

Building Afghan Security Requires a Long-Term U.S. Commitment



[U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod](#)

Sgt. Joshua Smith, a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team, chats with an Afghan boy during an Afghan-led clearing operation April 28, 2012, Ghazni province, Afghanistan.

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Can Americans — and their next president — see past short-term campaign promises to save Afghanistan?

Gen. John Campbell, America's top military officer in Afghanistan, would prefer to delay the planned 2017 drawdown of U.S. forces there. That's a good thing. Presently 9,800 U.S. troops are training Afghan forces and conducting counterterrorism missions. But the decision to keep U.S. military advisors in Afghanistan will ultimately depend more on campaign promises made ahead of the upcoming U.S. presidential elections than on an objective assessment of whether the Afghan forces are ready to handle the Taliban threat unassisted. That's a bad thing. Washington needs to stay the course.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have rekindled Washington's interest in security cooperation: the programs and activities through which the United States advises, trains, helps, and equips foreign security forces. While less risky than direct combat operations, training foreign forces has turned

out to be enormously difficult in conflict zones that lack legitimate local political institutions. After the U.S. withdrew its forces from Iraq in December 2011, the Iraqi security forces trained and equipped by the U.S. since 2003 were soundly beaten by the much smaller Islamic State in Mosul, Tikrit, and Ramadi.

To avoid a similar outcome in Afghanistan, the Obama administration decided to extend current troop levels there to the end of 2016. (Originally, the U.S. force was supposed to drop to half of that amount by 2015.) According to a Defense Department report sent to Congress last month, the Afghan national forces continue to have capability gaps in a number of areas: “aerial fires, logistics, maintenance, and operational planning... fixed and rotary-wing aviation, intelligence, and sustainment.” If the Taliban’s influence is to be contained, some U.S. forces must remain beyond 2016 to bridge those gaps.

Will the next administration, starting in January 2017, have the political will to keep enough troops in Afghanistan to successfully professionalize its defense forces? Will the American people support such a policy, and can any 2016 candidate win while seeking a mandate to uphold such long-term foreign commitments?

If we truly intend to professionalize a foreign military force in support of a legitimate local government, it could take a long time, even decades, as it did in the Republic of Korea and Germany. The amount of time that it takes for the young Afghan lieutenants now working with U.S. trainers to become general officers and impart a reformed ethos across their armed forces is about one generation, or roughly 25 years.

As the principal architect of U.S. foreign policy, a president hopes to achieve a decisive outcome in war during the four or eight years of his or her term of office, which is much shorter than the time needed to create a professional and self-reliant foreign force. In a system where politicians tend to frame public expectations in terms that demand early results, it is hard to rationalize exertions that will pay dividends only decades later. Political leaders may be deterred from pursuing the kind of long-term strategic investments such as security cooperation needed to accomplish important national security objectives.

We need a renewed recognition among our political leaders that threats to American security require sustained bipartisan commitment to help other societies resolve and recover from conflicts. Afghanistan, like Iraq, will test U.S. leadership and define America’s role in the world. No amount of transitory engagement by our military can substitute for a long-term American commitment to training and helping the Afghan armed forces fend off the Taliban. The next president and Congress must have the will and the wisdom to make such a commitment. **D**

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