

Trump's New Afghanistan Strategy

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to look at the freshly released outline of the new American strategy for the war in Afghanistan. This strategy was described only in the most general terms, but even these still have some implications. The focus of the paper will be on the question what does the new strategy mean for American allies in NATO and especially the younger members in Central Europe.

Basics

The whole idea of a new strategy was presented by President Trump in his speech at Fort Myer military base on the 21 August 2017. The idea was worked out by the Department of Defence and the General Staff following a comprehensive review of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Ever since the first draft, the strategy of the U.S. for Afghanistan and South Asia had to be based on [three premises](#) about the American goals in Afghanistan: an outcome must be worth the investment made so far, rapid exit is unacceptable and the security problems that the U.S. face in the area are without equal anywhere else in the world.

As Trump said in his speech, the U.S. "must seek an honourable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives". This means, simply put, that the Trump administration feels that the U.S. has already invested so much in Afghanistan in terms of time, money, effort, material aid and human lives; that they are unable to leave without reaching a satisfactory conclusion to the conflict.

However, there are already significant doubts among public and among the American allies whether it is even possible to win the war in Afghanistan. Donald Trump too criticised the commitment to the war before becoming a president and made a plan to [withdraw](#) the troops a part of his campaign. However, he apparently changed his mind after being confronted with reality by his aides, advisors, and generals, often the same people who recommended Obama to stay in Afghanistan, or who advised Bush Jr. Trump's change of attitude shows NATO and the world that he is not immune to reasoning, despite having his own plans and promises. On the other hand, plans to

withdraw from Afghanistan could have been just a device to gain more votes from the beginning, since they were not translated into any kind of action.

The second pillar of the new strategy is that it recognizes the unacceptable consequences of a sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan. A direct quote from the speech sums up the possible ramifications:

"A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and Al Qaeda, would instantly fill just as happened before Sept. 11. And as we know, in 2011, America hastily and mistakenly withdrew from Iraq. As a result, our hard-won gains slipped back into the hands of terrorist enemies. Our soldiers watched as cities they had fought for and bled to liberate, and won, were occupied by a terrorist group called ISIS. The vacuum we created by leaving too soon gave safe haven for ISIS to spread, to grow, recruit and launch attacks. We cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq".

As a matter of fact, Daesh is already involved in Afghanistan, but its presence is limited. A power vacuum would certainly help them [gain more ground](#). Trump's new strategy shows that the reason for the continued struggle in Afghanistan is not that they are be unable to let go or that they persist despite the unfavourable evidence, but because elsewhere they tried to disengage and the result was unacceptable.

Areas of focus

The three pillars constitute the guiding principles of the new strategy. The actual strategy of the U.S. for Afghanistan and South Asia has yet to be revealed in full, but in his speech, Trump has outlined the greatest changes from the strategy of the previous administrations and described the issues that will be central to the new one. These can be easily summed up into two brackets, changes in the internal and in the external policy.

In the internal part, the most specific change is going to happen when the U.S. shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions, meaning that the U.S. military will no longer announce the dates of new military operations in advance and timetables in which certain goals have to be reached. It will base all assessments of success of military operations in real conditions on the ground. Other than that, under the new strategy, the U.S. military will be provided with all resources they need to complete the goals that are expected of them and will be given a free rein to do as they see fit, without being micromanaged by the civilian government. However, many of these new policies only represent changes in the tactics, so it is questionable whether the new strategy is as revolutionary as presented. Moreover, the strategy is prepared and the war fought mostly by the same people who advised the previous administrations

of Obama and Bush Jr., and who had plenty of opportunities to solve the conflict, were they really able to do so.

The external side of the new strategy concerns other interested parties in the war and in South Asia, namely the Afghan government, Pakistan, and India. Firstly, the new plan promises to deal with Pakistan, especially the issue of its granting of safe havens to various terrorist and militant organisations. These certainly pose a threat to the region and beyond, but no specific steps as to how it implements the plan are mentioned. Pakistan has been supporting terrorists and militants in the region for years, but all calls for it to stop so far had only limited success.

Another critical part of the South Asia strategy for America is to further develop its strategic partnership with India. Indian help is specifically requested in the area of economic assistance and development, but again, no specific steps were indicated. A significant part of Trump's plan to win the war in Afghanistan is through diplomatic effort, but in that case, the [massive budget cuts](#) for Department of State and US Agency for International Development (USAID) under the current administration contradict such pledge.

Conclusion

To get back to the question stated in the introduction, what does the new strategy mean for the American allies? Turns out there are both good and bad news. Firstly, there is the clearly stated request for increases in defence spending from Trump, formulated in the speech: "We ask our NATO allies and global partners to support our new strategy, with an additional troop and funding increases in line with our own". In combination with the renewed interest for the war in Afghanistan, a request for additional spending and involvement might provide the American allies with a unique opportunity to get on the good side of the U.S. This is especially true for NATO members in Central Europe, who could use the opportunity to show that they have matured into developed democracies and reliable partners. Hand in hand with increased spending also come additional benefits for their mutual trade, domestic industries and integration projects such as the CFSP.

On the other hand, the new strategy may create worries in the allies about the lack of continuity in the American government. Trump's administration has been making a lot of changes and managed to shift the overall direction of the U.S. policy. The U.S. is no longer interested in building up democracies in distant parts of the world and from now on will probably only care about protecting their interests (but the same applies to the European Union). The war in Afghanistan continues for the sole reason that the U.S. has learned from their mistake in Iraq and it seems that they will be a lot more careful

when considering interventions in the future. However, the current President will remain in the White House for only a relatively short time, even if he is re-elected. These changes in American policy, therefore, should not be counted on to remain permanent.

But Afghanistan and the Middle East are not the only areas of American interest. Resurging Russia and its activities in Eastern and Central Europe are also considered a threat. New American strategy for South Asia changes little in Central Europe, where Russia is the greatest threat, and Europeans can hardly be expected to care. After years of reforming their armies into expeditionary and counterinsurgency forces at the request of NATO and the U.S., the threat of either hybrid or large-scale conventional conflict has become pressing and again, they must adjust. However, at least for the time being, the European allies can count on the U.S. to stay committed to the region, under the condition that they increase defence spending and become more involved in ensuring their own security and more responsible for their own defence.

Finally, the new strategy should not be taken as completely revolutionary. Despite its presentation, there are only minor changes and mostly on the organisational level, such as reducing restrictions on the armed forces and increasing their funding. The main question is how to solve the bigger issues of the new plan, for example forcing Pakistan to stop supporting terrorism, which the U.S. has been trying to do unsuccessfully for a long time. The new direction of U.S. foreign policy under Trump is much more impactful than the new strategy for Afghanistan.

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