

Continuity as Change: President Trump, His Predecessors and the Primacy of U.S. Imperial Policy

Donald Trump has been in charge of the U.S. for many months now and by now the novelty is beginning to somewhat wear off... one tweet at the time. Though in reality, Trump is still as unaccustomed to the job now as he was at the very beginning of his tenure.

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#), [PAKISTAN](#)

*On Monday, 21 August 2017 **President Donald Trump** went to Fort Myer, in Arlington, Virginia, and there he did what he seems to like best of all - address a crowd, preferably a huge one that is captive. Trump spoke to U.S. troops and the nation to unveil his “dramatically’ new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” as [reported](#) by CBS News’ **Rebecca Shabad**, who added that the “plan does not involve a withdrawal of U.S. troops from America’s longest-running war.” While Trump talked about the “American people’s frustration” with the apparently never-ending war in the Hindu Kush, he fell very short from his “original instinct [which] was to pull out,” as he had made plain as long ago as January 11, 2013 when the then-still businessman [tweeted](#) “... Let’s get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghans we train and we waste billions there.”*

Alas, rather than continue Obama’s withdrawal [strategy](#), the “draw-down of U.S. forces from Afghanistan - known as the retrograde - [that was supposed] to be completed by the end of 2014,” the businessman-turned-president has now come to the conclusion that the fighting must go on until an “honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives” can be achieved.

And, as if willing to illustrate these Presidential words, on Wednesday August 30th, [the Pentagon revealed](#) that the U.S. currently still had “about 11,000 troops [stationed] in Afghanistan,” a figure “higher than formally disclosed in recent years.” Arguably, enough boots-on-the-ground to get the job done, as promised by Donald J. Trump. Contrary to his “original instinct,” the U.S. President will authorise the [dispatch of more troops](#) into the Afghan theatre, but he assured his Arlington audience,

“[w]e will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities.”

And so it seems that now the “unconventional” and “unorthodox” U.S. President that is Trump has finally become yet another *Leader of the Free World* beholden to the infamous “military-industrial complex,” the opinion of people whom he refers to as “my Generals and

military experts” and the [Deep State](#), as it is known today.

After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow.....

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [July 26, 2017](#)

As a result, he is now performing a remarkable U-turn, completely negating his earlier-made pledges and promises, such as [the one he made in Fayetteville, N.C.](#), “We will stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn’t be involved with” (6 December 2016). Yet now, Trump appears committed to meddling abroad like any other of his predecessors, starting with the now infamous dispatch by MSNBC’s **Brian Williams** of “beautiful weapons” into Syria last April and now culminating in his ‘all-new, all-different’ Afghanistan policy that appears to be taking up where Obama left off earlier.

Brian Williams refers to this Pentagon video of missiles going to kill people as “beautiful” 3 times in 30 seconds pic.twitter.com/KBb3tP8qHT

— Trevor Timm (@trevortimm) [April 7, 2017](#)

Across the Durand Line

Still, U.S. President Trump managed to add something new to the heady mix of American activities and policies in the Hindu Kush, stating bluntly that “Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror,” as part of his wider statement regarding the new U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Going into some detail, Trump also added that the U.S. “can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond,” and ending his exposition on the *Land of the Pure* with the words that “it is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and to peace.” Whereas Trump’s newly articulated Afghan policy represents a clear victory for advocates of a continued American imperial policy in the Hindu Kush, his inclusion of Pakistan is a bit of a departure from time honoured U.S. policy. The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan under **President George W. Bush**, [Zalmay Khalilzad](#), said as much talking to ABC’s ‘This Week.’ Literally, Khalilzad declared that he does not think that “either President Bush or President Obama focused as sharply, as clearly . . . [on] Pakistan’s both role as a facilitator of and a help to Afghanistan and as a sanctuary for those who fight us,” going on to indicate that in his view “the single most important factor, the Pakistan problem, for prolonging the war . . . [are] the sanctuary issues.” In fact, it has long been an open secret that the Taliban freely and openly cross the Af-Pak border, as necessitated by circumstances and accommodated by the Haqqani Network (a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), according to erstwhile U.S. Central Command chief, Admiral Mike Mullen). While, the roots of the fundamentalist movement itself effectively lie in the northern Pakistan of the early 1990s when **Benazir Bhutto** headed the nation. At present, the homegrown Pakistani faction of the group, the TTP (or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, currently led by Maulana Fazlullah) oppose Islamabad and on occasion sow terror and mayhem throughout the Land of the Pure (such as a deadly blast in Lahore on 13 February last).

On the other hand, the sudden shift towards paying closer attention to Pakistan had been in the air for a while, or at least hovering in cyberspace since June, 14th, as tweeted by the Twitter user Afghan Army (@ArmyAFG):

To end war n [#AFG](#) it's importnt to target terror sanctuaries inside [#Pakistan](#) & make [#AfghanArmy](#) stronger

ex [#AfghanCGS](#) Gen.Sher Moh Karimi pic.twitter.com/Y0ml8TpbNb

— Afghan Army ?? (@ArmyAFG) [June 14, 2017](#)

And, **General Sher Mohammad Karimi** had been the Chief of Army Staff of Afghanistan in the period 20 June 2010 – 22 May 2015. In a nutshell, Karimi's words seem to have moved into Trump's mouth, as the new U.S. policy on Afghanistan seems to closely correspond to the opinion of the former head of the Afghan National Army. In fact, already in December 2014, General Karimi visited Islamabad, accompanied by Isaf commander **Gen John Campbell** (August 2014-April 2016), to discuss this thorny issue with Pakistani Army **Chief Gen Raheel Sharif** (November 2013-November 2016). In the previous year Karimi had also been part of a so-called "Tripartite Commission" to [discuss this very topic](#) in the Pakistani capital, accompanied by Campbell's predecessor **General John Allen** (June 2011-February 2013). In other words, the matter of Pakistani safe havens for the Afghan Taliban had been a pressing matter for quite some time. During his three-day-visit to India in January 2015, President Obama told the local press that Taliban "safe havens within Pakistan are not acceptable."

And once again, Trump's 'all-new, all-different' Afghanistan policy appears to be taking up where Obama left off.

Reactions at Home and Abroad

Observers might be led to conclude that "Trump's 'America First' Base [is] Unhappy with Flip-Flop Afghanistan Speech," as announced by Breitbart [on the same day](#).

The following day Breitbart writer **Joel B. Pollak** tweeted that

"Trump's [#Afghanistan](#) speech was Obama's speech minus the deadline & details. Like the bit about Pakistan [though]."

Trump's [#Afghanistan](#) speech was Obama's speech minus the deadline & details. Like the bit about Pakistan, not convinced we can deliver India

— Joel B. Pollak (@joelpollak) [August 22, 2017](#)

Whereas, on Wednesday, 23, August 2007, the Imamia Students Organisation (or ISO, a Shiite Muslim students' organisation in Pakistan) organised anti-U.S. rallies in the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Lahore – these gatherings even carried the significant heading of 'Death to America' – meaning that the world has now somewhat reverted to normal again, with the U.S. vowing to kill certain Muslims and others vocally calling for the demise of the

world's sole super-power. It seems highly appropriate though that these rallies were held by Shiite Muslim, as Trump somewhat erroneously and opportunistically singled out Shiite Iran as the main purveyor of [“radical Islamic terrorism” in Saudi Arabia](#). Pakistan, on the other hand, as the home of erstwhile British India's Muslims has a Muslim population which is mostly Sunni in orientation and Hanafi in outlook. And the same holds true for Afghanistan and its population. In this way, Trump has now evened out the field inhabited by “radical Islamic terrorists,” targeted by the U.S. military establishment. Arguably, such theological nuances and niceties are beyond Donald Trump's comprehension or even interest and/or proficiency. One but needs but to remember his words that “all of these experts . . . The experts are terrible!” uttered during last year's election campaign (4 April 2016). Trump skillfully utilised such anti-intellectual jibes as part of his bid for wide popular and populist appeal. It seems like a mere truism to state that Trump's ascendancy to the White House is in large part due to his espousal of a “nationalist” or even “nativist” rhetoric during the election campaign, and on Friday, 18 August, the man known as Trump's “Chief Strategist” mainly responsible for the occurrence of such words in the now-President's mouth, Steven (or rather [Stephen](#)) Bannon, was dismissed from the White House. Bannon had previously been at the head of the right-wing news website Breitbart, affiliated with a movement that has received the media-friendly moniker alt-right.

Becoming a War President

In view of the timing, there are now those who see a clear link between the ‘all-new, all-different’ yet all-the-same Afghanistan policy announced and this sudden departure. Bannon had been a highly visible part of the Trump White House, even sharing an office with the now equally departed **Reince Priebus** (28 Jul 2017), and notorious for exclaiming such outrageous words and phrases like the “deconstruction of the administrative state,” prominently announced during his appearance at this year's CPAC (or Conservative Political Action Conference on 23 February 2017). During the Conservative jamboree he also spoke at length about Trump's “economic nationalist agenda,” while simultaneously denouncing the news media and its practitioners as the “enemy.” **Kim Sengupta**, the Independent's Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent, opines that Bannon had urged his boss to “pull out and not get further tangled in Afghanistan.” And that Bannon, like his fellow alt-right henchmen, blamed “the neocons” for the military imbroglio in the Hindu Kush, even going as far as declaring that opinion amongst the alt-right held that the wars in Afghanistan (as well as in Iraq) had been “orchestrated . . . by Jewish big business.”

In reality, though, the invasion of the Hindu Kush which led to the volcanic eruption of the now-16 year war bogging down the U.S. was the brainchild of a number of experts during a “4-day [mid-July 2001] [Berlin meeting](#) carrying the heading ‘Brainstorming on Afghanistan’ and [that] was apparently the outcome of the Clinton administration's concerns over Osama bin Laden,” going back to the 1998 attacks on two US embassies in Africa - in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. But it was down to 9/11 and George W. Bush to ignite the Afghan powder keg, leading to a conflagration subsequently deftly and somewhat ineptly handled by the Nobel Peace Prize-wielding Barack Obama.

In light of Trump's recent Fort Myer speech, the Washington Post reporter **Robert Costa** [even tweeted](#) that

“Trump is echoing many of the points Bannon made behind the scenes. But he has gone along w/ a version of McMaster-Mattis plan.”

Notable: Trump is echoing many of the points Bannon made behind the scenes. But he has gone along w/ a version of McMaster-Mattis plan.

— Robert Costa (@costareports) [August 22, 2017](#)

In other words, Costa merely affirms my earlier pronouncements on Trump becoming beholden to the infamous “military-industrial complex” and the Deep State, insinuating that the current National Security Advisor (in office since 20 February) and the Secretary of Defense (in office since 20 January) had somehow colluded to delude and deceive the U.S. President into continuing the American imperial policy in the Hindu Kush...

On the other hand, not quite three months after CPAC, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association convened the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in Washington, D.C. (10-13 May 2017), where Trump’s Veep, Mike Pence, took to the stage. Pence, talking “on behalf of President Donald Trump,” there and then assured the gathered believers that the Trump administration would not be sitting on its hands when it comes to fighting “radical Islamic terrorists,” which the newly-minted President had already made plain during his inaugural speech in January. Pence, though, went a lot further in his public words: President Trump has “made it clear that America will stand by followers of Christ in this hour of need. Our administration is fully committed in bringing relief and comfort to believers not only across the Middle East but across the world. This President knows the terrorists will not stop until we stop them. And, under President Donald Trump, we will stop them. Under President Donald Trump, America will continue to stand for religious freedom of all people, of all faiths, across the world. And I believe that all God’s children, no matter their country or their creed, can know with confidence that God will continue to guide this nation, to play our unique role on behalf of freedom in the world.”

As a result, though initially unwilling to do so as his “original instinct was to pull out” of Afghanistan, Trump’s ‘all-new, all-different yet all-the-same’ policy in the Hindu Kush could be seen as part of this claimed commitment to do battle with the enemies of Christianity. At the same time, one could argue that the Billy Graham event was cunningly employed by the Trump team to fire up a significant part of its base to start a number of major military adventures in the Middle East and beyond, using the figleaf of protecting persecuted Christians as a rallying cry to garner domestic and international support.

In spite of all of his campaign promises, Donald Trump seems more than determined to follow in his predecessor’s footsteps and become a real war president.

Building Nations on Paper

During his speech Trump fine-tuned the American position in the Hindu Kush, saying that

“We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.”

And again, these words also first sprung forth from somebody else’s mouth: namely, Barack Obama’s. In early August 2015, President Obama told the members of his National Security Council that “[w]e’re no longer in nation-building mode,” according to an unnamed [person present at the meeting](#).

Like Trump just recently, after his inauguration in January 2009, Obama ordered a “quick policy review” of the Afghan situation, but “even before it was completed, he accepted a Pentagon recommendation to send 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total to nearly 70,000 American troops on the ground,” as worded by the journalist **Mark Landler**.

The mere idea of the U.S. engaging in a nation-building efforts has been anathema to American politicians in the 21st century, with candidate Bush making scathing remarks to Al Gore during the 2000 election campaign. But then, “After 9/11, I changed my mind,” as he wrote in his memoir [Decision Points](#) (published on 9 November 2010). Bush elaborated in his memoir that “Afghanistan was the ultimate nation building mission. We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better.” As a result, in the Hindu Kush an unbroken line of nation-building activities stretches throughout the 21st century, starting in the Bush years throughout the Obama period only to end at the outset of the Trump era . . . for now at least. At present, President Trump is adamant about the fact that the United States will only be engaged in the business of “killing terrorists” in the Hindu Kush – [across the Durand Line](#) apparently. But famous or rather infamous for his flip-flopping proficiency, time will tell whether President Trump will be satisfied with sticking to his “original instinct” this time around. Already the rightly-maligned [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) recognised the importance of Central Asia, and Afghanistan’s position at the heart of the region makes abandoning the Hindu Kush a questionable proposition. For starters, there is the [Bagram Airfield Base](#), a permanent U.S. foothold in the mountains, overseeing the country’s underground [mineral wealth](#) and keeping a close eye on the Chinese dragon across the border, particularly after the Manas’ Transit Center in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan was closed down in 2014. And the word China has famously been featuring prominently in Trump’s mouth, ever since he started switching career tracks last year. The current nuclear impasse on the Korean peninsula has brought the Middle Kingdom to the fore as well, given the DPRK’s nature as a Chinese client state. Will Trump merely order his ‘generals’ to kill “terrorists” and then stick with his “original instinct” and “pull out” or will strategic and other concerns prevail so that the U.S. presence in the Hindu Kush will continue unabated.

In 2011, retired USAF Lt Col Karen Kwiatkowski put it [like this](#): the Pentagon directors like “these military bases [in the Hindu Kush] too well, [they] like the minerals, and [they] like the geographic positioning Afghanistan provides our military.” Will Trump be able to break the dictates of U.S. imperial policy or will he have to succumb like all of his predecessors?

Will Trump be the one to end the war initiated by Bill Clinton’s experts in Berlin, or will he merely be able to add another chapter to the ongoing American saga in the Hindu Kush?!?

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