

The Long, Long Story: “Principled Realism”, Trump and Afghanistan

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*The story continues with dispiriting relentlessness. The remark by Samuel Beckett in *The Unnamable* comes to mind: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” With the sense of incapacity about going on, yet doing so with a drone’s dedicated commitment, President Donald Trump did what US Presidents have done since George W. Bush: commit. Commit, that is, to the mission; commit more promises; and commit more thoughts to blotted paper about the war that never ends in the graveyard of empires.*

Addressing the nation from Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia, Trump conceded to weariness – weary, that is, of not achieving victory in Afghanistan. “I share that American people’s frustration.”[1]

Another frustration were those failed efforts at nation building: “too much time, energy, money – and most importantly lives – trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests about all other considerations.”

Trump’s none-too-intense scouring of the Afghan problem suggested three conclusions. The first was seeking to honour the US fallen. “The men and women who serve nation in combat deserve a plan for victory.”

The second effectively hooked an indefinite US commitment to the region: “the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable.” More terrorist havens, he feared, would mushroom; more vacuums for instability, he warned, could result.

The third far from earth shattering conclusion: “the security threats we face in Afghanistan, and the broader region, are immense.” The region had been positively fecund in producing and harbouring some 20 US-deemed terrorist groups. “The highest concentration in any region, anywhere in the world.” (A big tut tut to Pakistan was uttered.)

These conclusions would entail a shift. Time as a measure of achievement would be ditched. Conditions would form the necessary criteria. Dates for commencing or ending “military options” would be abandoned. No timetables, no schedules, just ground conditions that “will guide our strategy from now on.” Rather neatly, Trump was suggesting a timeless deployment of US forces – for where time has ceased as a measure, there can only be conditions to assess.

The president also gave us a sprinkling of hoary old chestnuts. The government in Kabul would continue to receive support to combat the Taliban, but the issue of Afghan

governance remained one for Afghans. "We are a partner and a friend, but we will not dictate to the Afghan people how to live or how to govern their own complex society."

US nation building enterprises have generally floundered, and here was a president admitting to it. But that element of candour was followed by another ghoulish admission. Not only should the US shed such efforts at failed reconstruction, it should just admit to doing one thing: "We are killing terrorists."

To do so, Trump promised to untether the US war machine, lifting those encumbering restrictions placed upon the use of fighter aircraft in targeting various networks. "Micromanagement from Washington, D.C., does not win battles." Into the bin you go, international humanitarian law!

Other more idiosyncratic pointers were made, linked to a broadening of the South Asia strategy: India needed to muck in more to stabilise the situation, given its "billions of dollars in trade with the United States". Pakistan, historically closer to US interests, was irritatingly problematic, receiving "billions and billions of dollars" while "housing the very terrorists that we are fighting." That schizophrenic state of affairs would have to "change immediately."

A vital problem here is one of aims, as muddled as they seem to be. What, for instance, would ever elusive victory look like? Taken from its elementary point in 2001-2, US strategists were hoping to eliminate a base for al-Qaeda (a "haven" for terrorists) while ensconcing a half-representative government in Kabul. It has succeeded in neither, botching the latter while failing to eliminate the Taliban.

Kabul remains in control of only some of the country, and it is a hold that is tenuous at best. The Taliban continue being enthusiastically aggressive, keeping the countryside dangerous for government soldiers. It now controls 15 percent more territory than it did in 2015, despite those "surging" efforts pursued by General David Petraeus in 2010-2011.[2]

Such a state of affairs, rather than dampening enthusiasm among the military classes, enthuses them to commit more troops. Never mind that such a deployment would be to thicken and deepen a stalemate, a near mediaeval, unchanging status quo.

The current US commanding general in Afghanistan, John "Mick" Nicholson Jr., suggested to the Senate Armed Services Committee an increased fare of several thousand US troops.[3] Their role would be primarily to engage in "hold-fight-disrupt" operations.

But Trump has his vision, and it is free of complicating numbers, law of war constraints and reconstruction agendas. Go in, maraud and exterminate, and be frank about such aims too. Give the necessary succour to the Afghan authorities, but only in so far as there are results. Such is the way of what he terms "principled realism".

Finally victory could be given form, its elusive quality overcome. "From now on victory will have a clear definition: Attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terrorist attacks against America before they emerge." A truly violent, bull in the china shop definition, and an old, if slightly scoured one that will keep US boots in Afghanistan for a generation.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/full-transcript-donald-trump-announces-his-afghanistan-policy/537552/>

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/afghanistan-war-troop-surge-mick-nicholson-vietnam-graveyard-empires>

[3] <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/02/afghanistan-needs-thousands-more-troops-us-general-says-stunning-assessment/135280/>

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