The slim chances that President Trump's Afghanistan policy will succeed: Let's look honestly at recent history

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Last night, Donald Trump took full ownership of the war in Afghanistan, a war he has criticized for years. By Trump's own admission, and that of his secretary of defense, that war has been going very poorly. Using his first nationally televised prime-time address to articulate a new strategy for "winning," Trump has firmly yoked his legacy to making serious progress in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately for Trump, and even worse for the United States, this war will not end in victory.

The first problem with Trump's strategy is his full-throated embrace of a vague and expansive definition of American goals, which now include "attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing Al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan . . ." Why does Trump believe that the United States can solve these problems now when solutions have eluded both of his predecessors for the past 16 years?

Disrupting Al Qaeda was a discrete and achievable goal, one quickly realized in 2001. But defeating Al Qaeda "and every terrorist group of global reach" was not. When nations — even powerful ones like the United States — identify impossible tasks as their goals, they are doomed to fail.

Beyond that, although Trump claimed his strategy represents a clear break from the past, it is so far only a slightly more muscular version of the policy he inherited from Obama. And, in fact, it remains a much less forceful version of Obama's surge in 2009 and 2010, when the total number of American troops reached 100,000. That surge provided only temporary and partial relief to the Afghan government. There is no evidence, from the Trump administration or elsewhere, to suggest that things will be different this time. The facts on the ground are stubborn and longstanding. Neither a few thousand more troops nor a few more years will tame the Taliban or turn the tide of the conflict.

Nor should the public believe that there is anything new in Trump's focus on Pakistan. Though the President is right to reconsider the aid the U.S. provides to Pakistan given its support of the Taliban, Trump's call to hold Pakistan accountable amounts to a recycling of previous U.S. efforts. In 2001, the U.S. put "extraordinary pressure" on Pakistan. In 2006, the U.S. praised Pakistan for its "unfaltering" fight against terrorism. A similar to and fro continued during the Obama presidency. None of these efforts have amounted to much to date. Carrying them too far, on the other hand, may amplify the conflict in Pakistan, further destabilizing the region.

In the end, Trump's bold claims about keeping America safe by going on the offensive in Afghanistan ring hollow. The truth is that for all the talk of terrorism safe havens and American influence, neither propping up Afghanistan nor defeating the Taliban are necessary to ensure American security.

Al Qaeda, the threat that justified the invasion in the first place, is a pale shadow of its former self, nor is Afghanistan a safe haven for ISIS. Sadly, the greatest danger to Americans comes not from terrorists based overseas, but from people living in the United States who decide to commit violent acts.

After more than 2,400 American casualties and hundreds of billions of dollars spent in Afghanistan over the past 16 years, there is still no end in sight to America's longest war. But rather than acknowledge the United States has done all it could there, Trump's strategy ensures that the United States will keep paying a steep price for continued failure in Afghanistan.

Trump may also pay a political price for Afghanistan. He admitted that his initial instinct was to pull out of Afghanistan, but that was before he "studied Afghanistan in great detail and from every conceivable angle." Having successfully attacked Obama for continuing failed policies in the war on terror, there is little upside for Trump with his "America First" base. If U.S. efforts in Afghanistan don't "work quickly" as the President promised, he will have provided potential opponents — both Democratic and Republican — with a powerful issue with which to attack him in 2020.

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