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A Memo to the Next President on Winning in Afghanistan

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Mr. President-Elect:

Neither you nor Secretary Clinton said much in the campaign about the war in Afghanistan. I don't blame you. It's a complex issue, and there was no electoral payoff in it. Progress in our 15-year war has been halting. Neither advocating "staying the course" nor arguing for a full withdrawal would have won any votes. Soon, however, [this issue will be in your inbox](#). I am betting that you don't want to be the president who loses a winnable contest.

In the last four years, America's policy in practice has been to "not lose" in Afghanistan with the least amount of expenditures possible. Washington's uncertain trumpet has encouraged the Taliban to fight harder and for Pakistan to help them. In the ensuing chaos, both al Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State have stronger positions in

Afghanistan than they did just a few years ago. This is, in part, due to the success of Pakistani military forces against militants in the border regions of their country. Their success pushed bad actors into Afghanistan, adding to an already perilous situation. Our only ace in the hole has been the Afghan security forces who are fighting hard with minimal assistance. The Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani is dedicated to the fight, but faces daunting levels of economic and corruption challenges. There is also an internal political struggle with the legislature and local critics – the stuff of a budding democracy.

Some of your advisors will tell you to cut your losses in Afghanistan. Don't. Nothing smells worse than defeat or abandonment. Our enemies still tell their recruits about how we were forced to leave Lebanon during the Reagan years and Vietnam before that. Others will tell you that Afghanistan is beyond hope. It is not. The policy accountants will tell you that we have spent far too much money on Afghanistan. They are right, but those billions were wasted only because the United States lacked the will and a strategy to bring the war to a successful conclusion.

You will have to act expeditiously. After four years of leading the fight, by [U.S. government reckoning](#), Afghanistan's forces control all of the major cities, but only 63.4 percent of its 407 districts. More than a third of the country is under Taliban control or "contested." Fierce fighting killed or wounded some 16,000 Afghan soldiers and police officers in 2015, a record number, but one nearly matched by this year's death [toll](#). The Obama administration finally halted the withdrawal of U.S. forces, leaving about 9,000 behind, along with 4,000 men and women from our coalition partners, and over 25,000 [contractors](#).

In changing course, the desired end-state should be a terrorist-free Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors. To get there, you will have to gain leverage on the battlefield and use it and help from Pakistan to force the Taliban and its supporters to the table. Some "experts" will tell you not to worry about the Taliban, only worry about al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. They are wrong. At the highest levels, the Taliban are dedicated jihadists. When they thrive, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State thrive. When the Taliban is on the run and the Afghan forces strong, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will go to ground or move on to other targets.

Your objectives in Afghanistan should be similar to those Obama listed in December 2009 at the front end of [the surge](#):

Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future. To meet that goal, we will pursue the following objectives within Afghanistan. We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.

These were the right objectives, but the Obama administration did not stick with the surge long enough to bring them about. The only real Obama accomplishments were the strengthening of Afghan security forces, and taking out jihadist leaders. The Obama team withdrew troops on a fixed schedule, despite a deteriorating situation. Even worse than rapidly cutting the coalition's advisory force, the White House mixed signals on America's commitment, encouraging the enemy to fight on and our lukewarm friends in the region to hedge their bets. You will not have to commit a large American expeditionary force to win the war. The Afghans have plenty of fighters, and the Taliban are already feeling the pain from fighting for so long.

You will be able to accomplish your goal by following the "five mores."

1. You will need more clarity and fidelity in the American commitment. Let your enemies know that Afghanistan is what we have called them: a major, non-NATO ally, and that you will never abandon them.

2. You will need to be more forceful with our friends, the Pakistanis. If persuasion does not work, you should move on to coercive diplomacy. No nation should get nearly a billion dollars a year from the United States and then support the Taliban, even if it is to simply turn its head and allow the Afghan Taliban to use its soil. Beyond aid, if the Pakistanis can't and won't help, the U.S. government should let them know that we will pursue, at will, targets on Pakistani soil. Growing Indian cooperation with Afghanistan is also a potential lever to get Pakistani attention. On the incentive side, the United States should also guarantee the Pakistanis that regardless of the past, the United States will never permit a government in Kabul to be hostile to Islamabad. In effect, the Pakistanis should be offered a choice: be treated as part of the problem or an integral part of the solution.

3. You will need to provide your commander with more military assets and greater freedom of action. Obviously, U.S. forces must continue operations against jihadist cells. American combat troops will not be necessary, but you will need more special operators, advisors, and support assets, including air support. How much more? Leave that up to your commander in Afghanistan. With Gen. Mick Nicholson, you have one of the most experienced and brilliant commanders in the joint force. He will recommend the right mix. Without more obvious progress on the battlefield, it will be hard to bring the Taliban to the table.

4. Afghanistan needs more economic aid. With refugees flowing in from Pakistan and the weak economy slowed by fighting and internally displaced people, Afghanistan needs more help now. On this issue, the United States should not go it alone but pull in our coalition partners and the United Nations to give Afghanistan more aid on an emergency basis.

5. Afghanistan needs more consistent political attention. Reassure President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah of continuing U.S. support. After regaining the battlefield initiative, host a multinational peace conference to work with the Afghan leadership, regional partners, NATO allies, and coalition partners to bring about a negotiated settlement.

To accomplish your goal, you will need regional cooperation and the leverage that comes from a firm commitment and progress on the battlefield. Afghanistan can be the first big international win for the Trump administration and a sign that America's purposeful power is back on track.

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Image: U.S. Army photo by Capt. Jarrod Morris