

U.S. is quietly reducing its troops in Afghanistan

The size of the American force in the country had dropped by 2,000 over the last year, down to roughly 12,000

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The U.S. is already reducing the size of its troop force in Afghanistan despite the lack of a peace deal with the Taliban, at a time when President Donald Trump has expressed reluctance to remain engaged in costly wars abroad.

In a news conference on Monday, the top American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Austin S. Miller, confirmed that the size of the American force in the country had already quietly dropped by 2,000 over the last year, down to roughly 12,000.

Other American and Afghan officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the plan, said the eventual force size could drop to as low as 8,600 – roughly the size of an initial reduction envisioned in a draft agreement with the Taliban before Mr. Trump halted peace talks last



Trimming the force: U.S. military personnel in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. • NYT/FILE

month. Rather than a formal withdrawal order, they are reducing the force through a gradual process of not replacing troops as they cycle out.

A senior Afghan official said the Afghan government had signed off on the reduction. Officials would not discuss other details of the

drawdown, including any specific timeline for it.

The confirmation came during a visit to Afghanistan by Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper, and after months of debate within the Trump administration on meeting the President's goal of stopping what he has recently called “endless wars.”

Earlier in his visit, Mr. Esper seemed to allude to some potential reduction in American forces, saying that drawing down to 8,600 troops would not affect important counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan.

As Mr. Trump grew frustrated over the past year, diplomats tried to package an

American troop reduction as a bargaining chip in peace talks with the Taliban, hoping to get some concessions from the insurgent group, which has long demanded a complete troop withdrawal.

Bargaining chip

The decision to reduce American troops even before a deal with the Taliban means the U.S. is weakening its hand in future negotiations with the insurgents.

Reducing the number of troops ahead of a complete departure from the country was always the most important American bargaining chip in any negotiations with the Taliban to end the long war. But from the start, Mr. Trump made it abundantly clear that he wanted out of Afghanistan.

At one stage halfway through the year-long negotiations, Mr. Trump stumbled during a Fox interview, incorrectly saying that the number of American troops in Afghanistan was 9,000

and not the 14,000 it was listed at. Many, including some Taliban officials taking part in the talks in Qatar, read that as confirmation that the American decision to draw down had already been made whether the Taliban offered concessions or not.

American military officials, though wary of leaving Afghanistan altogether, had signed off on the first stages of a troop drawdown in a draft peace agreement that would have seen 5,400 American troops leave the country over about five months. The measure was put forward to show the Taliban that the Americans would abide by the proposed deal in return for the insurgent group reducing violence in Afghanistan, according to officials taking part in the negotiations.

But the peace talks collapsed last month when Mr. Trump pulled the plug on the deal his diplomats had finalized and initiated after a year of negotiations. NY TIMES

U.S. to keep some troops in Syria: Pentagon chief

Move to prevent IS from controlling oil

REUTERS
KABUL

The U.S. is considering to keep some troops in northeastern Syria to stop oil falling into the hands of Islamic State or others but no decision has yet been made, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said.

President Donald Trump decided earlier this month to withdraw all 1,000 U.S. troops from the region, a move widely criticised as a betrayal by Kurdish allies who had fought for years alongside them against Islamic State.

U.S. troops crossed into Iraq early on Monday as part of the withdrawal process. Mr. Trump began pulling U.S. troops back from northeastern Syria in early October, opening the way for Turkish troops to launch an offensive against the Kurdish fighters.

“We have troops in towns in northeast Syria that are located next to the oil fields, the troops in those towns are not in the present phase of withdrawal,” Mr. Esper told reporters during a visit to Afghanistan.

“The purpose is to deny access, specifically revenue to ISIS (Islamic State) and any other groups that may want to seek that revenue to enable their own malign activities,” he said.

Mr. Esper said there had been discussions about keeping some of the U.S. troops, who were with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in place. He said he had not presented that option yet, but the Pentagon's job was to look at different options.

The SDF, spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG militia, has been the main partner for



Mark Esper

the U.S.-led coalition in Syria. “There has been a discussion about possibly doing it (keeping some troops), there has been no decision with regard to numbers or anything like that,” Mr. Esper added.

A Reuters cameraman saw more than 100 vehicles carrying U.S. troops crossing from the northeast tip of Syria, where Turkey has agreed to pause its offensive for five days. The truce expires late on Tuesday.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has warned that Ankara will resume its military assault in Syria when the deadline expires if the SDF have not pulled back from its proposed safe zone area spanning the border. Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group because of its links to Kurdish insurgents in southeast Turkey.

Putin-Erdogan meet

On Tuesday, Mr. Erdogan will meet Russia's President Vladimir Putin in Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss Turkey's operation in Syria.

“We will take up this process with Mr. Putin and after that we will take the necessary steps,” Mr. Erdogan told a forum in Istanbul hosted by broadcaster TRT World, without elaborating further.

ELSEWHERE



Netanyahu gives up on forming new coalition

JERUSALEM
Israel's President Reuven Rivlin said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ended his quest to form a new coalition, a step that pushes the country into new political uncertainty. Mr. Netanyahu fell short of securing a 61-seat parliamentary majority in last month's election. AP

'Imran is not capable of completing his term'

KARACHI
Lashing out at the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government, opposition leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has said that Prime Minister Imran Khan is not capable of completing his term as political parties and people are unhappy with his administration's policies. PTI

No one can stop Taiwan reunification: China

BEIJING
China's Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe made an uncompromising call on Monday for the “reunification” of Taiwan with the mainland, telling a high level defence forum that the process was something “no force” could stop. AFP

Protests in Bangladesh after 4 die in police fire

DHAKA
Thousands protested against police across Bangladesh on Monday, a day after four protesters seeking execution of a Hindu man over a Facebook post that ‘defamed’ the Prophet Muhammad died in police firing. AFP

Johnson's push for Brexit deal vote blocked

House of Commons Speaker refuses to allow voting, saying the motion is in substance the same as Saturday's

REUTERS
LONDON

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's faces a potentially perilous ratification of his Brexit divorce deal in the British Parliament after the Speaker refused to allow a vote on it on Monday.

With just 10 days left until the United Kingdom is due to leave the EU on October 31, the divorce is again in disarray as Britain's political class argue over whether to leave with a deal, exit without a

deal or hold another referendum.

House of Commons Speaker John Bercow said a vote should not be allowed on Monday as the same issue had been discussed on Saturday when opponents turned Mr. Johnson's big Brexit day into a humiliation.

“In summary, today's motion is in substance the same as Saturday's motion and the House (of Commons) has decided the matter. Today's circumstances are in substance



Boris Johnson

the same as Saturday's circumstances,” Mr. Bercow told Parliament. “My ruling is therefore

that the motion will not be debated today as it would be repetitive and disorderly to do so.”

Although Mr. Johnson hammered out a deal in gruelling talks with EU officials last week, it was not certain that the Speaker of the House of Commons would allow a vote on the deal on Monday.

Mr. Johnson was ambushed by opponents in Parliament on Saturday who demanded a change to the

sequencing of the ratification of the deal, exposing the Prime Minister to a law which demanded he request a delay until January 31.

In a twist that illustrates the extent to which Brexit has strained the norms of British statecraft, Mr. Johnson sent the note to the EU unsigned – and added another signed letter arguing against what he cast as a deeply corrosive delay.

The EU has not yet given a clear response.

Australian newspapers redact front pages to protest curbs

Media industry unites against laws that restrict press freedoms

REUTERS
CANBERRA

Australia's biggest newspapers ran front pages on Monday made up to appear heavily redacted, in a protest against legislation that restricts press freedoms, a rare show of unity by the usually partisan media industry.

Australia has no constitutional safeguards for free speech, although the government added a provision to protect whistleblowers when it strengthened counter-espionage laws in 2018. Media groups say press freedoms remain restricted.

Mastheads from the domestic unit News Corp and rivals at Nine Entertainment ran front pages with most of



The blacked-out front pages on Monday. • AP

the words blacked out, giving the impression the copy had been censored, in the manner of a classified government document.

The protest aimed to put pressure on the government to exempt journalists from laws limiting access to sensi-

tive information, enact a properly functioning freedom of information system, and raise the benchmark for defamation lawsuits.

Opposition leader Anthony Albanese said that journalists should not be prosecuted for doing their jobs.

Canadian poll race too close to call

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
OTTAWA

Canadians vote in a general election Monday with polling predicting a minority government as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party risks losing its majority or even being kicked out of office.

The Liberals and the Conservatives, led by Andrew Scheer, could be set for a near dead heat with pundits calling it one of the nation's closest elections ever. But neither of the two parties that have led Canada since Confederation in 1867 is forecast to win enough support to secure an absolute majority. Mr. Trudeau made an appeal to voters to enable him to build on the achievements of his first term.

Morales narrowly wins first round in Bolivia poll

He faces second round run-off against Carlos Mesa

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LA PAZ

Evo Morales, seeking a controversial fourth term, led Bolivia's presidential election race on Sunday but faces a historic second round run-off against opposition rival Carlos Mesa, partial results showed.

Mr. Morales had 45% of the vote to Mesa's 38%, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal announced, with most of the votes counted.

Elected Bolivia's first indigenous president in 2005, Mr. Morales has won his previous elections in the first round, never having to contest a run-off.

The former coca farmer



Evo Morales

and leftist union leader has led the poor but resource-rich Latin American country for the past 13 years, though his popularity has waned amid allegations of corruption and authoritarianism.

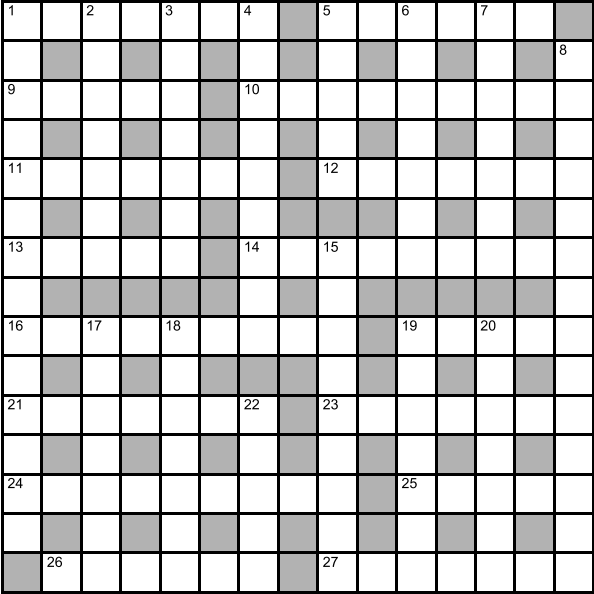
He will face a stiff challenge from Mr. Mesa, a 66-year-old former President who led Bolivia from 2001 to 2005.

Mr. Mesa celebrated “an unquestionable triumph” in getting to the second round, amid cheers from his supporters at his La Paz headquarters.

Mr. Morales welcomed his first-round win, telling cheering crowds “we have won again, really, it is something historical, unforgettable”.

South Korean-born evangelical pastor, Chi Hyun Chung, was the surprise package of the election, polling strongly to finish in third place with 8.7%.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12761



■ ACROSS

- 1 Cut short cut vegetable (7)
- 5 Hint the point's broken (3-3)
- 9 Talisman loses edge in racing site (5)
- 10 Poet has no direction for Indian dish said to be stew (9)
- 11 See old boy's ill-written verse (7)

- 12 Farmer is hospitable after admitting fifty (7)
- 13 Slow rate is sticking point with learner (5)
- 14 Dismounted – in no position to control (3,6)
- 16 Fair goal (9)
- 19 Brother beginning to appreciate a relative's foundation (5)
- 21 Hardy of the French mob lacks a follower (7)
- 23 Was somehow greeting on Long Island in a foreign language (7)
- 24 Being lax, I got a blob for musical accompaniment (9)
- 25 Continue to play with stick? (5)
- 26 Lives once sites are cleaned up by removing a bit of encumbrance (6)
- 27 Real networking goes on forever (7)

■ DOWN

- 1 Instrument of a key player with some squeeze (5,9)

(set by Gridman)

- 2 Tricks have ferreted out old transport vehicle (7)
- 3 Brown's up on mountain that is unspoiled (7)
- 4 Sausage found to be no peppier (9)
- 5 Infant raised to do a simple sum (3,2)
- 6 Expert sailor's up with a fair share arrangement (3,4)
- 7 Presumptuous female or child (7)
- 8 Gesture to the barber to cut one's hair? Not exactly (8,6)
- 15 Releases quality type of fruit (9)
- 17 Not one new hurt! Fight in court area (4,3)
- 18 Drivers who get hailed from a pickup line (7)
- 19 Bush's beginning on leisurely walk (7)
- 20 Struck by a Pole with a glove (7)
- 22 PM's tests? (5)

SUDOKU



Solution to puzzle 12760

SEDATIVE EMBALM
T W R A D I N U
I R I D I U M I N D I T E S
C N B P R S E I
K I D N A P M E C H A N I
I L L H C J I N T
N E E D F O R T E P I A N O
O I G H T S T O S S I Q
N I G H T S H I R T C H I N
E R R O R E Y D A E
S H U T A W A Y P E L V I S
C F N D I V E E
R E F U G E E S T O M A T A
A E L E D I U G R
W A R M E R U S U R I O U S

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

8 5 6 3 2 1 9 7 4
4 1 3 9 7 8 6 5 2
9 2 7 6 4 5 8 3 1
3 7 9 8 6 2 4 1 5
6 4 5 7 1 9 3 2 8
2 8 1 4 5 3 7 9 6
1 9 8 5 3 4 2 6 7
5 6 4 2 9 7 1 8 3
7 3 2 1 8 6 5 4 9

FAITH

Lotus eyed Lord

A distinguishing feature of the Supreme Brahman is that His eyes are like lotuses, said V.S. Karunakarachariar in a discourse. And this is seen in the episode in the Ramayana when Hanuman meets Sita. Hanuman, hidden in a tree, is witness to the goings on below. Sita has been threatened by Ravana. With no possibility of escape, Sita is grief stricken. She approaches the tree, in which Hanuman is seated, and contemplates hanging herself on a branch. But some good omens come Her way just then, like the sudden quivering of Her left eye, indicating that some good news is going to come to Her.

Hanuman is in a dilemma. Should he approach Sita and speak to Her? Will She trust Him? And yet, he knows that he has to speak. He decides to employ gentle, sweet words, so as not to frighten Sita. And he knows that the best way to win Her confidence is to speak of the glory of Rama and His illustrious family. Although the words are pleasing to Sita, She faints when She sees Hanuman. When She recovers, She narrates Her story. But Her doubts come back, and She wonders if this isn't one of Ravana's tricks. She cannot believe that Hanuman is Rama's messenger, as he claims. She thinks it is Ravana, who has come disguised as a monkey, for a demon can change his form. So, Sita asks Hanuman to describe Rama's form. While describing Rama's appearance, the first thing that Hanuman says is that His eyes are like the petals of a lotus flower, for he knows that this alone is enough to convince Sita. Who but the incarnation of the Supreme One can have such eyes?

Sage Narada tells Padmavati that the One She is to wed will soon appear before Her. And soon enough, Lord Srivasa appears but here again His lotus like eyes stand out.