

Mission indefinite: Donald Trump's Afghanistan policy

In a prime time national address on August 21 from the Fort Myer military base, U.S. President Donald Trump laid out his long awaited strategy for "[Afghanistan and South Asia](#)". After 16 years, Afghanistan remains America's longest war. It has spent more than \$800 billion and nearly 2,400 U.S. soldiers have lost their lives. The American people are now weary of this long war without victory — and Mr. Trump has characteristically promised, in the end, we will win!

Launched with the full support of the international community in 2001 after 9/11 by President George Bush, the war in Afghanistan got derailed as the U.S. shifted focus and resources towards Iraq from 2003 onwards. The end objective of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan began to recede further and further as the Taliban launched their insurgency in 2005 after they had recovered, regrouped, refinanced and re-equipped themselves from their sanctuary in Pakistan. Since then, the insurgency has gathered momentum and also exposed the U.S.'s policy weaknesses.

An Afghan exit plan for Obama

After taking over in 2009, President Barack Obama too had undertaken a major policy review describing the Afghan war as "a war of necessity", "a war that we must win". He went on to authorise a surge in U.S. troop presence from 55,000 in early 2009 reaching 100,000 in 2010. The objective was to gain a decisive victory over the insurgency. The simultaneous announcement that the drawdown would commence in 2011, and by 2014 the Afghan security forces would take charge of all combat operations, however, only encouraged the Taliban insurgency and also exposed the shortcomings of the Afghan army and the police forces, in terms of numbers, training and equipment to deal with the post 2014 situation.

In 2014, Mr. Obama realised that the bitterly contested Afghan presidential election had led to a politically fragile situation. He and Secretary of State John Kerry engaged in personal diplomacy to create the compromise of a National Unity Government, with Ashraf Ghani becoming President and his rival, Abdullah Abdullah, taking over as CEO, a newly created position that was to be converted into a prime-ministership through a constitutional amendment within a two-year time-frame. Having announced the pull-back, Mr. Obama withdrew the bulk of U.S. soldiers (the other allies were equally eager) and Operation Enduring Freedom formally concluded on December 28, 2014. Approximately 8,400 U.S. soldiers and another 5,000 from other allies stayed behind to "advise, train and assist" the Afghan security forces under Operation Resolute Support. Initially, this too was to conclude by end-2016 but faced with a difficult political and security situation, Mr. Obama decided to bequeath this decision to his successor. In addition, the U.S. maintains approximately 2,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, for counter-terrorism operations, described as Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

Mr. Trump was right when he said, "When I became president, I was given a bad and very complex hand." Since 2012, he had been voicing his frustration with U.S. policies in Afghanistan and had applauded Mr. Obama's original decision to pull out U.S. soldiers by end-2014. He reminded the audience that, "My original instinct was to pull out." But like his predecessor, he was prevailed upon to curb his instincts.

Full texts of Donald Trump's speech on South Asia policy

The same logic that persuaded Mr. Obama persuaded Mr. Trump to conclude that the U.S. "must seek an honourable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made"; that 'a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and al-Qaeda'; and the "20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organisations... active in Afghanistan and Pakistan"

continue to pose “immense” security threats to the U.S. With these conclusions, his options were limited. One option was to do nothing but this would only prolong the stalemate that Gen. John Nicholson (commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan) had publicly warned about. He could hardly announce a major expansion of U.S. presence which his predecessor had attempted and failed. So he had to go with the recommendations of the generals — Gen. Nicholson from Kabul, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Defence Secretary James Mattis and his new chief of staff, John Kelly. In short, once his conclusions were determined, the choices vanished.

He has therefore authorised a modest increase in the U.S. military presence on the ground (approximately 4,000 soldiers) but without specifying a time frame for the operations. He has also ‘lifted restrictions’ so that the commanders in the field can have access to resources needed to prosecute military operations. This mostly relates to surveillance and air support. He has put the Afghan government on notice by reminding them that “our support is not a blank cheque” and “the American people expect to see real reforms, real progress and real results”.

This provides a short window of 18 to 24 months. Today, 70% of operations on the ground are being conducted by the Afghan Special Forces (Ktah Khas). These numbers are expected to be increased from 35 to 63 companies and reforms in the Army will enable it to hold territory once the Special Forces have cleared it. Together with increased air capabilities, Gen. Nicholson hopes that this will tilt the stalemate against the insurgency.

Mr. Trump has made it clear that the purpose of the U.S. military presence “is not nation-building”, but “killing terrorists”. Linked to this is his disdain for any reconciliation with the Taliban — “someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But nobody knows if or when that will happen.”

Does all this make for a dramatically different plan as Mr. Trump would have the Americans believe? Will it help America declare victory as has been promised? The key lies with Pakistan, something Mr. Trump’s predecessors also understood but found too intractable a problem to tackle. The truth is that an Afghan policy review is also a Pakistan policy review. As the U.S. Department of Defence Report on Afghanistan issued in June this year categorically states, “Afghan-oriented militant groups, including the Taliban and Haqqani Network, retain freedom of action inside Pakistani territory and benefit from support from elements of the Pakistani Government.” Gen. Nicholson told a Senate committee that “the primary factor that will enable our success is the elimination of external (read Pakistan) sanctuary and support to the insurgents”. Neither of these is new. What is, however, new is the open acknowledgement of this by a U.S. President.

Mr. Trump has described the Pakistan policy as a key pillar of his new strategy and cautioned that the U.S. “can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organisations,” and that the U.S. has been “paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars, at the same time they are housing the very terrorists we are fighting”.

Expectedly, there have been vociferous protests in Pakistan. Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif rejected the charges and said that the U.S. “should not make Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures in Afghanistan”. Pakistan is upset that Mr. Trump has also indicated determination “to further develop its strategic partnership with India” and appreciated “India’s important contributions to stability in Afghanistan”. China has come to Pakistan’s defence calling it a frontline state in the struggle against terrorism that has “made great sacrifices and contributions”.

Pakistan’s problem is that it sees its relations with Afghanistan through the prism of its relations with India. It seeks a veto on Afghanistan’s relations with India which the Afghans will not accept.

Changing this dynamic requires getting rid of the military's stranglehold on Pakistan's India and Afghan policies.

As long as the U.S. maintains a military presence in Afghanistan, geography determines its dependence on Pakistan for supply routes. The other possible access routes are through Iran or through Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Neither is feasible since sanctions on both countries have been ramped up and the U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan closed in 2014 under Russian pressure.

Consequently, Mr. Trump's policy reflects more continuity than he is willing to acknowledge.

Rakesh Sood is a former Ambassador to Afghanistan and presently a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. E-mail: rakeshsood2001@yahoo.com

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