The Trump Administration finds itself unable to agree on a way forward in Afghanistan. Like administrations before it, the team is bitterly divided on whether or not the stakes there are worth the costs. Each day of dithering, however, prompts more aggressive hedging strategies from both Afghan and regional actors, thereby creating a downward spiral that makes stability a more distant proposition.

President Trump is trapped between a bad idea – a mini-surge of troops – and a worse idea: a mini-surge of mercenaries. There is a better way forward.
For Team Trump, the fault lines appear to center on committing more troops, taxpayer dollars, political capital, and time. National Security Adviser Lt. Gen. (Retd.) H. R. McMaster and much of the Defense and State “establishment” prefer to increase troop levels by roughly 4,000 to shore up Kabul and to push the Taliban to sue for peace. Their talking points seem not to have changed since 2011.

The opposition, apparently led by presidential advisor Steven Bannon, believes that the stakes are not commensurate with the current costs and prospects for success. Thus they have floated the notion of using mercenaries instead of soldiers, thereby limiting US exposure while not actually abandoning the Afghan government. Both the Defense and State departments, as well as President Ashraf Ghani have reportedly criticized this idea.

Concerns on both sides have broad merit. Increasing troop levels from 8,400 to over 12,000 raises the mission’s current cost to well over $25 billion per year. For a president who campaigned on the importance of rebuilding the country and preventing others from taking advantage of American taxpayer dollars, this increased level of support appears to fly in the face of one of his major campaign promises. At the same time, replacing soldiers with mercenaries who have lethal force authorities into an objecting country raises major strategic, legal, moral, and accountability concerns (and here). The scheme could have significant unintended consequences.

There is an opportunity cost for Americans, too. The $25 billion allocation could pay the salaries of 50,000 teachers for 10 years, notes the Daily Kos, repair 50,000 miles of roads, feed 3.4 million people three square meals a day, build nearly 300,000 homes – more than enough to house all of the country’s homeless families – and build the promised wall between the US and Mexico. Adding more troops but no strategy in the hope of bring the war to a successful conclusion will likely result in spending $100 billion over four years with no appreciable positive effect on actually ending the war. So much for draining the swamp or creating an alternative efficient strategy for Afghanistan.
Furthermore, Afghanistan has one of the most corrupt governments on the planet. Normally listed on the Transparency International index as among the top three of most corrupt countries, it improved slightly last year: It moved to number eight on the 176-member list. A US-imposed divided government has stymied President Ghani’s reforms (imagine a China-imposed Trump-Clinton coalition government). In addition, fabulously rich warlords see reforming the existing kleptocracy as too great a threat to their personal, political, and economic interests. Afghanistan could be “Exhibit A” of President Trump’s concerns about the US taxpayers being hosed by a foreign elite.

Ordinary Afghans are torn between a predatory government and a ruthless insurgency. The Afghan government that Americans see (conscientious Westernized technocrats) is not necessarily the government that ordinary Afghans see. Nor is the Taliban that many Afghans see the same al-Qaeda-loving international terrorist organization that Westerners perceive. The complexity and lack of bandwidth for nuance create severe policymaking challenges, particularly for an American administration with internal internationalist and anti-establishment tensions.

The ongoing American gridlock is not without its consequences.

Tensions are rising among Afghan political elites and warlords. Vice President Abdur Rashid Dostum, whose bodyguards were recently accused of sodomizing a political rival with a Kalashnikov, remains in what appears to be forced exile at a posh villa in Turkey. The powerful Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor, a traditional adversary and now political bedfellow of Dostum, recently threatened to shut down airports and office buildings unless certain demands were met and his new ally was welcomed back home. This is the same Noor who threatened civil war after the disputed election results of 2014. And, these are the threats that scared the Obama Administration into forcing the power-sharing deal between Ghani and his electoral rival Abdullah Abdullah (who received the Chief Executive position). Some Afghans describe this pressure group, officially known as the “Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan,” as a “Coalition of Killers.”
**Regional Tensions**

With the outcome in Afghanistan in doubt, regional actors are using more aggressive hedging strategies to safeguard their interests. Tehran has reportedly **increased its covert support to the Taliban** while simultaneously maintaining its relations with Kabul. Just how far relations between Shi’a Iran and the Sunni Taliban have improved can be gauged from the fact that the two nearly went to war with each other in 1998 when Taliban militiamen **killed 11 Iranian diplomats**. This action is part of Tehran’s broader effort to prevent American and Saudi encirclement and to expand its influence from the Hindu Kush to the Mediterranean. Iran’s success thus far in creating near-satellites in Iraq and Syria has broken the threat of Washington’s presence and controlling influence along its western border.

To the east, maintaining good relations with both Kabul and the Taliban foments continued instability and reduces the risk that the eventual victor will allow Washington to use bases there to strike Iran. While protecting their Shi’a co-religionists among Afghanistan’s Hazara population, Iran has also cultivated strong **political and economic** ties with other traditional Dari-speaking allies in an attempt to limit the spread of Saudi influence from Pakistan into Afghanistan. The Saudi-prompted criticism of Qatar by Trump Administration officials could also wear out the welcome of the large American airbase in the tiny peninsula.

For its part, Riyadh seeks to contain Iranian expansion by supporting militant Sunni groups in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria while egging on Washington to increase international pressure. The **Saudis seem pleased** with the Trump Administration’s response thus far. In addition, Saudi Arabia is reportedly using Pakistan as its conduit for providing **covert support to the Taliban** and its associated Haqqani network.

Pakistan views its interests in Afghanistan largely from its fears of encirclement by India. Islamabad believes that India and Afghanistan, if left with a free hand, will team up to undermine its national security. Its leadership perceives the two countries’ close ties as
a first step toward this existential threat. Indian influencers who call Pakistan a “fake
country feed into this paranoia, while Afghan nationalists of dubious influence talk of
reclaiming “Afghanland” or “Pashtunistan” – territory that stretches to the Indus River
(the Khyber-Pakhtunkwa province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and
Baluchistan. Pakistan cites Afghan government support to the Pakistani Taliban and
affiliates as evidence of these designs.

All of this enables Islamabad to justify its active and passive support of the Afghan
Taliban on the following grounds: A stable and hostile Afghanistan is an existential
threat, and thus an unstable and hostile Afghanistan that cannot be used as a launching
pad to dismember Pakistan is a preferable alternative. Meanwhile, Pakistan tries to be a
good partner of the US by supporting strikes and operations against other militant and
terrorist groups. The fact that NATO’s supply lines into Afghanistan pass through
Pakistani territory adds much needed leverage to ensure that Washington does not
become overtly hostile.

The Pakistan dilemma has now frustrated three successive American administrations.
The bottom line is that Washington, while its troops are in Afghanistan, lacks any
sufficiently compelling sticks or carrots that could force Pakistan to turn against the
Afghan Taliban and make the latter join the Afghan government. To the Pakistani
security establishment, this course of action would be tantamount to committing national
suicide.

Russia has also become more aggressive in Afghanistan, seeing an opportunity to
undermine US and NATO credibility while working to prevent the growth of terrorist
groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Central Asia. It has reportedly
been providing covert support to the Afghan Taliban. This foments instability by
undermining the US-NATO alliance and providing a hedge in case the Afghan
government collapses. It also gives Russia influence with the Taliban – the only group,
according to Moscow, that can actually defeat the IMU, the Islamic State, and similar
groups. To show it positive intention, Russia has sought to establish a rival peace process in Afghanistan and thereby discredit Washington’s efforts in this regard.

China sees Afghanistan as part of its so-called western strategy – an effort to expand its influence and economic opportunity without antagonizing Washington. Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC; aka the New Silk Road effort) and offers to support talks between Kabul and the Taliban are part this larger ambition. China’s efforts raise Indian suspicions (and here), which may push the latter to closer ties with Afghanistan and the United States.

Afghans say that they live in a tough neighborhood. As these hedging strategies become more entrenched and aggressive, their neighborhood is only becoming tougher. As a sparsely populated landlocked country nestled among larger powers, Afghanistan has historically been used as a pawn in what has been described as the Great Game. At best, it is of secondary or tertiary interest to its neighbors and thus always falls victim to the higher priorities of others – everyone is playing a double game. This version of a “tragedy of the commons” is a key reason why the conflict there is so complex and intractable.

A Different Approach

It is no wonder, then, that President Trump has expressed frustration over the conflict and his administration’s inability to agree on a way forward. Defense Secretary Gen. (Retd.) James Mattis has wisely withheld his approval for a troop increase until a new strategy is in place. This could be a very long wait. Not satisfied with simply muddling through or taking the Obama approach of splitting the differences and satisficing, Trump seems to be searching for a commonsense solution that better aligns costs and interests. His team appears to be split between the easy answers of “do more” and “do less.”
A different, but realistic, approach would be to recognize the limits to what outcomes the US can achieve in that country and to shape a strategy that achieves its own interests while respecting the dignity of American and Afghan sacrifices.

Here is the bottom line. The Taliban, who retain external and internal support, are unlikely to sue for peace. Given that they can realistically gain the support of less than half of the Afghan people, they are also unlikely to conquer the country. And, the Afghan government is unlikely to be overthrown as long as it retains international support. At the same time, the problems noted above in terms of its perceived legitimacy mean that Kabul is unlikely to defeat the Taliban outright.

What is a realistic outcome? The notion that “winning in Afghanistan” requires the Taliban to surrender is too narrow. This flawed assumption underlies both the mini-surge and mercenary models. The US wins if international terrorist groups can no longer use Afghan territory to plan and execute large-scale international terrorist operations against both it and its allies. This outcome does not require perpetual war or the indefinite draining of American resources. It also holds the best prospect of ridding Afghanistan of groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

A realistic win would result from a peace process that achieves the following goals: (1) a negotiated outcome that respects the dignity and sacrifices of the American and Afghan people, (2) an Afghanistan that is at peace internally and with its neighbors, and (3) actively prevents the reemergence of a large-scale terrorist presence in the country.

A viable peace process must engage all sides at the international, national, and local levels. It should pursue three major steps: (1) dialogue and confidence-building measures in order to identify common points of political agreement and recognition that the parties involved can and will keep credible commitments, (2) reduce the scale of military activities in order to reach local ceasefires and a final cessation of organized hostilities, and (3) negotiations to achieve a peaceful political resolution.
This outcome should be the focus of the Trump Administration’s Afghanistan policy. To achieve it, Washington must:

1. **Identify and support a credible third-party facilitator for the peace process.** This removes the matter from beltway politics and places it in the hands of actors who have a history and body of expert knowledge on managing peace processes. Norway, for instance, has a proven track record; Colombia is undergoing its own peace process with the FARC (with Norway and Cuba facilitating). Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Muslim countries not involved in the conflict could also play a helpful role.

2. **Stabilize the battlefield by encouraging political reform, shoring up the advisory effort, and eliminating timelines.** These efforts would make the fractious Taliban realize that an outright military victory is not possible. Gradual but tangible political reform efforts, with appropriate penalties being imposed upon spoilers and blockers, would reduce the Taliban’s opportunities to exploit the status quo in order to gain the support of a public victimized by predatory governance.

3. **Put a senior US civilian official in charge of the full range of American political, military, economic, and intelligence efforts in Afghanistan.** The National Security Council lacks the bandwidth to manage the war 24/7 from afar while contending with a wide range of far higher national priorities.

Afghanistan has been at war for over forty years. President Trump seems to understand that any such assertions that a mini-surge of troops or mercenaries will force the Taliban to sue for peace are nonsensical. At the same time, talks of fast-tracking a “power-sharing deal” between Kabul and the Taliban are poison pills that only create cynicism and further entrench the conflict. Peace will not come to the country overnight. The approach outlined above has the most realistic prospect of delivering a successful end to Washington’s longest war.

*About The Navigator*
The Navigator – CGP’s latest policy product – provides objective analysis of the week’s most pressing U.S. foreign policy issues related to Muslim geopolitics. Every Wednesday, the Navigator will: 1) Identify a significant geopolitical development; 2) Offer a rigorous analysis of the event; and, 3) Forecast what to expect next regarding the issue.