

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY: HOPES AND PITFALLS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- President Trump's overall decision on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan—to stay in the country with a somewhat enlarged military capacity—is to a large extent correct. However, his de-emphasis on Afghan governance and political issues is deeply misguided and could be a fatal flaw in the strategy.
- The security situation in Afghanistan is worrisome. Amid persistent problems within the Afghan security forces, momentum has been on the Taliban's side. The Haqqani network, Islamic State, and other actors have contributed to the deterioration in security. Most detrimentally, Afghanistan's political system remains in dysfunction.
- The regional environment has also palpably worsened amid endless frustrations with Pakistan as well as challenges vis-à-vis China, Russia, and Iran.
- The principal objective of U.S. policy in Afghanistan since the 9/11 attacks has been to ensure that the country does not become a haven for terrorist groups. Other core U.S. interests in Afghanistan relate to regional stability and international credibility (i.e., honoring its commitments in Afghanistan).
- The United States had principally three options regarding Afghanistan: full military withdrawal, limited counterterrorism engagement, and staying in the country with slightly increased military deployments and intense political engagement. The option the Trump administration chose—staying in Afghanistan with a somewhat enlarged military capacity—is the least bad option.
- However, that strategy needs to be resolutely coupled with explicit and sustained emphasis on better governance and political processes in Afghanistan and intense U.S. political engagement with Afghan governance issues.
- Thus, the Trump administration's announced approach to Afghanistan is not a strategy for victory. Staying on militarily buys the United States hope that eventually the Taliban may make enough mistakes to seriously undermine its power. However, that is unlikely unless Washington starts explicitly insisting on better governance and political processes in the Afghan government.

President Trump's overall decision on U.S. policy in Afghanistan is to a large extent correct. Staying in the country with a somewhat enlarged military capacity is the least bad option amidst difficult choices. His approach contains many good elements, such as focusing on conditions on the ground and recognizing that a precipitous withdrawal would severely undermine U.S. interests in Afghanistan, including and above all U.S. security and counterterrorism interests.

As I saw during my latest trip to Afghanistan in July 2017, the situation there remains highly precarious, and without a sustained U.S. and international military presence, an outbreak of a full-blown civil war is very likely, as is the expansion of terrorist safe havens. Nonetheless, President Trump's exhortations to Pakistan that it immediately stop support for anti-Afghan terrorist and militant groups is unlikely to be heeded by Rawalpindi, despite the White House effort to encourage greater engagement by India in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, President Trump's approach contains a critical and fundamental flaw: the downgraded importance of governance in Afghanistan. In dismissing "nation-building" and insisting that the United States not "export democracy"—implying that the United States will not involve itself in Afghan internal governance and political matters—President Trump has counterproductively signaled a *carte blanche* for the continuation of ruinous governance deficiencies, rapacious abuses of power, and pernicious political processes that help the Taliban entrench. Without real improvements in governance and political processes in Afghanistan, military gains will be eviscerated. Senior U.S. officials recognize this imperative and have re-emphasized it in the wake of President Trump's announcement.

So despite his claim, Trump's announced approach to Afghanistan is not a strategy for victory. Staying on militarily buys the United States hope that eventually the Taliban may make enough mistakes to crumble from within or be driven to the negotiating table (with terms acceptable to Washington and to Afghans). However, that hope will be undermined if governance and political processes in Afghanistan do not improve.

STATE OF AFFAIRS IN AFGHANISTAN

The security situation remains worrisome, with a significant deterioration since 2013. Afghan security forces are taking high casualties and face other challenges, the Taliban has shown some strengths and believes momentum is on its side, and Afghanistan's political environment remains dysfunctional.

Afghan security forces

Recent purges of incompetent corps commanders will hopefully improve performance.¹ This effort, which took several years to implement, is perhaps President Ashraf Ghani's most significant effort to improve the performance of the Afghan security forces and make them more meritocratic. Since that move threatens multiple power bases, the Afghan government has encountered significant political pushback and some officials have even received death threats, with the minister of defense temporarily forced to work out of his home.²

Nonetheless, the Afghan security forces—including both the police and military—continue to take high casualties, with over 800 estimated killed and more than 1,325 injured in the first two months of 2017 alone, and with little sign of improvement since.³ The severe casualty problem has been known since 2014, but has not yet been effectively addressed. Persisting problems with air support, medevac, and logistics; corruption; ethnic and political patronage; and fragmentation in the Afghan security forces only heighten the dangers to the security forces. Awareness of these deficiencies has existed even longer than of the high-casualty issue, but robust solutions to all of these issues remain elusive as well.

An important measure against corruption in the Afghan security forces was Ghani's decision to clean up a \$1 billion fuel contract for the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD). Crucial for the functioning of logistics systems and the physical movement of Afghan security forces, the fuel contract was believed to be made possible by massive corruption involving contractor collusion, price fixing, kickbacks, and other forms of bribery. Under strong pressure from the international community—including a particular constellation of top-level officials from countries contributing to Operation Resolute Support and Western diplomats in Kabul who were uniquely determined to press anti-corruption issues with the Afghan government—Ghani cancelled the contract and suspended MOD officials believed to be involved in the corruption.⁴ He also established a National Procurement Commission, which he chairs, to oversee large contracts. However, this important case has not yet translated into a broader clean-up of the massive corruption that still pervades the Afghan security forces, nor has it generated any meaningful follow-up on anti-corruption and cascade effects.

¹ Ronald E. Neumann, "In Afghanistan, Reform Can't Come Fast Enough," *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/16/in-afghanistan-reform-cant-come-fast-enough-ghani>.

² Author's interviews with Afghan government security and intelligence officials, Kabul, July 2017.

³ "Death toll among Afghan forces at 807 in Jan-Feb, says report," *Reuters*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-casualties-idUSKBN17X1VN>; Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, "American Airstrike Hits Afghan Security Forces," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/21/world/asia/helmand-afghanistan-airstrike.html>.

⁴ Author's interviews with officers of U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, and Western diplomats involved in fuel contracting oversight and other anti-corruption efforts, Kabul, September 2015, and Washington, DC, August and September 2016.

A severe economic downturn in Afghanistan since 2013 means that the Afghan security forces still represent one of the two main sources of employment in the country, the other being opium poppy cultivation and harvesting. Thus, recruitment for the Afghan security forces has not yet fallen off dramatically, even as retention rates decline. However, high casualties create significant morale problems, and eventually may change the economic calculus of Afghan families and their willingness to sacrifice their sons for temporary income.

The Taliban

Although the Taliban has not been able to hold cities, it has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to take over districts. Its informal control permeates significant portions of Afghanistan, both in the south, such as in Helmand Province, and the north. Even provinces previously considered secure, such as Kandahar, are experiencing a determined Taliban effort to destabilize them. According to a U.S. government report from early 2017, approximately 57 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts were under Afghan government control or influence as of November 2016, a 6 percentage-point decrease from late August 2016, and nearly a 15 percentage-point decrease since November 2015.⁵ These numbers have not significantly improved during the first half of 2017, with new and previously liberated districts falling, at least temporarily, back under Taliban influence. In short: Despite some splintering, the Taliban is nowhere close to being spent, let alone defeated. Although the Taliban often treats its fighters as cannon fodder, being willing to absorb large casualties on nominally non-suicide missions, it has not yet experienced significant recruitment problems.



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In fact, the Taliban believes that the momentum is on its side, and it has hence shown little inclination to negotiate a peace deal. The U.S. killing of the Taliban's former leader Mullah Mansour further weakened voices for negotiations within the Taliban and strengthened its most blood-thirsty elements.⁶

Much insecurity has crept into major cities, including Kabul, where all types of criminality have grown significantly. Extortion and kidnappings are particularly acute, debilitating the lives of even young, educated Afghans. Ransoms as low as \$5,000 are now the basis for kidnapping government employees, relatives of small business owners, and foreigners. Much of this destabilizing crime is linked to police forces, government officials, and various other government-linked powerbrokers. As will be addressed in more detail later in this paper, by downgrading the importance of governance in Afghanistan, President Trump counterproductively encouraged these and other poor governance conditions that allow the Taliban to stay entrenched.

⁵ John F. Sopko, "Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction: Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, January 2017), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-01-30qr.pdf>: 89.

⁶ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Hits and Misses of Targeting the Taliban," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/opinion/the-hits-and-misses-of-targeting-the-taliban.html>.

Governance

Most detrimentally, Afghanistan's political environment remains in utter dysfunction. Crucial governance reforms that the vast majority of the Afghan people expected from the National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah have been creeping and sporadic. Although some good measures have been undertaken—such as an effort to reform the civil service to limit political patronage, encourage meritocracy, and start chipping away at ever-present and egregious corruption, for instance through the Anti-Corruption Justice Center—there is a widespread perception in Afghanistan that the government lacks legitimacy and political support. Heavy-handed measures against anti-government protestors have turned deadly, and the government is contemplating a series of laws that human rights advocates consider unconstitutional, undemocratic, and a suppression of basic civil liberties.

There is nostalgia for the government of Hamid Karzai, whose administration became vastly unpopular because of its corruption, criminality, power abuse, and embracing of warlords. Yet today, the “reconciled” warlord Gulbudin Hekmatyar, who has much blood on his hands, is a highly popular Pashtun leader. He draws the largest crowds at rallies, primarily because of the effectiveness of the political machinery of his faction of Hezb-i-Islami. While few Afghan analysts with whom I spoke believe that he could win in Afghanistan's 2019 presidential elections, his support may yet turn out to be crucial for any contender, raising serious questions about the quality of governance after the elections.

Although there is widespread belief in Afghanistan that no political candidate can win the presidential elections without U.S. support, the United States will need to determine very judiciously how vocal a role it will play. President Trump's comment that the United States is not exporting democracy abroad and that Afghan politics will be left to Afghans alone will easily be read as an invitation to vast election fraud and debilitating crisis-making that can allow the Taliban to significantly augment its visible power. Senior U.S. officials have subsequently sought to soft-pedal the president's statements, emphasizing that the 2018 parliamentary elections and 2019 presidential elections in Afghanistan must be “credible.”⁷ Continually emphasizing that requirement and helping Afghanistan to achieve it will be crucial.

Indeed, the United States and the international community cannot run away from the politics of Afghanistan. Rather, Washington and the U.S. embassy in Kabul need to carefully consider whether, for example, to state explicitly that the victory of certain candidates (such as Hekmatyar or former President Hamid Karzai) would make it extremely difficult for the United States to maintain its support of Afghanistan. The Obama administration attempted such a strategy in Kenya in 2013, but ultimately found itself unable to deliver on its warnings following the victory of Uhuru Kenyatta and Vice President William Ruto (both of whom had been indicted by the International Criminal Court for instigating ethnic violence during the deadly 2009 elections). While any such public statements likely should be avoided, the United States should internally determine which potential candidates it could not work with in case of their victory. Moreover, it is rather likely that the presidential elections will produce a new, prolonged political crisis, à la 2014, over who actually won and how much fraud was committed by whom during the process.

⁷ Remarks by a senior U.S. official on South Asia, U.S. Institute of Peace, August 23, 2017.

Rather than fully distancing itself from Afghan politics in a way that can critically undermine any military gains, the United States should decide whether and how it will 1) again resort to intense crisis and negotiation management among the two second round candidates and support another possible unity government, or 2) let the crisis work itself out, even at the cost of prolonged political paralysis due to the Taliban's increased strength, and perhaps a U.S. military withdrawal, as detailed in the last section of this paper.

In fact, the United States must remain keenly involved in Afghan politics to discourage pernicious brinkmanship by Afghan politicians that debilitates governance. President Ghani has struggled to maintain political alliances, and Afghan politicians continue to engage in constant scheming, crisis-generation, and brinkmanship to milk concessions and payoffs from the government as well as political opponents, thereby marginalizing quality governance. The country's precipitous economic decline after the significant reduction of U.S. and international military forces since 2013 has had multiple consequences. Among them is that the economic shrinkage also constricts access to financial resources necessary for political patronage. Thus, the temptation has grown to engage in crisis-making in order to generate payoffs from the government to secure resources for patronage. Similarly, the constricted access to resources has led politicians and powerbrokers to cultivate one's muscle networks in the police and to maintain militias to extract resources illegally.

Ethnic tensions have also significantly grown. In June 2017, when a series of bombs at a funeral for the son of a prominent Tajik politician only narrowly missed killing most of the Tajik leadership, Kabul came very close to erupting in major civil strife. Even young, educated Afghan technocrats who have been my interlocutors for many years and who long denied the possibility of the country slipping into a civil war again, feared that ethnic violence would erupt and spread. They told me during my trip in July that during the days after the bombing, they were liquidating assets and stockpiling food and water. Nonetheless, CEO Abdullah defused the political crisis by unequivocally blaming the Haqqani network for the funeral attack. Yet the ethnic tensions persist, and the Islamic State in Afghanistan is doing its best to whip up not just ethnic strife, but also militant sectarianism.

STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THE REGION

The regional environment has also worsened, with Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran all posing challenges.

Endless frustrations with Pakistan

Pakistan has long been a difficult and disruptive neighbor, seeking leverage in Afghanistan, hoping to limit India's influence there, and cultivating radical groups within Afghanistan as proxies. Despite a decade of U.S. attempts to bring Islamabad and Rawalpindi (the seats of Pakistan's civilian government and military establishment, respectively) on board with its efforts in Afghanistan, Pakistan has continued to augment Afghanistan's instability and violence by providing intelligence, weapons, and protection to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. Years of U.S. pressure alternating with economic aid and efforts to forge a strategic partnership with Pakistan have failed to induce Pakistan to stop this behavior. Pakistan fears both a strong Afghan government closely aligned with India, potentially helping to encircle Pakistan, as well as an unstable Afghanistan

that becomes—as has already happened—a safe haven for anti-Pakistan militant groups and a dangerous playground for outside powers. Pakistan further fears that if it strongly targets Afghanistan-oriented militant groups, it will provoke them to escalate violence in Pakistan's Punjab heartland, thus threatening the core of the Pakistani state.

Many in the U.S. policy community who used to call for greater pressure on Pakistan were delighted to hear President Trump's exhortation of Pakistan to immediately stop all support for the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other terrorist groups. However, the president did not specify how the United States would retaliate if Pakistan does not comply. After Trump's speech, U.S. officials have not publicly specified punitive measures, though Secretary of State Rex Tillerson mentioned that among the U.S. tools of leverage are aid to Pakistan and the country's designation as a non-NATO strategic partner. Even prior to Trump's announced strategy, some former U.S. government officials and non-governmental policy experts suggested designating Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁸

Other forms of U.S. pressure could entail increased military strikes against those Taliban and Haqqani network leaders in Pakistan who are not in major urban centers, where civilian casualties would be high. On aid, the United States could fully and permanently eliminate its military aid to Pakistan. Already, a part of the Coalition Support Fund—designed to enable Pakistan to go after counterterrorism targets and against militant groups—has been suspended because of its continued support for the Haqqani network. Overall, U.S. military aid to Pakistan has decreased by 60 percent since 2010 without a significant impact on Pakistan's behavior. The United States could also cut economic aid to Pakistan. With growing Russian support and an enduring partnership with China, Pakistan can easily believe it can ride out a large curtailment of U.S. economic assistance and other diplomatic pressure from the United States.

Thus a determination of exactly what aid should be cut needs to be made carefully in detailed deliberations with the U.S. embassy in Pakistan and the U.S. military commander in Afghanistan. However, the United States should not cut its aid to Pakistan to zero. It has many other interests in Islamabad that go beyond the Afghan conflict: ensuring the stable control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, getting Pakistan to dispense with the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons that can lead to inadvertent use or fall into the hands of terrorist groups, preventing a major Pakistan-India war, and preventing Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks in India. Thus, in response to U.S. pressure, Pakistan could threaten to discontinue cooperation on nuclear safety issues or suspend Pakistan-India nuclear confidence-building measures. Moreover, the United States also wants to encourage democratization, pluralization, and stronger civilian and technocratic governance processes in Pakistan. Just as there is a young, educated, well-meaning technocratic segment of the population battling it out against the warlords and parochial powerbrokers in Afghanistan, there are such reformist elements in Pakistan as well, battling against the country's entrenched and problematic interests.

Thus, there are significant limitations to the United States' coercive power vis-à-vis Pakistan. The United States needs to understand that Pakistan has many tools to retaliate against

⁸ Zalmay Khalilzad, "Pakistan: Friend or Foe in the Fight against Terrorism" (testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Washington, DC, July 12, 2016), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20160712/105188/HHRG-114-FA18-Wstate-KhalilzadZ-20160712.pdf>.

U.S. pressure beyond cooperation on nuclear safety issues: by undermining the security of U.S. interests in Pakistan, by provoking border instability in the Punjab, or by shutting down the Afghan-Pakistan border for U.S. military logistics or Afghan trade. Although President Ashraf Ghani hopes to redirect all Afghan trade to Pakistan toward Central Asia within two years, such a total switch is unlikely to materialize. Pakistan will remain a crucial market for Afghan goods and logistical access. And despite Afghanistan-Central Asia energy deals—such as the electricity transmission project linking Central Asia to South Asia through the Afghanistan CASA-1000 and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI)—many governments in Central Asia are deeply worried that expanded trade with Afghanistan also exposes their countries to militancy and radicalization leaking north.

Moreover, if the United States once again relies on Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table, as Secretary Tillerson suggested in his August remarks, it once again gives Pakistan the same leverage that President Ghani gave to Pakistan between 2014 and 2015, including the ability to act as a spoiler, or to bring some elements of the Taliban to the negotiating table without severing intelligence and military support for the group.⁹ If, on the other hand, the price of Pakistan maintaining those relations is that Pakistan will not have a seat at the eventual negotiating table with the Taliban, as other senior U.S. officials suggested, Pakistan may precisely seek to augment the Taliban's dependence on its support. Indeed, an August *New York Times* report suggested that Pakistan provided the United States with intelligence for killing the former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour because Pakistan objected to Mansour's desire to reduce Pakistan's intelligence-control yoke and negotiate a peace deal more independently.¹⁰



[I]t is highly unlikely that even major U.S. pressure would motivate Pakistan to fully sever its support for and desire to control the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban...

It is also crucial to understand that Pakistan's behavior in Afghanistan is not merely the product of its political scheming; it reflects deep skepticism that the current political dispensation in Afghanistan will hold, and a fear of India-Afghanistan encirclement and hostilities. Thus, the India card that President Trump invoked in his speech to pressure Pakistan—calling for a greater Indian engagement in Afghanistan, though cushioning it by mostly endorsing India's economic engagement there—is not likely to moderate Pakistan's behavior. Instead, it can increase Pakistan's paranoias and suspicions of India's engagement in Afghanistan, including its perceived support for Baluchi separatist groups in Pakistan. Subsequent to President Trump's speech, senior U.S. officials again recognized the doubled-edged sword of the India card in Afghanistan—suggesting that India's role in Afghanistan should not come at the expense of Pakistan's legitimate interests in the country and that the United States is keen to see an improvement in relations between India and Pakistan and is ready to facilitate such efforts.

⁹ "Remarks of Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State," Press Briefing Room, Washington, DC, August 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/08/273577.htm>.

¹⁰ Carlotta Gall and Ruhullah Khapalwak, "Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan before He was Killed," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/world/asia/taliban-leader-feared-pakistan-before-he-was-killed.html?mcubz=1>.

Moreover, Pakistan's refusal so far to fully sever its support for Afghanistan-oriented militant groups is also the product of the Pakistani government's limitations and lack of full control over the militant groups it has sponsored. It fears that going against groups like the Haqqani network or the Taliban will provoke them and others to start targeting the Pakistani state and perhaps provoke major militant activity in Pakistan's Punjab. Thus, it is highly unlikely that even major U.S. pressure would motivate Pakistan to fully sever its support for and desire to control the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban, even though it could produce a temporary decrease in support for these groups. Most likely, Pakistan will say it is not supporting Afghanistan-oriented militant and terrorist groups, and temporarily reduce the level of its support for them, but not sever the relationship fully and wait to increase it again.

There are three possible, and to some extent interlinked, scenarios under which Pakistan could become motivated to dramatically reduce or altogether cut support for the Taliban and the Haqqani networks, and perhaps even start targeting their networks in Pakistan:

- Pakistan-India relations significantly improve;
- The military-intelligence apparatus loses its predominant power in the Pakistani government and becomes subordinated to an enlightened, capable, and accountable civilian leadership (i.e., both the Pakistani military and the country's civilian politicians undergo a radical transformation); and
- Pakistan develops the political and physical resources and wherewithal to tackle its own internally-oriented and metastasizing terrorist groups, such as various Punjab Taliban groups, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba, and the Islamic State in Pakistan.

To some extent, the United States can help bring about the last scenario by helping Pakistan develop politically-informed, sequential targeting counterterrorism strategies focused again on anti-Pakistani groups of regional and global concern. Former U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley also advocated such U.S. assistance against anti-Pakistani terrorist groups (both internal and Afghanistan-based) as part of a larger strategy.¹¹

But the U.S. ability to encourage the first two scenarios is highly limited. Multiple U.S. efforts at facilitating a Pakistan-India rapprochement, while critically defusing acute crises, have produced little lasting effect, with India systematically rejecting such a U.S. role and Pakistan systematically not meeting expectations. Whenever some progress has been achieved, a terrorist spoiler or an institutional spoiler has effectively undermined the efforts. The U.S. capacity to promote a systematic change of political and power arrangements in Pakistan is highly limited as well, though Washington can and should provide sustained and patient support to the development of civil society, a technocratic class, and rule-of-law institutions. In addition, Washington can provide support by encouraging the growth and engagement of new economic interests in Pakistan benefitting from more peaceful relations with India and Afghanistan. However, any such positive developments will likely take decades to fundamentally alter Pakistan's internal power distribution and strategic calculus.

¹¹ Stephen J. Hadley, "A new, winning strategy for Trump in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-new-winning-strategy-for-trump-in-afghanistan/2017/08/16/7d38c898-8296-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e006ab_story.html?utm_term=.5632a717fa3f.

China, Russia, and Iran

The international community had previously hoped that China's large, promised investments in Central Asia, Pakistan, and eventually Afghanistan—under economic schemes such as the One Belt, One Road initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—would motivate China to put pressure on Islamabad to disavow its support for terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan.¹²

Moreover, some have expected that China's economic interests in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia—and its fear that militancy and terrorism from Pakistan could leak into China—would motivate Beijing to pressure Pakistan to sever all of its relations with militant groups, including anti-Indian ones and those operating in Afghanistan. Yet this hope has not materialized thus far, and China's increased role has so far failed to dissuade Pakistan from supporting the Taliban or encourage it to seriously support peace negotiations. President Ashraf Ghani has been disappointed with his outreach to China as a mechanism to change Pakistan's behavior.¹³

To further complicate matters, two previously determined opponents of the Taliban—Iran and Russia—are engaging with the group and providing it with limited support as insurance in case the Taliban's power continues to grow. In addition, Tehran and Moscow see their relationships with the Taliban as constituting a coalition against the emergent Islamic State in Afghanistan and an anti-American tool. Russian government officials have come to openly characterize the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan as a failure and have called for the United States to withdraw its forces.¹⁴

Subsequent to President Trump's speech, senior U.S. officials have stated that the sustained U.S. military presence in Afghanistan should dissuade Russia, Iran, and others from their detrimental hedging behavior. Certainly, a sustained U.S. presence is a step in the right direction. Whether it will be sufficient to eliminate hedging behavior will critically depend on whether these countries think U.S. policy can make a significant difference on the battlefield, or indeed if it will be capable of driving the Taliban to the negotiating table (which U.S. officials, such as Secretary of State Tillerson, identify as the goals of U.S. policy).¹⁵ However, Russia's courting of the Taliban is also an expression of Russia's broader hostility to the United States, as well as its fear that Washington will seek permanent bases in Afghanistan and interfere with Russia's effort to again dominate Central Asia. On Iran, President Trump has adopted a far more confrontational attitude than the Obama administration. Thus, even with a sustained U.S. military presence, a regional consensus on Afghanistan is undermined by a difficult and rivalrous geopolitical situation.

¹² Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan and Implications for Regional Politics," (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016), <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=883>.

¹³ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Get over it: The limits of Afghan-Pakistan rapprochement," *The Brookings Institution*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/05/19/get-over-it-the-limits-of-afghan-pakistan-rapprochement/>.

¹⁴ "Full Withdrawal From Afghanistan Is An Option: Mattis," *Tolo News*, August 15, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/full-withdrawal-afghanistan-option-mattis>.

¹⁵ "Remarks of Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State."

U.S. INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Amidst these difficult trends, what are U.S. interests in Afghanistan? In his speech, President Trump focused predominantly on one: counterterrorism. That has indeed been the principal objective of U.S. policy since the 9/11 attacks. Appropriately, it remains so to ensure that the country does not become a haven for virulent Salafi terrorist groups like al-Qaida. The premise underlying this policy since the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001 is that if any part of the liberated territory once again comes under the control of Salafi groups, their capacity to increase the lethality and frequency of their terrorist attacks—including against U.S. assets—will grow, since they will be able to use safe havens to plan and train for their operations, and more easily escape retaliation by the United States and the international community.

There is a policy and scholarly debate as to how closely aligned the Taliban is today with terrorist groups and whether the Taliban would once again allow al-Qaida to operate out of the territory it controls. Indeed, some members of the Taliban considered acquiescence to al-Qaida operations a key strategic mistake and call for distancing themselves from the group.¹⁶ The Taliban also actively battles the Islamic State in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban has not denounced al-Qaida publicly and as an official policy, undoubtedly because it knows that openly breaking with al-Qaida would cost the Taliban political capital with jihadi groups around the globe and their financial backers.

While al-Qaida has been severely degraded, it has lost none of its zeal to strike Western countries and undermine governments in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. In Afghanistan, the terrorist group has also experienced a resurgence. The Islamic State in Afghanistan, a newer terrorist group in name—consisting of various Taliban splinter elements and other relabeled Pakistani and Uzbek Salafi groups—is also a determined anti-U.S. and anti-regional-order actor.

However, U.S. interests in Afghanistan go beyond combatting terrorism. An unstable Afghanistan risks also destabilizing Pakistan, and as a result, the entire region of Central and South Asia. Pakistan's tribal areas and other areas deep in the country have been host to many Salafi groups, and the Afghan Taliban and its vicious Haqqani network branch use these areas as safe havens, with support from Pakistani intelligence services. Thus, Pakistan's cooperation, even if not forthcoming, is important for effectively countering terrorism in Afghanistan. But the reverse is also true: If Afghanistan is unstable and home to Salafi groups that leak over into Pakistan, Pakistan itself becomes deeply destabilized and distracted from tackling its other crises, including militancy in the Punjab and a host of domestic calamities, such as intense political contestation, a distorted economy, widespread poverty, and a severe energy crisis.

Finally, the U.S. reputation and self-regard as a country that can be relied upon to honor its commitments are at stake in Afghanistan. In mobilizing support for Operation Enduring Freedom, the mission to topple the Taliban regime in the wake of 9/11, the United States made a pledge to the Afghan people to help them improve their difficult condition and not abandon them once again. Although often caricatured as anti-Western, anti-government, anti-modern, and stuck in medieval times, Afghans crave what others do: relief from violence and insecurity and sufficient economic progress to escape

¹⁶ Michael Semple, "'Al Qaeda Is a Plague': A Remarkable Insight into the Mind of a Senior Member of the Afghan Taliban Movement," *New Statesman*, July 16, 2012, 32-35.

dire, grinding poverty. On its own, the altruistic concern for the people of Afghanistan is not sufficient for the U.S. to perpetuate an immensely costly effort. However, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, including the deployment of adequate military force, still advances key U.S. interests and provides a crucial lifeline for the Afghan government and the country's pluralistic post-9/11 political dispensation. Moreover, once the United States made its initial decision to intervene, consideration for the elemental needs of the Afghan people whose lives we have altered so profoundly must continue to matter.

The promise of Afghanistan's minerals, however, is *not* an appropriate reason to perpetuate U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan. A July *New York Times* story reported that Trump had discussed the country's mineral deposits with Ghani.¹⁷ Not only is any extraction of those minerals (presumably amounting to a value over a trillion dollars) a long way off and dependent on significant improvements in security, the natural resources belong to the Afghan people. They should never be a U.S. war booty; in fact, neither the George W. Bush nor the Barack Obama administration ever regarded these minerals as a basis for U.S. military engagement. Any articulation by U.S. officials of such an objective is both fundamentally inconsistent with U.S. interests and values, and profoundly delegitimizes U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Even prior to such statements leaking to the U.S. press in early July 2017, I—sadly—found many Kabul cab drivers repeating the Taliban propaganda that the United States is in Afghanistan to loot the country's minerals. It was very useful and important that President Trump did *not* state during his speech that Afghanistan's mineral wealth was a reason for the United States to stay in Afghanistan. Still, the absence of that claim will not fully erase the damaging perception that his reported focus on the issue has already likely generated.

POLICY OPTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Among the difficult choices the United States had and continues to have in Afghanistan, President Trump chose the least bad one, sending about 3,500 more troops to Afghanistan and bringing the total of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to about 14,500.¹⁸

Putting aside a major increase in U.S. military deployments to Afghanistan, which would be politically infeasible and would have questionable impact, the United States principally had three options regarding Afghanistan: Washington could fully withdraw; reduce the mission to a very narrowly-cast and narrowly-prosecuted counterterrorism mission; or stay the course, perhaps with a slight—and desirable—increase in military resources.

Military withdrawal from Afghanistan

What would a full withdrawal mean? If the United States liquidated its military mission in Afghanistan, the security situation in the country would deteriorate an order of magnitude further and U.S. interests in the country would be significantly more compromised. The Taliban would come to control large portions of the territory outright, while a fragmented civil war between and among the Taliban, its ethnic opponents, and Pashtun rivals would rage elsewhere. While pockets of the country could be relatively stable and held by

¹⁷ Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-mineral-deposits.html?_r=0.

¹⁸ Ellen Mitchell, "U.S. to Send 3,500 More Troops to Afghanistan: Report," *TheHill.com*, September 6, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/349486-us-to-send-3500-more-troops-to-afghanistan-report>.

individual powerbrokers, Kabul would likely be a bloodbath. Such a civil war, if replicating the 1990s, could easily result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Afghans. Salafi groups such as al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and others yet to emerge would have a freer hand to operate and plot. A significant escalation of proxy fighting in Afghanistan by India, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran would also ensue.

Limited counterterrorism engagement

Alternatively, the United States could have attempted to liquidate only its anti-Taliban deployment and only seek to conduct counterterrorism operations from Afghanistan against al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and potentially other terrorist groups with global reach. However, such a policy struggles with two critical problems.

1. First, in the absence of sustained security and acceptable governance, terrorist groups—even those that have been repeatedly struck—will be able to resurrect themselves and over time replenish their capacities. Thus, despite the United States repeatedly striking the Islamic State in Afghanistan, including by dropping the “mother of all bombs” on its stronghold in Nangarhar, the group remains potent and responsible for serious, destabilizing sectarian hatred and provoking terrorist actions in Afghanistan.¹⁹ The availability of safe havens in contested areas with a limited government presence also allowed al-Qaida to re-establish itself in Afghanistan after a decade and a half of efforts to dismantle it, and in 2015 to operate perhaps a large camp in Afghanistan with over 150 fighters.
2. Equally important, Afghanistan would have little incentive to allow the United States to maintain military bases in Afghanistan that contribute little to the country’s security. Absent some sort of accommodation with the Taliban, such a presence would still provide nationalist justification and motivation for the Taliban to fight against the Afghan government. It may also motivate the Taliban to continue attacking U.S. bases, thus drawing the United States back into the anti-Taliban fight. And it may well prove doubly risky for Pakistan, raising the specter that the United States could conduct politically sensitive military strikes in Pakistan without mitigating Islamabad’s fears about instability in Afghanistan and India’s potential role there. Quite apart from its questionable counterterrorism efficacy, such a limited U.S. role may quickly prove politically unsustainable for the Afghan government and Pakistan may only increase its support for the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Russia may also strengthen its support for the Taliban and otherwise actively try to sabotage such a U.S. policy, as it is already calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, in addition to cultivating the Taliban.

Staying on with a slightly increased military deployment and intense political engagement

The remaining alternative, and the one that President Trump ultimately chose as the least bad option, was to stay in Afghanistan with a slightly increased U.S. force posture. A few thousand more troops, as requested by General John W. “Mick” Nicholson, the

¹⁹ Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Drops ‘Mother of All Bombs’ on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html?mcubz=1&r=0>; Frud Bezhan, “Islamic State Proving Resilient In Afghanistan In Face of Targeted Campaign,” *Radio Free Europe*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-proving-resilient-afghanistan-targeted-campaign/28659602.html>.

commander of U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, will likely follow and will help improve the tactical performance of the Afghan security forces and perhaps over time reduce the Taliban's perception that it can win.

Hopefully, the slight increase in U.S. military deployments will be in the form of U.S. *soldiers*, not contractors. Contractors have a highly problematic record in Afghanistan, and are widely disliked. There were numerous allegations of major civilian casualties involving contractors several years before President Karzai banned them in 2010, as well as incidents of other provocative, delegitimizing, and counterproductive behavior (including involving subsidiaries of Blackwater, later called Xe).²⁰ Globally, few wars have been won by contractors, and their legacies have often been highly problematic. Moreover, by outsourcing the war to contractors, the United States is signaling to the Afghan government, people, politicians, and regional actors—including the Taliban—that it has lost the wherewithal to support the political dispensation it has promoted in the country.

However, the indicated force augmentation policy, while avoiding an outright disaster, is not a strategy for victory. In fact, there is currently no strategy for victory. Instead, there is a policy of maintaining support for the Afghan government and people while hoping that over time, the Taliban will face pressure from within to either to engage in negotiations or some sort of accommodation, or wither on the battlefield. Essentially, the policy amounts to holding on while hoping that the other side will make enough mistakes over time. This is not an impossible scenario: Colombia's leftist guerrillas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) started making key strategic mistakes in the late 1990s, at the peak of their power, while U.S. military support to Colombian forces greatly strengthened their fighting capacity.²¹

So, in avoiding immediate disaster (not achieving victory, as Trump indicated in his speech), this policy preserves hope. It is extremely unsatisfactory, but there is no alternative.

BUILDING ON THE LEAST BAD OPTION

There are several parallel efforts that Washington should pursue alongside its increase in U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The United States should seek to bolster economic development there, though significant progress is dependent on security and governance improvements.²² An eventual exploitation of the mineral riches that Afghanistan is assumed to contain, if accountably and equitably managed, could be a major engine of the country's economic growth. However, insecurity and the lack of infrastructure have rendered this promise moribund for over six years. Making Afghanistan the hub of regional connectivity, while sound in principle, faces similar obstacles and remains in very initial stages, as the above discussion of Afghanistan-Central Asia trade shows.

²⁰ Nathan Hodge, "Blackwater in Kabul, or Eric Cartman Gets an AK-47," *Wired*, February 24, 2010, <https://www.wired.com/2010/02/blackwater-in-kabul-or-eric-cartman-gets-an-ak-47/>.

²¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 69-112.

²² Earl Anthony Wayne, "7 Pillars for Success in Afghanistan," *The National Interest*, August 12, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/seven-pillars-success-afghanistan-21869>.

Building a regional consensus on Afghanistan's future, including an eventual political settlement with the Taliban, is very important—but for the reasons outlined above, that is more elusive today than at any point since 2001.

Nonetheless, the United States can and should be encouraging negotiations, but the Taliban is showing even far less interest in peace negotiations than during the leadership of Mullah Mansour. Currently there is no consensus among the Taliban to negotiate and many of its top leaders and mid-level commanders are strongly opposed to doing so. The Trump administration policy hopes that the sustained and increased U.S. and international military effort will change the calculus of the Taliban and drive it to the negotiating table with terms that would be acceptable to the rest of the Afghan polity *and* to the United States—i.e., no Taliban support or safe havens for terrorist groups plotting attacks against the United States or its allies. When, if ever, such a change in the Taliban's calculus will materialize remains to be seen, but it is hardly just around the corner.



Improving governance in Afghanistan needs to be on par with staying on militarily.

Perhaps more productively, meanwhile, there can be outreach to various Taliban sympathizers to support more moderate Taliban participation in next year's parliamentary elections. This is an approach that Afghanistan's former Minister of Interior Mohammed Umer Daudzai has been advocating. Over some years, this could both divide the Taliban and show its more moderate elements that some political accommodation could be achieved, as happened with Hezb-e-Islami and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Such gradual political participation could also serve as a precursor to more systematic peace negotiations in the future.

Inescapable and crucial, however, is governance: Trump's policy will be fundamentally undercut if the administration follows what the president said in his August speech and downgrades political engagement with Afghan politicians and the government to insist on better governance and political processes.

By downgrading the importance of governance in Afghanistan, President Trump counterproductively encouraged the poor governance conditions discussed earlier, which allow the Taliban to stay entrenched. Senior U.S. government officials have subsequently sought to re-emphasize the need for improved governance in Afghanistan, pointing to recent Afghan commitments to reduce corruption such as the Kabul Compact, which contains hundreds of specific commitments. In his statement detailing the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson appropriately insisted that the Afghan government must continue "much more rigorous efforts around anti-corruption." It remains to be seen, however, whether such statements will be sufficient to roll back the bad signals in President Trump's speech implying a reduced emphasis on better, less corrupt, less predatory, and more inclusive governance, and less pernicious political processes in Afghanistan.

Improving governance in Afghanistan needs to be on par with staying on militarily. Indeed, without it, any military gains will be eviscerated. The United States must insist on accountability from the Afghan government and politicians, with the inadequacies of both being recognized as the crucial reason that the Taliban has so much staying

power and replenishment capacity.²³ Because of President Ghani's and CEO Abdullah's political vulnerabilities and indebtedness, moves against corrupt, rapacious, and destabilizing powerbrokers need to be measured, sequential, and embedded within broader political strategies.

There are opportunities to start moving at least against some of the highly corrupt politicians accused of major human rights abuses and crimes. If such moves politically neutralize pernicious powerbrokers, the government could finally prove its ability to strengthen rule of law and reduce impunity.²⁴ The efforts to bring Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum to justice for allegations of assault and sexual abuse of a rival politician unfortunately failed to make that impression. Rather, they resulted in the formation of the politically powerful, if unstable, coalition of Dostum and his Uzbek constituency, the Tajik Atta Mohammad Noor, and Hazara Mohammad Mohaqiq, even though he is nominally the deputy to CEO Abdullah.

CONCLUSION

If staying in Afghanistan with a slightly increased military deployment merely buys the United States time and hope, while avoiding a much worse outcome, Washington should also assess what triggers would lead to the complete liquidation of the mission. There are at least three such tripwires:

1. The Afghan army fully fragments along ethnic and political patronage lines, with units fighting each other, or massive defections lead to a complete meltdown of the Afghan security services, particularly the army.
2. Ethnic infighting, beyond the Taliban, breaks out on a substantial scale in various parts of the country.
3. Afghan politicians trigger an outright coup d'état or a similar prolonged political crisis, such as over the 2019 presidential elections, during which no governance is effectively taking place and the Taliban manages to take over and hold several provinces.

Absent such developments, there are still crucial interests to protect and good reasons to stay and keep supporting the Afghan government and military forces, while encouraging—indeed insisting on—better governance and pluralization. The Trump administration correctly refrained from setting explicit timelines like the Obama administration did, so as not to tip off the Taliban to how long it needs to hold out before the U.S. leaves.²⁵ The U.S. emphasis on a conditions-based approach is right.

²³ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan's terrorism resurgence: Al-Qaida, ISIS, and beyond," The Brookings Institution, April 27, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghanistans-terrorism-resurgence-al-qaida-isis-and-beyond/>.

²⁴ For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan Affections: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition," (Tokyo: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/afghanistan-affectations-how-to-break-political-criminal-alliances-in-contexts-of-transition.pdf>.

²⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

However, Washington needs to be clear that it will carefully and diligently monitor Afghan progress. It also needs to be explicit and clear to the Afghan government and politicians that U.S. support is not an open-ended *carte blanche*, but rather dependent on significant improvements in Afghan governance and political processes, not just military and economic contributions as President Trump emphasized. Without significant improvements in Afghan governance and political processes, a policy of staying on does not guarantee success by perseverance. In fact, even with improvements, there remains no guarantee of success. But a policy of liquidating U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan would have spelled disaster for U.S. interests and the Afghan people. There is no miraculous silver bullet.

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