



PERSPECTIVES

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The US Does Not Lose Much by Withdrawing from Afghanistan

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,114, March 17, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In December 2018, the Trump administration announced that its military will start withdrawing roughly 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in the coming months. Though the decision seems an abrupt shift in the US's 17-year-old war in Afghanistan, it fits into the American grand strategy of keeping Eurasia divided.

The US decision to withdraw about 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in the coming months seems to go against recent developments inside that country. Afghanistan just saw a spike in violence (terrorist attacks, etc.), largely caused by elections. It raises eyebrows on the foreign policy level, too, as Russia, Iran, and Pakistan – all of which have difficult relations with the US – will try to use the American withdrawal to their own respective advantage.

Washington's decision is being viewed by many (quite correctly) with consternation, as the withdrawal of these troops can be regarded as a continuation of a major trend under the Trump administration: withdrawal from major treaties and global responsibilities the US has had for decades, since the end of the Cold War. The decision follows a similar one on Syria, where the US plans to reduce its military presence to a minimum. Together, these moves conjure the idea of a global retreat by the US.

There are, however, counterarguments to the scenario of an American global weakening. First, it should be noted that the number of troops to be withdrawn from Afghanistan is about half the number the US has in the country. Moreover, the pullout does not mean Afghan troops and security contingents will be left unprepared. In fact, the Afghan military has been largely in charge of the country's security since 2014, when more than 100,000 NATO troops were withdrawn. Also, beyond US forces, there are some 7,500 troops from 38

other NATO members and partners in Afghanistan as well as 25,239 private security contractors deployed.

Still, the US withdrawal will probably be a serious problem for Afghanistan. Considering how the decision to withdraw the troops was taken and Trump's overall skepticism about the Afghan mission, it can be seen as a possible precursor to further major financial and military cuts.

Security in the country will deteriorate if less money goes to Afghanistan. International aid is very important to that country: in recent years, about 50% of the Afghan state budget and 90% of its military and police costs have been covered by international donors. Reductions in such funding will weaken the security situation, embolden local warlords, and render the regions less and less controlled by the central government.

Signs of this have already been seen. Taliban control over Afghanistan has increased in recent months, and the government currently controls or influences only 55.5% of the country's districts. This is the lowest percentage in several years.

The withdrawal will have global repercussions, as the situation in Afghanistan matters a great deal to its large neighbors. Pakistan, for instance, has long tolerated the use of its territory by the Taliban. After the US withdrawal, Pakistan will likely become more open in its aid to the group and could even try to fill the power vacuum.

Since 2001, Russia and Iran have generally supported the Kabul government. Recently, Moscow used the Taliban as a hedge and, along with Iran and Uzbekistan, provided support for Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara warlords. This kind of pattern will likely occur more often as the Kabul government's grip on power weakens.

The countries to watch most closely after the US withdrawal are Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. Each has a security and military stake in Afghanistan. Since it is unlikely that any of them will be able to fully control Afghanistan's difficult terrain, these states will probably try to assist those groups close to the borders who prove amenable to cooperation. This diversity of foreign interests will push Afghanistan down the road towards political and security disarray.

A bird's-eye view

As noted, the US withdrawal will certainly be harmful to the Afghan state and will create a geopolitical vacuum for other regional powers to fill. Many believe the US is showing signs of global status fatigue.

It should be recalled, however, that this is not the first time the US has withdrawn from territory with uncertain results. When the US withdrew from Vietnam, Lebanon, and recently Iraq, it had not been victorious in those theaters – but the US nevertheless won the Cold War and remains the sole global superpower. Those US wars (Afghanistan included) are not indicative of a definitive weakening of the US, but are rather small pieces in a broader American global strategy that (like most everything else in the world) works perfectly sometimes and less well at others.

Analysts often forget to look at Eurasian conflicts from the distant US perspective. We tend to believe that the US aim in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan was to reach a definitive victory from the very beginning. While it is true that victory in those conflicts would have been a good result, such a culmination was never an absolute aim of the US. Washington wants the Eurasian continent to be as divided as possible so as to prevent the development of rival alliances.

The US has intervened in Eurasia in order to spoil the rise of Iraq, Iran, the Taliban, and other powers into more than what they are: local and regional powers. Seen from that perspective, the US has been quite successful. True, hundreds of billions have been spent and numerous lives lost in those conflicts, but the strategic aim of the US – to keep Eurasia divided – has worked well so far.

The US, like other great powers in history before it, has the right to withdraw from conflicts when it deems necessary. Facing numerous rival powers in Eurasia, America intervenes and withdraws in accordance with its strategic aim of dispersing its enemies.

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