SITUATION ASSESSMENT

Trump Announces a New Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia: Understanding the President’s Address

Policy Analysis Unit | August 2017
Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad Axis: A Question of Energy and Politics

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Introduction

Speaking on August 21, President Donald Trump announced the launch of a new US policy in Afghanistan and throughout South Asia. In his statements, Trump mentioned the deployment of an additional 4,000 US troops to Afghanistan, adding to the 8,400 already stationed there but was otherwise short on details. The new strategy, however, does seem to mark a departure from bluster during his electoral campaign, when the president had criticized the approach to Afghanistan of his two predecessors and called for the withdrawal of US forces from the country. Trump’s abandonment of his initial isolationist tendencies and the stated aim of ending what had become America’s longest war indicate acquiescence to the military command and the Pentagon. This also echoes a similar situation which former president Barack Obama found himself in, where his early promise to end US involvement in Afghanistan by the end of his second term could not be fulfilled. In the 16 years of fighting the Taliban up to this point, the US has little to show for the loss of 2,400 of its soldiers except that now 40% of Afghanistan is under direct Taliban control.

The Lead–up to the New Strategy

During testimony in front of a US Senate committee tasked with military oversight last February, the US forces commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, had asked for an increase in troop numbers deployed to the country to help break the deadlock with the Taliban. The Pentagon’s adoption of Gen. Nicholson’s ideas precipitated sharp disputes with White House advisors, who were largely reluctant to support the idea of

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expanding US forces in Afghanistan. The President ultimately backed the proposals by the military, explaining his volte-face by saying:

"My original instinct was to pull out -- and, historically, I like following my instincts. But all my life I've heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office; in other words, when you're President of the United States."

According to Trump, “many meetings” with White House advisors and Pentagon officials and military commanders distilled into a set of three main conclusions. Firstly, these included the need for a victory in Afghanistan. Second, Trump asserted that a “hasty” exit from Afghanistan, one before outright victory could be claimed, would be “both predictable and unacceptable”. Drawing unfavorably from the “hasty” retreat from Iraq, Trump predicted that a premature withdrawal of American forces from South Asia and Greater Middle East would precipitate the rise of terrorist threats in the mold of Al-Qaeda and ISIL. Following on from that, Trump’s third assertion at the press conference was to focus on Afghanistan together with Pakistan as a region in which the US faced “immense” threats. Trump described these two countries as having “the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world” of “terrorist organizations” working against US interests.

**Internal Discord**

Trump’s justifications for the increase of US forces in Afghanistan belie the lack of a consensus among White House advisors. It now seems clear that the president’s decision to deploy more troops to Afghanistan was shaped by senior officers, including Secretary of Defense Gen. John Mattis; Senior White House aide Gen. John Kelly; and

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National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster⁴. Previously, this militarily-minded clique had been blocked in their intentions by ideologically committed isolationists, a White House faction that at any rate is dwindling rapidly, with Steve Bannon and Seb Gorka being dismissed from their positions. Previously, this group of isolationists had been the inspiration behind the “America First” foreign policy which had fired up Trump’s grassroots during the campaign. The disaffection of these former insiders in the Trump White House came out very clearly in editorials published in Breitbart, to which Steve Bannon has returned following his displacement from Washington, DC.

Insiders to the Trump White House have pointed out that while the president may have decided to take the approach traditionally followed by the generals, they also mention that Trump has failed to authorize the deployment of the tens of thousands of troops the military leadership asked for⁵. What the same insiders indicate, is that Trump’s not entirely committed to any particular principle of foreign policy, but is determined to be accepted as a decisive and strong leader.

**The New Strategy**

Trump’s much touted “new strategy” remains short on detail. On the surface, Trump’s commitment to “push onward to victory” and to crush Al-Qaeda and ISIL seems not to substantively differ from the policies of Obama and George W. Bush. Nonetheless, there are a number of key points where Trump is keen to contrast his foreign policy approach with that of his predecessors.

The first indication is Trump’s projection of his strategy as one which concerns not only Afghanistan, but South Asia more broadly. Trump singled out Pakistan as a country which provided safe haven to the Taliban and other armed extremists who attacked US

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forces. Yet he also called on India to provide economic and development assistance in Afghanistan, as well as contributing to stabilization across South Asia. A second uniquely Trump plank is his desire to be seen expressing a vote of confidence in the US military leadership by handing control of the day-to-day military operations to them. Third, the president’s speech included the germ of a coalescing foreign policy doctrine. An exposition of what Trump called the White House’s “principled realism” was that America “will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands, or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. ... Instead, we will work with allies and partners to protect our shared interests.”

In contrast to the above, there are specific ways in which Trump is attempting to actively set his presidency apart. The first such way is Trump’s shift away from a foreign policy centered on deadlines, to one which takes its cues from developments on the ground. Commenting unfavorably on former President Obama’s approach to the withdrawal of US troops from the Greater Middle East, Trump said

“I’ve said it many times how counterproductive it is for the United States to announce in advance the dates we intend to begin, or end, military options. We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities.”

A second marker would be the way in which Trump will attempt to blend military, economic and diplomatic elements of US policy to achieve the same aims. While Trump has been skeptical of the possibility of successful dialogue with the Taliban, he did make clear that “after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan” but was quick to add that “nobody knows if or when that will ever happen”. Continuing in the same vein, the developing Trump foreign policy will move away from the “nation-building” purportedly carried out by the United States in the past. Instead, American forces in South Asia would concentrate on “killing terrorists.”

Trump also signaled increased stringency in dealing with Pakistan, threatening Islamabad that it had “a lot to lose by continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists”.

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7 “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia”
This went in hand-in-hand with his calls for greater Indian involvement in stabilizing the region. A fifth and final distinguishing feature of the nascent Trump foreign policy doctrine is the supposed unbridling of American forces.

"I have already lifted restrictions the previous administration placed on our warfighters that prevented the Secretary of Defense and our commanders in the field from fully and swiftly waging battle against the enemy. Micromanagement from Washington, D.C. does not win battles."

This was meant to address the feelings of exasperation which many military planners expressed during the Obama Administration about their inability to strike at Taliban-associated targets unless these posed a direct threat to either American forces or the Afghan state.

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8 Phil Stewart, “Trump’s Afghan decision may increase U.S. air power, training,” Reuters, August 22, 2017, available online: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-afghanistan-airforce-exclus-idUSKCN1B22GY