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## Bad for U.S., worse for Afghanistan

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# Vox Pop: Bad for U.S., worse for Afghanistan

*While the U.S. Congress tries to restrain their impulsive president, Afghanistan faces a stubborn Taliban with ISIS in the wings*

Author of the article:

**Free Press Vox Populi**

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US. acting secretary of defense Pat Shanahan, appointed by President Donald Trump despite his lack of military experience, greets an Afghan commando at Camp Commando, Afghanistan, on Monday. The unannounced visit is the first for Shanahan as the U.S. tries to negotiate a settlement with Taliban rebels. (Robert Burns/AP)

## Article content

U.S. President Donald Trump's impulsive foreign policy was restrained last week by the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives when 43 senators from Trump's Republican party helped pass a measure 68-23 opposing the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and Syria.

The text warns that "the precipitous withdrawal of United States forces" from either country "could put at risk hard-won gains and United States national security."

Trump's withdrawal strategy from Syria was announced in December without consulting NATO allies and regional partners. A day later, he ordered the start of a reduction of American forces in Afghanistan from 14,000 to 7,000 — a reversal of his deployment of 3,000 more troops in September 2017.

In response to Trump's capricious decision-making, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis lambasted his boss's impulsiveness and inexperience in military and security affairs in a widely circulated resignation letter.

Then Trump chose deputy defence secretary Patrick Shanahan to replace Mattis on an acting basis — and chaos at the Pentagon intensified. The acting defence secretary as well as Trump's acting chief of staff have no military experience.

Now it is up to the Senate and the House, to the extent they are able, to check the president's actions.

The Senate vote came on the heels of the House passing legislation last month that would ban Trump from using federal funds to withdraw from NATO.

Meanwhile the latest round of negotiations with the Taliban, led by veteran U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, could result in a tentative peace agreement for Afghanistan after 18 years of protracted war. The Trump administration backtracked last July on its longstanding policy of an Afghan-owned peace process and appointed Khalilzad to negotiate directly with the Taliban on behalf of the U.S.

The Taliban sent a delegation from the movement's political headquarters in Qatar, including two representatives of Mullah Yaqub, the elder son of the late mullah Mohammad Omar, a Taliban founder, and three commanders from the notorious Haqqani network. Regional participants in the talks include representatives of Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The Taliban's consistent list of demands include the withdrawal of all foreign troops, full implementation of Islamic law and customs, and a revamping of Afghanistan's political system in ways that do not conflict with an Islamic code. Because their goals are religious, not political, according to Wahid Mojdah, a military affairs analyst and former diplomatic aide under the Taliban regime from 1999 to 2001, the Taliban will not be in a hurry in these talks.

While the talks drag on and Congress legislates around Trump, the Afghan government remains embroiled in violent conflict with the expanding Taliban insurgency and faced with territorial expansion of ISIS into the eastern provinces. Nobody is negotiating with ISIS, leaving the possibility that it may take over Taliban-won territory.

In a quarterly report prepared for the U.S. Congress, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported the Afghan government controls or influences 55.5 per cent of the country's districts, marking the lowest level recorded since SIGAR began to keep records in 2015. At one time, the Afghan government controlled 72 per cent of districts. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are unable to hold onto the country's territory in the face of ISIS — the wealthiest terrorist organization in human history — and a resilient and sophisticated Taliban insurgency.

On our trip to NATO Headquarters last fall, we met with many diplomats to discuss options to end the war.

NATO diplomats tend to maintain the Canadian Forces are capable of taking a greater military role in NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

If the U.S. were to more withdraw from Afghanistan, that country's security capabilities would need to be strengthened to turn the tide against territorial losses and counter low morale prevalent among its troops. The Resolute Support Mission needs augmentation with military expertise and technical assistance from more NATO allies.

However, it is unclear which NATO allies can be counted on to contribute more. Along with its NATO allies, the Canadian government could commit to further developing the ANSF through an unwavering capacity-building beyond allocating mere financial aid.

Discussions with diplomats from Kabul, Afghanistan, however, indicate another path toward an elusive peace would be to focus on transitioning the Taliban from an armed movement into a political party. If that were the case, however, there must be no compromises on the gains made over the past 18 years in enshrining people's constitutional rights and liberties, especially women's rights, into the overall democratic system.

*Erika Simpson is an associate professor of global politics at Western University and the author of How Canada can Support UN Peacekeeping in a recent issue of Policy Option, Peacekeeping Reimagined. Sakhi Naimpoor is a PhD candidate at Western University and registered business executive member with Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC).*