement. I fear that their aspirations may be mutually incompatible, and that talks may ultimately go nowhere. This danger has probably been increased due to President Trump's December 2018 decision to halve U.S. forces in Afghanistan in early 2019—a decision that may not be binding, but that the Taliban have already heard and digested. The Taliban, already of the view that they were winning on the battlefield, may simply stall for time, expecting that the United States (and thus its NATO and other foreign allies) will ultimately leave in frustration. The Taliban may in fact be wrong that such a development would ensure them a military victory over the Afghan government, especially if the latter continued to receive financial support from the international community. But if the Taliban believe such victory likely, they are less likely to compromise in peace talks.

Or, even if successfully negotiated, the wrong deal could wind up failing. Many peace processes do succeed, at some point, as from Mozambique to Cambodia to Colombia to El Salvador to Nicaragua in recent decades. But often, they take many years, and they may also require that one side to a conflict accepts that it has been largely stymied or defeated on the battlefield, making it more flexible in the terms of peace that it will accept.

In this case, the Taliban likely believe they have some degree of military momentum, together with the advantage of strategic patience. As the old adage goes, Americans may have the watches, but the Taliban has the time. The fact that the United States has displayed considerable strategic patience over these last 17 years should partially counter such a narrative. However, the fact that President Trump, like his predecessor, clearly would like to end the American military role in Afghanistan works at cross-purposes with any U.S. desire to project resoluteness.⁸ Moreover, while their foot soldiers suffer mightily in this battle, Taliban leaders safe across the Pakistani border in Peshawar and Quetta continue to lead relatively easy, safe, and prosperous lives. And the Pakistani state, particularly its Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), may continue to prefer an ultimate Taliban victory over any alternative outcome. Doubting America's commitment too, and fearing India's influence with a future Afghan government, it may continue to support, or at least condone and tolerate, Taliban operations planned from its own soil.⁹ This is an unwise and counterproductive policy for the ISI, and the Pakistani state, but it is deeply entrenched.

The Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani probably has a sincere desire for peace. But Ghani has made clear that he is not interested in conceding the presidency or key security ministries to the Taliban as part of any interim government of

⁸ See Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2012).

⁹ See Madiha Afzal, *Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2018); Bruce Riedel, *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2011); and Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

national unity, and that any changes to the country's government structures and power distributions will have to occur constitutionally.¹⁰ More likely, any deal will offer provisions to hire individual Taliban soldiers into the future army or police forces after suitable vetting, to allow the Taliban to form a political party and compete in future elections, and to allow Taliban leaders to move back to Afghanistan while keeping much or most of their money (however illicitly earned it may have been). These would be generous concessions by Kabul, at one level. But at another, they would reflect the ongoing belief of a popularly-elected and constitutionally-legitimated national government that there is no equivalency between its own standing and that of the Taliban. Only if the latter effectively did more than half of the conceding and compromising would any deal therefore be likely.

Assuming that the above views are roughly correct, and that peace talks reach an impasse, more creative and disruptive ideas may be considered. For example, Afghanistan's constitution could be modified to allow the direct election of provincial governors and city mayors by local citizens (today, all are appointed by the president, as a result of the constitution approved back in 2004 and written with a large degree of U.S. influence). Such a move towards decentralization would be consistent with much of Afghanistan's history, in which the traditional regions around Kandahar, Herat, Mazaar-e-Sharif, and Jalalabad had a considerable degree of autonomy and clout.¹¹ In such a situation, the Taliban might hope to win some elections in the country's east and south, even if it were unlikely to win a national vote at the presidential or parliamentary level.¹² Indeed, if the nation's security forces increasingly feature ANATF units, the Taliban might even have a hand in creating much

of the local security presence in areas it controls politically (under at least loose central supervision, and with limitations on the size and combat power of those ANATF units).

On balance, even with such disruptive ideas including constitutional reform on the table, the right attitude to maintain in regard to the peace process is one of skepticism and patience. Negotiated peace is the right outcome, probably the only way to end this war. But any expectation that it will happen fast or on terms that Washington and Kabul now prefer would be an unwise foundation for strategy.

AFGHANISTAN AND THE AUMF DEBATE

Consideration of where we stand in the Afghanistan war should be one of the key factors informing any efforts by the 116th Congress to review and reconsider the 2001 Authorization on the Use of Military Force (AUMF). That AUMF, now more than 17 years old, provides the main legal basis for operations against extremists from Afghanistan—the location from which the 9/11 attacks were first planned, and thus the logical first focus of that 2001 legislation—to Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and even Niger. It has, in the eyes of many, been twisted and stretched multiple times to justify operations against entities that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. Even for those of us who are more flexible and forgiving about how the legislation has generally been employed, it must be acknowledged that it is getting old and that it seems to provide a justification for “forever war” well beyond the locations of strongholds of al-Qaida and affiliates or allies. It was only these latter groups that the 2001 law aimed to target.

10 Ayaz Gul, “Afghan President Announces Team for Peace Talks with Taliban,” *Voice of America*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-president-announces-team-for-peace-talks-with-taliban/4677826.html>.

11 See for example, Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton and Oxford, 2010); and Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

12 For somewhat related views, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Ballots and Bullets in Afghanistan.” Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Laurel Miller at RAND, as well as experts at the U.S. Institute of Peace, are also doing important thinking about the possible parameters of a peace agreement, though of course it is ultimately Afghans who will have to decide if and when and how to reach such an accord.

Advocates of a new AUMF tend to favor restrictions on the geographic scope, time duration, and targeting flexibility of any future U.S. military operations. Clearly, as the focal point for the initial planning of the 9/11 attacks and the sanctuary from which al-Qaida leadership then operated, Afghanistan would seem to qualify as within the reasonable geographic limits of any future law. But revised legislation needs to be drafted carefully. If focused on only a few specific groups, it would be vulnerable to the possibility that a wily future terrorist entity could simply change its name while maintaining much of the membership, operational networks, and underlying philosophy and goals of al-Qaida or ISIS. For example, even if “ISIS-K” were included as within the purview of a new AUMF, that group might rename itself as something to the effect of “the South Asia Caliphate” under some future new leader. There would have to be a means for the intelligence community to evaluate whether any such new derivative or offshoot were itself threatening enough to the United States to be brought within the scope of a future AUMF; otherwise, the restrictions of a new law could be severely injurious to the security interests of the United States and its allies.¹³

And as for time duration, while it seems reasonable that any new AUMF should only cover a certain number of years, drafters of the legislation would have to be careful. Given Washington’s recent penchant for playing brinkmanship with everything from judgeships and political appointments to the annual federal budget process, one worries about a scenario in which an AUMF expires but Congress and the president fail to consider a successor bill in time to allow ongoing operations against very real threats. As such, any new AUMF should include

a default mechanism allowing crucial military operations to continue if it expires without Congress having yet voted on a proper replacement.

AFGHANISTAN AND AMERICAN POLITICS

As the 116th Congress settles into town and the 2020 electoral campaigns quickly approach, how should each political party think about the Afghanistan mission?

On the one hand, the war remains frustrating and costly. There are nearly 15,000 U.S. troops involved—not counting regional forces or temporary units. The cost to the United States of this ongoing operation is probably about \$25 billion a year, plus or minus several billion.¹⁴ American fatalities have been in the range of 10 to 20 per year since the major drawdown of forces was completed towards the end of President Obama’s term in office.¹⁵ Original goals of helping build a stable, functional Afghan state have generally not been met, and nation-building remains as unpopular as ever within the United States political discourse. A modest majority of Americans say they would prefer to downsize or end the Afghanistan operation.¹⁶

On the other hand, the simple fact remains that the United States has not again been attacked by any group operating principally out of Afghanistan or environs since 9/11. A couple of Afghans or Afghan-Americans have attempted or carried out lone-wolf attacks since then, but on the core goal of protecting the homeland, it would seem that the Afghanistan effort to date has been a general success.

13 For a thoughtful view, see Denis McDonough, “Can Congress Stop the Forever War?” *Foreign Affairs*, December 17, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/12/17/can-congress-stop-forever-war-pub-77987>.

14 Congressional Budget Office, “Funding for Overseas Contingency Operations and Its Effect on Defense Spending,” Washington, D.C., October 2018, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files?file=2018-10/54219-oco_spending.pdf.

15 Statista, “Number of Fatalities Among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 through 2018,” Hamburg, Germany, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan>; and Nese F. DeBruyne, “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., p. 23, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf>.

16 Charles Koch Institute, “New Survey: Seventeen Years On, Americans—including Veterans—Want Out of Afghanistan,” Arlington, Va., October 8, 2018, <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/afghanistan-17-anniversary-poll>.

It may also be worth noting that Afghans helped America and its allies win the Cold War by defeating the Soviet Union on their territory in the 1980s, at huge human and national cost to the Afghan people. Few foreign countries have contributed as much to U.S. security historically. This is not a reason to reinforce a failing mission, or to overlook all the corruption and poor performance of many Afghans since 2001. But it is worth bearing in mind when Americans feel that they are being taken advantage of by allies around the world. Whatever the merit of that argument in other places, it applies much less to Afghanistan and the Afghan people.

Both political parties seem to be toying with the idea of opposing the Afghanistan war and trying to end the U.S./NATO mission there as soon as possible. But they should be careful. The Afghanistan war polls badly, to be sure, but there is very little intensity around the issue. It did not factor importantly into the 2012 or 2016 presidential elections and it rates very low on a list of issue priorities in virtually any poll done in the United States in recent years. If and when the United States pulled out of the effort, and as a result a terrorist group could use parts of Afghan territory to organize an attack of significant consequence on the U.S. homeland, the politics could work very badly against whichever party were seen as the main driver of that decision to leave. For President Trump, it would counter his claim back in 2015 and 2016 that a Trump presidency would ruthlessly target ISIS and other terrorists. For Democrats, it could conjure up memories of when the party was seen, in the years and decades after Vietnam, as weak on national security. Again, political paranoia is no reason to sustain a failing mission. But if the mission is troubled, challenged, and frustrating, yet not failing—as I believe to be the case—it is important for both parties to think two or three steps down the road politically, and not be guided simply by current polling numbers.

CONCLUSION

With improvements in U.S./NATO and Afghan strategy that emphasize the sustainability and gradual improvement of the Afghan security forces, even at the expense of losing a bit more territory to Taliban influence in the future, Washington can achieve its core objectives in South Asia. Moreover, it can do so at reduced cost and risk. A 50 percent drawdown of U.S. forces in early 2019 is undesirable and unhelpful for achieving this goal—but is not at complete odds with it, either. In other words, while I would not recommend such a rapid drawdown, I would argue that the mission's prospects would probably not be fatally undermined by it either.

After such a redefinition and refocusing of the mission, and even after a possible 50 percent drawdown of U.S. and NATO forces in early 2019, most Afghans would also continue to enjoy a happier life than in the 1980s or 1990s. Success in the form of outright military victory or a comprehensive building of the Afghan state would likely continue to prove elusive for years to come. But the U.S./NATO mission in Afghanistan can likely work with the Afghan government to protect the West from large-scale terrorist attacks originating in South Asia, while declining in size with time. And Afghans can sustain the patient hope that their country will gradually stabilize and improve over time.

Such goals may not sound very Churchillian. But they are what is now realistic—and, for core American national security interests, they are probably also good enough.

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