

Report

Afghanistan and the U.S. Strategy to Defeat ISIS

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US President Barack Obama speaking during a visit to US soldiers at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan [EPA]

Abstract

While the unfolding Syrian crisis is expected to dominate the foreign policy debates in Washington and throughout the various European capitals, NATO must continue to prioritize its presence in Afghanistan in order to help protect the fragile gains achieved over the past decade by keeping a robust troop contingency beyond 2016. As part of a diplomatic strategy to strengthen the Afghan government, President Ghani received significant regional support for his quest to advance the country's embattled peace process with the Taliban at the newly completed Heart of Asia conference in Islamabad, Pakistan. While the country's fragile peace process is receiving support from China, India and Pakistan, a long-term NATO military presence is required to help bring the Taliban to the negotiation table. If anything can be learned from the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, it is that a persistent military presence is far cheaper and a more effective strategy to help build a fragile state from the ground and up while preventing insurgents from changing the facts on the ground.

Introduction

Amid renewed calls for a more robust U.S. strategy to defeat the Islamic State group in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Paris, the Afghan war is moving into its fifteenth year without any end in sight. While President Obama warned against being "drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria,"⁽¹⁾ only weeks prior to Sunday's prime-time address to the nation, he quietly agreed to extend the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan despite initially having pledged to withdraw all but a small U.S. force before leaving office in January 2017.

Obama's decision to protect the fragile gains achieved in Afghanistan over the past decade while pushing back against fresh calls to double down against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, underscores the difficult choices Washington must take as it faces a prolonged war, again without any end in sight, against a host of extremist organizations operating in large parts of Africa (Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia) and throughout the Middle East and the Af-Pak region.

But although the Syria crisis may dominate the current political conversations in Washington and throughout the various European capitals, there is still a strong case to be made for continued Western support for Afghanistan. It is equally encouraging that the United States, China, India and Pakistan are actively seeking to revitalize the stalled Afghan peace process while simultaneously shoring up the government of Ashraf Ghani. Washington, along with its regional partners, understand that while only a political process can ultimately bring peace to Afghanistan, a robust international security presence in the country must be maintained in order to prevent extremist groups from leveraging their negotiation positions vis-à-vis the Afghan government by changing the facts on the ground.⁽²⁾

It is equally important that Washington, with a unified NATO behind it, makes clear that insurgents cannot simply wait out international troops by taking advantage of artificial timetables set for a complete withdrawal based on fatigue of the Afghan war throughout the West. In an increasingly interconnected world, where the ISIS brand of terrorism has spread from Syria to Afghanistan, it is critical that NATO's political and military leadership make the case to the American and European publics for why a robust commitment to Afghanistan is necessary to stem the tide of global jihad. Discussions centering on a drawdown from Afghanistan for only to call for increased military pressure on ISIS in Syria once a new terrorist attack takes place in either Europe or the United States is not a responsible comprehensive strategy, but merely resembles a whack-a-mole game with international terrorism that the West cannot afford to play in the long run. President Obama underscored this danger during his recent prime-time address to the nation.

Sustaining International Troop Levels

Afghanistan's future has widespread security implications for the West. The substantial withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan after NATO's International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission ended in 2014 has created a vacuum, allowing extremist groups such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda and now ISIS to step up their deadly hit-and-run attacks after having successfully captured large swaths of territory within the Kunduz, Nangahar and Kandahar provinces. The Taliban has also been able to carry out large scale and highly symbolic terrorist attacks in Kabul, including on the nation's Parliament this past summer. The fall of Kunduz City last October illustrates both

strategically and symbolically the inroads that extremist groups are making across the country. 2014 was the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since 2001 in terms of Afghan civilians killed.⁽³⁾ There are few reasons to expect things to improve anytime soon as fighting between the Taliban and Afghan security forces continue. Besides establishing significant footholds throughout Afghanistan, some of these groups may also potentially use them as platforms to carry out large scale terrorist attacks against the West in the not too distant future. While Syria is attracting the bulk of foreign Jihadist fighters at the moment, should the West manage to contain this flow, it must make sure that it does not leave other potential destinations wide open.

Furthermore, as a result of the deteriorating security situation in the country, Afghans now constitute the second largest group of refugees in Europe, after Syrians. According to the UNHCR, 64,000 Afghans were registered entering Greece in October alone.⁽⁴⁾ With no end in sight of the conflict in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan asylum seekers in Europe is expected to continue in 2016, further straining already struggling European economies and risking creating even more political backlash at home.

Protecting Gains, Revitalizing the Afghan Peace Process

Secondly, the enormous strides Afghanistan has made over the past decade are often underplayed, if not outright ignored. Despite a plethora of shortcomings, the international community has made significant progress on a number of development goals in Afghanistan ranging from education and public health to protecting women's rights and transport infrastructure. Last year's peaceful transfer of power from the Karzai-administration to President Ghani is also a significant achievement in itself. The deteriorating security situation and the donor community's disengagement from Afghanistan means that many of these gains are now in jeopardy.

Still, there are some positive signs too: The newly completed Heart of Asia conference, hosted by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, successfully boosted regional support for President Ghani's quest to advance the embattled Afghan led peace process. While expectations for an immediate diplomatic breakthrough are glum, increased Af-Pak military cooperation against militant hideouts along both sides of the border are within reach. For the Afghan peace process to ultimately succeed, Indian-Pakistani distrust must be bridged: Presently, Pakistan fears an Indian encirclement by New Delhi's strategic alliance with Kabul which helps explain Islamabad's historic support for the Afghan Taliban. Over the last decade, however, Pakistan has itself become a victim of the Taliban insurgency it once supported in Afghanistan. A growing understanding that bringing Afghanistan's war to an end requires a regional solution serves as an important impetus of bringing the leaders of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India together. By seeking U.S. and Chinese support for a longer diplomatic process, of which the ongoing conference is an important component, the two great world powers could over time

pressure Kabul, Islamabad and New Delhi to take the necessary steps to form a unified security architecture to fight and ultimately defeat regional extremism. While this diplomatic strategy is key, it can only succeed with the necessary NATO military presence in Afghanistan to prevent militants from changing the facts on the ground in their favor. If this strategy were to succeed in bringing about lasting peace in Afghanistan, it may even provide a template for how to solve other complex crises such as Syria.

Conclusion

Finally, there is the issue of NATO's legacy in Afghanistan. While there can be no doubt that NATO has a newfound post-ISAF rationale in countering Russian aggression in Europe following the Ukraine crisis, and that European powers are becoming more concerned with the security situation in the Mediterranean than Central Asia, a collapse of Afghanistan would cast more doubt on the entire state-building agenda. If so, we could see a further reduction in the appetite for Western interventions, at a time when the need for stability promotion is arguably higher than ever in Europe's neighborhood.

While Syria is and will likely continue to top the Western foreign policy agenda for months, the West should not take its eyes off Afghanistan. In a country where NATO troops have struggled for a decade and a half to bring stability, repeating the Iraq 2011 scenario of walking away prematurely would be detrimental not only to Afghanistan's future but also to broader international security goals. While the country's fragile peace process involving key regional players is showing a semblance of hope, the risks entailed in a return to full-on conflict in Afghanistan are also great. This is why NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's recent announcement that NATO will maintain around 12,000 troops throughout 2016 as part of Operation Resolute Support is a positive step.⁽⁵⁾ However, a modest but serious NATO commitment is also needed beyond 2016 to help lock in fragile gains while ensuring that the worst-case scenario is avoided. If Iraq teaches us anything, it is that a persistent presence is a far cheaper and more effective strategy than picking up the slacks again once a place blows up.

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