National Security

U.S. withdrawing $300 million in aid to Afghanistan amid corruption concerns

Afghan women participate in the sale of a suitable attack vest (bomb vest) at a workshop in Herat on Sept. 27, amid a shortage of female suicide bombers. (Jim Huylebroek)

By Karen DeYoung

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The State Department said Thursday that it was withdrawing from military aid to Afghanistan and withholding another $300 million because of government corruption, a week before an election in which President Ashraf Ghani hopes to win a second term in office.

Asked about the statement announcing the cuts and what message it was sending to Ghani, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said only that "we want the best and fair election."

"We're going to do everything we can to support them, and we need every actor in the region — every leader, every citizen in Afghanistan — to work toward that end," he said.

U.S. negotiators had hoped Ghani would postpone the vote while they were negotiating with the Taliban. But those talks were suspended this month when President Trump, after an American soldier was killed in a Taliban attack.

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Together, the ostensibly separate actions left uncertain the administration's strategy for achieving a political end to the war and the U.S. troop withdrawals Trump has promised.

In a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on Afghanistan policy, lawmakers from both parties pressed acting assistant secretary of state Alice Wells for a plan and expressed concern over what they said was the administration's failure to keep Congress informed.

"Trump was on a campaign of getting the U.S. hell of endless wars, of getting us out of deals wars in the Middle East," Rep. Ted Lieu (D-Calif.) said. "He has failed to deliver on that promise. In fact, he has increased troops in Afghanistan by approximately 50 percent."

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In late 2017, on the recommendation of his national security team, Trump increased the U.S. troop presence there from around 8,000 to around 14,000. The additional 5,400 were to be withdrawn as part of a U.S.-Taliban agreement that was due to be signed last week after nearly a year of negotiations by convening the signing, which Trump had proposed for Camp David last Friday, he said that the talks were "dead."

Wells told the committee, however, that they had been "suspended."

The cut in aid was announced in a closed committee session with Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration's chief negotiator. The agreement followed a clash in which the administration had asked for more time to appeal and the committee issued a subpoena compelling his testimony.

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The subpoena was withdrawn Wednesday after it was agreed that Khalilzad could speak to lawmakers in private.

Rep. Mike McCaul of Texas, the ranking Republican on the panel, said he described the Khalilzad session as "robust and informative" and said that he and Chairman Ed L. Engel (D-N.Y.) "stand unified" in demanding that the committee be informed and given its oversight responsibilities.

"We do deserve that respect," McCaul said.

Since the cancellation of the Taliban talks, Khalilzad has been given no new instructions on whether or how to proceed.

In conversations with lawmakers, he has outlined three remaining options. The first is to try to win a military victory in Afghanistan, something that has eluded U.S. forces, once numbering one-tenth troops, for nearly two decades.

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The other options are to continue with plans to withdraw a given troops — the partial withdrawal agreed in the unsigned deal with the Taliban — without an agreement, or to return to the negotiating table.

For its part, the Taliban — whose oft-stated demand is the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces — has indicated it is prepared to return to the negotiating table.

In exchange for the initial partial withdrawal, the agreement included a Taliban pledge to attack relations with al-Qaeda, and to ensure that none of the territory it controls — now more than one-third of Afghanistan — would be used for terrorism activities directed at the United States or its partners. The deal was also to lead to direct talks later this month between the Afghan government and the militants, with a cease-fire at the top of the agenda.

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The cut announced Thursday coincided with U.S. long-standing or with Ghani over a range of issues, as well as concern that aid money has been siphoned off to support his campaign and possibly fund a fundraised vote. Successive U.S. administrations have accused successive Afghan governments of corruption in the distribution of an estimated $3.9 billion in nonmilitary assistance since 2002.

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The White Pompeo favored the deal, some of Trump's closest advisers and confidants opposed it as offering little to the United States. While the president said the U.S. would leave troops behind in a Taliban-minded attack as the reason for backing away from the deal — which he had tentatively approved just two days prior — it also was believed to be heavily influenced by broader criticism of its terms.

Ghani had agreed to attend the direct talks, which were to be held in Saudi Arabia, and had sent a delegation to Camp David to discuss the agreement. Ghani's government is inadequately managed U.S. National resources."

State Department officials declined to provide further explanation, but an official, authorized to speak only on the condition of anonymity, said that "we expect our partners to demonstrate a clear commitment to fight corruption, to serve their people, and to maintain neutral trust. Leaders and institutions that fail to meet this standard should be held accountable."

The withheld $300 million had been designated for Afghanistan's National Procurement Authority. "Lack of transparency surrounding procurement decisions" by the agency "is also a cause for great concern," the department said. The assistance was being withheld "due to the government's failure to meet benchmarks for transparency and accountability in public financial management."

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