No Easy Way Out: Increasing UAV Deployment for COIN in Afghanistan

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**MEMO**

To: Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State, and James Mattis, Secretary of Defense

From: Policy Advisor

Subject: Increased use of UAV’s in Afghanistan

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**Executive Summary:**

Although Afghanistan presents an interest to the United States’ geopolitical and security interests, insurgent groups such as the Taliban are threatening Afghanistan’s stability. As a result, the United States should increase the use of armed UAV’s in Afghanistan for intelligence and targeted airstrikes, and should provide unarmed UAV’s to Afghan forces for intelligence collection in order to reduce the U.S. military’s direct footprint in country and gradually allow afghan security forces to restore legitimacy to the government. In order to approve this policy, President Trump should be convinced that it will be more popular among voters, and lower his chances of having low approval ratings as a result of the conflict. Despite having the downsides of not addressing the root causes of the insurgency, this policy is faster, cheaper, and more immediately effective than other long-term plans, and can help establish a groundwork upon which the Afghan government and security forces can use to rebuild their country.

**Issue at Hand:**

The United States’ sixteen year war in Afghanistan has made its mark as the longest ongoing war its American history. Since the war’s inception in 2001, more than 2,300 American military personnel have lost their lives fighting in the conflict, and despite spending $800 billion in appropriations on the war, the Afghan government only controls around 63.4% of the country.[[1]](#endnote-1) Even so, Afghanistan represents a large interest to U.S. security and global influence.

According to the U.S. Department of State, Afghanistan “remains an important partner of the United States in the fight against terrorism.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The main insurgent group in Afghanistan, the Taliban, have provided a safe haven from which Osama Bin Laden was able to plan the attacks conducted on September 11, 2001, and have also expressed that one of their main priorities is bringing harm to American citizens.[[3]](#endnote-3) The Taliban have also partaken in attacks on members of the U.S. military in Afghanistan, resulting in the loss of multiple American lives.[[4]](#endnote-4)

These claims and actions on behalf of the Taliban represent a direct threat to the security of the United States. If the Afghan government is unable to contain and eliminate the threat posed by the Taliban, they will continue to expand their sphere of influence, encourage the spread of radical Islam, and will become emboldened to increase their attacks on American military installations. Moreover, an unchecked Taliban insurgency would “risk turning the country back into the terrorist safe-haven it was before 9/11.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Thus, the Taliban’s increase in power could result in the proliferation of other insurgent groups in Afghanistan, and create a breeding ground that the Taliban could use to plan and sponsor attacks that expand beyond Afghanistan’s borders.[[6]](#endnote-6) Due to their anti-American rhetoric and actions, it is possible that these expanded operations could target American installations in the region, representing a direct threat to American servicemen and civilians. Therefore, in order to ensure for the security of our military members, allies, and civilians, it critical that we support the government of Afghanistan in their fight against the Taliban insurgency.

The second aspect that makes Afghanistan important to U.S. interests is based on global influence. Afghanistan’s geographical location plays a large role in its prominence to the United States because it shares borders with China, Iran, and Pakistan, and is the only state in the region that “gives open access to the United States and NATO allies”[[7]](#endnote-7). Due to the recent tensions with China over their expansion in the South China Sea and their ties with North Korea, as well as the United States’ unstable relationship with Iran and its suspected nuclear program, it is extremely important that the United States retains a physical presence in the region. A secure and American-friendly Afghanistan would allow the United States to maintain this regional presence, thereby increasing the United States’ geopolitical position in their sensitive and volatile relations with China and Iran.

However, the struggle to retain influence in Afghanistan is not uncontested. Recently, Taliban representatives have revealed that Russia has been supplying them with arms, and aims to become their leading “security partner.”[[8]](#endnote-8) In addition, Iran is also attempting to assert its influence in Afghanistan by providing the Taliban with “money, weapons, and training,” as well as new Taliban recruits.”[[9]](#endnote-9) By diverting resources and funding to a group that is in direct conflict with a U.S.-backed government, Russia and Iran are actively working to undermine U.S. efforts to stabilize and secure Afghanistan, and are directly opposing U.S. interests in the region. This is inherently dangerous to the United States as it bolsters Taliban authority and will embolden them to conduct more attacks on U.S. troops and our allies. Moreover, if Russia and Iran are able to subvert U.S. support and influence in Afghanistan, the United States will experience a critical geopolitical loss in the Middle East, and will lose its ability to balance and influence the actions of China, Iran, and Pakistan.

Policy under the Obama administration revolved around reducing the involvement of the United States by gradually withdrawing troops, as well as continually providing training, equipment, and advisors to Afghan forces.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, President Trump has recently increased the number of U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan to 14,000, and has also ramped up efforts to increase airstrikes on insurgent targets.[[11]](#endnote-11) Despite this, experts claim that “there are no good options in Afghanistan,” as the Taliban now controls more territory than they did during 2002.[[12]](#endnote-12) Moreover, only 20% of voters believed that the U.S. should increase its troop deployments in Afghanistan,[[13]](#endnote-13) signifying the public’s general disapproval of an increase in military involvement in Afghanistan.

Therefore, the United States seems to be in a dilemma: withdrawing more troops would lead to a revival of insurgent power, loss of geopolitical interests, and further loss of control by the Afghan government, whereas a surge of U.S. troops would be an extremely unpopular decision among citizens and politicians alike.[[14]](#endnote-14) As a result, the United States needs to find a solution that allows for Afghan security forces to provide protection and security for their citizens with limited involvement from U.S. military personnel, while gradually transitioning control back to the Afghan government and its forces.

**Recommendation:**

Therefore, the counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy of the United States should consider the following:

* The Taliban insurgency represents a direct threat to U.S. security, American military personnel, and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan;
* The Taliban are currently gaining territory and influence within Afghanistan despite current COIN efforts;
* Reducing troop numbers further would allow the Taliban’s power to resurge, and a drastic increase in troop numbers would elicit an extremely unpopular domestic response;

As a result, U.S. COIN policy should take the following actions:

* Begin the transfer of unarmed U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV’s) and training to Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security and the Afghan National Army;
* Increase armed U.S. drone deployments to Afghanistan for intel collection and precision airstrikes

According to Seth Jones, the Taliban’s primary motivation for their insurgency was to spread their ideology by overthrowing the Afghan government and implementing an extreme version of Sunni Islam.[[15]](#endnote-15) By remaining committed to their goals of regime change for such a long time, the Taliban’s strategy can be compared to what Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter dub “attrition”.[[16]](#endnote-16) In other words, by pursuing a strategy of attrition, the Taliban are attempting to “persuade the enemy that the group is strong and resolute enough to inflict serious costs, so that the enemy yields to the terrorists’ demands.”[[17]](#endnote-17) According to Kydd and Walter, one of the best ways to combat this strategy is through engaging in the targeted retaliation of “leaders of the terrorist group, its followers, their assets and other objects of value.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Increasing the role that UAV’s play in COIN can provide the United States with the means and abilities to assist and conduct these targeted strikes against insurgents. Most importantly, UAV’s allow pilots to “more carefully verify targets than an attack pilot..(making) UAV strikes more likely to be accurate than trikes by alternative platforms at the same targets.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Therefore, UAV’s present themselves as a favorable alternative over other kinds of mechanized strikes because they can limit collateral damage, thereby minimizing the chance of inciting resentment towards friendly forces. Moreover, increasing U.S. airstrikes carried out by UAV’s would also help to reduce the risk of casualties undertaken by the same missions carried out by manned aircraft, as they engage the enemy without risking the life of U.S. pilots.[[20]](#endnote-20) Thus, the increased use of UAV’s would allow the United States to slowly transition pilots and their related support assets out of the country, lowering the U.S. presence in the region.

In addition, allowing Afghan forces to increase their utilization of unarmed UAV’s would substantially boost their COIN efforts. Currently, Afghan security forces are unable to provide effective security to rural areas of Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to exercise influence and gain power in those regions.[[21]](#endnote-21) While the increase of unarmed UAV’s will not assist Afghan forces in target elimination, they will provide greater “situational awareness”[[22]](#endnote-22) as well as increased surveillance abilities that a limited Afghan security force can use to more effectively allocate the operational plans of their forces.

Moreover, the intelligence that unarmed UAV’s provide would also lower the Taliban’s ability to conduct “surprise attacks or covert activities.”[[23]](#endnote-23) As a result, Afghan forces will be placed in a better position to defend themselves and U.S. military forces for insurgent threats. This will also help efforts to restore legitimacy to the government, as one the many aspects that indicate a legitimate government is its “ability to provide security for the populace.”[[24]](#endnote-24) As a result, unarmed UAV’s have the ability to both provide security and intelligence efforts of Afghan security forces and the U.S. military, while simultaneously restoring faith and legitimacy into a weak government. Considering the Taliban’s recent use of special groups like their “Red Unit,” which are wreaking havoc on Afghan security forces,[[25]](#endnote-25) it is now increasingly critical that they are sufficiently equipped and trained to engage in self-defense strategies.

Fortunately, Afghan forces are already using small aircraft and are beginning to use the ScanEagle UAV to assist intel gathering efforts.[[26]](#endnote-26) These intelligence gathering sources are still growing, and they are allowing the Afghan military to move toward becoming self-sufficient.[[27]](#endnote-27) By allocating unarmed UAV’s to Afghan security forces, the United States can help to reduce the direct military role that they play in the conflict by empowering Afghan forces to take ownership of their intelligence gathering and COIN efforts. This will subsequently allow for the gradual transition from a security force that is reliant upon the United States, to one that is able to operate without outside assistance, thereby reducing the U.S. military’s footprint in the country.

**Political Considerations:**

In general, the transfer of UAV’s from the U.S. government to another foreign government is to be conducted by the Foreign Military Sales Program (FMS),[[28]](#endnote-28) of which the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense are able to approve and execute the transfer of drones.[[29]](#endnote-29) Seeing as both of these positions serve at the pleasure of the President, and the President will be responsible for the approval of increasing drones strikes, it is crucial that President Trump is convinced that this policy is worth implementing. To do so, it is highly recommended that you appeal to the basic democratic function of public accountability for elected positions. As previously mentioned, the war in Afghanistan is not holding over well with the public. Moreover, with each new American death in Afghanistan, President Trump may face increasingly severe domestic audience costs, as the public is generally averse to American deaths overseas. Therefore, increasing troop deployments to Afghanistan presents a threat to his overall popularity and approval ratings with the American people.

In addition, the American public is largely supportive of the use of drones, with approval ratings for UAV use standing at around 65% from 2011-1014.[[30]](#endnote-30) Moreover, UAV’s are unmanned, therefore presenting no direct threat to U.S. pilots or military members’ lives. Thus, by approving the current policy President Trump will be able to mitigate the negative views that the public has of the administration’s decision to continue involvement in Afghanistan while simultaneously reducing his risk of incurring domestic audience costs resulting from the potential loss of piloted aircraft and its crew.

**Possible Drawbacks**

Despite the appeal, there are a few drawbacks to increasing the use of UAV’s in Afghanistan. One of the most prominent drawbacks to this strategy is that it does not address the root problems that contribute to the Taliban insurgency, such as their ability to escape and regroup in neighboring Pakistan, their monopoly on the opium trade, or the corruption and insufficiency of the Afghan government. While improving all of these factors would eventually lead to the restoration of a healthy Afghan government, they also take extensive amounts of time, resources, diplomatic engagement, and military force. While the increased deployment of UAV’s may not completely solve the insurgency problem in Afghanistan, it provides a method of intervention that produces minimal risks to the United States, requires little funding as compared to other solutions, and can produce immediate positive results. It can also set the groundwork upon which a legitimate Afghan government can be built, and begin the process of gradually transitioning security back into the hands of Afghan forces. While it may not be an end-all solution, this policy provides the most feasible intermediate measure to reinforce a state which the United States cannot afford to lose.

**Conclusion**

Due to its geopolitical importance and strategic value in assisting with the global war on terror, the United States cannot afford to allow insurgent groups to destabilize the Afghan government. While there may be widespread systemic problems in Afghanistan that contribute to the strength of the insurgency, one of the most efficient ways that the United States can support the Afghan government is by increasing the use of U.S. UAV’s for precision airstrikes, as well as providing Afghan security forces with unarmed UAV’s for intelligence collection purposes. Doing so will lower risk to U.S. military personnel, provide Afghan security forces with the means to become increasingly self-sufficient, and can lower the military footprint within the country. Despite not being the ideal solution, to bring stability back to Afghanistan, this policy will provide the groundwork upon which the Afghan government can steadily regain control of their country.

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