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**Citation:** Swenson, G. (2017). Trump says 'our troops will fight to win' in Afghanistan. Here's why peace and stability are so elusive. The Washington Post,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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# Trump says ‘our troops will fight to win’ in Afghanistan. Here’s why peace and stability are so elusive.

Washington Post [Monkey Cage](#)- Analysis  
August 22, 2017

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/22/trump-says-our-troops-will-fight-to-win-in-afghanistan-heres-why-peace-and-stability-are-so-elusive/>

By Geoffrey Swenson

Over 15 years ago, the United States first intervened in Afghanistan. In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, U.S. forces backed the Northern Alliance in a successful effort to depose the Taliban regime that had harbored al-Qaeda terrorists.

Last night, after months of intense debate, President Trump announced the expansion of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. In a [major speech](#), Trump reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to winning in Afghanistan. No firm numbers were given, but it is estimated that roughly [4,000 U.S. troops](#) would join the 8,400 stationed there to train and assist Afghan forces.

While rejecting any firm timetables for withdrawal, Trump also stressed that the U.S. commitment “is not unlimited.” The new approach’s exact parameters are unclear, but it is fraught with risks.

## **There are no quick and easy answers**

The U.S. intervention in late 2001 promised a fresh start in Afghanistan. The country was to be a bastion of democracy and regional stability — and no longer a haven for violent extremists.

Yet the Taliban soon re-emerged and by 2006 had launched a [full-blown insurgency](#). When President Barack Obama took office in 2009, stabilizing Afghanistan through effective counterinsurgency was a top priority.

Reflecting conventional wisdom, the [U.S. approach](#) placed better governance at the heart of counterinsurgency efforts and marshaled huge resources toward that goal. Obama ordered a “surge” of [30,000 troops](#) to Afghanistan to help stabilize the country.

*[\[The Trump administration wants to send more military advisers to Afghanistan. Good luck with that.\]](#)*

By the time Obama left office the situation in Afghanistan [was worse](#), not better. The Afghan military continued to lose troops at an [alarming rate](#). The Taliban now [exerts control](#) over wide swaths of the country. The state remains wracked with corruption and mismanagement. Afghanistan continues to be subject to influence, often negative from its neighbors.

## **Why has stability proved so elusive?**

Afghanistan poses a complex set of governance problems. But [my research](#) shows that it is imperative for any new approach to take account of six main barriers to stability in Afghanistan.

### **1. The current state has limited popular legitimacy**

Since its founding in 1747, Afghanistan has rested on the support of Islamic religious and tribal authorities. Locally, village dispute resolution forums maintained order. These are known as *jirgas* for Pashtuns, the country's largest ethnic group, and *shuras* for other groups. These [mechanisms continued to resolve most disputes](#) in the country even after President Hamid Karzai's new regime came to power in 2001. The post-Taliban regime, however, has never effectively engaged with the [long-standing foundations](#) of Islamic and tribal culture.

Trump appears decidedly disinterested in changing the status quo. Last night, [he said](#), "We will not dictate to the Afghan people how to live or how to govern their own complex society."

### **2. Afghanistan's political institutions are a poor fit for the country**

Historically, Afghanistan enjoyed relative peace and stability through effective decentralization and limited governance. Under the 2004 constitution, Karzai sought, and achieved, an extraordinarily strong presidential system with a directly elected chief executive. This concentration of power in the executive created an intense winner-takes-all dynamic and disfavored political compromise. It also allowed the president to effectively circumvent checks and balances from the parliament and the judiciary, and [ultimately the electorate](#). It seems unlikely that political reform will be a major component of the new U.S. approach, as Trump explicitly declared, "We are not nation-building again."

### **3. Afghanistan suffers from divided and ineffectual governance**

The current government suffers from severe internal divisions and serious legitimacy concerns. The 2014 elections were so deeply compromised that the final vote count was never released. U.S. diplomatic intervention was needed to establish a novel coalition arrangement with Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah Abdullah as chief executive, a post with no constitutional basis.

Since then, the president and CEO have [consistently clashed](#) and the coalition government has faced chronic instability. While no means certain, a more engaged U.S. policy that reaffirms support for the Afghan government while making it clear that all sides of the coalition government need to work together to improve governance might yield some positive results.

### **4. The current regime is deeply dependent on warlords**

In the early 1990s, warlords dominated Afghanistan. Their rule was brutal and arbitrary, generating widespread popular support for the Taliban to come to power in 1996. The United States effectively outsourced security during the crucial early years after the 2001 intervention to many of those same warlords.

[\[Private military contractors aren't going to do a better job in Afghanistan. Here's why.\]](#)

A similar dynamic therefore occurred in the 2000s as warlords [reasserted authority](#) and became entrenched with [the backing](#) of the Afghan and U.S. governments. While increased U.S. troop presence may limit the need to depend on warlords even further, this dynamic is unlikely to change.

## **5. Corruption and poor governance strengthen the Taliban insurgency**

The state's consistently poor performance, along with increasingly predatory behavior by warlords and state officials, have bolstered Taliban insurgents, who emphasized their ability to provide [a less capricious legal order](#). The Taliban's justice approach is brutal and decidedly [uninterested in human rights](#). However, Afghans generally recognize this approach to be [more consistent, effective and culturally intelligible](#) — as well as less corrupt than what the state offers. While noting “the American people expect to see real reforms,” Trump never acknowledged the staggering corruption and injustice that have plagued Afghanistan, let alone offered a vision for how to address it.

## **6. The U.S. approach to aid and counterinsurgency is not working**

The [U.S. approach to counterinsurgency](#) has emphasized the need to promote good governance and reduce corruption. [My research](#) on U.S. foreign assistance to Afghanistan demonstrates this approach rested on flawed, overly optimistic assumptions about how programs could promote the rule of law and bolster state performance. Past counterinsurgency initiatives have not improved governance.

In theory, Trump is right that “a successful outcome” hinges on the effective “integration of all instruments of American power — diplomatic, economic, and military.” A true test of the administration's strategy will be if that integration occurs and to what ends.

Other scholars have challenged the foundations of governance-based counterinsurgency itself. Jacqueline L. Hazelton, for instance, [contends](#) that promoting democratization and focusing exclusively on killing insurgents is not likely to generate success. She argues that effective counterinsurgency requires accommodation of rival domestic elites, brute force to exert control over civilians — and coercive force to eliminate insurgents' will to fight.

Trump will continue to face unenviable choices in Afghanistan. Instability has become deeply entrenched over the last 15 years, but it is not inevitable. Domestic and international policy decisions can still make a positive difference. However, these decisions need to reflect the reality of how power is structured and exercised in Afghanistan.

*[Geoffrey Swenson](#) is a fellow with the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His current [research](#) focuses on post-conflict reconstruction and the rule of law. Follow [@geoffswenson](#).*