

Donald Trump's New Strategy for Afghanistan

REACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LEADING US THINK TANKS



His original instinct was, in fact, to pull out of Afghanistan, explained Donald Trump on August 21, 2017 in the introductory remarks of his speech in Fort Myer. The US president then went on to present the objectives and measures of his "path forward in Afghanistan and South Asia".¹ The community of experts in Washington welcomes some of his decisions, but is generally skeptical and subsequently recommends further possible courses of action to the administration.

One Strategy for the Entire Region

Donald Trump's "new strategy" is founded on five main pillars.

At the very top of the agenda based on his change of course is the idea that the timing

of the withdrawal of US soldiers will not be determined by a fixed date set by politicians, but exclusively by the conditions on the ground. Trump prefers not to talk about troop numbers nor the details of his military strategy. The enemies must never know US plans, he said, so that they could not use that knowledge to their advantage.

In addition, the US president aims at reaching a political solution in Afghanistan by integrating diplomatic, economic, and military power instruments and does not rule out potential involvement of the Taliban. But he stressed that the role played by the US would be clearly limited: "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists."

A further part of the strategy addresses Pakistan, which neighbors Afghanistan. Trump stated that the United States could no longer be silent about Pakistan providing safe havens for terrorist organizations and called upon Pakistan to change its course.

With regard to South Asia, he said that it was important to further develop the stra-

¹ *The New York Times*, "Full Transcript and Video: Trump's Speech on Afghanistan", August 21st, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-speech-afghanistan.html>

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tegic partnership with India and strengthen its role in Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development.

To the US soldiers, President Trump promised better equipment and relaxed rules of engagement. To this end, Washington should grant greater decision-making authority to military personnel who are closer to the front line.

Honest Analysis with Good Ideas

Generally speaking, the conservative think tanks are showing greater enthusiasm for the president's new strategy than the left-leaning ones. But in view of the difficulties of the longest war the US has ever been engaged in, the latter have also welcomed some of Donald Trump's decisions.

"Conditions" instead of "Time"

An overwhelming majority across all think tanks agree that the US engagement should continue in principle because it is against the US' own interests to leave the conflict to local forces or private contractors in the belief that doing so could increase the chances of success. This is the position put forward by Max Boot from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), for example, who warns that the use of private contractors would add fresh hazards due to the lack of clarity about the relationship between them and regular forces, such as in the event of illegal conduct or emergency situations.²

Calls by think tank experts for more US troops or, conversely, for a complete American withdrawal from Afghanistan are few and far between.

"The best part of Trump's speech was what he did not say," comments Shuja Nawaz from the Atlantic Council, meaning that, unlike his predecessor, Donald Trump had not declared a date for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.³ On behalf of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Michael Rubin writes that Trump is absolutely correct in his conditions-based approach, alt-

² Max Boot, "Trump's Path to Indefinite Afghan War", CFR, August 22nd, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/trumps-path-indefinite-afghan-war>

³ Shuja Nawaz, "Trump Misses an Opportunity in Afghanistan", Atlantic Council, August 22nd, 2017. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-misses-an-opportunity-in-afghanistan>

though he still needs to define those conditions in detail.⁴

Killing Terrorists instead of Nation-Building

With Trump having repeatedly emphasized a new focus on the fight against terror while distancing himself from the aim of nation-building, many think tank representatives consider the revision of US interests a done deal. Conservative think tanks, in particular, are very pleased about this. James Jay Carafano from the Heritage Foundation gives one of his commentaries the title "Trump Puts America First in Afghanistan".⁵

Michael Kugelman of the Wilson Center argues that to be effective, a strategy needs clearly defined objectives. He believes that Trump has now fulfilled this condition by focusing on the fight against terror.⁶ In this context, Roger L. Simon calls attention to the lessons learned from the attacks of September 11, 2001. Afghanistan must not once again become a staging area for international terrorism, stresses the expert from the Hoover Institution in justification of his support for a continued US engagement.⁷ But Simon goes on to say that this does not mean that the US should waste one minute trying to "turn places like Afghanistan or Iraq into Denmark".

It is predominantly conservative experts who approve this rejection of nation-building as a goal. "So the endgame is not to rebuild the Afghan nation," emphasizes James Carafano (Heritage), for example.⁸ "The chief result of nation-building programs under Bush and Obama has been to

⁴ Michael Rubin, "There's too much at stake in Afghanistan for Trump to fail", AEI, August 21st, 2017.

<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/theres-too-much-at-stake-in-afghanistan-for-trump-to-fail/article/2632185>

⁵ James Jay Carafano, "Trump Puts America First in Afghanistan", Heritage Foundation, August 23rd, 2017.

<http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/trump-puts-america-first-afghanistan>

⁶ Michael Kugelman, "Trump Gets Counterterrorism Strategy Right on Afghanistan", Wilson Center, August 24, 2017.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/trump-gets-counterterrorism-strategy-right-afghanistan>

⁷ Roger L. Simon, "Trump Makes the Right Decision on Afghanistan... and Pakistan", Hoover Institution, August 21st, 2017.

<https://pjmedia.com/rogersimon/2017/08/21/trump-makes-right-decision-afghanistan-pakistan/>

⁸ James Jay Carafano, "Afghanistan by the Numbers", Heritage Foundation, August 26, 2017. <http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/afghanistan-the-numbers>

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spark corruption, which corrodes security”, thinks Michael Rubin (AEI).⁹ But for Anthony Cordesman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): “It is one thing to give up the futile US efforts to use aid to transform the political, legal, and economic system of a nation from the outside and do so regardless of its cultural values and the views and needs of its deeply divided peoples. It is quite another not to help and push them into shaping and executing their own reform programs when these are vital to their survival, progress, unity, and stability.”¹⁰ Laurel Miller from the RAND Corporation, however, emphasizes that Trump’s strategy would require the US to continue with its engagement in nation-building. In her eyes it is not, as many maintain, a matter of re-making the country “in our own image”. Instead, nation-building is part of the US counter-insurgency strategy – the idea being that the Afghan government must have the political and institutional wherewithal to win and maintain the population’s support.¹¹

Pakistan is Part of the Picture

There is a greater consensus among the expert community on the idea that there is a need for a regional strategy to solve the conflict in Afghanistan and that Pakistan plays a crucial role. Daniel L. Byman from the Brookings Institution writes that even though a change of course in Islamabad’s dealing with terrorists would be difficult to achieve, Trump has at least taken a step forward, namely by making some US aid to Pakistan conditional on ending support for the Taliban.¹² In an interview with his colleague Ashish Kumar Sen, James B. Cunningham (from the Atlantic Council) states that Trump’s policy has created an opportunity to offer Pakistan incentives as well as deterrence to change its behavior.¹³ Luke

Coffey (Heritage Foundation) sees Trump’s firmness in his stance towards Pakistan as crucial to his regional approach and succeeding where his predecessors’ endeavors failed.¹⁴

Much Military and Little Governance

Despite a certain amount of positive feedback, the picture overall is dominated by criticism – criticism that relates not only to the content of the new strategy but also to Washington’s so-called “swamp”.

Trump Repeats Predecessors’ Mistakes

Alyssa Ayres from the CFR titles her analysis “The Not-So-New ‘New’ South Asia Strategy”¹⁵, reflecting the sentiment of some of her colleagues, who do not accept the word “new” in this context. In terms of content, their criticism is aimed at stationing “new” US troops in Afghanistan, and this applies across the board, whatever their political orientation.

“If we couldn’t win with 100,000 troops under President Obama, how will just one-fifth as many prevail?”, asks Rich Barlow from the Hoover Institution, for instance.¹⁶ His opinion is shared by experts at the Cato Institute, among others. Doug Bandow also makes reference to the substantially higher numbers of troops in the pre-Trump era and adds that the increase in troop levels that seems to be envisaged would not help the Afghan forces. On the contrary: more foreign troops fighting in more areas would probably enhance Taliban recruiting.¹⁷

“Unfortunately, Trump’s way forward focuses almost exclusively on increasing military pressure,” complain Michael Fuchs, Hardin

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-s-commitment-to-afghanistan>

¹⁴ Luke Coffey, “Trump Lays Out a Winning Strategy for Afghanistan”, Heritage Foundation, August 22nd, 2017.

<http://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/trump-lays-out-winning-strategy-afghanistan>

¹⁵ Alyssa Ayres, “The Not-So-New ‘New’ South Asia Strategy”, CFR, August, 22nd, 2017.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/not-so-new-new-south-asia-strategy>

¹⁶ Rich Barlow, “On Afghanistan, Trump Should Have Gone with His Gut”, Hoover Institution, August 29, 2017.

<http://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2017/08/29/afghanistan-rich-barlow>

¹⁷ Doug Bandow, “Afghanistan Is President Donald Trump’s War Now: Fighting without Purpose or End”, Cato Institute, August 22nd, 2017.

<https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/afghanistan-president-donald-trumps-war-now-fighting-without-purpose-or-end>

⁹ Michael Rubin (AEI), see Note 4.

¹⁰ Anthony Cordesman, “Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen: Once Again, Is Half a Strategy Better than None?”, CSIS, September 11, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-iraq-somalia-and-yemen-once-again-half-strategy-better-none>

¹¹ Laurel E. Miller, “President Trump’s Recommitment to Nation-Building in Afghanistan”, RAND Corporation, August 30, 2017.

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/08/president-trumps-recommitment-to-nation-building-in.html>

¹² Daniel L. Byman, “The case against involvement in Afghanistan”, Brookings, September 5, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/05/the-case-against-involvement-in-afghanistan/>

¹³ Ashish Kumar Sen, “Trump’s Commitment to Afghanistan”, Atlantic Council, August 22nd, 2017.

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Lang, and Vikram Singh from the Center for American Progress (CAP). They believe that this explicit focus on the military to the detriment of all other parts of an integrated strategy (including a diplomatic dimension and development aid) is "a recipe for disaster".¹⁸

Differentiated Image of the Adversaries

According to many experts, the US government should bring its anti-terrorist strategy up to date. After all, a great deal has changed since September 11, 2001, says Rolf Mowatt-Larssen from the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (Harvard). The mere existence of safe havens for terrorists hardly represents a genuine threat to US national security anymore.¹⁹ John Mueller from the Cato Institute even talks of a "safe haven myth" and calls for a distinction to be made between the Taliban in Afghanistan and ISIS with its international outlook. He consequently warns against applying the strategy used in Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan as well.²⁰

Quite apart from that, the US should be careful in its dealings with Pakistan. As already explained, most experts consider Afghanistan's neighbor to be in a key position and therefore both part of the problem and part of the solution. Daniel L. Byman (Brookings) is not convinced that Trump can be successful in making Islamabad change course²¹ – and he is not alone in his skepticism. "There is no new US policy towards Pakistan – and there won't be one soon", writes Jonah Blank from RAND; as a first proof of this, he cites the fact that no significant actions towards Pakistan have been made public in the first two months since Trump's announcement of the strategy.²²

Lawrence J. Korb (CAP), for his part, argues that Trump's attempt to assign India a more important role in this conflict will not stop Pakistan from providing assistance to the Taliban. He is also critical of curtailing aid to Pakistan. That would make it even more difficult to move material for US troops in Afghanistan through Pakistan.²³ Jonah Blank (RAND) shares this opinion. Gautam Adhikari (CAP) adds that closer cooperation between the US and India may alarm Islamabad and drive it deeper into the arms of China, particularly since Beijing has already declared its readiness to assist Pakistan if Pakistan begins to lose US backing.²⁴

War for War's Sake?

Some experts still do not feel sufficiently well informed even after Donald Trump's speech. Bruce Riedel from Brookings, among others, complains that Trump has left open important details of his strategy.²⁵ "He failed to say how many additional troops he would send or what they would do," adds Stephen Taniel from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). What he – and some of his colleagues – believe is lacking is a definition of the overarching goal. Taniel writes that Trump has never specified the conditions necessary to bring the US troops home.²⁶

Occasionally, individual experts attack the Washington political establishment as a whole and accuse Trump of having succumbed to it. Lee Smith from the Hudson Institute has expressed this idea most harshly. Afghanistan is regarded as something of a "boon", he maintains, making reference to the many military jobs and promotions, profitable business deals in the military-industrial complex as well as the

¹⁸ Michael Fuchs, Hardin Lang, Vikram Singh, "The American People Deserve More Answers on Afghanistan", CAP, August 22nd, 2017.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2017/08/22/437571/american-people-deserve-answers-afghanistan/>

¹⁹ Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, "Trump's War-More Risk Than Reward for US Military Involvement in Afghanistan", Belfer Center, August 22nd, 2017. <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/trumps-war-more-risk-reward-us-military-involvement-afghanistan>

²⁰ John Mueller, "Redefining Winning in Afghanistan", Cato Institute, September 5, 2017.

<https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/redefining-winning-afghanistan>

²¹ Daniel L. Byman, (Brookings), September 5, 2017, see Note 12.

²² Jonah Blank, "Despite Tillerson, U.S. Won't Abandon Pakistan for India", RAND, October 27, 2017.

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/10/despite-tillerson-us-wont-abandon-pakistan-for-india.html>

²³ Lawrence J. Korb, "10 Fatal Flaws in Donald Trump's Afghanistan Plan", CAP, August 23, 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/10-fatal-flaws-donald-trumps-afghanistan-plan-22021>

²⁴ Gautam Adhikari, "Big Questions about South Asia", CAP, August 25, 2017.

<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/world-report/articles/2017-08-25/donald-trumps-afghanistan-plan-leaves-big-questions-for-south-asia>

²⁵ Bruce Riedel, "The 3 wars in Afghanistan", Brookings, August 30, 2017.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/08/30/the-3-wars-in-afghanistan/>

²⁶ Stephen Taniel, "The Only Way Trump's Afghanistan Plan Would Make Sense", CNAS, August 22nd, 2017.

<http://fortune.com/2017/08/22/trump-afghanistan-speech/>

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chance for aid organizations to “benefit” from such a war.²⁷

Help to Promote Self-Help

The experts from the different think tanks by no means limit themselves to assigning praise and blame. They also put forward ideas of their own and indicate further possible courses of action. In this context, a broad coalition of all political camps is coming together under the principle of helping the Afghan state to gain new strength of its own.

Reforms in Afghanistan Should Be Prioritized

John R. Allen – a former four-star general with Afghanistan experience and now president of the Brookings Institution – and Michael E. O’Hanlon (Brookings) have presented an entire catalogue of measures with which the US could help Afghanistan to “reverse the momentum of the war”. The two experts would like to see the added US troops used to mentor and advise Afghan units. In addition, the US government should help its Afghan counterpart to fight corruption.²⁸ According to S. Rebecca Zimmerman from the RAND Corporation, the US should also, in any role possible, exert its influence to ensure that the parliamentary elections can take place in 2018. She believes that electoral law will subsequently need to be reformed – preferably before the presidential election one year later.²⁹

Anthony Cordesman (CSIS) also insists on an economic component. He believes that domestic economic reforms are what the country needs above all, combined with a reduction in the barriers to private enterprise and development. But the United States should not be seen to be the only

outside force driving this process. Cordesman proposes a World Bank field team as a partner.³⁰ In the search for partners, India once again comes into play. Alyssa Ayres (CFR) writes: “We should be doing more with India to support Afghanistan, including helping to shore up its challenged government.”³¹

Some experts from the conservative camp can identify with the above proposals. Peter Brookes from the Heritage Foundation, for one, provides the following summary: “As Afghanistan’s friend, the United States and other partners (India and Europe, for example) will work with Kabul to assist the country politically, economically, and socially in support of our common interests.”³²

Proper Stewardship with Pakistan and the Taliban

Trying to find the appropriate approach to dealing with Pakistan, experts come to different conclusions, not necessarily dividing along conventional lines. If the Trump administration is serious about taking on Pakistan, it should consider a substantial escalation, according to Daniel L. Byman (Brookings); the key measures here would entail drones, covert operations, and commando raids, because confrontation is the only way to defeat the Taliban leadership.³³ The alternative is to go with the stick-and-carrot approach. In an interview with Ashish Kumar Sen, James B. Cunningham (Atlantic Council) has this to say on the matter: “The Trump administration must launch a multi-lateral effort to get Pakistan into a better place in terms of its actions, not just its rhetoric, and then find a way to push the Taliban into negotiations.”³⁴

Laurel E. Miller (RAND) among others also believes that one of the best solutions for Afghanistan would be to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban thereby giving them a place at the political table while at the

²⁷ Lee Smith, “John Kerry Was Right About Terrorism in 2004, and Donald Trump And His Generals Are Wrong”, Hudson Institute, September 18, 2017.

<https://www.hudson.org/research/13898-john-kerry-was-right-about-terrorism-in-2004-and-donald-trump-and-his-generals-are-wrong>

²⁸ John R. Allen, Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Trump made the right move on Afghanistan”, Brookings, August 23rd, 2017.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/08/23/trump-made-the-right-move-on-afghanistan/>

²⁹ S. Rebecca Zimmerman, “What Afghanistan Needs to Move Forward: A Political Solution”, RAND Corporation, August 24, 2017.

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/08/what-afghanistan-needs-to-move-forward-a-political.html>

³⁰ Anthony Cordesman (CSIS), see Note 10.

³¹ Alyssa Ayres (CFR), see Note 15.

³² Peter Brookes, “New Afghan Strategy Hits the Mark”, Heritage Foundation, August 24, 2017. <http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/new-afghan-strategy-hits-the-mark>

³³ Daniel L. Byman, “The case for continued U.S. involvement in Afghanistan”, Brookings, September 5, 2017.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/05/the-case-for-continued-u-s-involvement-in-afghanistan/>

³⁴ Ashish Kumar Sen (Atlantic Council), see Note 13.

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same time engaging key regional players to support this initiative.³⁵

Finally, some experts believe that it is also important to think about the roles Iran and Russia play in Afghanistan.³⁶

Conclusion

Most experts believe that it would be a good thing for the United States to maintain its engagement in Afghanistan and follow a regional strategy involving Pakistan and India. This strategy should, however, be pursued with caution, making constructive efforts to reduce tensions in the region. Some experts think that resolving the conflict in Afghanistan will in the long term require the political involvement of the Taliban.

Even though comprehensive nation-building is generally no longer viewed as a realistic aim, many Afghanistan experts advocate continued US engagement to strengthen the domestic political system, provide training for the Afghan army, fight corruption, and promote private enterprise and development work.

As regards to the military aspect of Trump's strategy, there is still a great deal of uncertainty among the think tanks because of the lack of information. To many experts, the announcement of the intention to combat terror is not enough. They demand further details about planned troop numbers and the overarching objectives of the operations. Most do not believe a military mission alone can bring about success. Years of previous military engagement did not produce a convincing result, so why should it work this time – with even fewer boots on the ground? That is the main question experts pose to the US government.

In conclusion, even after 16 years of US engagement in Afghanistan, the debate has not quieted down. The dispute is conducted by a large number of Asia and security experts who are spread across the entire political spectrum. One remarkable aspect of the current discussion about US strategy in the region is the fact that its transatlantic partners which have stationed troops in Afghanistan, such as Germany, are largely ignored. The contributions the Europeans are making

in Afghanistan and their cooperation with the US is either not mentioned at all or only in passing. Nor do the interests or strategic objectives of the transatlantic partners form any part of the debate in Washington. One almost gets the impression that the US is the only external force present in Afghanistan. This raises many questions about future cooperation between the Americans and Europeans in matters of global security, including the fight against terrorism.

³⁵ Laurel E. Miller (RAND), see Note 11.

³⁶ For example: Bruce Riedel (Brookings), see Note 25, or Peter Brookes (Heritage Foundation), see Note 32.

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Further Reading:

Brookings Institution

**“The case for/against continued US involvement in Afghanistan”
(Two-Part Series)**

Daniel L. Byman, September 5, 2017

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/05/the-case-for-continued-u-s-involvement-in-afghanistan/>

CSIS

“Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen: Once Again, Is Half a Strategy Better than None?”

Anthony Cordesman, September 11, 2017

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-iraq-somalia-and-yemen-once-again-half-strategy-better-none>

Heritage Foundation

“New Afghan Strategy Hits the Mark”

Peter Brookes, August 24, 2017

<http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/new-afghan-strategy-hits-the-mark>

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