

Trump's brave new Afghan strategy

US President Donald Trump was right to jettison his initial instincts for a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and to articulate a firm, continued commitment to that country and the region. Trump deserves credit for a decision that goes against immediate political interests. Sure, this is a low bar; we all expect our commander in chief to prioritize national security above voter popularity. But it is easy to forget how domestic political considerations were so often the driving force behind president Barack Obama's foreign policy. The best example of this is the drive to remove all US forces from Iraq before the 2012 presidential election.

More important, Trump's new strategy discards the timeline under which Obama's Afghan strategy always laboured. The significance of returning to the conditions-based approach of president George W. Bush cannot be underestimated. Nothing did more to undercut Obama's 2009 surge of troops into Afghanistan than his announcing in advance when forces would be pulled out. Given that no victory over the Taliban was conceivable, the only realistic objective of more military might was to bring the enemy to the negotiating table. Yet as long as waiting out US resolve was a distinct option, compromise never seemed attractive to the Taliban, and the war dragged on.

Ditching the timeline will also help strengthen the nation's institutions critical to success. Afghans were reluctant to invest in a state when the chances of its failure seemed high; instead, many in important roles saw their time in government as little more than a chance to position themselves as well as possible for when the state collapsed. But now that the US seems committed to staying, Afghans are more likely to see the state as worthy of their efforts to create a new reality.

Finally, losing the timeline could make a big impression on two countries that are not mentioned in Trump's speech, but are creating obstacles to a better Afghan future: Iran and Russia. Both governments have upped their meddling, positioning themselves for an imminent American departure.

Yet, while appreciating these points, I still find the new strategy wanting. As a former deputy national security adviser to president George W. Bush, I listened to the speech asking myself whether it would give all members of our government sufficient strategic guidance to put in place a winning plan. The answer was no. At least three contradictions need to be resolved.

First, Trump spoke of how "a fundamental pillar of our new strategy is the integration of all instruments of American power: diplomatic, economic and military". Yet not only did Trump not explain how the non-military tools would be used in concert with physical force, he sowed doubt about their importance with his line "we are not nation-building again, but killing terrorists".

"Nation-building" may be the most unpopular phrase in America. But one cannot succeed in squelching terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) without improving the military and civilian abilities of partner governments. Military engagement helps but it is in the realm of nation-building that the non-military instruments of national power truly come to bear. What is the purpose of diplomatic and economic efforts in Afghanistan if not to buttress the legitimacy and capacities of Kabul?

Second, Trump made his usual comments about how he will not provide the enemy with details about his military approach. But his audience is not only the enemy; it is also, more importantly, the American people. If he wants to calibrate US military presence to conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, he will need to invest a lot of time and effort speaking to the American public about why Afghanistan is important. Obama rarely did this, even with tens of thousands of Americans deployed there.

Trump will have to be different, and specific, if he hopes to succeed. Americans aren't interested in tactical plans, but they want to understand and have confidence in the strategy—which will require sharing more details than offered on Monday.

Finally, Trump glossed over the complexities of the US relationship with Pakistan. It was refreshing to hear an American president call Pakistan out on its troubling behaviour but there is an obvious tension between the ability of the US to work with Pakistan on the larger agenda of non-proliferation and counter-terrorism that goes beyond Afghanistan, and threatening to condition US support for Islamabad based only on Pakistani actions in Afghanistan.

In a world in which terrorism and WMD have not yet been married but could be, Pakistan—the fastest builder of nuclear weapons in the world—has as least as much leverage over the US as Washington does over Islamabad.

The Trump administration may have decided to prioritize Afghanistan above all other interests in which Pakistan has a role. If so, this approach requires contingency planning about other crises that may occur, and we can only surmise such planning is going on behind the scenes.

Trump's speech on Afghanistan was welcome on several fronts. But let's hope that it was a telegraphed version of a more developed strategy—one that the president's team is laying out in greater detail to the military and civilian leadership, and one that he will take more time to explain to the American people. If not, the kudos he gets for resisting a more politically popular short-term approach will be meaningless in the face of a long-term strategy full of unresolved contradictions.

Bloomberg View

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