

NEWS ANALYSIS

Trump's Tweets on Troop Withdrawals Unnerve Pentagon

The president's demands to draw down forces in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria seek to fulfill a campaign promise. But officials warn rapid troop reductions could bolster adversaries.



By Eric Schmitt

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WASHINGTON — President Trump's surprise tweet last week that he would pull all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by Christmas is not the only important military mission he may abruptly shrink or end as Election Day nears.

Mr. Trump has told senior advisers that he also wants to see plans for withdrawing all American forces in Somalia, despite warnings from senior military and counterterrorism officials that doing so would bolster the deadly Qaeda affiliate there and cede strategic ground in East Africa to China and Russia.

The president sent mixed signals last month when he declared that U.S. forces "are out of Syria," except to guard the region's oil fields. His comments came on the day the Pentagon said it was sending Bradley fighting vehicles, more fighter jet patrols and about 100 additional troops to northeast Syria after a Russian armored vehicle rammed an American ground patrol there in August, injuring seven soldiers.

"We're in all these different sites fighting in countries that nobody ever heard of, and it hurts us because we're — you wear out your military," Mr. Trump said last week in an interview with Fox Business. "And we have to be always prepared for China and Russia and these other places. We have to be prepared."

But even senior military commanders have sought to distance themselves from their commander in chief's troop withdrawal forecasts, which have caught them off guard. And critics say that in seeking to fulfill a campaign pledge to bring American troops home from "endless wars," the president is exposing the country to even greater national security risks.

"There's no strategy; there's just electioneering," said Kori Schake, who directs foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

The latest head-snapping news on possible troop withdrawals came this week, when senior administration officials said Mr. Trump had told senior aides that he wanted to withdraw U.S. forces from Somalia, confirming an earlier report by Bloomberg News and adding further details.

One idea now under consideration would involve removing most or all ground troops from the country — including those who have been training and advising Somali forces — and ending strikes aimed at combating or degrading the Shabab, Al Qaeda's largest and most active global affiliate. Counterterrorism strikes, drone use, troop presence in nearby countries and targeting individual Shabab members believed to be plotting terrorist attacks outside Somalia would apparently still be permitted.

The White House convened a small interagency meeting of senior officials late last week to discuss Mr. Trump's demand for more drastic troop withdrawal options, according to three officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Officials involved in the discussion included Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they said, adding that no decisions had been made.

A Pentagon spokesman referred questions about the deliberations to the White House National Security Council, where a spokesman declined to comment.

There are now about 700 American troops in Somalia. Most are Special Operations forces stationed at a small number of bases across the country. Their missions include training and advising Somali army and counterterrorism troops and conducting kill-or-capture raids against the Shabab.

The Shabab have in recent months issued specific new threats against Americans in East Africa — and even in the United States. After a hiatus this year, they have increased a campaign of car bombings in Somalia, American counterterrorism and intelligence officials said.

Several ominous signs indicate that the Shabab are seeking to expand their lethal operations well beyond its home base and attack Americans wherever they can — threats that have prompted 46 American drone strikes so far this year to try to snuff out the plotters. Last year, there were 63 drone strikes, almost all against Shabab militants, with a few against a branch of the Islamic State.

In recent years, the Shabab, which American intelligence analysts estimate have 5,000 to 10,000 fighters, has lost many of the cities and villages they once controlled. Despite a record number of American drone strikes, the group has morphed into a nimbler and deadlier organization, carrying out large-scale attacks against civilian and military targets across Somalia and in neighboring countries.

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“A withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia will give the Shabab a decisive strategic advantage in the conflict in Somalia and increase the terrorist threat in East Africa, including to Americans and American targets, significantly,” said Tricia Bacon, a Somalia specialist at American University in Washington and a former State Department counterterrorism analyst.

Col. Christopher P. Karns, the chief spokesman for the military’s Africa Command, declined to comment on Mr. Trump’s push to withdraw troops from Somalia. Instead, Colonel Karns offered a defense for the current mission.

“U.S. Africa Command continues to train Somali forces, monitor Al Shabab and disrupt and degrade a dangerous Al Shabab terrorist network whose long-term ambitions include attacking the United States,” he said in a statement.

Colonel Karns also noted the Pentagon’s broader strategy to counter threats globally from Moscow and Beijing. “When you look at global power competition in Africa, it is very much a place where China and Russia seek to be great and continue to prioritize activity, especially on the economic front,” he said.

Even some of Mr. Trump’s staunchest Republican allies in Congress are warning against deep troop cuts in Somalia.

“This strategy has worked, and our continued presence there has prevented Al Shabab from expanding its foothold in the region,” Senator James M. Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said in a statement. Mr. Inhofe expressed hope that Mr. Trump would “not take any action that would cause us to lose the ground we’ve gained, thanks to his strategy.”

The military’s pushback on large troop pullouts in Somalia came after General Milley distanced himself from sudden and conflicting announcements from the White House last week on Afghan troop withdrawals.

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Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

With no warning to the Pentagon, Robert C. O’Brien, the national security adviser, told an audience in Las Vegas on Oct. 7 that the United States would cut its troops in Afghanistan to 2,500 by early next year. That surprised Defense Department officials and top military commanders, who said they were still operating under orders to reduce troop levels to 4,500 by later this fall.

Mr. Trump then added to the confusion when he contradicted Mr. O’Brien hours later and suggested via Twitter a timeline as early as Christmas to bring all troops home.

“We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!” he wrote.

General Milley, wary of upsetting the good working relationship he has established with the president, nonetheless appeared to voice frustration with the accelerated timeline and the conflicting troop withdrawal messages. He did not criticize the commander in chief, but he discussed the national security adviser’s comments.

“I think that Robert O’Brien or anyone else can speculate as they see fit,” General Milley said in an interview with NPR on Sunday. “I’m going to engage in the rigorous analysis of the situation based on the conditions and the plans that I am aware of and my conversations with the president.”

In northeast Syria, the military’s Central Command sent reinforcements to the hotly contested region last month after the Russians deliberately rammed the American vehicle.

White House and Pentagon officials criticized the Russians for what American officials said was reckless aggression. But Mr. Trump kept silent on the episode, prompting Democrats to seize on it as the latest example of the president’s failure to challenge Russia’s increasing hostility toward the West, which also includes interfering in the election and putting bounties on American troops in Afghanistan.

Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., the Democratic presidential nominee, rebuked Mr. Trump for failing to publicly address the altercation in Syria: “Did you hear the president say a single word? Did he lift one finger?” he said in a speech in Pennsylvania on Aug. 31.

U.S. military commanders voiced cautious optimism that the president would not pull out any of the more than 600 troops in Syria, at least for now. Those troops are helping Syrian Kurdish allies carry out counterterrorism missions against remnants of the Islamic State.

But those same commanders remember all too vividly Mr. Trump’s penchant for taking to Twitter to blurt out a new policy change, as he did in announcing a previous troop withdrawal from Syria in 2018 without informing the Pentagon. That move Jim Mattis to resign as defense secretary.

With Election Day less than three weeks away, Pentagon officials are bracing to deal with the consequences of another possible presidential troop forecast.

“How will we mitigate the risk of withdrawing U.S. troops from these places?” said Seth G. Jones, the director of the transnational threats project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. “I’m hearing crickets. That is not a recipe for a sound foreign policy.”

Charlie Savage contributed reporting.