

America's longest war drags on in Afghanistan

James Cogan
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The US national security advisor, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, was in Afghanistan over the weekend, speaking with President Ashraf Ghani and General John Nicholson, the US military commander in the country. The aim of the talks, the *Military Times* reported prior to McMaster's arrival in Kabul, was to "assess whether more military personnel are needed to break the stalemate there." In February, Nicholson had told a US Congressional hearing that he needed thousands more troops.

McMaster's visit follows a raft of reports showing that the term "stalemate" vastly downplays the situation. More than 15 years after the US launched its war in Afghanistan, the insurgency against the US-backed government in Kabul and its puppet masters in Washington is gaining the ascendancy. The conflict is by far the longest war in which the United States has ever been involved.

US imperialism and its allies invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, on the basis of false allegations that the Islamist Taliban government had collaborated with Al Qaeda in carrying out the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The 9/11 atrocities were the pretext for the US to achieve its ambition of a military footprint in Central Asia. As well as Afghanistan being close to oil and gas-rich Central Asian republics to the north, it borders Iran to the west, China to the east and the Indian subcontinent to the south.

The invasion and overthrow of the Taliban took a matter of weeks. An American client state was installed in the capital Kabul with the venal blessing of the United Nations in December 2001. The US military set about transforming the dual-runway airfield in Bagram, in central Afghanistan, into one of its largest bases in the world.

What the American establishment had not anticipated

was that by 2003–2004, it would face expanding armed resistance to the foreign occupation by large sections of the Afghan population, especially in the majority ethnic Pashtun provinces bordering Pakistan's volatile tribal northwest region. By 2008–2009, the fighting was so intense that it led to the Obama administration's "surge," which boosted US troop numbers in the country to over 100,000 by 2011, alongside more than 30,000 troops from NATO states and other countries, and thousands of "contractor" mercenaries.

Today, the occupation force has been reduced to 8,400 American military personnel, barely 5,000 NATO troops and some 26,000 mercenaries. The fighting, however, has again reached dimensions that rival those of six years ago.

The Taliban published a map last month showing the areas it controls or is on the verge of controlling. Out of 349 districts, the Taliban claims to fully control 34 and to be "contesting" a further 167. Apart from major cities, the Kabul government exerts next to no authority in the southwest region bordering Pakistan. Entire swathes of the country's north, including the rural areas around the major city of Kunduz, are also in insurgent hands.

A February report by the US government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) verified the Taliban's claims. SIGAR estimated that the insurgency "controls, contests or influences" at least 171 districts and the Kabul government had authority over no more than 52 percent of the country.

Other reports estimate the government's control to be higher, at between 57 and 62 percent, but there is no question that its grip is crumbling.

In comments this month to *USA Today*, the Afghan ambassador to the US, Hamdullah Mohib, revealed that

the US-trained and equipped Afghan military and police suffered a staggering 29,000 dead and wounded in 2016 alone. Tens of thousands of troops have deserted. As many as 30,000 members of the nominally 200,000-strong Afghan Army may be “ghost” soldiers—they exist only on paper and their pay is taken by corrupt officers and officials.

The dominant force in the insurgency remains the Taliban and the allied Haqqani network, which have fought the occupation since 2001. In recent years, small groupings in Afghanistan have declared their allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its “caliphate” in the Middle East.

A few hundred ISIS supporters in eastern Afghanistan were the ostensible target of the first-ever use in combat of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) conventional bomb on April 13. Unknown numbers of alleged fighters and civilians were killed in the horrific firestorm created by the MOAB detonation.

While clearly intended as an international warning to Syria, Iran, Russia, North Korea and China of American ruthlessness, the use of the MOAB also signalled that the US military will use all the means at its disposal to try to push back the Afghan insurgency.

The prospect of a strategic defeat in Afghanistan is playing into the growth of US rivalries and tensions with Russia. With growing stridency, American military and strategic figures are making provocative accusations that the Russian government of President Vladimir Putin is supporting the Taliban in order to undermine the Kabul government and the US position in the country.

Russia, while acknowledging it maintains communication lines to the Afghan insurgents, has rejected the US allegations that it is giving weapons or equipment to the Taliban. In March, its foreign ministry labelled the claims as “fabrications designed to justify the failure of the US military and politicians in the Afghan campaign.”

Russia sponsored a third conference on April 14—involving Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, Central Asian states and the Afghan government—on how to develop talks between Kabul and the Taliban. Moscow is asserting that its main objective is to try to bring about some type of peace settlement that ends the conflict and its destabilising impact on the entire region.

The Trump administration refused to participate, declaring that the conference was an attempt by Russia to “assert influence,” and that the motives of other participants were “unclear.” Instead of attending, the US dropped the MOAB bomb on the eve of the talks. Over the weekend, General McMaster not only clearly implied that Russia was an obstacle to defeating the Taliban “on battlefields,” but so was Pakistan.

The Taliban also refused to take part in the conference, issuing a statement that the precondition for peace negotiations with Kabul was the total withdrawal from Afghanistan of all US and foreign forces.

At this stage, the Trump administration has not announced any additional American troop deployments to Afghanistan.



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