Afghanistan: A New American Strategy?

Or Yissachar

Seventeen years into the war in Afghanistan, the Trump administration has an opportunity to fashion a delicate balance between isolationism, the imperative to keep America safe from terror groups, the need to find a way out of the Afghan theater, and the obligation to give sovereignty to the Afghan people. President Trump's lenient approach has allowed the military to respond to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which the Taliban have used to take more territory and intensify their terror activity to a level not seen since the beginning of the war. Facing a struggle between global forces over Afghanistan, the United States must present a clear vision for the country and depart from past approaches that have led to unsatisfactory results elsewhere, for example, in Iraq. This article proposes several paths to rebuild trust and hand Afghanistan over to local actors, such as tribal leaders, and regional actors, such as China and India, while preserving key American interests.

Keywords: Afghanistan, United States, NATO, resolute support, Barack Obama, Donald Trump

In August 2017, some seven months into his presidency, President Donald Trump laid out his administration's strategy for Afghanistan. Though Afghanistan was by then overshadowed by other issues of higher priority, this was still an opportune moment to discuss the path the United States would choose to take, sixteen years into the longest war in its history.

In his policy speech, President Trump appeared to be looking at old issues from a fresh perspective. This was characteristic of this administration's behavior on many fronts, domestic and international alike. The new approach to Afghanistan, dubbed "principled realism" – a term used to describe the

Or Yissachar, an M.A. student at Sciences Po in Paris, is a former intern at INSS.

administration's national security strategy as a whole – holds that America should adjust itself to the situation on the ground and not dictate its way of life to other nations, but instead offer partnership and support.[1] The ultimate goal was to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan through a consensual political process supported by measured military power.[2]

In simple terms, the President expressed his aspiration to implement his "America First" agenda: he adopted the traditional conservative perspective by rejecting the notion of nation building, echoed nostalgia for isolationism, put the basic goal of hunting down terrorists high on the agenda, and repeated a single word – "win" – many times. Some commentators even noted that in his 15-minute speech, Trump used that word more times than Barack Obama did during his entire eight years in office.

However, Trump did not specify concrete solutions, did not lay out his idea of the kind of Afghanistan he would like to see, and did not commit to any specifics about future action. In short, there was a lack of a greater vision. The strategies of each of Trump's predecessors had their advantages and disadvantages. What they had in common, however, was that at the end of their terms in office, the situation in Afghanistan had not moved in the direction of peace and stability, America had not moved closer to ending its involvement in the region, and the various frameworks to resolve the conflict were not working. These outcomes were largely due to the nature of the war in Afghanistan, which is much more complex than the traditional battlefield, because it involves asymmetrical combat with guerilla fighters in the context of a foreign culture and a different ideology.

The Trump administration's ultimate strategy must seek the fine balance between "America First" and sustainable self-government for Afghanistan, in circumstances in which a perfect solution simply does not exist.

That fact, however, did not prevent President Trump's officials, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, and even the former commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, from issuing repeated statements claiming that the President's strategy in Afghanistan was working. Moreover, since November 2017, President Trump's new and less restrictive rules of engagement gave the military broader freedom of action. This was manifested in intensified attacks on the Taliban's financial infrastructure, with some 113 strikes aimed, inter alia, at its currency and at opium warehouses valued at $44 million;[3] more ordnance dropped by US aircraft in May 2018

than was dropped in both 2016 and 2015, and close to the 12-month totals for 2013 and 2014;[4] and the use of new, more lethal weapons such as the 20,000-pound "mother of all bombs."[5] General Nicholson also claimed that violence initiated by insurgent groups had dropped 30 percent and that more than 80 percent of these groups' attempts to conquer territory were rebuffed, while territory lost in the other attacks was quickly retaken.[6]

However, critics of the policy noted that this all simply looked like more of the same, an à la carte menu instead of a new, cohesive strategy. Now, over two years into his presidency and some twenty months after that speech, the war in Afghanistan still has no apparent end. The question is whether the current US administration is implementing a strategy that indeed addresses the problematic aspects of its predecessors' policies and offers an effective path, if not to a resolution of the issue, then at least to the best possible outcome under imperfect circumstances.

The Afghan Quagmire

Afghanistan offers a unique situation that appears to interest all the major global forces: the United States and the West, Russia, China, and Islam (though the latter is hardly a unified force). The Afghan quagmire is a thorn in the side of all those who meddle in it. As a strategic crossroad in the middle of Asia, this "graveyard of empires" has always attracted foreign conquerors, but none have managed to gain stable control once the conquest stage was over. Furthermore, no void remains once abandoned, and respective elements continuously attempt to undermine one another's hegemonic aims.

In 2001, twelve years after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan returned to global prominence following the September 11 attacks. That blow to the United States forced the world's greatest superpower to respond one way or another, and in a speech to Congress on September 20, 2001, President Bush demanded unequivocally that the Taliban extradite al-Qaeda officials to the United States and stop all terror activity. "These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion," he added. Despite the aggressive rhetoric, the United States actually gave a generous present to Taliban and al-Qaeda officials by providing them with over two weeks – an eternity in military terms – to slip into neighboring Pakistan. On October 7, as the whole world watched the onset of the American offensive in Afghanistan, the "big fish" were no longer around, and the asymmetric warfare against the stubborn schools of "little fish" was only just beginning.

The initial success was staggering: Afghanistan was conquered in just two months, the Taliban were toppled, international military and political support was recruited, troops from over 50 countries participated, and Hamid Karzai was appointed to serve as a temporary president. In April 2002, President Bush gave a speech that was referred to as the "Afghan Marshall Plan," in which he committed to strong military and financial support for Afghanistan. However, there was no realistic vision to the American and international presence in the country, and even worse, the United States failed to recognize other powerful and influential public elements in Afghanistan, relying heavily on the Northern Alliance, an organization that despite its impressive-sounding name, did not prove to be effective on the ground. After 2003, military and public focus shifted to Iraq, and President Bush found himself bogged down in nation building in both theaters with no long term vision. This seemed to be a guaranteed recipe for failure.

Inheriting the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and mindful of his campaign promises to end them, President Obama vowed to focus on clearing these countries of insurgents and handing them over to local governments, while training local forces. He delineated the new foundation of Resolute Support and promised to end the war within a clearly limited timeframe. In doing so, however, he repeated his predecessor's pre-invasion mistake of giving the insurgents advance notice. That proved to be self-defeating, since the insurgent groups had prepared in advance to retake areas that would effectively be ceded to them according to this very timeframe. Once a vacuum was left by the mass departure of international forces − from a peak of over 140,000 in 2011, to just over 13,000 in 2016 − this is exactly what happened.

For example, already in 2012, intelligence showed how al-Qaeda was planning a comeback, but no change in policy was implemented.[7] The American goal to secure the country and deliver it to well-trained Afghan security forces simply did not correspond with reality. The same failed strategy of withdrawing according to a strict calendar rather than a nuanced assessment of the situation on the ground was also adopted in Iraq. There, the consequences of the completion of a total withdrawal resulted in the flourishing of the Islamic State / ISIS, the crumbling of the Iraqi military when it came under attack, the arrest warrant issued for Tariq al-Hashemi, Maliki's Sunni vice president, and the deterioration of the country into

complete chaos. Iran inadvertently gained the most from its neighbor's disarray.

Instead of informing the public of the outcome of its policy, the Obama administration tried to cover it up in two ways: first, civilian contractors rather than larger military forces were dispatched to Afghanistan, in order to meet the promised troop quotas. Second, the reports of senior officials sugarcoated the reality on the ground. For example, in 2010, CIA Director Leon Panetta publicly downplayed the number of al-Qaeda operatives in the country and pegged it at 50 to 100.[8] A few months later, however, a raid on a major al-Qaeda compound resulted in the death of 150 fighters affiliated with the organization.[9] Because of that discrepancy, Congress launched a probe in 2015 to "investigate numerous allegations of the manipulation of intelligence by Centcom officials."[10] The administration's narrative turned out to be overly optimistic, if not altogether false and misleading.

"Sir, I Believe We're in a Stalemate"

The Trump administration inherited an Afghanistan in which – according to official reports – at least 20 different terrorist groups were operating, making it the leading jihadist incubator in the world. The Congressional Research Service subsequently reported that "while U.S. military officials maintain that Afghan forces are 'resilient' against the Taliban, by some measures insurgents are in control of, or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001."[11] The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report of October 2018 painted a no less alarming picture, in which government control or influence over Afghanistan's districts fell to the lowest level since 2015 – encompassing 55.5 percent of the territory (compared to 72 percent three years earlier), or just 65 percent of the population.[12] That meant that the Taliban kept challenging allied forces while already controlling over 12 million Afghans and benefiting from greater familiarity of its home terrain and, according to US assessments, cooperation with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and countries like Russia, Iran, and Pakistan.

In 2016 alone, there were over 6,700 casualties among security forces and 8,300 civilian deaths, representing a 22 percent increase in the number of security incidents over the previous year.[13] Those were the highest single-year figures ever recorded by the United Nations Assistance Missions in Afghanistan.[14] Furthermore, one report after another affirmed that the situation on the ground was deteriorating rapidly; the opium trade problem

was worsening, and a severe drought led to the displacement of more than 263,000 Afghans in addition to the more than 2.5 million refugees, most of them living in neighboring Pakistan and Iran.[15]

Furthermore, the costs of the war were mounting, not just in terms of American casualties, but also in financial terms. After all, the investment of $132 billion in reconstructing Afghanistan and the $783 billion in military spending (as well as billions diverted to the rehabilitation and pension of veterans) have not yielded very impressive return-on-investment.[16] Over the seventeen years, no less than 147,000 lives have been lost in Afghanistan, of which over 6,000 were American.[17] That prompted the late Senator John McCain to ask General Nicholson during a Senate hearing: "Are we winning or losing the war in Afghanistan?" Nicholson replied, "Sir, I believe we're in a stalemate."[18] From the perspective of an administration headed by an impatient businessman searching continuously for the ultimate deal, that was almost certainly a highly unsatisfactory answer.

At the heart of the Trump administration's strategy for Afghanistan is the will to "win." However, the major gap in achievement of this strategy is the lack of a defined vision of victory. Asymmetrical warfare on the ground is more complex than simply winning or losing. Modern lessons, such as those the United States learned in Vietnam and in Iraq or Israel's conflicts with Palestinian groups and with Hezbollah, instruct that small but decisive guerilla groups may not win militarily, but they can take on superior armies by exploiting their own advantages as non-state actors. Specialists like James Dobbins referred to this predicament as choosing between "losing and not losing."[19]

President Trump recognized the fact that military power alone was not enough to win the war in Afghanistan, but he maintained that his administration's top goal was to prevent the reestablishment of a terror sanctuary, and in doing so upheld his isolationist "America First" agenda. Many specialists remarked that for the first time, an American president publicly cited Afghanistan on its corruption when declaring, "America will work with the Afghan government as long as we see determination and progress. However, our commitment is not unlimited, and our support is not a blank check." Ironically, President Obama used this very expression – "blank check" – in his Afghanistan strategy speech in 2009: "The days of providing a blank check are over…going forward, we will be clear about what we expect from those who receive our assistance." While President

Trump used blunter language, it remains to be seen whether this will lead to a different outcome.

Setting a Clear Goal

Since the policy speech in 2017, the Trump administration's strategy has begun to bear fruit: NATO yielded to his demand to share the burden and in its 2018 summit dedicated a day of discussions to Afghanistan, when it extended its financial commitment to the Afghan government until 2024; the UK also agreed to send 400 more troops. Furthermore, Trump has authorized the military to escalate its activity in Afghanistan, and agreed to send 4,000 more troops, to "train and advise" Afghan forces. As a result, he was criticized for going down the same path as his predecessors, whose policies he criticized fiercely.

A case study for the administration's new approach is Pakistan, which has seen American military assistance frozen until it ceases providing sanctuary to terror groups. Some Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officials, for example, serve as top members in the Haqqani network. "It's hard to argue the status quo has been working, so we are looking at changing it to advance our security objectives," said Brian Hook from the State Department.[20] This is yet another example of this administration's drive to face reality as it is, look at it from a new perspective, and act accordingly. Such behavior is typical of a learning organization and is an asset in the search for a way out of the current imbroglio in Afghanistan.

However, the United States still does not appear to be able to leverage its many tactical, short term achievements into a strategic victory. It can annihilate warehouses full of opium crops but has not persuaded the population to cease cultivating it in the first place. It can eliminate senior terrorists, but new insurgent groups continue to pop up. What the administration most lacks is a defined strategy: a clear plan to create a secure and stable long term reality that paves the way to the kind of future the United States would like to see in Afghanistan. More troops alone will not suffice; even a troop level of 140,000, which was the case in 2011, did not prevent the evolution of the current situation. As James George Jatras wrote in *Strategic Culture*, President Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan was "neither new, nor a strategy, nor Trump's."[21]

The Trump administration must decide if its top priority is to put the Afghan story to rest, and if so, it must show creativity in designing a plan to cut back the deep American involvement in this theater. One measure to

promote that end would be to integrate tribal leaders more substantively in the country's political evolution. These individuals know the local population and the nuanced politics on the ground better than anyone else, and they can win the hearts and minds of the people facing insurgent groups, if given the authority and tools to do so. That could be pursued simultaneously with the intensified training of woefully ill-prepared Afghan forces, now 40,000 men short of their target strength of 352,000.[22] Mass recruitment under the direction of tribal leaders, for example, could help lift people out of poverty, attract them away from opium production, and rebalance troop numbers in favor of those who will benefit from the outcome – the local population. Injection of financial aid worth hundreds of billions of dollars has not proved sufficient in and of itself. However, it is still unclear how to find the leaders, in a large part of Pashtun origin, who would not just be a variant of Taliban leaders, many of whom are themselves Pashtuns (as are many of the government officials accused of corruption).

The US can also invite other countries, like India or China, to become involved in monitoring the country's security – President Trump specifically mentioned India in his speech as a "critical part of the South Asia strategy for America" that could "help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development." Taking a leading role in Afghanistan might be seen by India as a strategic benefit, with the establishment of a presence in the rear of its arch-rival, Pakistan, and New Delhi has already funneled $3 billion in financial aid to Afghanistan as well as military support.[23] To be sure, Pakistan might be expected to respond to a growing Indian presence in Afghanistan by boosting its own military profile on the border and involving itself more in internal Afghan affairs – a contingency that any American demarche to India would need to take into account. China, for its part, may be willing to take the lead in local industrial and human development that will boost the economy. That could draw people away from the opium trade that already accounts for 7 percent of Afghanistan's GDP and has grown swiftly with rapid spread of the cultivated area, including a 63 percent increase in 2016-2017 alone.[24] China is already integrating Afghanistan into its programs for global influence, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road Initiative. However, there is no assurance that any other country will agree to relieve the United States of the major military and financial burden and allow it to confine itself to what it does best, such as surgical

military strikes against terrorists, as it has done in other theaters, such as Yemen and Somalia.

In any case, it would be ill advised for the administration to repeat President Bush's mistake and offer partnership to "elements of the Taliban" in forming a coalition government. According to General Nicholson, the current strategy is "talking and fighting," meaning that as they wage an intensified military campaign, top US officials are simultaneously holding talks with Taliban members, most recently in Qatar.[25] Such talks failed to yield results in 2001 and there is no reason to believe they would work now – especially while the Taliban still constitutes the biggest security threat in the country. It is quite ironic that after sacrificing so much American blood and treasure to topple the Taliban, the United States is now wooing the same Taliban to be a partner in the future of a country it destroyed. Legitimizing the Taliban will be a step in the wrong direction for Afghanistan. Similarly, it would be counterproductive to withdraw too much or too quickly, thereby allowing the terror sanctuary there to re-emerge and undermine regional and global security.

Finally, one of the top countries on the current US foreign policy agenda is Iran, a neighbor of Afghanistan that already hosts more than a million Afghan refugees and has sent thousands of them to fight in Syria as mercenaries under the banner of Lesghar-e Fatemiyoun. This issue, as well as the diversion of the Helmand River, is a source of ongoing tension between the two countries. Iran has shown growing interest in Afghanistan in recent years, expanded the bilateral trade, and involved India in the supply of goods to Afghanistan through the Iranian port of Chabahar.[26] As a predominantly Shiite country with ties to the significant Shiite minority in Afghanistan (some 10-15 percent of the population) and to Shiite holy sites such as the Blue Mosque of Mazar al-Sharif, "Iran is ready and will spare no effort to help establish sustainable peace and fight terrorism in Afghanistan," stated Iranian President Rouhani. "Iran is determined to expand relations with [its] neighbors, particularly Afghanistan, and run a joint venture in various development projects such as transport infrastructure."[27] The US will naturally be wary of allowing Afghanistan to become a "second Iraq," that is, of facilitating an increase in Iranian presence and influence that could operate contrary to US interests in the region.

The Trump administration's ultimate strategy must not be guided either by the will at all costs to pursue a "victory," which most officials consider unattainable, or by the desire to withdraw at all costs. Instead, it

must seek the fine balance between "America First" and sustainable self-government for Afghanistan, in circumstances in which a perfect solution simply does not exist.

Notes

1 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 1, https://bit.ly/2CzLLd7.
2 The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," August 21, 2017, https://bit.ly/2ARglgI.
3 Michael M. Phillips, "U.S. Attacks Taliban's Source of Funds in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2018, https://on.wsj.com/.
4 Christopher Woody, "The US is on pace to bomb Afghanistan more than ever this year, but the nominee to be US commander there 'can't guarantee ... an end date,'" *Business Insider*, June 20, 2018, https://bit.ly/2YKjtIu.
5 Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 13, 2017, https://nyti.ms/2oacBS0.
6 Terri Moon Cronk, "South Asia Strategy in Afghanistan Shows Results, Nicholson Says," US Department of Defense, May 30, 2018, https://bit.ly/2KcMMQG.
7 AP, "Al Qaeda in Afghanistan is Attempting a Comeback," *Fox News*, October 21, 2012, https://fxn.ws/2CMXasf.
8 Jack Date, "CIA Director Leon Panetta: Serious Problems with Afghanistan War but Progress Being Made," *ABC News*, June 27, 2010, https://abcn.ws/2Ia5WEw.
9 Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "U.S. Military Admits Al Qaeda Strengthening in Afghanistan," *Real Clear Defense*, April 13, 2016, https://bit.ly/2I9bDCw.
10 Dan De Luce, "Did the Pentagon Cook the Books on Its Afghanistan Intel?" *Foreign Policy*, November 19, 2015, https://bit.ly/2WKfU3s/. See also Inspector General – U.S. Department of Defense, "Unclassified Report of Investigation on Allegations Relating to USCENTCOM Intelligence Products," January 31, 2017, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1025805.pdf.
11 "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, February 26, 2019, p. 1, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf.
12 SIGAR – Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2018, p. 45, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf.
13 SIGAR – Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2017, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-01-30qr.pdf.
14 UN General Assembly, "The Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General,"

March 3, 2017, p. 3, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/n1705111.pdf.

15 See note 12, and UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency, "Afghanistan," https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html.

16 Neta C. Crawford, "Costs of War: US Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: $4.79 Trillion and Counting," Watson Institute, September 2016, p. 7, https://bit.ly/2coLUWh, and note 12.

17 Ibid.

18 "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, February 9, 2017, p. 16, https://bit.ly/2FOTgzZ.

19 James Dobbins, "Trump's Options for Afghanistan: Losing or Not Losing," RAND, June 23, 2017, https://bit.ly/2KcDzIg.

20 Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump, Citing Pakistan as a 'Safe Haven' for Terrorists, Freezes Aid," *New York Times*, January 4, 2018, https://nyti.ms/2CHFSiv.

21 James George Jatras, "Trump's New Strategy for Afghanistan is Neither New, nor a Strategy, nor Trump's," *Strategic Culture*, August 24, 2017, https://bit.ly/2UsU8ne.

22 See note 12, p. 67.

23 Annie Gowen, "India Already Gives Afghanistan Billions in Aid. Now Trump Says India Must 'Help Us More,'" *Washington Post*, August 22, 2017, https://wapo.st/2K66uOh.

24 *Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation and Production*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNDOC, 2017, pp.5, 13, https://bit.ly/2iiJlHT.

25 Phil Stewart, "Taliban 'Talking and Fighting,' Says U.S. Commander in Afghanistan," *Reuters*, May 30, 2018, https://reut.rs/2OS6Uqg; Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Afghan Taliban Meet U.S. Officials as Peace Efforts Intensify," *Reuters*, December 17, 2018, https://reut.rs/2uJYyHR.

26 "Iran Increases Electricity Exports to Afghanistan," *TOLO News*, February 26, 2018, https://bit.ly/2owHBx3; "Iran Exports 5.37 mln Tons of Minerals to Afghanistan in 9 Months," *Xinhua*, February 4, 2018, https://bit.ly/2WMXUVR; "Iran and India Sign Deal to Deepen Relations," *al-Jazeera*, February 19, 2018, https://bit.ly/2KNGDK5.

27 "Rouhani Expresses Support for Peace, Security in Afghanistan." *TOLO News*, June 10, 2018, https://bit.ly/2y2Q17m.