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# Losing on All Fronts: The Mattis Resignation and Trump's Failed Strategies for America's Wars

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# **Losing on All Fronts: The Mattis Resignation and Trump's Failed Strategies for America's Wars**

*Note: This commentary updates a previous version to reflect the impact of Secretary Mattis' resignation and the announcement of major U.S. force cuts in Afghanistan*

## **Anthony H. Cordesman**

The flood of criticism that has followed President Trump's sudden decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, the resignation of Secretary of Defense Mattis, and Trump's announcement that he was cutting U.S. force levels in Afghanistan in half is all too justified. The President has alienated the one man left among his top advisors that had real bipartisan credibility as a strategic thinker and defense leader, but – far more importantly – President Trump had substituted failed strategies in all of America's wars for weak and uncertain ones. He literally has placed the U.S. in a position where it is losing on all fronts.

The President's decision in withdrawing from Syria was based on a fundamentally wrong strategic assumption: ISIS is not defeated and still has a significant presence in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, even the total defeat of ISIS as an organization does not mean the defeat of the terrorist and extremist threat in Syria. Just as ISIS rose out of the ashes of Al Qaida, some new extremist movement – like Al Nusra – will be born out of the remnants of ISIS.

As virtually all the President's most senior experienced military and civilian advisors evidently pointed out to him before his decision, ISIS is still fighting in Syria and Iraq, it may well have some 40,000 fighters left in both countries, and it has a serious presence in other countries ranging from Africa to Asia. It is far too early to claim that ISIS is defeated and rush out of Syria – particularly suddenly and in ways that make it look like the U.S. is willing to abandon its allies and strategic partners without warning.

The President's decision to withdraw half of the roughly 16,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan will make it impossible to carry out an effective train and assist program for Afghan forces and check the Taliban. Coupled to U.S. peace negotiations that come perilously close to declaring victory and leaving, and a lack of U.S. effort to persuade Afghanistan to hold meaningful Presidential elections to unify the country, it may well turn an uncertain war of attrition into the same kind of defeat the U.S. suffered in Vietnam.

More generally, Secretary Mattis has timed his resignation to the end of February 2019. In theory, this gives him time to try to reassure America's allies and strategic partners, and to develop an FY2020 defense budget submission that will implement the new national security strategy he helped develop in 2017, and the follow-on national defense strategy he issued in 2018. As the President has shown, however, he rejected Mattis' efforts with a single tweet.

## **The Broader Strategic Challenge of America's Ongoing Wars**

In fairness, President Trump's recent actions are scarcely responsible for the fact U.S. strategy range from failed to flawed in all its wars before he even took office. The crisis President Trump has now triggered by announcing sudden force reductions in Syria and Afghanistan is only part of the much broader failure to develop effective U.S. strategies for any of America's present wars that had its beginnings at the start of the Afghan and Iraq wars in 2001 and 2003.

At the same time, the sudden unilateral character of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria impacts far more than the fight against ISIS in one country. The President's actions in reshaping the U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan are equally problematic, and undermines the U.S. position in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in keeping the trust of Americas strategic partners throughout the world.

As Secretary Mattis' letter of resignation makes clear, his actions also further undermine the core structure of America's strategic position in the world. Like Trump's emphasis on false burdensharing arguments and exaggerated arms sales, his bullying treatment of NATO and key allies in Asia – and his strategic mood swings in dealing with Russia, China and North Korea – his decision to suddenly withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, and slash U.S. forces in Afghanistan, affect every aspect of U.S. national security.

At the same time, his critics do need to acknowledge that they only compound much broader and costly strategic failures that are the result of actions taken by President Bush and President Obama. President Trump did not create the lack of any U.S. effective strategy in fighting and ending America's wars. The younger President Bush invaded Afghanistan after 9/11 without a clear strategy for ensuring the final defeat of the Taliban, and failed to either create a stable new Afghan government economy or check Pakistani interference. He invaded Iraq with no plan to stabilize the country after the fall of Saddam Hussein and mismanaged the post-invasion effort so badly he created a whole new threat of Sunni Islamic extremists while opening the country up to Iran.

President Obama did no better. He failed to keep an effective U.S. presence in Iraq, sustained a meaningful civil-stability effort, and left Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki to create new sectarian and ethnic tensions that opened up Iraq and Syria to ISIS and the still ongoing war to defeat it. He failed to intervene in Syria when a limited push could have removed Assad, failed to enforce his own red line against the use of chemical weapons, and failed to react when Iran, Hezbollah, and then Russia intervened. He set impossible goals for withdrawal from Afghanistan, and then failed to deploy effective levels of force when his withdrawal plans decisively failed.

As a result, a President with almost no real foreign policy and military background and experience has inherited a climate of bipartisan strategic failure in the Iraq/Syria war, the Afghan War, and some seven much smaller U.S. military interventions from Africa to Asia, as well as having to deal with successful Iranian intervention in Syria and Iraq, as well as the all too many areas where Arab divisiveness and self-destructiveness has opened up the Middle East to Iranian intervention.

In fairness to President Trump, no one can ignore his emphasis on the cost and casualties in any of America's wars. The latest publically available Cost of War report issued by the Department of Defense indicates the total direct cost of America's wars since 2010 will be \$1.77 trillion by the end of FY2018 – with \$756 billion for Iraq and Syria and \$730 billion for Afghanistan and a large amount of support for both wars and other costs. The State Department has never provided a credible costing of its part of the fighting, but it probably adds another \$127-\$132 billion.

Even if one ignores civilian and allied casualties, the Department of Defense reports that there were 6,978 US military dead. 5,434 killed in combat, and 52,783 wounded between 2010 and December 19, 2018. Far too many of those wounded will continue to suffer and need continuing medical care for all of their lives.

## **The Broader Strategic Challenge in Syria**

That said, America's current strategy cannot be based on "might have beens." It must be based on "what now can be done." A strategy based on a sudden, unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Syria

without a proper effort to deal with its future or the region's stability would be dangerous even if ISIS had actually been defeated, rather than just seen most of its "caliphate" broken up.

The Assad regime is an authoritarian nightmare, Russia's presence in Syria threatens vital U.S. interests, the Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria threatens our Arab strategic partners and Israel, and Turkey's potential intervention in Syria can mean a major round of fighting with the Kurds and potentially in support of Sunni extremists in the Syrian enclave around Idlib.

More broadly, the U.S. will now leave in a way where it did not consult any of its strategic partners, including France, Jordan, and Israel, and do so at a time its role in the region is deeply distrusted in Iraq and the Arab Gulf. It will give the Hezbollah a major boost in Lebanon by default and give a similar boost to Iran throughout the region. It has effectively betrayed its Kurdish partners, its impact on the Iraqi Kurds and Pesh Merga will be highly negative, and it will compound its problems in dealing with other strategic partners in the MENA region.

This is especially true because the prospect for any form of future stability in Syria are so poor, regardless of current ceasefire and peace efforts. The U.S. has said earlier that it will stand aside from any civil effort to bring stability to a worn torn state, and that it will not provide any aid for Syrian economic and civil recovery if Assad stays in power – although it may continue to do so on a de facto basis by providing humanitarian aid.

This leaves Syria as a nation without a working economy, with millions of refugees that have no clear incentive to return, and with something like a third of its remaining population displaced from its pre-civil war homes, schools and jobs. Moreover, Transparency International ranks the Assad regime as the 3rd most corrupt government in the world. As the CIA's *World Factbook* notes,

"Syria's economy has deeply deteriorated amid the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, declining by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017. The government has struggled to fully address the effects of international sanctions, widespread infrastructure damage, diminished domestic consumption and production, reduced subsidies, and high inflation, which have caused dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising budget and trade deficits, a decreasing value of the Syrian pound, and falling household purchasing power. In 2017, some economic indicators began to stabilize, including the exchange rate and inflation, but economic activity remains depressed and GDP almost certainly fell....During 2017, the ongoing conflict and continued unrest and economic decline worsened the humanitarian crisis, necessitating high levels of international assistance, as more than 13 million people remain in need inside Syria, and the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from 4.8 million in 2016 to more than 5.4 million."

This economic crisis interacts with major sectarian and ethnic tensions and conflicts. It is the Assad forces, not ISIS, that many experts estimate may be responsible for most of what may total over half a million dead and a million wounded as a result of the recent fighting. It is the Assad regime that will probably bear the brunt of the anger and resentments growing out of one of the world's most bitter civil wars.

It is coupled to the reality that Assad – part of a relatively tiny Alawite minority in Syria (1.5-1.9%) – must now try to rule a Syria whose Sunni majority (74%) has every reason to fear and hate him, whose Kurds have never been treated as fully citizens, and whose larger Shi'ite minority (10-11%) must now depend on Iranian and Hezbollah support. The idea that peace negotiations can somehow produce lasting stability under these conditions is absurd. Like the premature U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and failed plan to withdraw from Afghanistan, it can only breed new forms of extremism and civil conflict.

Simply keeping 2,000 U.S. forces in staying in Syria could not deal with such deeper issues, but it did give the U.S. continuing leverage, reassure strategic partners, allow for a much more complete defeat of ISIS, and provide some degree of stability. The U.S. also had the option of greatly increasing its leverage – and countering both Assad and ISIS-like extremism – by organizing an international aid package that was conditional on Assad leaving, all of Syria's factions uniting to revive the country, and Iranian and Hezbollah departure. Even if Assad (and Russia) did not budge, such an option could put intense pressure on both and offer a clear alternative to extremism.

Now, the same Kurds that helped lead the fight against ISIS on the ground are reported to be dealing with ISIS to compensate for U.S. withdrawal. If such efforts are real, or if the Syrian Kurds insist on autonomy, the result may Turkish intervention and/or a major new mix of Assad, Russian, and Iranian back attacks on the regions the Kurds now control in eastern Syria. President Trump's actions are an open invitation to new extremist efforts, and new forms of civil conflict, open up Syria even more to Russia and Iran, and give potential Turkish military intervention all too much of a free hand.

They also leave the U.S. with three bad options: Relaying on money and air strikes to somehow secure the Syrian Kurdish-Arab resistance enclave, covertly keeping or reintroducing special forces trainers and assisters, and/or seeking to create some form of a condition international aid package to try to counter or undermine Assad and Russian and Iranian influence.

## **The Broader Strategic Challenge in Iraq**

President Trump's sudden decision to withdraw from Syria raises equally deep questions about the lack of any clear U.S. strategy for Iraq. Iraq still lacks effective governance. It is still trying to cope with the second election in a row that left it without an effective majority government. It faces massive problems in rebuilding the rest of its economy, uniting its Kurds and Arabs, in uniting its Sunnis and Shi'ites, and in both completing the feat of ISIS in its west and rebuilding the largely Sunni cities and rural areas damaged or destroyed by the fighting against ISIS.

The rushed U.S. withdrawal from Syria may well open up Western Iraq to new threats from ISIS and other Sunni extremists as well as allow Iran to create a major new corridor of influence and a transit route through Iraq's south. These problems will be sharply exacerbated by the Iraqi central government's failure to keep its promises to help the Sunnis in the west and Mosul recover from the fighting, and the increased fear Iraq Kurds will have of being isolated or weakened by similar U.S. abandonment.

The lack of any coherent political unity in its new government, and the deep internal tensions between Iraq's divided Kurds (15-20%), Sunni Arabs (29-34% of total), and Shi'ite Arabs (64%-69% of total) mean that Iraq will face a growing risk of new civil conflicts. There will be even less incentive for Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs to give their popular militias – some of which approach an extremist character – and for the Kurdish Pesh Merga to work with the central government forces. The U.S. withdrawal will also make all Iraqis question U.S. reliability, and push them towards dependence on Iran and even more purchases of Russian arms.

Iraq faces a massive economic crisis as well as political divisions and security threats. As the CIA notes, the Iraqi government is almost totally dependent on its oil export revenues for roughly 85% of government revenue and 80% of foreign exchange earnings, and oil exports are the major determinant of the economy's fortunes.

These funds could not meet Iraq's current needs even if they were spent honestly and effectively. Iraq has one of the most corrupt governments in the world, and Transparency International ranks it the 11th most corrupt country out of the 180 countries it ranks.

Iraq is now virtually bankrupt, critically dependent on outside aid and loans, and is barely able to fund its most basic functions and the salaries for its state sector. It has far too few additional funds for wartime recovery, economic reform and development, and to help bridge the gaps between Sunni and Shi'ite or Arab and Kurd. It still is spending some 10% of its GDP on its military, is dependent on imports from Iran, and needs help in carrying out critical economic reforms in its private and agricultural sectors

In short Iraq needs years of further U.S. help to achieve internal stability. It needs help to secure its borders. It needs a strong U.S. military train and assist mission to finish the job of creating effective Iraqi forces. It needs U.S. military support until ISIS is further defeated and to deter any outside threats by Iran or from an Assad controlled Syria. It needs U.S. help in putting together the kind of international economic aid package that can bring stability, recovery, and development; unite its people; and fight extremism.

At present, however, the U.S. has no real strategy for Iraq that is coupled to real world promises, plans, and resources. The results of the election this year left it far too close to the position it had when a paralyzed election in 2010 led Maliki to turn on the nation's Sunnis, and to create a low-level civil war in the Sunni parts of Western Iraq that empowered ISIS. Unless the U.S. now develops an effective civil-military strategy, and implements it over a period of years, it will run a serious risk of repeating Iraq's all too grim recent past.

## **The Broader Strategic Challenge in Afghanistan**

The Afghan conflict raises similar concerns about the present Trump policies and strategy. President Trump certainly made things worse by seeming to react to the criticisms in Secretary Mattis' letter of resignation by suddenly announcing that he would cut the U.S. presence by some 7,000 uniformed military out of a total of some 14,000.

However, months before this announcement, the U.S. seemed to be pursuing a strategy in Afghanistan at the political level that was all too close to the U.S. strategy that led to the collapse of South Vietnam. Despite Secretary Mattis' efforts to build-up the U.S. train and assist force, add 4,000 personnel, and expand its mission, the Trump Administration began to pursue a separate peace policy. It increasingly seemed to be negotiating with the Taliban in ways where it could at least claim it had reach a "peace" and then withdraw.

Even more than the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration largely ignored the critical civil dimension of the war, and the need to give Afghanistan effective political and economic support. It had no clear plan for creating an effective Afghan government. It also had no credible plan for finishing the job that the Obama Administration had botched earlier in seeking to create Afghan forces that could stand on their own.

The Afghan government remains a divided, corrupt, and ineffective mess, and often is more the government of "Kabulstan" than the nation of Afghanistan. In spite of real anti-corruption efforts by President Ghani, Transparency International still ranks Afghanistan as the 4<sup>th</sup> most corrupt country in the world out of the 180 countries it ranks.

The election that left Ashraf Ghani as President and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah as CEO created a leadership that is not functional enough to meet Afghan needs on either a civil or warfighting level. The Afghan legislature lacks the unity, authority, and control over money to be effective. Yet, the U.S. seems to be negotiating with the Taliban in ways that could block or further delay an Afghan presidential election that might provide a single leader with real political credibility – an option even worse than the stage-managed elections in South Vietnam.

Afghanistan faces critical civil problems. Flight to the cities, rising poverty, massive unemployment, corruption at every level, divisions between power brokers and de facto warlords, a brain drain to other countries, and growing dependence on a narco-economy all offset the areas where Afghanistan is making civil progress. As the CIA notes,

"Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Corruption, insecurity, weak governance, lack of infrastructure, and the Afghan Government's difficulty in extending rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. Afghanistan's living standards are among the lowest in the world. Since 2014, the economy has slowed, in large part because of the withdrawal of nearly 100,000 foreign troops that had artificially inflated the country's economic growth.

The United States is also negotiating with the Taliban at a time when the Taliban is refusing to deal with the Afghan government, focuses on demands that the U.S. and NATO leave the country, and is confident of victory. This confidence is not without cause.

The Taliban seems to be slowly winning its battle of attrition with Afghan forces despite the fact that the U.S. has increased some aspects of its train and assist effort and will probably drop nearly 50% more air weapons in 2018 than it did in 2017 (6,584 strike sorties through October 31, 2018 vs. 4,603 in all of 2017 or 43% increase; 5,982 weapons dropped through October 31, 2018 vs. 4,361 in all of 2017 or 37% increase).

While Afghan government casualty levels are classified, the Afghan forces now seem to be suffering from unacceptable levels of killed and wounded –with some 25,000 dead in recent years –much higher numbers of wounded, and the same critical desertion problems that undermined the ARVN at the end of the Vietnam War.

Here, the Department of Defense is partly at fault for concealing the level of these problems. More and more of its reporting seems to either ignore the war or spin its contents to avoid honestly reporting on the growth of Taliban and other extremist influence, and the problems Afghan forces are encountering. It is doing so in ways all too similar to the "follies" in Vietnam.

There seem to be serious differences in the Department of Defense view of the war and that of the CIA. Independent official analyses like those of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General raise serious questions about the course of the fighting, the steady growth of Taliban control and influence in new areas, and progress of Afghan forces if the United States does not provide sustained support.

Key outside analyses like those of the *Long War Journal* – and most media reporting – also raise similar or much greater doubts about what will happen if the U.S. should now agree to the wrong kind of peace, fail to provide years of economic aid and support to Afghan forces, and rush out as it did in Vietnam.

There is a desperate need to seek peace in Afghanistan, but it must be a real peace, and one that leaves a legitimate government in charge – not the Taliban. The President's sudden cut of U.S. forces in Afghanistan now leaves the Taliban with no incentive to negotiate, and a near assurance

of winning a war of attrition over time. The Trump Administration would have to make far greater concessions now to have any chance of persuading the Taliban, concessions that would amount to declaring victory in ways that clearly meant defeat. Even before such cuts, however, the odds of success were terrible. Vietnam is scarcely the only case in point illustrating how a fragile or false peace can produce the wrong results. The outcome of peace negotiations in Nepal and Cambodia are further examples as to just how easily peace negotiations can become an extension of war by other means.

Some of the blame does have to go to the Afghans, and President Trump is right in one key respect. The U.S cannot support Afghanistan indefinitely. The U.S. has no responsibility to continue to do so if the Afghans again fail to elect an effective government, if they fail to develop their forces over a reasonable period, or do not reduce corruption and if they make the necessary reforms.

Declaring peace and abandoning Afghanistan, however, is no substitute for only being willing to agreeing to the right kind of peace, and for continuing to provide kind of military and economic aid that Afghanistan needs to have a meaningful chance. So far, there is far too little evidence that this is the strategy that the Trump Administration is now willing to pursue.

### **If Secretary Mattis Remains through February**

It is far from clear what a Secretary who has already resigned – effective February 28, 2019 – can now do to fix the lack of effective strategy in America's "long wars." It is also unclear how long President Trump will actually let Secretary Mattis stay if he seeks to create truly effective plan to implement the new strategy that he – not the President – helped develop.

Secretary Mattis' letter of resignation speaks for itself and far more wisely than the President. Mattis places emphasis on allies, partners, and the benefits global security, not marginal budget costs, meaningless burdensharing percentages, and grossly inflated arms sales:

...While the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies. Like you, I have said from the beginning that the armed forces of the United States should not be the policeman of the world. Instead, we must use all tools of American power to provide for the common defense, including providing effective leadership to our alliances. 29 democracies demonstrated that strength in their commitment to fighting alongside us following the 9-11 attack on America. The Defeat ISIS coalition of 74 nations is further proof.

Similarly, I believe we must be resolute and unambiguous in our approach to those countries whose strategic interests are increasingly in tension with ours. It is clear that China and Russia, for example, want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions to promote their own interests at the expense of their neighbors, America and our allies. That is why we must use all the tools of American power to provide for the common defense.

...My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors are strongly held and informed by over four decades of immersion in these issues. We must do everything possible to advance an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values, and we are strengthened in this effort by the solidarity of our alliances.

Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position. The end date for my tenure is February 28, 2019, a date that should allow sufficient time for a successor to be nominated and confirmed as well as to make sure the Department's interests are properly articulated and protected at upcoming events to include Congressional posture hearings and the NATO Defense Ministerial meeting in February. Further, that a full transition to a new Secretary of Defense occurs well in advance of the transition of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in September in order to ensure stability Within the Department.

It is even more vital that the U.S. develop an effective overall strategy, a plan to implement it, and suitable plans and programs in its FY2020 budget submission rather than develop strategies for what are ultimately optional conflicts. In practice, however, U.S. national security interests require it to do both. The question now is whether the President will give Mattis even the chance to make a proper beginning. Given the President's track record to date, the result seems more likely to be tragedy by Tweet, rather than triumph by thought, planning, and careful implementation.

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