

The Dangers of Disengagement: Gen. David H. Petraeus on Withdrawing US Troops from Afghanistan



Featuring General David H. Petraeus

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Civil war and an unrestrained al Qaeda are all but certain should the US withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in May per the US-Taliban deal signed over a year ago. American disengagement will only embolden revisionist powers and create an even more dangerous security situation for the region and beyond. On this episode of Overwatch, Frederick W. Kagan, director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, and General David H. Petraeus sit down to discuss the US-Taliban agreement, the consequences of a US withdrawal, and a sustainable way forward that protects not only American interests, but also advances those of the Afghan people.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War.

Just over one year has passed since the United States signed an agreement with the Taliban that commits US forces to leave Afghanistan this May if the Taliban has met certain conditions. On this episode of Overwatch, Frederick Kagan, Director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, sits down with General David H. Petraeus, to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, the state of the US-Taliban deal and the dangers for American national security of withdrawing US Forces from Afghanistan under the circumstances.

General Petraeus is the former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. His 37-year career in the US Military included command of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq, Multinational Force Iraq, in which capacity he developed and executed the Surge Strategy, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and the US Central Command.

Fredrick Kagan:

General Petraeus, thank you so much for joining us today.

Gen. David Petraeus:

Great to be with you, Fred. Thanks.

Fredrick Kagan:

We're recording this podcast on the anniversary of the signing of the deal between the US and the Taliban. The agreement specifies, if US military forces will withdraw from Afghanistan by May, if the Taliban has met certain conditions, including breaking with Al Qaeda, and if there has been progress in talks between the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan government and society. So General Petraeus, the first question I think we need to ask is, was this the right deal to make?

Gen. David Petraeus:

I don't think so. So, if that was what we were seeking, I don't think this was the right deal to make, candidly, Fred. It certainly is not one that seems likely to lead to a durable, equitable, sustainable solution in Afghanistan. If you think about what the Taliban wanted, it gave them a great deal of that. They essentially want us to reduce and then to remove our forces, and they wanted their fighters and leaders out of detention. There were well over 5,000 of them, as I recall.

They've gotten us to reduce the forces. They have gotten their fighters out of detention. In fact, there's already over 500 of them that are back in detention, because they returned to the fight instead of laying down the weapons as was supposed to have been their commitment. And, in the meantime, the level of violence has actually gone up, perhaps not against the US forces, although they're pretty hard to get to now, because we're doing the advise

and assist and naval mission rather than fighting on the front lines.

There is certainly no sign that they are cutting their ties to Al Qaeda. In fact, they're actually referring to al-Qaeda members as refugees, which was a term that they used to use when they sheltered the group before 9/11. And of course, you'll recall that the 9/11 attacks were planned in a sanctuary in Eastern Afghanistan during the time that the Taliban controlled the bulk of the country.

And then beyond that, there's been a campaign of targeted murders against journalists, judges, human rights activists, civil servants in Kabul, that seems to be intended to eliminate as many of the modern minded Afghan professionals as they can. Those who, in other words, oppose the Taliban's extremist agenda. My colleague Matt, our mutual friend, has referred to this as a Khmer Rouge-style campaign of targeted murders.

And they've gotten us to reduce our forces, on the hope that eventually they would actually negotiate a settlement with the Afghan government, and Afghan people, which is still actually at the stage of determining the agenda of what they're going to talk about, much less actually coming to some agreement that, again, would produce the kind of equitable and sustainable agreement that we should want to see for our Afghan partners.

Fredrick Kagan:

Now, some argue that the reason why the Taliban isn't abiding by the conditions in the deal is that US forces are still there. And that if the US really want the Taliban to abide by this agreement, we should just withdraw our forces and then they would. What do you think of that argument?

Gen. David Petraeus:

Well, I think that's very unlikely and we certainly don't see signs of the kind of conduct if you will, that we would want to see in those rural areas that are controlled by the Taliban now.

Really, again, what they have wanted was to get us out of the country so that they could fight much more effectively against Afghan security forces, who would not be supported by our enablers--our drones, our precision air strike, advice and assistance and so forth--presumably so that they can once again control as much of the country as they possibly can, as they were able to do in the wake of the civil war of the 1980s. The civil war that began, of course, when the Soviets stopped funding, the Soviet-installed Afghan government in the wake of their own departure from Afghanistan. That was not a happy period for Afghanistan you'll recall that the soccer stadiums became killing grounds, women and girls weren't allowed to go to school or have a meaningful place in the economy or society.

Now, again, we're not there to purely to support those kinds of activities, if you will. We're there because that's where the 9/11 attacks were planned. We went into Afghanistan when the Taliban refused to eliminate that sanctuary that they allowed the Al Qaeda forces to have in eastern Afghanistan. We did eliminate it and, sadly, the Al Qaeda, and now also the Islamic State, has tried to reestablish a sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan. That is our overriding national security objective, to prevent that from happening. And we do know that when the Taliban is able to control certain areas, that there is a high likelihood that Al Qaeda may find sanctuary in some of those areas.

In fact, there was a sanctuary in southern Helmand Province in the southern part of the country a year or two ago that our forces discovered and, together with Afghan forces, eliminated. That is the overriding reason we have stayed in Afghanistan, and that's why we went to Afghanistan, to eliminate that sanctuary. Beyond that, of course, Afghanistan is also a very important platform for the so-called regional counter-terrorism campaign. It's well-known, for example, that the operation that brought Osama Bin Laden to justice in Pakistan was launched from

eastern Afghanistan. So, we have some very real national security objectives there. We also certainly should want to ensure that our Afghan partners are not sentenced to a civil war once again, as a result of our haste, our desire to reduce the final forces that we have there. Keeping in mind that we have some 2,500 or less while our NATO and non-NATO allies have somewhere around 8,000 as well.

This is a vastly reduced force, needless to say, from what you will recall. In fact, when you and the other Dr. Kagan, your wife, spent a year in Afghanistan at my request to help us during that period, that I was privileged to command the International Security Assistance Force. At that time, we had 100,000 American men and women in uniform and the other 50,000 from our coalition partner countries.

The fact that we've been able to reduce as substantially as we have, and still largely maintain security, although it has undeniably eroded to a level that is quite worrisome, but that is a tribute to the fighting of the Afghan National Security Forces. There's no question that they are fighting and taking casualties and dying for their country, as our casualties have been dramatically reduced, along with our numbers and the cost. But what the Taliban would like to see is for us to withdraw completely, presumably so that they can, indeed, increase the areas that they control and, ideally, from their perspective, together with other like-minded insurgent and extremist organizations, like the Haqqani network and so forth, retake control of Kabul in particular.

Fredrick Kagan:

So, it sounds like it's fair to say that you don't think that the conditions of the agreement will be met by May. Let alone that conditions would be set by May to withdraw US forces, according to the timeline of the deal, is that a fair assessment?

Gen. David Petraeus:

It is. And now, let me just say Fred that, no one would like to see endless wars and our involvement in endless wars end, more than those who have been fighting them. And those in particular, perhaps who have been privileged to command them who, at the end of the day, were the ones writing the letters of condolence to America's mothers and fathers that are most keenly aware of the costs, the sacrifices of these efforts. I would love to see an agreement that allows our forces and other coalition forces to go home, and enables Afghan forces to continue to secure their country, and Afghan institutions to perform the other functions necessary for their country.

The problem is that that prospect is just not really there. Again, the Taliban have shown no signs of being willing to reduce the violence. Indeed, they have this campaign of assassinations and other operations to erode the control of Afghan security forces, and to reduce the numbers of those who, again, are the modern minded Afghan professionals who most significantly opposed the kind of Taliban rule that one anticipates would be once again established.

And so, again, in the absence of the prospect of, again, a durable, sustainable agreement that would be favorable for our Afghan partners and their government, I don't see an alternative to staying. And we should be very clear, oftentimes we hear leaders in Washington from both parties who, again understandably, want to end endless wars. But what they're really talking about is ending US involvement in a long war, an endless war. They're not necessarily talking about ending the war.

The war continues, even if our forces withdraw, unless there is a durable agreement. And that's my concern in this case. Certainly we can end our involvement in Afghanistan. We can withdraw our final 2,500 forces, which I question whether they are enough actually, as it is. But what we leave behind is undoubtedly likely to become a civil war, and one that ends up with millions of refugees and all of the other horrors that one would imagine would result from the kind of civil war that we saw in the 1980s.

We'll see the warlords from different regions of Afghanistan reactivate their forces and there'll be an enormous battle as there was, again, before the Taliban were able to take control of the capital Kabul. We'll see that kind of battle once again. Again, that was a very, very difficult, again, horrific period for Afghanistan and the Afghan people. And that is what is most likely to result from a situation in which we withdraw our forces without a reasonable, durable, sustainable agreement.

Fredrick Kagan:

So, end endless wars is a bumper sticker. It's not a strategy. It doesn't tell us what to do. And it doesn't even, as you explained so eloquently, end the war, it just ends the American involvement in the war for a time. Although, the risk that we will be drawn back in at a later date, and possibly in much worse conditions, is very high. But I think that we also owe it to the new administration to offer some ideas about what they might do instead of executing the Trump-Taliban agreement. And one of the things that's worth interrogating, I think, is the way that agreement was negotiated.

Gen. David Petraeus:

Well, the challenge has been that if the enemy knows that you want to leave and, in fact, if you are drawing down without them having to really concede anything, you're getting nothing really in return, and the incentive for them to negotiate seriously is not particularly significant.

So, what is the answer? Well, the answer would be to declare a sustained commitment that is sustainable. And sustainability from our perspective is measured in the expenditure of blood and treasure, and the same would be true of our coalition partners. So, how much would we be willing to provide in terms of advice, assistance, enablers from the year and on the ground and funding for Afghanistan and the Afghan security forces?

Clearly, we do need to focus our US military, understandably, on the tasks involved in the resurgence of great power rivalries, as it's termed, the era of great power competition. And certainly the bulk of that focus, rightly, will be in the Indo-Pacific area, and reducing our commitments in places like Afghanistan or Iraq, Syria, Africa, and so forth, is very important in that regard. But certainly maintaining a modest force in those countries is sustainable for the world's greatest military force. And, in fact, you have to think of the United States when it comes to military tasks, like the guy in the circus that puts a plate on a stick, gets it spinning and does another one and another one. And we have to maintain a number of plates on sticks. We have to keep them spinning and by giving them attention.

Clearly, the biggest of those plates has to do with, again, our deterrence mission and partnership missions in the Indo-Pacific region. And that focus has to be paramount, but it doesn't mean that you can't undertake other tasks or shouldn't undertake other tasks that are still necessary, that you can't keep other smaller plates spinning. And I firmly believe that we can do that, quite simply, frankly, again, a modest force, I'd say 5,000 or less Americans in uniform, along with, again, 8,000 coalition partners, supporting our Afghan security force partners. That is very doable.

And, actually, if the enemy, if the Taliban, comes to see that we have the level of commitment that we've committed to a sustained and sustainable presence, that you're actually more likely to get serious negotiations than if they sense that what you really want to do is just get an agreement that justifies your withdrawal from a particular "endless war." That's the way I believe we should look at this.

And noting, for what it's worth, we have tens of thousands of troops deployed around the world. Certainly none in active hostilities like this, but in the Korean Peninsula, there's still between 30 and 40,000 troops. There's 30,000 in various places in Japan, tens of thousands still in Europe, as you know. Tens of thousands more

throughout the greater Middle East, we can afford to do that. We need to do that. Again, we do have interests around the world, even as we rightly shift our focus, rebalance our attention, resources, funding and so forth, to the Indo-Pacific region. So that would be how I would come at this.

And I'd finally note that, you know, we have seen this movie before. We did withdraw all of our combat forces from Iraq. It was a very different situation. Actually, violence went down, we drove it down by some 85% during the surge in early 2007 to the summer of 2008. And it continued to go down in subsequent years as you'll recall, for a good three, three and a half years, even as we reduced our forces very substantially, and then finally withdrew the final combat forces and then-four star General Lloyd Austin, the last commander on the ground in Iraq, of combat forces in late 2011.

And then, tragically, we watched as our former partner, the prime minister pursued highly sectarian activities that tore the fabric of society apart. Once again, alienated the Sunni Arab population, took his eye off the Islamic State. It was able to reconstitute itself, drift into Syria, gain enormous, additional power, and then sweep back into Iraq and actually control the northern part of the country, which was part of its caliphate, and much of the western part as well. And required us, of course, to go back into Iraq, to ensure that the Islamic State forces weren't able to attack the capital of the Kurdish regional government in the north, nor the capital of Iraq, Baghdad, in the center.

So, again, I think that the price of a sustainable commitment is one that we certainly can afford, and it is likely that it produces better negotiating opportunities than a situation where the enemy knows that you're just desperate to get out of there and go home, and really what you want as an agreement that will allow you to justify that back in our home country.

Fredrick Kagan:

I think the challenges of working with the partner that we have in the Afghan government have led to thinking about other partners that we might try to work with instead. And I think, in fact you can, in a certain sense, characterize the deal that the Trump administration did with the Taliban as it's kind of looking at the Taliban as a preferable partner to the Afghan government in some respects, which I think is pretty problematic. But there's long been an argument that says that the partners we really should be focusing on are the partners that have a much greater stake in Afghanistan than we do, and that is Afghanistan's neighbors. And that, in fact, what we really should do is probably pull our forces out. But, regardless of that, we should really focus on getting Afghanistan's neighbors engaged and making clear to them, that they're going to be responsible for the disaster on their borders, and that they need to step up and take care of this problem. Do you think that that approach holds promise?

Gen. David Petraeus:

I'm afraid that I don't. Now, we have certainly sought repeatedly to engage Afghanistan's neighbors, and most significantly Pakistan. There have been periods where we thought that they were being helpful. The period of 2009 was a real high watermark in that regard, where Admiral Mullen, then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had a very good relationship with the Chief of Army Staff, as did I, we worked it very, very hard. I was at Central Command. We provided an enormous assistance to the Pakistani Army and their military forces, as they combated the Pakistani Taliban, a different group from the Afghan Taliban, which had been threatening the outskirts of Islamabad.

In fact, and they went into Swat Valley and then into all these different tribal areas, Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, South Waziristan and so forth. But unfortunately, they could never really close their forces on all of North Waziristan, in particular, which is really the heart of darkness there, and the location where you find the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda senior leadership, most likely, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a number of

other groups. Nor were they ever able to do anything to pressure the Taliban and the Afghan Taliban headquarters, which was outside the capital in Baluchistan. And that was very, very frustrating, needless to say.

It's a unique situation for our efforts like this. Certainly not something that we saw in Iraq where the major insurgent groups all had their headquarters outside the country. In Afghanistan, that is the case, and it's very difficult to put real pressure on the Taliban senior leaders if they're sitting outside Quetta, again, the capital of Baluchistan. And, by the way, their Shura, their top council, is called the Quetta Shura, which gives you an indication, again, where they're generally located.

Beyond that, Iran has generally been unhelpful. It provides a modicum of support to some of the Taliban that are in the areas of Afghanistan contiguous to Iran. And then, if you look at the other countries to the north, again, they all have interest in Afghanistan, but certainly not the kind of power of influence or what have you that would ever give you hope that their involvement there, in some fashion, would enable you to reshape this situation.

So, we have worked this very, very hard, the frustrations with Pakistan, again, the country in which these groups have their headquarters outside Afghanistan, and generally beyond the reach of our forces and capabilities. Those frustrations are very, very significant. We have tried every approach from enormous help to them...again, Ambassador Holbrooke and I secured very substantial economic assistance to them. I think it was 6.5 or more billion dollars over a five-year period. We provided enormous security assistance and a variety of other elements of support in the economic realm. And yet, we were unable to get them to deal with these groups on their soil, which could have contributed so much to the situation in Afghanistan where the fighters of these groups were making life so difficult for the Afghan people, for our coalition forces, and for the Afghan government.

So, again, that approach certainly should continue, but I think you should have very measured expectations about what it is likely to achieve. It is not going to be a game changer. Nor is Russian involvement back in there, which has generally been unhelpful at best, as well, and has even included, in more recent years, as you know, bounties on the heads of some of our soldiers if the Taliban killed them. So, there's no silver bullet to be found in the neighboring countries, unfortunately. And, in many cases, not only is there no silver bullet, what is going on with those countries and in those countries is decidedly unhelpful, especially, again, when it comes to the case of Pakistan.

Fredrick Kagan:

So, to conclude, I think you've made a very strong case that a very small American deployment in Afghanistan, something below 5,000 troops, enables our allies from Europe and Australia and elsewhere, to help us help the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces put pressure on the Taliban, put pressure on the Haqqani Network, put pressure on ISIS, and set conditions for a settlement of that war, that would ensure American security interests are preserved and would allow the chance for real peace in Afghanistan.

I think that's a very cogent argument. I think that it's an extremely important argument. And I think that, as this administration continues its review of the deal and of its policy in Afghanistan, it's an argument and consideration that it should take to heart, particularly coming as it does from you sir, who have tackled such a terribly difficult problems as those in Iraq in 2007 and those in Afghanistan, during your tenure there. And I think that your expression, "The heart is not hopeless," really characterizes the most important thing that we need to keep in mind as we look at what to do in this difficult situation.

Thank you General Petraeus for your incredible service to the nation. And thank you for sharing your thoughts with us about Afghanistan today.

Gen. David Petraeus:

Well, thanks Fred. Thanks for this invitation.

Thanks also for what you have done over the years when you oversaw the think tank study, if you will, that was a very important intellectual contribution to the surge Iraq. Thanks for what you and your wife did during your own year-long deployment in Afghanistan. And thanks for summing up so effectively that indeed a sustained, sustainable approach is the best alternative at this juncture, noting that none of the alternatives is easy or without cost or going to be short in duration. We do need to recognize that, with our eyes wide open, the challenges of Afghanistan, the continued frustrations, but also recognize, very clearly, what the result would be of a full US withdrawal at this point in time, without a durable, sustainable agreement, especially when viewed from the Afghan perspective.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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