



'New Strategy,' Same Results

Trump's 'new' Afghanistan plan won't lead to a victory there.

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Monday night Donald Trump announced a "new strategy" for Afghanistan and South Asia. He said the new strategy is predicated on three conclusions he drew regarding U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Those conclusions are the "immense" threat posed by Afghanistan and the region, the need for an "honorable and enduring outcome" and the pitfalls of a rapid exit.

How this will change U.S. strategy, though, was not entirely clear. He spoke of holding Pakistan accountable – not new; following a conditions-based schedule rather than a time-based one – also not new; easing use of force and targeting policies – again, not new.

In the end, though, Trump focused on killing terrorists: "attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaida..."

And most critically, throughout his speech he reminded Americans of his penchant for "winning." On 10 occasions he affirmed that "we will always win," or "in the end, we will win..."

His "winning" rhetoric, like that of previous administrations, makes it sound as though this is America's war to win or lose. It is not.

In the aftermath of a previous war that did not go America's way, an American military officer told his counterpart, "You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield." To which the Vietnamese officer replied, "That may be so. But it is also irrelevant." A similar exchange could take place today. Thanks to its military might, the U.S. has exclusive control over who wins on the battlefield. However, the U.S. has very little control over how the Afghan government will govern or how Afghan security forces will fight. America, therefore, has little power to affect the outcome of Afghanistan's civil war.

Ever since the signing of the Bonn Accords in late 2001, the U.S. and the international community have endeavored to stand up a fledgling Afghan democracy. That has failed. Based on the lack of political rights and civil liberties available to Afghans, Freedom House rates the country as "not free," the lowest rating. Afghanistan also remains abysmally corrupt, ranking 169 out of 176 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index.

If civil wars occur, in part, because citizens rebel when they have enough grievances against their government, then it seems unlikely Afghan insurgents will lay down their weapons now to support one of the world's most corrupt and least capable governments and live in a country that is not free.

Afghan security forces are similarly lackluster. There are approximately 350,000 Afghan military, police and local constables facing 35,000 to 45,000 Taliban and other insurgent groups. Despite being dramatically outnumbered, out-trained and out-equipped, the Taliban now control or contest 40 percent of Afghan districts, more than at any other time since 2001.

If civil wars occur, in part, because the government cannot prevent them, it seems unlikely, after 16 years and billions of dollars of effort, that additional U.S. troops and money will motivate and professionalize the Afghan security forces enough to secure its citizens.

The failure of the Afghan government and security forces is, primarily, a failure of Afghans. The U.S. can adjust its strategy as often as it would like, but Americans should not expect substantially different outcomes until Afghans find their own way.

And Trump's suggestion that we can kill our way to victory is similarly unsupported by the evidence. Despite invading two countries, toppling three regimes and conducting military strikes in seven nations, the estimated number of Islamist-inspired terrorists has grown from approximately 32,000 before initiation of the war on terror to 109,000 now.

Some may find these to be tough truths. Yet the reality is that all these issues are manageable because no vital U.S. interests are at stake. The terrorist safe haven argument does not hold water, as Americans since 9/11 have been and remain quite safe. Homeland security efforts have successfully kept foreign terrorists out of the country even as the number of Islamic State group, al-Qaida and similar terror group numbers have multiplied. And if terror safe havens were a vital national interest, then a number of other countries would require U.S. action well before Afghanistan: Pakistan, Syria, Yemen and Iraq, chief among them.

President Trump's new strategy ignores the evidence amassed over 16 hard-fought years, and, as a result, more American treasure will be lost as this unnecessary war continues. There will be no winning for the U.S. in Afghanistan.

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