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‘There is no military solution’

The US is right to renew its commitment to Afghanistan. But focussing on killing terrorists above nation-building is a mistake.

On 21 August, 2017, US president Donald Trump announced a new strategy for resolving the 16-year conflict in Afghanistan. In a televised speech to troops at Fort Myer in Virginia, Trump said he would deepen the US’ military engagement in the country, conceding that ‘a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and Al Qaeda’. He also said the US would put significant pressure on Pakistan to crack down on terrorist sanctuaries along its border with Afghanistan. <link about writers-and-contributors writer sabine-doerfler-1>Sabine Dörfler spoke to Mirco Günther, who heads up the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Kabul, about the implications of Trump’s new strategy.

On the campaign trail US president Donald Trump said he would withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. Now he's done a U-turn. What do you make of his new Afghanistan strategy?

The first thing to say is that we should welcome the fact the US has affirmed its commitment to Afghanistan. Given Donald Trump's election campaign promise to withdraw US troops from the region, we might have seen a quite different scenario play out. In his speech on Monday 21st August, [laying out the US’ Afghanistan strategy], Trump tackled an issue head on that was difficult for his predecessors, Bush and Obama. After all, Afghanistan's the longest combat deployment in US history. There are no quick answers and no easy solutions left.

Trump’s own solution to the challenge of Afghanistan, however, is very one-sided – and also wrong. Concentrating on military means alone – or, to use his words: ‘We are not nation-building again; we are killing terrorists’ – will not bring a successful outcome. Of course there needs to be military action against terrorist groups in Afghanistan, but the fight against terrorism is first and foremost about building up strong state institutions, a functioning government, as well as reliable security forces and independent courts.

'We are not nation-building again; we are killing terrorists' – will not lead to success.

Under Trump's plan, there will be less supervision from Washington, less transparency, more air strikes – and probably more civilian casualties as a result. That will irritate the US' European allies who are concentrating on training and advising Afghan forces within the framework of the current NATO Resolute Support mission – and who've been bemoaning a lack of coordination between the USA and Europe.

It wasn't helpful of Trump to use his primetime presidential address to call out Pakistan and, at the same time, encourage India to step up its engagement with Afghanistan. No matter what one thinks of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, relations between Islamabad and New Delhi are already severely strained. Openly playing the two states against each other can only lead to more problems when it comes to regional security dynamics.

How do people in Afghanistan view the new US strategy?

Unsurprisingly, there's a broad spectrum of opinions: President Aschraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah have welcomed Trumps announcements, as has the former head of secret services and minister for security reforms, Amrullah Saleh. Others, including former president Hamid Karzai have severely criticised the plans. Most Afghans I've spoken to say they're relieved Trump won't be withdrawing troops after all. At the same time though, human rights activists and NGOs are worried the new strategy could lead to an escalation of violence.

International troops have been stationed in Afghanistan for 16 years now, yet it remains an incredibly dangerous place to live, there's high unemployment and the national unity government is deeply divided. Has it all been for nothing?

International donors have pledged billions to Afghanistan, and there can be no doubt that this aid has had an effect. Education, literacy and healthcare have all improved, for instance.

But it's also true that the security situation has deteriorated substantially in the country's northern provinces, and there've been numerous attacks in Kabul. That means even areas we considered more or less 'safe' are no longer secure. A lot of the progress we've made has turned out to be short-lived.

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Afghanistan – they can make us become too black-and-white in our thinking.

We really need an honest, public debate on the situation in Afghanistan and on all the work we're doing there – be that in the military, police training or other civilian initiatives. As yet, Norway is the only NATO member to have held this kind of debate.

Afghanistan has been in a continuous state of war for almost 40 years now. Will there ever be peace?

No side is going to be able to solve this conflict militarily. The only resolution will be a political one, and getting there will be painful. Last year, the Afghan government signed a peace agreement with the former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – better known as 'the Butcher of Kabul'. While the deal was, in military terms, not particularly decisive, it carried a strong symbolic message: Hekmatyar was allowed to return even though he'd bombarded Kabul with missiles in the 1990s. He had to be specially removed from the UN sanctions list in February 2017, which many in Afghanistan found difficult to deal with.

Donald Trump has also hinted that talks with the Taliban will at some point become inevitable. Negotiating directly with war criminals will be a bitter compromise. Also, the conflict will only be solved once the Afghans run talks themselves and take responsibility for the outcome. Countries like China, Russia, and Iran will need to show their support here.

Stability does not always mean peace. And a peace settlement does not always lead to justice and reconciliation. After almost 40 years of fighting, how could it be any different?



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