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Three problems with Trump's Afghanistan strategy

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Last month, President Trump outlined his new strategy for Afghanistan that calls for increasing troops on the ground, a reverse of the Obama administration's policy of gradual withdrawal. The President also reprimanded Pakistan for continuing to harbor militants while urging India to assist the United States in developing Afghanistan's economy.

First, the strategy is not new. It's really a repackaging of old strategies that have already been tried and tested—and have failed. For example, prioritizing the capturing and killing of terrorists over the building of sustainable institutions has been tried in Afghanistan before, and in Iraq from 2003–2010, and has been ineffective in the long run. Weeding out safe havens and ensuring that they do not redevelop is the job of a law enforcement agency, not a military. Putting more U.S. troops on the ground, therefore, is not a solution.

Second, Trump's strategy reinforces the security dilemma between Pakistan and India. It is true that as a non-NATO ally, Pakistan has been a recipient of millions of dollars in aid. It is also true that it is sympathetic to the Taliban and supports the Haqqani Network in its attempts to establish a Pakistan-friendly Afghan government. But chastising Pakistan while encouraging India to invest even more in Afghanistan's economic development in the same breath merely intensifies the animosity between the nuclear rivals while threatening regional stability and U.S. interests. For example, the United States has become increasingly interested in building economic ties in Central and South Asia, and cannot do so without some kind of relationship with Pakistan. More significantly, U.S. troops rely heavily on routes within Pakistan for NATO supplies. Aid cuts, sanctions, increasing drone strikes or designating Pakistan as a "state sponsor of terrorism" will all jeopardize U.S. troops' access to these vital supplies.

And third, the strategy largely ignores China, who has reinforced its position as a key player in the form of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China is beginning to serve as a mediator between the United States and Pakistan. Earlier this year, Hafiz Saeed, the leader of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, affiliated with the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, the perpetrator of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, was put under house arrest. While it seems plausible that Pakistani authorities did so to curry favor with newly elected President Trump, Michael Kugelman of the Wilson Center concludes that Saeed's arrest was mainly done to satisfy the steady progression of CPEC. While Saeed does not pose a direct threat to China or CPEC, any militant attack within the Pakistani state could turn into a liability for Chinese investors and citizens working there. CPEC, therefore, is opening avenues for China to exert its influence on Pakistan, which may or may not work in the United States' favor.

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