

## **A Trump Strategy for Peace in Afghanistan**

America has been at war in Afghanistan for 17 years, but Afghanistan has been at war since the Soviet invasion in 1979. Throughout the 80s, the Communist puppet government in Kabul and its Soviet allies face a highly motivated, popular anti-Soviet mujahideen insurgency by Afghans opposed to foreign occupation and a Communist political program of social engineering promoting atheism and trampling Afghan culture. Outside powers – notably the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan – supported the insurgency, both to strike a blow against Communist ideology and prevent the southward spread of Soviet domination.

The insurgency succeeded, driving the Soviets out in 1989, but it came at a terrible price for Afghans. Without the Soviet threat to draw American interest, the international community disengaged from an increasingly violent and chaotic Afghanistan, which fell into the hands of insurgent leaders turned warlords who devastated the country in their fight for power. Only Pakistan paid attention, grooming a generation of young men – children who had arrived in Pakistan as refugees – into dedicated jihadis, creating the Taliban, which overran the warlords to create a self-styled Islamic Emirate that would become a safe haven for terrorists, where al Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, would plot the 9/11 attacks.

### **After September 11<sup>th</sup>**

Those attacks were what it took for the US to rediscover Afghanistan, with the Taliban regime becoming the first target of President George W. Bush's War on Terror. In those days, with the wound of 9/11 still raw, American policy prioritized righteous vengeance over far-sighted security strategy. The initial goal was punitive – end al Qaeda and the Taliban regime, destroy its leadership and seize Osama bin Laden – with a quick handover of power to a successor government and a rapid American withdrawal which would allow the Bush Administration to refocus its energy on Iraq, which it saw as a more important security priority. This led to some fateful mistakes which decisively shaped the American effort – the Bush Administration rejected Taliban offers to negotiate a post-war settlement and instead placed its trust in a poorly supervised Afghan government composed of exiles and former warlords. This set the stage for corruption and tribalism, creating the conditions for a Taliban resurgence out of safe havens in Pakistan and preventing the creation of an effective government that could represent all Afghans.

President Obama shifted resources and attention from Iraq to Afghanistan, but his efforts were constrained by the course that Bush had set. The Taliban were by then entrenched in much of the country and unwilling to negotiate when they thought they could win. American officials attempted to strengthen Afghan institutions and reform the country, but frequently made mistakes by pursuing policies inappropriate for Afghanistan or contrary to Afghan culture. President Obama's insistence on public timelines for American withdrawal also undermined efforts – they provided the Taliban with a path to victory and demoralized pro-American Afghans who understood that success would take a long-term commitment – and without safe haven in Pakistan and sponsorship from other states.

### **The Trump Opportunity**

President Trump has the opportunity to break from the mistakes of the past and accomplish what President Bush and President Obama could not – withdraw in success from a stable, friendly Afghanistan and secure American influence in Central and South Asia. Recently, the conflict with the Taliban has intensified into a bloody stalemate for both sides – the Taliban cannot defeat the combined forces of the US and the

Government of Afghanistan, but it cannot be defeated by military force alone. Part of the solution requires a coordinated, global approach to cut resources from terrorists and criminal networks; incentivize Taliban commitment; and secure the resources Afghanistan needs for reconstruction and development. At the geopolitical level, the future of the country is drawing more interest than ever. This is not an entirely good thing. Many different states – from friendly countries and US allies such as Turkey, the UAE and India to rivals like Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran – sense that US withdrawal is imminent and have pushed themselves forward to offer mediation in order to direct the political settlement in their favor. This has led a multiplicity of initiatives to engage the Taliban, occasionally working at cross-purposes and sometimes undermining US efforts in Afghanistan. However, these conditions could also lead to a breakthrough. Muscular US leadership – spearheaded by President Trump and coordinated by the capable Zalmay Khalilzad – could unite the disparate initiatives and create a global coalition to finally create the conditions for a lasting Afghan peace.

International pressure is crucial to securing the compliance of Pakistan, which has been playing a double game ever since 9/11. The country has a long history of cultivating Islamic extremists as agents of its own foreign policy. This has included sheltering and training not only the anti-Soviet mujahideen and the Taliban, but also other Islamic militants for use against India in Kashmir and elsewhere. On the other hand, it presented itself as a US ally, allowing the use of its airspace, logistics connections between Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean, and sharing intelligence with US agencies in exchange for military aid and development dollars. This has allowed Pakistan's security services to milk the US – on the one hand, using their influence over Taliban leadership to keep the conflict going (by protecting militant leaders and eliminating those willing to negotiate) while continuing to draw resources from US administrations reliant on Pakistani cooperation. Only coordinated pressure from the international community can force Pakistan to renounce this duplicity and play a constructive role.

### **The Afghan Road to Peace**

However, only Afghans themselves – with the partnership of the United States – can create that peace. Previous American efforts have emphasized hard power and sought to impose a military solution at the expense of finding a durable domestic political solution, but the Trump Administration has shown a new willingness to join new initiatives to military force, with potential for a historic success. The key – but only the first step – is to join social pressure from the Afghan population to the military pressure the Taliban already face.

Separating Afghans from the Taliban will require a bottom-up approach that reaches out to the Afghan people and recognizes their hopes and their challenges. The population of Afghanistan is one of the youngest in the world and the millions of young Afghans have the potential to transform the country, eager to commit to a leadership and a peace program that's just as committed to their security and prosperity.

A strategy of engagement with all segments of the Afghan population – included those that the Taliban depend on – through raising public awareness, fighting misinformation and “fake news” undermining international cooperation, and direct outreach to all social groups (youth, women, elders) through local councils and events. Media in Afghanistan is still in its infancy, and much of the population lives in isolated villages and rural areas with little connection to the rest of the country. Reaching the Afghan peoples means going to them, approaching them with respect for their culture and their interests, and including them in the national political process. With the public mobilized for peace, the Taliban will negotiate a settlement for

participation – not domination – in the political process. America has Afghan partners who can do this, but they need the time and support to succeed.

The sequencing of negotiations is no less important once the Taliban is brought to the table. The war has pit Afghans against one another, splitting tribes, clans and families. Children have lost parents; parents have lost children. In a culture that prizes honor and justice, reconciliation will take time and a move to secure a final political settlement risks exacerbating rather than diffusing hostility. The peace process must begin by building trust between communities split by the conflict. While the leadership cadres of the Taliban are motivated by their Islamist ideology, in a conflict with countless civilian casualties, many rank-and-file fighters are pulled in by the pursuit of revenge, seeking justice for lost lives and loved ones. Humanitarian, conflict-deescalation measures such as prisoner releases, establishing of safe zones around civilian populations, settling local disputes and ceasefires are extremely popular among the Afghan population. These would demonstrate that former belligerents can cooperate, deliver immediate benefits to all Afghans, and diffuse the sense of grievance that drives many fighters. Rather than a single effort, trust building would consist of many different local initiatives, reducing risk and spreading benefits across the country.

The lowered level of violence would enable the second stage of the peace process, economic development and reconstruction. Decades of conflict have shattered the little infrastructure Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, relied upon for the domestic economy and international trade. Unemployment is rife, with a cratered private sector matched by destroyed public services. Economic desperation has been as much of a driver of Taliban recruitment as grievance and revenge. Currently, the government of Afghanistan cannot offer its young population much hope for a brighter future – with an international commitment to development and reconstruction, we can further on the achievements of trust building efforts to turn fighters into job holders, provide the essential services to allow society to function and incentivize peace over violence. Without economic desperation or personal grievance to keep them fighting, the overwhelming majority of rank-and-file Taliban fighters would opt for peaceful reintegration over continued bloodshed.

At this stage – with a pattern of trust established and development underway – Afghans will be ready to tackle negotiations on a political settlement. It is impossible to know what it will look like, though it will need to reflect the diverse and decentralized nature of the country and the tribal and religious culture of its inhabitants. A peace deal forged by Afghans through this process – settled domestically, with benefits broadly shared – can succeed where top-down efforts by external actors have failed.

### **The Price of Peace, The Cost of Withdrawal**

To bring this about, the United States must make a serious commitment, though not an unlimited one. This model succeeded in Northern Ireland, where the move from an IRA cease-fire to the signing of the historic Good Friday Agreement took four years. The similarity of these two conflicts – community-based violence; a flawed peace program pursued by a Western power; the role of a neighboring, kindred state in supporting the insurgency – suggests that moving from initial Taliban negotiations towards a final settlement over four years is not unrealistic. America will need to maintain current troop levels for at least the first two years to prevent backsliding and foreclose the Taliban's militant strategy, but once trust building efforts have begun to bear fruit, the US could transition to an over-the-horizon posture based on air power with a reduced ground presence, phasing out its forces over two more years. Part of this will involve making constructive investments, likely on the order of \$60 billion dollars over the four-year period. There is no reason for the United States to shoulder the economic burden alone, however, and cost-sharing can be one basis for

international cooperation. Further, this assistance can be in the form of bona fide investments, with American investors securing opportunities in infrastructure, minerals and energy. America again is being asked to work for the benefit of the world, but the promise of success is real and America too can share in the benefits of victory.

After 17 years of bloodshed and sacrifice, American may be tempted to withdraw prematurely, but the consequences of that choice would be dire. It would amount to a repeat of the mistake made after the Soviet withdrawal, leading to more bloodshed and instability. Already foreign powers – American rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran – are seeking influence, some through sponsoring the Taliban insurgency. Leaving without a political settlement in place would also embolden other terrorist groups, showing that its possible to wait out the United States, and creating a new safe haven for anti-American extremists, with ISIS already attempting to establish a presence. Under those conditions, the stage would be set for another 9/11.

The social engagement necessary to create a stable and pro-American Afghanistan will not be easy – it’s an effort which eluded Presidents Bush and Obama. It will require sacrifice. Already many Afghans – including some of our country’s finest leaders – have paid for supporting America with their lives. But a successful conclusion to America’s effort is still possible, and it would represent a world-historical legacy for America and for President Trump’s foreign policy.

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