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Mini-Surge in Search of a Strategy

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Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz claimed that war was simply a continuation of state policy – an instrument to be applied with other means – be they diplomatic, economic or otherwise. It was partly a caution against making military conflict an end in itself, although that is exactly what the United States appears to be doing as it prepares its “strategy” in Afghanistan.

On June 29, the Defense Department said Pentagon chief James Mattis was in Brussels with NATO counterparts to fill in the gaps of the Afghan war plan. The final strategy, which will likely not be released until mid-July, is expected to include up to 5,000 troops focused on training Afghan forces, supporting special operations, and intensifying air support.

It is telling that the Pentagon is driving the process with little input from the State Department. In fact, many are concerned Secretary of State Rex Tillerson may abolish the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) now that Laurel Miller has completed her tenure. Contrary to media reports the special envoy position has not been eliminated, yet.

“With the appreciation of the U.S. Department of State, Acting SRAP Miller completed her detail to the Department from the Rand Corporation on June 23,” a State Department spokesperson told Afghan Online Press. “The Secretary has not made a decision about the future of the [SRAP] Office.”

However, as cited by the State Department official, Tillerson said during congressional testimony he was concerned that the United States had more than 70 special envoys around the world hinting that it was time to downsize. So any thoughts of a political or diplomatic “surge” to accompany the military one is, at best, on hold.

Of course, the generals are not fully to blame because the White House has provided zero objectives, hence escalation of war *is* the policy. The reality is domestic politics dictates that the only strategy that matters is one that ensures Afghanistan does not fall on President Trump’s watch. Hence, there is a lack of vision beyond the deployment of the troops themselves.

Former White House national security aide Gwennyth Todd told Afghan Online Press that she has yet to see a strategy articulated to date that offers the possibility of successful nation-building behind the decision to send troops.

“Putting additional troops there is unlikely to succeed in turning Afghanistan into a united, democratic, modern society,” Todd claimed.

For well over a century, she argued, outside invaders have tried to employ military operations in Afghanistan “to effect deep political and societal change,” but all of these great powers have failed.

Thomas Ruttig, Co-Director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, agreed that more troops will not solve anything, however, he was also skeptical that foreign envoys or non-indigenous solutions would be of much use either.

“It isn’t even sure whether a ‘political strategy’ developed elsewhere than in Afghanistan would have much of an impact,” Ruttig told this journalist.

We also have heard close to nothing about how the United States plans to address Pakistan’s role, but we could guess probably little if anything. Which means the U.S. military will be pouring more troops into Afghanistan to train up local forces who then get shot and killed by Taliban that exploit sanctuary over the border.

Hawks in the U.S. have applauded Trump for, at a minimum, not announcing a withdrawal date like his predecessor did, because now the Taliban (and Pakistan) cannot simply “wait out” the surge. It is little consolation, however, to admit that the U.S. military commitment is “open ended” and indefinite. I guess one can give the Trump administration high grades for at least being forthcoming, because no one really believed the United States was *actually* leaving anyway.

The solution, however, is accepting the fact that there is no solution. Wholesale withdrawal hardly seems an option at this point without some type of political stability in Kabul. Injecting more forces into the quagmire will not work considering it didn’t when troop levels were at 100,000.

The real answer is why didn’t you ask us this question almost four decades ago before the United States began funding/arming the mujahideen – the same holy warriors who beget al-Qaeda and the Taliban? Or, after the fall of the Taliban before the United States forced Karzai upon the

Afghan people turning him into an instant puppet who struggled for legitimacy while the Taliban rebounded? Or, before the United States handed ministry positions and bags of money to warlords who have run amok for 16 years? Why didn't they ask us when there were actual political solutions in reach?

Clausewitz also said that "war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different." Afghanistan, then, is the case study that certainly defies this principle, given the massive disconnect between U.S. state policy and war strategy – a tragic flaw that practically guarantees the conflict will remain a stalemate, and a very active one at that.