

Developing a Plan for Afghanistan

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### **Abstract**

The United States of America is faced yet again, with conflicting interests of withdrawing from the Middle East. This report will address the overarching question: why is it in the United States' best interest to withdrawal from Afghanistan? The total deployment numbers, military personnel loss and overarching costs of the war are astounding. The United States is continually pouring money, lives and time into a country with no established end goal in sight. To save taxpayer dollars and remove military personnel from harm's way, the U. S. first needs to create a stabilizing framework for the Afghani government to work from. Then, conducting a slow withdrawal out of the country would prove to be the most significant choice in preserving allies and avoiding another instance like Iraq. Once all boots are off the ground in Afghanistan, U. S. policy makers can reallocate the saved money from Afghanistan to fix current domestic issues.

### **Afghanistan**

Following the horrific attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States invaded the country of Afghanistan. During this time, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan gave sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden and refused his return, while also granting Al-Qaeda a safe haven in which they trained and fought. In August of 2009, President Barack Obama stated, "We must never forget: This is not a war of choice, this is a war of necessity" (Shapiro, para. 5, n.d.). Now, sixteen years after the U.S. invasion and capture of Bin Laden, the legitimacy of a "necessary war" in Afghanistan appears to be in question. Military personnel and their families have begun to object to the length and frequency of the deployments along with the "stop-loss" policy. The once broad international support of the U.S. in the region has significantly crumbled and any end goal on a military, political or economic spectrum is still nowhere in sight. Therefore, the withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan is imperative to ensure that the United States expends no more time, money, nor lives in a drawn out conflict.

### **Active Numbers**

According to the U.S. Department of State, "the United States had approximately 9,800 troops in Afghanistan in 2015 and 2016, drawing down to 8,400 in January 2017" (USDS, para. 4. n.d.). The troop numbers have depleted since the death of Bin Laden in 2011, when there were an assumed 100,000 U.S boots on the ground in the region (Kurtzleben, para. 2, 2016). Taking a glance back to 1979, the Soviet Union's entry in Afghanistan will prove that numbers and brute force alone will not work in gaining peace for the region. The USSR's attempt to stabilize Afghanistan and subdue a low-level insurgency lead up to 115,000 troops on the ground in 1984. Yet, after ten years of conflict, Soviets were still unsuccessful in stabilizing the country.

Now, for six years the original entry goal of capturing Osama Bin Laden has been met and the threat of Al-Qaeda and Taliban adversaries has notably plummeted. Yet, without an established mission objective or alert order (ALERTORD) from policy makers and top military leaders, the United States continues onto another years' worth of uncertainty in a country that has

trounced more than a single empire in recent centuries.

### **Death Count**

Above and beyond the number of troops on the ground in Afghanistan comes a number far more important, the U.S. death toll in Afghanistan. Since 2001, coalition military fatalities in Afghanistan have reached a staggering 3,529 with U.S. personnel accounting for 2,293 of the total count (Michael White, para. 5, n.d.). Improved Explosive Device (IED) attacks constituted for a great deal of deaths during the beginning and middle of the war. However, the new concern is blue on green attacks of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) turning on their help, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Despite the ISAF's considerable efforts, the current training strategy allows for additional seepage of terrorists into the system and another way to attack U.S. forces. That being said, "the rise in insider attacks, by either rogue elements in the ANDSF or by Taliban operatives who have infiltrated the ranks of the national military and police, have begun to shake the faith of even the most ardent supporters of the war effort" (Munoz, para. 8, 2012). With ambivalence in the overall goals for the U.S. in Afghanistan and plummeting support for the war in general, it is hard to justify keeping those uniformed American lives in peril.

### **Economic Distress**

Finally, numbers concerning all Americans are the total of taxpayer dollars that are going into the war in Afghanistan. Before leaving office, Obama and the Secretary of Defense had a request defense budget of \$582.6 billion dollars, including the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget of \$58.8 billion (USDOD, p. 9, 2016). The requested defense budget will make up 14% of the requested total federal budget for the year of 2017. In 2014, Obama's requested defense budget was a total of \$612.5 billion dollars. According to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, the requested defense budget allocated to each soldier in Afghanistan for 2014 was astounding. "The cost per service member deployed to Afghanistan rises to \$2.1 million in FY 2014, compared to an average cost of \$1.3 million per deployed service member from FY 2008 to FY 2013" (Harrison, p. 17, 2013). Though the FY2017 defense budget request is less than of that in the FY2014 defense budget, tensions are currently rising in North Korea and Syria in ways they had not in February 2016 when the budget was requested. Thus, spending could far surpass the requested number if the U.S. enters on to yet another front.

If the U.S. rationally pulled out of Afghanistan, the billions of dollars spent on supporting military personnel alone could be used much more efficiently in fighting domestic issues. The *Cost of War* project analysis by Heidi Garrett-Peltier suggests that the war "affected the ability of the US to invest in infrastructure and probably led to increased interest costs on borrowing, not to mention greater overall federal indebtedness" (as qtd in Crawford, p. 18, 2016). The money saved in Afghanistan could go towards paying off a nation-wide debt that will slowly surpass \$20 trillion dollars by the end of the year. Given that there is no ALERTORD in place, taxpayer's dollars are continuing to fund stagnant military operations in Afghanistan. Support from the American public, military personnel and their families, and U.S. allies continue to plummet. Taking every number and aspect of the war into consideration, it is clear that

withdrawing from Afghanistan is the best decision the United States can make.

### **Potential Solutions**

A withdrawal from Afghanistan is imperative for the United States. This can be done in two ways: an indefinite withdrawal, or a slow withdrawal. Sebastian Gorka, a director of the National Security Fellows Program and Military Affairs and Fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracy, insists that a framework must be set in place prior to withdrawal. This framework will ensure that all the U.S. has already done in Afghanistan does not get squandered.

First, the U.S. must help implement a charismatic Pashtun leader that is respected amongst the other ethnicities in the country. Not only will he represent the majority, but he will also be able to make peaceful negotiations amongst the other groups. The next mission will include appointing members of the government from all of the remaining ethnic groups. This will allow them to feel as if their voice is heard. For instance, a Tajik council minister, a Hazaras provincial governor, and an Uzbeks and Turkmen national assembly. Then, the U.S. must help ensure the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is secure from all sanctuary terrorists in the region. Creating a buffer zone and eliminating proliferation into the country from radical extremists should support the democratic system. Finally, in addition to Gorka's framework, U.S. forces must continue their work with ISAF forces to help train the ANDSF to a high enough level to defend themselves. In doing so, U.S. forces must also disguise and infiltrate the ANDSF, while using covert action to eliminate blue on green attacks before they happen. Once this is standing order, the U.S. can pull out of the country without years' worth of effort collapsing.

### **Indefinite withdrawal plan**

An indefinite withdrawal plan from Afghanistan is a plausible solution. Much like the Outside Continental United States (OCONUS) bases of South Korea and Germany, Afghanistan gives the United States a strategic placement of active duty military personnel. These units are constantly ready to deploy if anything were to take place in the surrounding countries. Given the current escalating issues in Syria, this withdrawal plan may not be so out of reach. Cantonments could remain in major provinces such as Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, Kandahar and Helmand that are on the border of Pakistan, as well as Kunduz, a hot spot for Taliban fighters. Those units will work with the ISAF to continue training the ANDSF. The rest of the units would proceed to complete reverse debarkation and return to the U.S.. Several afloat supports can remain outside of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea for resupply lines and assisted help if needed. Backfill units will be set in place from bases in Germany, Italy, and Djibouti. An indefinite withdrawal would continue to hold the original framework in place while deterring outside threats. Taxpayer dollars would continue to support the military personnel living in Afghanistan. However, much like South Korea, keeping U.S. forces on foreign soil for the protection of that country is cheaper for the United States. Thus, the U.S. will save money while also obtaining a strategic placement of troops.

### **Slow Withdrawal Plan-**

The second option, a slow withdrawal, may prove to be the most significant choice in preserving political allies in the surrounding regions and avoiding another instance like Iraq. The

effects of a multi-lateral phased drawdown in the region would be two-fold; a sustainment force could be utilized in small-scale military operations to prevent a vacuum of U.S. presence, as well as drastically decrease the overall cost of military operations.

The U.S. could deploy several specialty TDY brigades to Afghanistan to continue ISAF operations training the ANDSF, which advances the original framework. The units could also help maintain a secure Afghanistan and Pakistan border while in the area. Then, conversely pull out half of the total force currently stationed in the country since, “the single largest component of DoD’s military personnel costs is basic pay for active duty personnel” (Harrison, p. 6, 2013). As previously stated, the last count taken in 2016 by the U.S. State Department of U.S. military personnel serving in Afghanistan was approximately 8,400 U.S. troops. Assuming this year each of these 8,400 troops cost an average of \$1.8 million dollars to deploy, pay and provide a general duty of care to (\$0.3 million dollars less than the FY2014 defense budget request), doing so would result in the monetary gain of at least \$8.82 billion dollars (Harrison, p. 17, 2013).

Not only would a slow phased draw down place billions of dollars back into the U.S. system, but it would also eliminate the chance of lost military personnel lives, of which there is no number great enough to suffice. Although a slow withdrawal plan may take more time and money than other choices, it will ensure that a complete debellatio is not created once U.S. forces are removed. Thus, avoiding the power vacuum effect seen in recent history. The United States would slowly eradicate all involvement in the country and would, in turn, induce the Afghani government to fight for their own land.

### **5. Conclusion/Recommendations**

A quote frequently ascribed to Mark Twain is that “history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme”. Afghanistan is unfortunately no different. Therefore, it would be in the United States’ best interest to withdrawal from Afghanistan in a structured and timely manner. Now, after sixteen years, the United States is obliged to making this decision for the safety of their military personnel and the counterpoise of their economy. Although each withdrawal option is feasible, a slow withdrawal is the only choice that will end in a desirable result. An immediate withdrawal will fail Afghanistan, just like Iraq, and will create a power vacuum for the remaining Taliban, whereas, an indefinite withdrawal is another futile attempt. As long as there are boots on the ground in Afghanistan, it will be considered a deployment and not an OCONUS base. As long as there is western influence in Afghanistan, there will be conflict. A slow withdrawal will prove to be the most significant choice in preserving political allies in the surrounding regions, maintaining the most stable framework for the region, ensuring ANDSF forces are sufficiently trained and avoiding another instance like Iraq. Afghanistan is a lost cause, and it is imperative that the United States to stops pouring more money, lives and time into it.

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