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The President Should Announce U.S. Troop Extension in Afghanistan Before the 2016 NATO Summit

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The 2016 NATO summit will be held on July 8 and 9 in Warsaw, Poland. It will be the first summit since NATO ended its combat operations in Afghanistan in December 2014 and started its Resolute Support mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

President Barack Obama should announce—before the summit—that he will leave in place the 9,800 U.S. troops currently stationed in Afghanistan through the end of his presidency to show NATO partners that the U.S. remains committed to leading the international effort to stabilize Afghanistan. Reinforcing U.S. commitment to Afghanistan will encourage other NATO countries to redouble their efforts to help to secure the country at a time when the Taliban is making military advances and ISIS is seeking to make inroads.

Brief Capture of Kunduz Shows Need for Continued NATO Support

For the past 15 years, the U.S. has been involved in combat operations in Afghanistan. An 18-year-old soldier serving in Afghanistan today was *three years old* on 9/11. NATO has been commanding various aspects of the campaign there since 2003, and in 2006 assumed command of the entire campaign.

At NATO's 2010 Lisbon summit, the alliance decided that its combat operations will finish by the end of 2014 and that full security control will be transferred to the Afghans.

This was accomplished, but the Afghan security forces still require robust U.S. and NATO assistance, especially funding, air support, intelligence, training, and battlefield mentoring. At the Wales summit in September 2014, many NATO countries that had contributed troops in the past were unwilling to commit sizeable numbers of troops for the Resolute Support mission. For example, the United Kingdom, once with more than 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, now only has 350 soldiers there. Today nearly 13,000 troops are part of the Resolute Support mission, including 6,900 American forces and 2,900 troops from NATO and partner nations.¹ An additional 2,900 U.S. troops are deployed in Afghanistan to conduct counterterrorism missions. The international forces operate from one central hub (in Kabul/Bagram) and from four other locations around the country in Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Laghman.

Now that Afghans have taken the lead on their own security, the mission in Afghanistan has entered one of the most crucial periods. This was best illustrated last September when Taliban forces captured Kunduz, Afghanistan's fifth-largest city, for several weeks. This was the first time that a major city had been taken over by the Taliban since 2001.

U.S. Toughens Strategy Against Taliban

Shortly after the fall of Kunduz, President Obama reversed his earlier pledge to withdraw nearly all troops by the end of his term and said the U.S.

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instead would keep a force level of 5,500 U.S. troops in the country until he departs office in January 2017. A letter signed by several former U.S. Ambassadors to Afghanistan in early June of this year called on President Obama to go even further and keep the current level of 9,800 troops in Afghanistan through the remainder of his term.²

The Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan is helping al-Qaeda to regroup. The presence of a major al-Qaeda training camp in southern Afghanistan that the U.S. and Afghan forces destroyed last October demonstrates that the international terrorist organization has the ability to regenerate, particularly in areas where the Taliban is influential. In October 2015, a joint U.S.–Afghan military operation, involving 200 U.S. Special Operations Forces, destroyed the al-Qaeda camp located in Kandahar province, killing 160 terrorists.³

ISIS also is seeking to make inroads into Afghanistan but its efforts so far have met with only limited success. The Afghan Taliban view ISIS as a direct competitor, and there have been reports of clashes between ISIS militants and the Taliban in eastern and southern Afghanistan. A spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan said in April that ISIS has the potential to be an “enormous” threat in Afghanistan, but its presence has declined since the beginning of this year.⁴

The Obama Administration has recently sharpened its efforts to confront the Taliban. Last week, U.S. officials announced that they were loosening rules of engagement against the Taliban by allowing American forces to use additional air power and close air support when such engagement can “enable strategic effects on the battlefield.” In addition, last month the U.S. killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone strike in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province, a bold move that signaled the U.S. would not deal lightly with those Taliban leaders posing a direct threat to U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Staying Focused

It is important that the U.S. follow up the drone strike on Mullah Mansour with other steps that demonstrate commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan, including holding the line on troop levels.

While NATO is primarily focused on Russia and the debate about what role, if any, the alliance should play in confronting ISIS, the war in Afghanistan must not be pushed to the sidelines. The NATO summit provides an opportunity for the international community to redouble its commitment to Afghanistan and the Resolute Support mission there. The U.S. and NATO should ensure that:

- **The alliance stays committed to Afghanistan.** Too often, the international community has turned its back on Afghanistan. The failure to keep a residual force presence in Iraq post-2011 is playing out with disastrous results. The summit is an opportunity to demonstrate that the international community will not make the same mistake in Afghanistan.
- **The ANDSF remains at 352,000 troops for the foreseeable future.** The strength of the ANDSF should be determined by security conditions on the ground. NATO leaders should resist the temptation to reduce the ANDSF’s size and capability for financial reasons.
- **International partners provide their fair share of the funding for the ANDSF.** Everyone benefits from a strong ANDSF. However, maintaining a robust Afghan force will not be cheap. The U.S. should continue to press international partners to commit adequate funding for the ANDSF until the Afghan government takes over full responsibility in 2024.

1. NATO, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” May 2016, http://www.rs.nato.int/images/media/20160518_rsmplacemat.pdf (accessed June 15, 2016).

2. Ryan Crocker et al., “Keep Troop Levels Steady in Afghanistan: An Open Letter to the President,” *The National Interest*, June 3, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/keep-troop-levels-steady-afghanistan-16450> (accessed June 15, 2016).

3. Dan Lamothe, “‘Probably the Largest’ al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/> (accessed June 15, 2016).

4. Rebecca Kheel, “General: ISIS in Afghanistan Potentially an ‘Enormous’ Threat,” *The Hill*, April 14, 2016, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/276325-general-isis-in-afghanistan-potentially-enormous-threat> (accessed June 15, 2016).

- **The ANDSF remains capable.** The U.S. should ensure that the ANDSF has the equipment and capabilities required to fulfill its mission—especially helicopters and counter-improvised-explosive-device capability.
- **At a minimum, NATO troop commitments are maintained for the Resolute Support mission.** The U.S. must lead the way by announcing it will keep its current force level of 9,800 troops in place through the transition to the next U.S. Administration. NATO members need to make public commitments for their future troop numbers. This will send a message to the Afghan people, the insurgency, and the region that NATO is committed to Afghanistan’s future.

A Wake-Up Call

The brief fall of Kunduz last year should be a wake-up call for NATO. NATO must commit to supporting the Afghan security forces and maintaining troop commitments until the Taliban no longer threaten to recapture power. The end-of-2014 deadline for Western-led combat operations was not the end of the war but simply a continuation of the campaign led by the Afghans and supported by the international community. The upcoming NATO summit should reflect this reality.

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