THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION FACED WITH AFGHAN PREDICAMENT

Antonio Giustozzi and Ali Mohammad Ali

CRPA
Center for Research and Policy Analysis

af-crpa.org

About CRPA:
As the Afghan government increasingly takes control over its own policy making, government department and agencies struggle in the absence of consolidated sources of policy advice inside Afghanistan. Afghan think tanks and academia should be increasingly called upon to advise or at least to contribute to a public debate, which until now has been dominated by the media and by the parliament, whose level of competence is not always adequate. Although public opinion is in its infant stage in Afghanistan, NGOs, civil society organizations and some academics and politicians have been contributing to lively if not always technically well-informed debates. This seems to demonstrate demand for competently run think tanks, which can act as an interface between international debates and Afghan ones. The CRPA positions itself as one of the first few Afghan think tanks on the scene.

The CRPA wants to promote innovative visions of how to get Afghanistan out of its current impasse, in all the main fields of state activity. It also wants to develop a new understanding of political violence in Afghanistan. With the conflict in Afghanistan now in its 38th year and counting, it is time to make a new effort to look at the root causes of political violence.

The CRPA will contribute to the debate in multiple ways, It will provide advise to Afghan policy makers. It will inform educated opinion about issues and challenges that the Afghan state is going to face.

Info@afcrpa.org
Af-crpa.org

About Authors:
Dr Antonio Giustozzi is a visiting professor at King's College London (KCL). He has authored a variety of articles, papers and books, including 2013's "Policing Afghanistan" and 2011's "The Art of Coercion." Dr Giustozzi is currently researching issues of security in Afghanistan, including the insurgency, the military and the police.

Ali Mohammad Ali is a researcher and analyst. He has expertise on radical Islamist groups, Afghanistan's political economy, state, insurgency, and the Taliban. Ali has served as an advisor to a variety of national and international agencies, and has written numerous research publications.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Few people in late 2001 would have predicted that two US administrations later Afghanistan would have still figured as a major unresolved foreign policy issue for the US government. Although Afghanistan has dropped dramatically as a priority for America, both Afghanistan's country outlook and the Afghan US foreign policy priority appear in a much worse shape today. However unpleasant this sight might be (and it is indeed), can the Trump Administration simply walk away from it? Despite the rhetoric used by candidate Trump during his electoral campaign, and his verbal opposition to 'nation-building', it might well be that the consequences of walking away might be even more negative and unpleasant than staying put, not only for Afghanistan but also for the Trump Administration and for America's foreign policy. But on the other hand, can the US stay in Afghanistan forever, seemingly without making much progress in consolidating a friendly government there?

In fact during the first two months or so of the Trump Administration, the prospect of a complete, sudden American cut-off appears to be receding. None of the main figures in the security apparatus of the Administration are in favour of abandoning Afghanistan.

But arguably the Trump Administration cannot afford to do business as usual in Afghanistan either. This is not just because it would not look good, after all the rhetoric against the shortcomings of the Obama Administration, to follow exactly the same path. It is also clear that the current eroding stalemate, with Afghan security forces losing more and more control, is not sustainable indefinitely. It does not seem too likely to be leading to a negotiated settlement either. It could lead to several more years of indecisive conflict, or it could lead to defeat.

Something has to be done; but what? This paper reviews the debates in the US and highlights the options and the opportunities and risk implicit in each of them. We start however with a short survey of where the 'Afghanistan project' of America is at now.

What the Trump administration inherits: The state of America's geopolitical aims in Afghanistan

The US intervention in Afghanistan, begun in 2001 with Operation Enduring Freedom, cannot be defined a success by any standard. In terms of American geopolitical interest, the intervention in Afghanistan had one stated aim -- punish Al-Qaida and its allies for the 9/11 attacks, remove them from their Afghan safe haven -- and several subsidiary aims, which were never stated clearly and unequivocally. There was for example much talk in the US military of turning Afghanistan into a new South Korea, with a permanent US military presence that would give the US greater influence in Central Asia and an additional point of pressure on Iran. The comparison with South Korea was still being made at the end of the Obama Administration and at the beginning of the Trump one.[1] Whether or not these aims

[1] At least two US military officers mentioned South Korea as a model for future US presence in Afghanistan to one of the authors in 2006 and 2008. See also Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, 'The U.S. was supposed to leave Afghanistan by 2017. Now it might take decades', Washington Post,

were seriously considered under the Bush Administration, they were in any case largely dropped by the Obama Administration. Gradually 'nation-building' in Afghanistan crept in as a key political objective: the best guarantee of keeping 'global jihadists' out of Afghanistan was seen as endowing it with a functioning, legitimate government, which could control territory and population. This is actually not nation-building (nobody can build somebody's else nation), but state-building.

Vocabulary aside, this was sound reasoning, though it did not prove that easy to put in practice. The debate carries on with regard to whether Afghanistan is peculiarly unsuited for state-building, or whether the Americans do not know how to do state or nation-building. The Administration became aware during President Obama's first mandate of the financial, political and diplomatic costs of maintaining a heavy footprint in Afghanistan, and quickly grew disappointed at the lack of appreciable results. It gradually came to the decision that state-building in Afghanistan was not worth the cost. It decided then to downscale and try to achieve a political settlement of the conflict, hoping to bring stability that way.

The Obama Administration eventually determined that a political settlement would be the least expensive and most rewarding (in terms of America's status as a superpower) option to end the conflict; and probably also the only real option to end the conflict given the resilience demonstrated by the Taliban on the battlefield. The armed opposition of the Taliban proved in 2008-12 that it could not be defeated militarily. Today hardly anybody can be heard in the US arguing that the war against the Taliban can be won. What neither the Obama Administration nor the majority of its critics seem to have evaluated correctly at any stage is the importance of the regional dimension of the conflict. This was not due to lack of intelligence about covert support for the armed opposition from Pakistan, but rather to a failure in determining the causes and reasons for that support, and in figuring out how to undermine it.

As explained in greater detail below, undoubtedly the expanding US footprint in Afghanistan in 2008-12 mobilized funds and energy in the region and beyond, against US aims in Afghanistan, mostly from governments or countries otherwise friendly and even allied to the US. By disengaging, those funds and energies were either demobilized, or deployed elsewhere. This was, from an American perspective, the biggest positive fallout of the American disengagement. But disengagement alone does not resolve all problems in Afghanistan, and might be creating new ones, the more so as the hoped-for reconciliation process with the armed opposition has not taken off.

January 26, 2016; Michael Kitchen, 'US Considering Permanent Bases in Afghanistan, General Says', October 29, 2009.
Sen. McCain has been the most coherent proponent of the need for permanent US bases in Afghanistan, alongside the South Korean model (Ron Synovitz, 'Afghanistan: How Would Permanent U.S. Bases Impact Regional Interests?' RFE 23 February 2005; Rowan Scarborough, 'McCain says U.S. troops should permanently deploy to Afghanistan, much like in S. Korea', The Washington Times, January 28, 2016; 'Sen. McCain Expects A Permanent U.S. Presence In Afghanistan' NPR, October 7, 2015, http://www.npr.org/2015/10/07/446499466/sen-mccain-expects-a-permanent-u-s-presence-in-afghanistan; Travis J. Tritten, 'Armed Services Committee chairman calls for indefinite military presence in Afghanistan', Stars And Stripes, September 8, 2015).

The lesson that can be derived from the failures of the Bush and Obama administrations is that the American policy debate on Afghanistan was too focused on what the US should or could do in Afghanistan, with limited appreciation of the impact of these policies on the Afghan environment and importantly even less appreciation of the impact that American choices on Afghanistan had at the regional level. Each American action, whether in the direction of escalating involvement, or of de-escalating, had often massive, usually undetected or underestimated repercussions within the region. Half the story of the US intervention in Afghanistan (the largely unwritten half) is the story of how the regional powers have intervened to limit the damage to their interests that arose from American actions.

Another big part of the story is how some of those same regional powers and Afghan actors otherwise supportive of US intervention in their country have worked to make reconciliation not happen, subverting a key US policy objective. Washington struggled to comprehend how its desire to achieve reconciliation could face such widespread opposition.

Perhaps as important, there has been little appreciation in Washington of the extent to which its actions in Afghanistan (alongside actions in Iraq) were affecting the image and the standing of the US as a superpower.

American springboard in Central Asia

It is not clear whether expanding US influence in Central Asia was ever part of Washington's 'Afghanistan project'. There were surely officials in the State Department who saw the opportunity to do just that, but it not clear that this was ever more than a side effect of having landed in Afghanistan for completely different reasons. The Central Asian governments were mostly glad to have the Americans in the neighbourhood, as long as they did not play up their pro-democratic rhetoric. Overt American support for Orange revolutions clearly upset the Central Asian regimes, but otherwise they could all see the advantage of the Americans being positioned to exercise influence in Central Asia: they could be used to counter-balance overwhelming Russian and Chinese influence. It is also clear that the authorities of both Russia and China saw with suspicion apparent US efforts to dig into Afghanistan in 2008-12. Whatever the case, it is now clear that Washington lost interest in Central Asia. The fact that president Obama stated clearly his intent to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan reassured the Chinese authorities that at least its Central Asian interests were not being challenged; it also convinced the Central Asian governments that Washington was not a serious long-term counter-balance to Russian and Chinese influence.

Russian and Chinese concerns about US aims in Central Asia resurfaced later, in 2015, as the strengthening presence of Central Asian jihadists on the northern Afghan border was attributed by them to 'dereliction of duty' by the Americans and NATO, who particularly in the Russian perception were not doing all they could to prevent their move north. That gradually gave way to the suspicion that Arab Gulf support for Central Asian jihadists, which dramatically increased after Russia's intervention in Syria in late 2015, could be to some degree coordinated with the Americans, or at least benevolently tolerated by them. These perceptions contribute to drive growing

Russian activism in and around Afghanistan, including by engaging directly with the Taliban. They also complicate further any attempt to maintain at least a semblance of stability in Afghanistan, and to achieve a negotiated settlement of the ongoing conflict.

The state of reconciliation

After long questioning whether reconciliation between the Kabul government and the armed opposition (primarily the Taliban) was desirable or even possible, Washington eventually made reconciliation one of the pillars of its Afghan strategy. The Obama Administration assumed its disengagement would foster reconciliation and allow a divergence between the Taliban and global jihadist groups such as Al-Qaida and related organizations. Reconciliation in turn was supposed to make disengagement viable militarily, by removing the incentive for many Taliban to fight and offer incentives for armed opposition and the Afghan government to sit together and talk. At that point the Afghan security forces were expected to be able to handle the conflict with minimal support from the US and its NATO allies, except for substantial financial aid.

In practice, things did not work that way. US disengagement did have a major impact on the political military landscape, but not as expected. Divergence between Taliban and global jihadist groups occurred, but without producing a clearcut split across the board; Al-Qaida and other global jihadists retained extensive contacts within the increasingly fragmented Taliban. Many Taliban factions and fronts did lose the incentive to fight, but not before having brought under their control their own chunk of the Afghan countryside, significantly eroding government influence. Not all Taliban factions in any case gave up fighting for Kabul; in fact the best organized and equipped Taliban factions kept fighting, leading to an actual increase in the level of violence and seriously threatening government hold even in cities and over highways. The internal divisions of the Taliban were exacerbated, making it impossible for them to fight in a coordinated way, but at the same time also making it impossible for them to agree on reconciliation issues. There were indeed Taliban political leaders interested in reconciliation, but they could not gather sufficient support within the movement to dare to venture into serious talks with Kabul.

The killing by a US drone strike of Taliban (self-proclaimed) supreme leader Akhtar Mansur in any case froze reconciliation efforts, and might even have buried them together with Mansur. Despite the extremely controversial character of his leadership, no other Taliban political leader was better positioned to drag a large portion of the Taliban to get behind reconciliation talks. Mansur had his own financial resources, accumulated in years of siphoning off funds from the Taliban Finance Commission, and had centralized more power in his hands than any other leader of the Quetta Shura of the Taliban had ever managed to. He was also the first one to reconcile with the Haqqani network after its ‘declaration of autonomy’ in 2007 and the first one ever to integrate them fully into the leadership and command structure of the Quetta Shura. His successor Haibatullah does not even remotely approach wielding the kind of power that Mansur had, and would only be able to take a small minority of Taliban with him if he were to accede reconciliation today.

The state of state-building in Afghanistan

The impact of US intervention in Afghanistan has been mixed. Without American support, the post-2001 Afghan regime would simply not be there. In particular, its security establishment is largely the result of US efforts and investment. However, the data released in recent years to present the intervention as a success is gradually been demolished by critics, particularly SIGAR, which has investigative powers not matched by any other independent observer of the mission. Even the education and health sectors, once hailed *the* success stories of 'aiding Afghanistan', are now under increasing scrutiny. The Afghan National Army was another 'success story', but once it went from parading to actually fighting a war, many flaws were exposed. The blocking of 30,000 salaries in January, believed to be pocketed by corrupt officers, illustrates the point. The mere fact that the Obama Administration would have liked to disengage and simply could not do so, tells us a lot about the extent of the mission's success.

All this points towards the accusation of inefficiency of the American intervention in Afghanistan: loads of money spent on multiple sectors, but with much leakage, waste and misallocations. While these problems are clearly real, the real questions is to what extent this inefficiency is structural, and to which extent it is avoidable. In other words, to what extent is it possible to do better in a country with a weak or absent rule of law, weak institutions, and with little control over its territory and population? Probably a bit, but not much.

Those taking a narrow 'American taxpayer satisfaction' approach have been tempted to argue that the only way not to waste money in Afghanistan is to stay away from it, or to spend little in the few spots where activities can be monitored and supervised. Some small donor countries with small aid programmes have indeed been able to be more efficient. The important point however is that American money, however inefficiently spent and however little development might have brought about, contributed crucially to keep together the post-2001 political settlement in Kabul. Together with 'special favours' de-facto granted by the Afghan political leadership to political-economic actors operating outside the law (primarily in smuggling and mining), American (and to a lesser extent, European) money smoothed the acrimonies of long years of civil conflict, allowing uneasy and artificial alliances to hold together. In other words, it propped up the post-2001 regime in Afghanistan. American money might not have stabilized the country as a whole (quite the contrary, given the rise of the Taliban insurgency), but it did contribute crucially to stabilizing the ruling elite.

It is clear on the other hand that the inflow of US money, as any other cash coming into Afghanistan, fed the Taliban insurgency. To some extent this was and will be inevitable: the Taliban tax all economic activities, so anything that stimulates economic activity in the end contributes to the Taliban's (and other insurgents') coffers as well. The Afghan authorities will not be better able to prevent this in the future than they have to date. The big picture problem is therefore of a status quo in which Americans and their allies paying to keep the Afghan regime afloat and more or less united, but as a result also fuelling a violent and never ending conflict. This conundrum is going to be difficult to resolve.

Last but not least it is clear that such massive investment fostered Afghan dependency on US support, making an American disengagement a source of painful withdrawal symptoms in Afghanistan. This is nowhere more evident than in the security sector. Without American logistical support, the Afghan army has a limited capacity to deploy on operations away from its main bases. The Afghan army in also unable to fight major engagement without US air cover, and the Afghan Air Force is never going to have the capability to replace the Americans in this role.

The regional environment

When the Americans started intensifying their intervention in Afghanistan in 2008, the regional powers reacted mostly negatively. The Pakistani authorities were never happy about the post-2001 political settlement in Kabul. They had expected to see their influence in Afghanistan recover gradually after the 2001 debacle, as a reward for having collaborated with the Americans during Operation Enduring Freedom. Instead, they were seeing (or believed they were seeing) Indian influence consolidating, and Afghan administrations dominated by elements hostile to Pakistan. By 2008 they started worrying that the Americans might succeed in freezing the new status quo indefinitely, thanks to the massive resources they were pouring in. According to the account provided by Taliban beneficiaries of Pakistani support, the Pakistani authorities started lobbying other concerned regional actors to share the burden of preventing the consolidation of an unwelcome status quo in Afghanistan. These actors might have harboured different specific concerns and aims, but the Pakistani intelligence services acted as a hub bringing it all together, sometimes even without informing the different stakeholders of the other participants in the 'project'. The Chinese Government, for example, was concerned about a permanent US military presence in Afghanistan and how that would translate into US influence in Central Asia. The Iranian authorities had similar concerns about a US military presence and intelligence activities near its border. The Saudi Government was worried instead about undue Iranian influence in Kabul and around Afghanistan, which the Americans, in the Saudi view, were not trying to prevent. The Saudis also felt the need to stay close to local and global jihadist groups, in order to neutralize the threat that they could one day pose to the Saudi Kingdom itself. By supporting them, the Saudis saw an opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of the monarchy.

The Pakistani skill was to work out a framework where all these concerns were catered for, with the added benefit of the stakeholders not being directly involved in supporting the Taliban: Chinese and Saudi aid was channelled through the Pakistani ISI, although the Iranians always took care to establish direct relations with specific Taliban leaders and groups, which they considered more amenable to their influence. For a period (2009-2013) the system worked rather smoothly. The perception of American influence and power in Afghanistan being on the increase created a convergence in trying to counter-balance that. As US disengagement became obvious, however, the convergence of this group of regional actors came to an end. What is important to stress in the context of this paper is that neither the Bush and Obama Administrations figured out the regional repercussions of their escalations, nor did the Obama Administration figure out the consequences of its disengagement, even when the consequences were actually positive. Metaphorically, the Americans were trying

to play chess without trying to foresee the moves of those sitting at the other end of the chessboard.

The impact on America's superpower status

The third problem with the intensification of American operations in Afghanistan in 2008-12 was that the United States 'planted a flag' in Kabul; that is, it asserted strongly that Afghanistan was now part of Washington's sphere of influence. They seem to have assumed that this mere action would drive regional actors into accepting the new, US-imposed status quo. As discussed above, this proved not to be the case. However, once the flag was planted, it could not be simply hidden away. Washington took up a position that could not be retracted without a major loss of face. Simply announcing victory and leaving will not suffice to safeguard America's credibility as the world's superpower. Re-examining the involvement in Afghanistan ex-post, it seems clear that overtly asserting influence in such a chaotic environment was a risky enterprise, but now it is done. It is already clear that the combination of two under-performing US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has discredited American leadership among old Middle Eastern protégés of the United States. Cutting losses and running will only deepen this perception of an unreliable superpower that is not willing or not able to protect its clients and its allies.

Although President Trump has promised 'no more nation-building' (which is what state-building tends to be called in the US), in fact his administration finds itself trapped in a nation-building project that has not been accomplished, has turned out to be very wasteful, but at the same time cannot be abandoned without serious (further) prejudice for America's image and interests.

Mission accomplished?

What about the remaining (stated) policy aim of US intervention in Afghanistan, the removal/destruction of Al-Qaida and linked organizations in Afghanistan? The official line of the Obama Administration was that by 2014 this aim was achieved and that Al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan had reached negligible levels. From the Pentagon and CIA, this narrative was subtly challenged with operations against Al-Qaida assets, resulting in claimed 'hundreds' of casualties inflicted in 2015 alone. Taliban and Al-Qaida sources indicate that the latter's presence in Afghanistan reached a nadir in the first few years after the fall of the Taliban Emirate, in part because most assets had been moved to Pakistan and in part because of losses and of members having moved to the Middle East. From 2004 onwards, however, Al-Qaida started re-building a presence first in Eastern Afghanistan and then elsewhere, gradually increasing its presence to a few hundred operatives by 2014/5, and a few thousand second tier militiamen. Al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan was boosted in 2015/6 by the relocation of most of its Pakistan-based assets into Afghanistan.

The 'mission accomplished' narrative is more seriously undermined by the expanding presence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. Claims by Resolute Support that the Islamic State has been contained to a narrow area of Nangarhar are contradicted by evidence provided by the Taliban, Afghan officials and local elders, which indicate

how this new insurgency is spreading rather fast and establishing serious footholds at least in Kunar, Zabul, Sar e Pol and Badakhshan.

Hints of a debate in its infancy

Nobody can, at the time of writing (mid-April 2017), tell what the Trump Administration has in store for Afghanistan yet, as the Administration's review of Afghan policy has not even started and Secretary of Defense Mattis has not issued his formal recommendation yet. The Trump Administration will however have to develop an Afghan policy by summer 2017 in time for the NATO defense ministers summit. Still, a debate has by now been taking shape for some time around a number of topics: US attitudes towards Iran and Pakistan, the need to protect the investment made so far in Afghanistan, the desire to reinforce counter-corruption efforts, the loss of faith in development aid (and the cuts proposed by the Trump administration to the USAID budget) and the need to pre-empt the re-establishment of a jihadist safe haven in Afghanistan.

An enemy's enemy?

The Afghan ambassador to Washington recently contrasted President Trump's approach towards Afghanistan with Obama's, on the basis of a face to face meeting and two telephone calls between Trump and Ghani.[2] If we take it at face value, Trump would seem inclined to give the Afghan Government a last chance. He reportedly asked Afghan President Ghani what Afghanistan needs to 'become financially independent' and what can the US do to 'develop business and mining in your country', as well as 'how can you win in this fight [against terrorism]?' The Afghans seem to have seen in Trump's questions the possibility of a clean start in terms of obtaining the kind of support they need to achieve a breakthrough: more and better weapons, stronger support against 'rogue' neighbours, without ceilings and deadlines. The old Afghan frustration with the Obama Administration and its deadlines resurfaced, and so has the hope that Trump will offer an open-ended commitment not just to the Afghan Government, but to Ghani himself:

> *To bring real reform, we must be able to defeat enemies outside our country and inside. We must overthrow the Afghan warlords who are profiteering off the war. Every time we tried to remove one of them from power, [Secretary John] Kerry would say "no" because it would potentially make it unstable and require more troops be brought in. […] But Trump is very different from Obama in this way.*[3]

Other reports have suggested that Trump indicated to Ghani that he would consider sending more troops to Afghanistan. A source familiar with the DoS and DoD bureaucracy believed in March 2017 that a small increase of 1,000-3,000 US troops

[2] http://ijr.com/2017/03/822619-i-had-dinner-with-the-afghanistan-ambassador-what-he-said-about-the-differences-between-trump-obama-is-stunning/

[3] http://ijr.com/2017/03/822619-i-had-dinner-with-the-afghanistan-ambassador-what-he-said-about-the-differences-between-trump-obama-is-stunning/

was 70% likely.[4] The Afghan National Unity Government is clearly emboldened by the perception they have of President Trump as hostile to Pakistani interests. Trump indeed avoided meeting a Pakistani delegation in December, led by a retired Pakistani general. The delegation managed eventually to meet NSA Flynn (who later had to resign), but both NSA and Secretary of Defense are now believed to see Pakistan as a major threat to US national security. Trump of course is now known to have large business interests in India.[5] Trump also plans to tighten the screws on Iran, another neighbour with whom Kabul does not get along too well. Trump aside, US Congress, and to a somewhat lesser extent the government bureaucracy, have been turning increasingly hostile to Pakistan for some time and have now completely lost faith in Pakistani institutions and in their willingness to genuinely cooperate with the US.[6] Will the desire of the Trump Administration to clamp down on its real or perceived enemies, who also happen to be Kabul's enemies, bring any benefit to Afghanistan?

The Afghan authorities also want US help in massively expanding their own Special Forces, ideally doubling them in size, a target that would require an increase in the number of US Special Forces trainers in-country. The Afghans also want the Americans to increase the tempo of the training of their air force, as well an expansion of its capabilities. They have renewed their demand for more combat capabilities, in the shape of fighter jets, and they hint that the Americans this time will consider the request seriously.[7] This is not a new demand, but it has been given new political support from the top levels of the Ghani Administration.[8]

There was already a recognition in the Pentagon towards the end of the Obama Administration that something had to be done to resolve the impasse of the Afghan Air Force, as sanctions against Russia pre-empt the American aid programme to the Afghan Air Force to replace losses and effectively maintain the existing fleet of Russia-manufactured Mi-17 transport helicopters. If the Pentagon's proposal to replace the Mi-17 with a fleet of refurbished American-made UH-60 will go ahead quickly, there will still be a gap between the 'expiry date' of the current (poorly maintained and over-used) Mi-17 fleet and the readiness of the new UH-60 fleet, of probably a couple of years.[9] There is still no guarantee that the Americans will eventually agree to give fighter-bombers to Afghanistan, and even if they did it would take two or three years for them to reach an operational stage. However, if Washington agreed to hand over to the Afghans these capabilities, it would be an important symbolic step, and a breach of the unwritten agreement with the Pakistani

[4] Ehsanullah Amiri, Jessica Donati and Gordon Lubold, 'Trump Told Afghan Leader He Would Consider Troop Increase', *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 24, 2017; personal communication with US specialist in Pakistan affairs, March 2017.

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/trumps-extensive-deals-in-india-raise-conflict-of-interest-concerns/2016/11/21/3313319e-3f04-44fa-a28a-c297d891465c_story.html

[6] Personal communication with US specialist in Pakistan affairs, March 2017. See also the article co-authored by Lisa Curtis, new head of South and Central Asian Affairs at the NSC: Husain Haqqani & Lisa Curtis, 'A New U.S. Approach to Pakistan: Enforcing Aid Conditions without Cutting Ties', Hudson Institute, 2017, and the article co-authored by Ted Poe, Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade: Ted Poe and James Clad, 'Time for a Radical Reset with Pakistan', The National Interest, March 8, 2017.

[7] Karim Amini, 'Govt To Bring Major Changes In New Security Plan', *Tolo News*, 1 April 2017.

[8] Interview with mid-rank official, Washington, February, 2017.

[9] Franz J. Marty, 'Will Afghanistan's Air Force Soon be Without Vertical Airlift?', *The National Interest*, March 1, 2017.

authorities (dating back to the immediate aftermath of Enduring Freedom in 2001-2), that the Americans would not endow the post-Taliban Afghan armed forces with significant conventional capabilities. In practical terms, nothing would happen for years, but it could be one of the 'sticks' Washington could use to force the Pakistani authorities to toe the line: unless they quickly make significant concessions to Kabul, Washington could turn the Afghan army into a significant potential threat to Pakistan. The risk implicit in this approach is that the Pakistanis, instead of toeing the line, might increase their support for the armed opposition, quantitatively and qualitatively, strengthening the insurgents' chances of seizing and holding cities in the south.

Protect the investment

Overall, within the Trump Administration there is much support for increased engagement in Afghanistan: the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Advisor, the Joint Chief of Staff and the Republicans in general all opposed President Obama's imposition of a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops. The argument is that having spent a trillion dollars and over 2,000 lives, the US can at least avoid defeat with a comparatively small additional investment of $10 billion or so a year.[10] General Nicholson (Resolute Support) argued that 'Failure here would embolden terrorists globally'.[11]

Although the absence of an expiry date for the US commitment will worry a Trump Administration committed to end 'nation-building', it will also motivate some regional actors and some Taliban leaders at least to sit at the table and accept the current 'correlation of forces' in Afghanistan as a basis for a settlement. Linking US withdrawal to the successful completion of peace negotiations might represent for some of these actors the easiest and cheapest way of getting the Americans out of their neighbourhood.

The contrarian view is nonetheless being aired on conservative media, arguing that Afghanistan cannot be reformed, that staying in means remaining committed to a failed nation-building experiment and that the 'sunken investment' argument does not hold: what has been wasted in Afghanistan will not come back anyway. The Afghan authorities will only get their act together when faced with a clear, non-negotiable, short-term deadline.[12] The terms of this debate echo the debate among Soviet leaders in the mid-1980s; Soviet President Gorbachev in the end decided that he could not wait forever and that he would give his Afghan counterpart, Najibullah, a non-negotiable deadline. The Soviets in the end did back down from their original idea of withdrawing completely by the end of 1987, but they did impose a two-year deadline, which was respected, withdrawing the last troops in February 1989. As the Soviets expected, their Afghan allies did get their act together finally and organized themselves for survival, but the outcome was always uncertain and Najibullah's regime remained frail. What would have happened to it, if the Soviet Union had not collapsed in 1992 is a matter of speculation, but the gamble taken by Gorbachev in deciding to withdraw was justified by the major diplomatic gains expected elsewhere:

[10] Interview with former DoD official, February 2017.
[11] Christina Lamb, 'General calls for more troops to combat Isis', *The Sunday Times*, March 26 2017.
[12] See for example Amitai Etzioni, 'America Can't Afford to Buy a Broken Afghanistan', *The National Interest*, March 26, 2017.

the withdrawal from Afghanistan was one of the conditions imposed by the Chinese Government for reaching agreements on border demarcation and demilitarisation of the Soviet-Chinese border. The agreement with China was a major diplomatic turning point, allowing the Soviet Union to demobilize several hundred thousand troops, even if the agreement arrived too late to help save the Soviet system. In the case of Afghanistan today, the question to be asked should be what Washington stands to gain from withdrawing from Afghanistan without any guarantee of a settlement. Is saving some $billion a year worth (yet another) humiliation of the American superpower?

There is also a view within the DoD that NATO allies should share more of the logistical, intelligence and surveillance costs, and special operations commitments.[13] Any additional European contribution is in all likelihood going to be symbolic, in part because of the lack of capabilities (in logistics for example) and in part because of the financial difficulties that most European countries are presently facing. In continental Europe in particular there is a growing feeling that Trump is trying to undermine the European Union and bully its members; this might not be a basis for constructive US-European engagement on Afghanistan. In reality it was informally understood from the beginning that the Europeans were in Afghanistan to help the Americans legitimize their intervention there, having little interest of their own in Afghanistan. The Afghan war has always been an American war, not a European one.

Tougher on corruption?

Secretary of Defense Mattis and National Security Advisor McMaster are likely to confront the Afghan authorities with corruption issues, because they are both well aware of how corrosive its impact has been on the ability of the Afghan security forces to function effectively. The level of funding might well stay put at about $10 billion annually overall, but pressure to see results is likely to grow. Conditions may be introduced for future funding; there is talk of benchmarks such as reducing casualties and improving recruitment processes.[14] The pressure to see results is in fact growing already as the US military bureaucracy tries to align with the prevailing wind. The recent (January 2017) decision to withhold the salaries of 30,000 'ghost' Afghan army troops had nothing to do with the Trump Administration, at that time barely starting to shape up, and appears instead to have been taken in the Pentagon as a pre-emptive measure to earn points with the Administration or at least avoid criticism for inaction on corruption issues.[15] However the positive development is that contrary to what happened to efforts to fight corruption in 2002-2014, the Afghan authorities have been more cooperative and have even in several cases pushed for the Americans taking measures. As in the previous decision to cut fuel supplies to the Afghan army (to reduce fuel theft), there was a decisive input from the National Unity Government in requesting the salaries of ghost soldiers being cut. President Ghani has also tasked a special unit of the security services to investigate and monitor corruption in the Ministry of Defense.

[13] Interview with former DoD official, Febraury 2017.
[14] Personal communication with NATO officials, February 2017.
[15] Interview with former high-rank official, Washington, March 2017.

There is a general wariness in Washington of Afghan failures to deliver on their promises and a perception of Afghans not really trying to do their bit. With the exception of the Afghan special forces, it is acknowledged off the record in NATO that the Afghan army is not making significant progress and that the police are even worse.[16] The new measures will take time to achieve any effect; it is going to be important to develop the tools to monitor their implementation and their impact, to avoid distrust between Washington and Kabul to arise again.

More mil, less civ?

In matters related to Afghanistan there have always been two main schools of thought in the US. One argued in favour of a light footprint, whether because of the limited strategic value of the country to the US, or because of the risk of getting stuck in a quagmire there. The other argued in favour of massive investment there, in order to crack the Afghan nut once and for all. These two schools of thought are bipartisan in terms of American politics: the Bush Administration started light and began going heavier towards its end, the Obama Administration initially went big, and then downscaled. The Trump Administration seems tempted to go at least a little bigger again, as discussed above, at least as far as military engagement goes. The request to send 5,000 more troops to Afghanistan has already been logged by General Nicholson, the head of Resolute Support. Should the Trump Administration agree to some of the Afghan demands for more equipment as well, the direct military aid to Afghanistan is also likely to rise in the future.

Maintaining the same level of civilian aid will be more of a challenge; expanding it seems to be well beyond the realm of possibilities. President Trump's cut to the USAID budget will have to face strong resistance in Congress. Assuming it gets through, it is not yet clear how cuts to USAID's budget will reverberate on aid to Afghanistan, but there is likely to be an impact. NSA McMaster came out of his experience in Afghanistan with a poor impression of USAID's performance there, and therefore presumably disinclined to defend the current level of USAID engagement there.[17] In all likelihood Trump will ask its European allies to do more here too.

The net result of these two divergent trends in US aid assistance to Afghanistan will probably be a re-balancing of the aid breakdown in favour of the military component.

Perhaps the eponymous example of an impending drift towards a more 'militarist' approach is the dropping of the MOAB 21,000 pounds bomb on IS Khorasan tunnels in Achin in April 2017. The MOAB did hurt IS Khorasan and won plaudits not only in Kabul but also among Afghan communities in Nangarhar, who had been at the receiving end of IS Khorasan's intemperance since mid-2015. The MOAB might hint at a greater commitment of US air power to the Afghan battlefield, but in reality there are big limitations to what the USAF can bomb without having detailed intelligence and/or air controllers on the ground. The IS Khorasan tunnels in Achin appear to have been a kind of command center, with a radio communications center that made it possible to track it down with precision even in the absence of troops on the ground. Despite the resonance the strike had, it is not an exportable model. If the Trump

[16] Personal communication with NATO officials, February 2017.
[17] Interview with former senior State Department official, Feb 2017.

administration wants to become more active militarily in Afghanistan, it will have to commit more troops to more places and be ready to deploy them around Afghanistan.

Keep the terrorists down and out

The Afghan authorities argue that the distinction between the Taliban, with whom a negotiated settlement would be welcome, and global jihadist groups like Al-Qaida, which should be wiped out, is arbitrary, because "The Taliban, while they may not be directly planning direct attacks on U.S. territory, they provide the environment for all kinds of terrorist groups to operate".[18] While this might be true, if 130,000 ISAF troops could not destroy Al-Qaida's assets in Afghanistan, there is little that the Trump Administration will be able to do in this regard. Given the geography of Afghanistan, only by completely pacifying the country the Afghan Government could close down Al-Qaida hideouts in remote mountainous locations. Such an objective would drag the Trump Administration back towards full size 'nation-building'.

While this slow return of Al-Qaida did contradict the narrative of the Obama Administration, in practice it made little difference as far as its ability to train new operatives is concerned. The real concern for the Trump Administration will be the serious embarrassment deriving from any claim of Al-Qaida attackers trained in Afghanistan striking somewhere. It is not obvious, however, that staying in Afghanistan would reduce the chances of that happening, and might even make the ensuing embarrassment worse. Al-Qaida for its part does not necessarily want to see the US gone, at least if that should mean reconciliation between Taliban and Kabul. An agreed trade-off seeing withdrawal of western forces versus reconciliation talks with Taliban would represent Al-Qaida's worst nightmare.

Because the Islamic State is much less discrete than Al-Qaida, its presence and activism is going to be even more of an embarrassment for the Trump Administration. This is going to be more so the case given that fighting the Islamic State is one of the stated priorities of the Administration. Because the Islamic State is more prone than Al-Qaida to engage in territorial expansion in Afghanistan, here could be a rationale for America staying put: fight back against the Islamic State. US forces have already engaged in air and drone strikes in 2015 and even more so in 2016, when the first few ground engagements also took place. If the Islamic State kept expanding and started threatening strategic assets in Afghanistan, there could even be a rationale for an increase in the presence of US combat forces, and it could even be sold to some of the regional actors who are otherwise not keen on a US presence in Afghanistan.

The risks and opportunities ahead

Although as stated at the start of this paper the picture of Afghanistan after almost 16 years of US efforts is not a pretty one, by design or by chance US actions from 2008 onwards have created not only risks and liabilities, but also opportunities to be exploited. The surrounding environment has to be understood and analysed correctly in order for these opportunities to be exploited.

[18] Josh Rogin, 'Selling Trump a new Afghanistan commitment', *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2017.

The risk of intensifying regional proxy warfare

Today the Trump administration is going to face the same kind of complex regional environment as the Bush and Obama administrations did. The attitude of the regional powers is what is really going to determine the fate of the US intervention in Afghanistan, eventually. The Taliban recognize in private interviews that it was regional support that allowed them to survive and prosper even during the peak of the US surge in 2010-12. The Afghan authorities have been inviting Washington to raise the pressure on Pakistan, which is still the main safe haven used by the Taliban. But even if the Trump Administration decided to go farther than previous US administrations, there is probably not much it can realistically do. Pakistan is not seriously dependent on US aid anymore; even IMF financial support is no longer as strategic as it used to be a few years ago, given the economic and financial recovery of the last few years. Should the Trump Administration withhold all civilian and military aid to Pakistan, the impact would be marginal. In order to hurt Pakistan, the Administration could go even further and think of economic/financial sanctions, though even these would have little or no chance of receiving wider international approval. Certainly the Arab Gulf countries, China, Russia and Iran would not support any sanctions, and would in all likelihood all help Pakistan bypass them. Financial sanctions may be more effective because of the role of US banking in international transactions, but they would not seriously cripple Pakistan unless they are very tight, again unlikely in the absence of wider international support. Among the closer US allies, the United Kingdom is also unlikely to see sanctions on Pakistan with favor.

If Pakistan is as determined in pursuing its strategic aims in Afghanistan as it seems, therefore, there is little that the Trump Administration can do to force change, without major diplomatic consequences in the region and beyond. In fact, the Pakistani authorities have for years been discounting the risk of US sanctions, following their experience in the 1990s (when their nuclear program attracted the ire of Washington). An option, mentioned above, would be to boost the conventional (that is, non-COIN) capabilities of the Afghan armed forces, a step which would certainly irritate the Pakistanis. Another option, guaranteed to irritate the Pakistanis even more, could be to signal an acceleration in Washington shift towards closer relations with India.

Any initiative of this type would have to be carefully handled as they could well end in pushing Pakistan further away from Washington, rather than closer, and/or towards an even more confrontational attitude towards Kabul. The Pakistanis have intelligently avoided committing themselves to fully supporting insurgents in Afghanistan; they have left enough room for escalation, should Washington try to clamp down on them. They are also clearly signalling their ability and readiness to establish closer relations with US rivals such as Iran and Russia, should they need to. This started years ago with Pakistan's application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and continued more recently with Pakistan's endorsement of the Russian peace initiative on Afghanistan. After some freezing in relations with Iran in 2014-15, in the second half of 2016 Pakistani military and diplomats are restarted frequent meetings with the Iranian counterparts to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and the 'handling' of the Taliban. There might only be room for convincing the Pakistani authorities to offer the Afghan Government a slightly better package in terms of the price Afghans would have to pay in order to get Pakistani cooperation on reconciliation with the Taliban. It is understood that apart from wishing to see a

coalition government in Kabul, incorporating a substantial proportion of Pakistani clients and allies, Islamabad also demands a major downgrading of Kabul-Delhi relations. Islamabad also wishes to see a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan, as US bases there strengthen Afghanistan's position vis-à-vis Pakistan.

The Trump administration seems also intent on adopting a harder position vis-à-vis Iran, possibly resulting in the re-instatement of sanctions, with a clear risk of escalating tension after that. If that coincided with even a modest increase in the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, it would be an obvious conclusion for the Iranian regime, or at least for the Revolutionary Guards (who control the Afghan dossier), that Iran should return on the scene as a spoiler, the position it occupied in 2007-15. Regardless of how the Revolutionary Guards would evaluate American re-engagement, an increase in US presence would offer the opportunity to deliver a 'tough message' again, even if the Iranian regime has no interest in seeing the collapse of the Afghan state or even a Taliban military victory. Indeed the Iranians have moved away from their spoiler attitude at the end of 2015, worried about the weakness of the Afghan state and the prospect of chaos in Afghanistan. This more constructive attitude could easily be reverted if the Iranians felt directly threatened.

The Trump Administration might even consider, if carried away by its own rhetoric, to use Afghanistan as a platform for exercising pressure on Iran, or the Pentagon might argue in that direction as a way to convince the Administration to retain a presence in Afghanistan. Resuming the recently wavered sanctions against Iran would hurt the country of the Ayatollahs only moderately, because the removal of the sanctions did not boost the Iranian economy as much as expected. Moreover, the Iranian Islamic Republic does not have a record of letting itself be intimidated by outsiders, and would certainly consider bowing to US pressure now a major loss of face.

Short of all-out war on Iran, which seems farfetched even for the Iranophobic Trump Administration, the most likely outcome of upping pressure on Iran would be the Iranian Revolutionary Guards retaliating inside Afghanistan, where they have plenty of pre-positioned assets that they can exploit for the purpose. In 2016 and early 2017, the Revolutionary Guards have directed their allies and clients among the Taliban to avoid putting pressure on the Afghan Government forces, and focus instead on expanding their presence inside Afghanistan and in fighting off Islamic State forces. Until 2015, the Revolutionary Guards had instead pushed their Taliban friends to fight as hard as possible against Western and Afghan Government forces. They could easily do it again, if it suited their strategic calculus.

If we consider how hard a time the Afghan security forces have had in 2016 against the limited sections of Taliban who were fighting against them (essentially Serajuddin Haqqani's men in the south and in the south-east, and the Shura of the North), the idea of the substantial number of Revolutionary Guard-trained or –sponsored Taliban joining the battlefield should advise caution to Washington, unless what the Trump Administration really wants is getting deeply engaged in Afghanistan again.

Upping pressure on Pakistan and Iran in synchrony would also give the two countries a strong incentive to revive their old (and now faded) partnership in coordinating Taliban efforts in Afghanistan. That would be the best chance the Taliban had in years

of achieving a higher degree of internal unity, with two of their main sponsors being on the same page again. There are already signs of Irano-Pakistani convergence on Taliban issues, which emerged from January onwards, such as the support the Iranian Pasdaran and the Pakistani ISI have both been lending to current Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah, whose leadership is increasingly been challenged from within the ranks.

The risk of assuring the Afghan elite its old ways

Aside from prompting reactions in the region, a heavily advertised increase in troop numbers in Afghanistan would also deliver the wrong message to the Afghans again, that whatever the failures of the Afghan authorities to reform and improve effectiveness, they will be bailed out regardless, with little or no accountability. Sending in more combat troops would be particularly deleterious from this point of view, although the talk for now is that the extra troops would mostly be tasked to train and mentor the expanding Afghan Special Forces and mentor Afghan units at a lower unit level than in 2015-16. In practice, however, the more tactical the 'advisers' are who deploy, the more likely they are going to be involved in combat, with the risk of resuming the 'officering' role that they were often playing in ISAF's time.

Although there were signs in 2016 of greater efforts to tackle corruption particularly in the security sector, it is not clear yet that factional politics is not influencing these efforts. Certainly more people are being sacked and even tried on allegations of misconduct, but there is little transparency on the process of cleaning up the security forces. More importantly, renewed anti-corruption efforts have not yet translated into greater efficiency of the security forces. These efforts could easily falter if there was a sense that once again the Americans were taking the burden of fighting the war on their shoulders. Much of the progress made has been contingent on emergencies: the new acting Minister of Defense, Tariq Shah Bahrami, is a respected professional, but could only be nominated to the job after his predecessor and the army Chief of Staff resigned in the wake of the Taliban attack on the headquarters of Corps 209.

Helping the Afghan security forces fight more effectively

Investing in the expansion of the Afghan Special Forces has merit: it could be the only reasonably fast way of adding to the combat power of the Afghan security forces, given that nobody has come up with a reasonably credible plan for reforming the army and police of Afghanistan. However, it will not be an easy task to double the already comparatively large Afghan Special Forces, as the only way to do it is to draw even more of the best junior officers and NCOs from the regular army and re-train them. There are already few of these suitable qualified people left to be inducted in the Special Forces. The more the best elements are taken out of the army, the lower the performance of the regular army can be expected to be. The Afghan authorities will still have to take measures to reform and strengthen the administrative and logistical apparatus. Given the rather abysmal performance of the Afghan security forces in 2014-16, there should be plenty of room for improvement. It might be necessary to increase pressure on the Afghan government for implementing reforms which are unpopular within the security forces, such as the civilianization of much of

the ministerial bureaucracy (interior and defense). This seems to be the only way to bring in the required professional skills.

Positive regional engagement

There is potential to exploit in the region, for a resolution of the Afghan conflict. In different ways and with different aims, the Chinese and Saudi governments have been active in trying to foster reconciliation between the Afghan authorities and the armed opposition. Possibly the path to ending the Afghan conflict most likely to yield results would be engaging with these actors, who are already actively engaged with Kabul, and facilitate their efforts further. It is questionable of course whether the Trump Administration would want to engage closely with the Chinese, given the hard rhetoric of the first few post-election weeks, and given that no US Administration would be too keen to surrender the diplomatic lead in sorting out the Afghan conflict to any country, particularly if not allied or partnered. But the fact remains that the Chinese Government might be the best positioned one to make progress on the reconciliation front: it is of course very close to the Pakistani authorities, has good and close relations with Iran and Russia, as well as Afghanistan and should be an acceptable interlocutor for the Saudis.

Preventing Afghanistan from turning into a terrorist safe haven again

The presence of the IS in Afghanistan and the evident fact that AQ's presence in Afghanistan has not been annihilated either could provide a strong rationale for continuing US presence there, at least in the eyes of the American public. This is regardless of whether either organization actually needs Afghanistan to plan attacks in the west. The main risk implicit in taking this stand is for the Trump Administration that IS and/or AQ would continue roaming around or even expand their presence. While AQ has so far been a discrete 'guest' in Afghanistan, to the extent of expanding operations again after 2001 almost without being detected, IS is not discrete at all and touts 'Khorasan' and in particular Afghanistan as one of its two main operational areas of the future (the other being Libya). In such an event, the Trump Administration could easily be forced 'to do something' to contrast IS in Afghanistan, and dropping bombs here and there would not be enough. In other words, there could be a risk of being dragged back into deploying a growing number of US troops and assets to Afghanistan, without better prospects of achieving decisive victory than in the previous 15 years. One thing that the Afghan experience of post-2001 has confirmed is that Afghanistan is no place for deploying massive firepower successfully, for geographic and social reasons.

If the Trump Administration does want to make of Afghanistan one of the theatres of its confrontation with IS, it would be better advised to develop a comprehensive strategy of how to deal with it, with clear priorities. Pushing against Taliban and IS at the same time, and also confront Iran, Pakistan and Russia would create an unmanageable environment. There are already signs that the majority of the Taliban oppose confronting IS and advocate seeking some accommodation with it; increase US pressure on the Taliban and IS will probably facilitate reconciliation between the two organisations.

Perhaps the Trump Administration can exploit its honeymoon with the Arab Gulf monarchies and particularly with the Saudis to convince them to seriously curtail support for jihadist groups, while the Trump Administration seeks to recover the traditional US role of 'protector' of the Gulf monarchies, in particular vis-à-vis Iran. This might be the best opportunity to seriously weaken IS, without getting engaged in a counter-terrorist campaign on unfavourable ground.

'Business as usual' is not a long-term option

Continuing the intervention in Afghanistan as 'business as usual' carries its own risks. The internal dynamics of the Taliban have been changing all the time and are likely to keep changing in the future. It cannot be ruled out that a set of circumstances could prompt them to act in a more cohesive way in the future, committing with greater strength to trying to defeat the Afghan authorities militarily. Those Taliban already committed to the fight are also trying to improve their tactical skills, in order to bypass the (for now) seemingly insurmountable hurdle of US air power. They have been experimenting with 'embrace' tactics, that is, getting into close contact with the enemy and into urban areas fast enough to avoid being hit from the air with devastating power. Small unit infiltration tactics have been used to positive effect already, although the Taliban have not figured out yet how to keep supplying their units once they enter urban areas and are locked in protracted combat there. As the Taliban improve their tactics, the risk of them achieving a breakthrough at some point cannot be discounted. Then the Trump Administration would be faced with the hard choice of quickly stepping up its involvement, or stepping out quickly and in humiliation.