

US “Failures” in Afghanistan. US Military Still There

Report of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

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A [report](#) of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), especially prepared for the US Congress and the Trump administration, finds what should be called a magnanimous failure of the US in achieving any of its major objectives in Afghanistan even after spending almost 16 years in the country.

Ironic though it may sound, this report, along with its list of grave threats that the US needs to tackle, endorses the war as, what Trump himself has called, totally “disastrous” for the US. While the actual intention behind the preparation of this report seems to be to impress upon the president and the Congress to sanction more funds, commit more US troops and continue the rehabilitation programme (read: Trump has vowed to end the programme), it ends up enlisting the US’ multiple failures in Afghanistan, ranging from eliminating the Taliban completely to restoring even a semblance of peace and establishing a strong security force in the war torn country. Hence, the question:

Will commitment of more resources (funds and troops) to Afghanistan make any difference, especially when the proposed increase is nothing compared to what the US had committed and continued to utilize for years after it invaded Afghanistan in 2001?

It is worth recalling that since 2001, around 2250 US military personnel have died and over 20,000 wounded in Afghanistan and the war is not over—yet. Apart from it, as the report notes, the US has spent more money in Afghanistan than it collectively spent to reconstruct the whole Europe after the Second World War, marking this the “largest expenditure to rebuild a single country in our (US) nation’s history.” Given the scale of the loss, it cannot be gainsaid that it is also the greatest failure the US has suffered ever since. And as the report highlights, “after 15 years the task is incomplete.”



Afghanistan, for the US, remains a “high risk” territory—something that warrants, the US policy makers think, a long-term military presence. Despite spending a whopping US\$70 billion on establishing Afghan security forces—almost half of the reconstruction budget going to this particular sector of national reconstruction— the report finds that Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) remain acutely incapable of tackling the war on their own.

While the report places the onus of responsibility on Afghan forces for seceding territory to the Taliban, the fact remains that the US forces have not left the country either and remain militarily engaged.

According to the US-Afghanistan Bi-Lateral Security Agreement (BSA), the very purpose of retaining a significant strength of US troops and military personnel is to “enhance the ability of Afghanistan to deter internal and external threats against its sovereignty.”

However, despite the fact that two years have passed since the agreement was signed, no major progress has been seen in terms of the Afghan forces’ ability to recover territory from the Taliban. On the contrary, as the SIGAR report notes,

“approximately 63.4% of the country’s districts are under Afghan government control or influence as of August 28, 2016, a decrease from the 70.5% reported as of January 29, 2016.”

What this indicates is that the US has been unable to achieve, so far, its publicly stated objectives. According to the SIGAR report, the other “high risk” areas include corruption, sustainability, on-budget support, counter-narcotics, contract management, oversight, strategy and planning.

Curiously enough, SIGAR does not mention the rising threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and the threat it is posing to the regions surrounding this country. The regions surrounding Afghanistan include Central Asia, South Asia and China.

Were the Islamic State to be allowed, by not taking action against it, to spread in Afghanistan and be able to set foothold in this region, it will spread utter devastation—something that will directly serve the US interest against Russia and China. Not only will it jeopardize China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ project but will also cause a manifold increase in the threats of ISIS finding support in China’s Xinjiang province and in Central Asia states i.e., Russia’s “under belly.”

No wonders, the US doesn’t see ISIS as a “real threat” to their interests in Afghanistan because it is not, as yet, posing any direct threat. For the US, the primary threat remains the Taliban and the imperative of silencing their movement remains the primary objective.

It is for this reason that both China and Russia have found a justifiable reason in establishing contacts both with the Afghan government and the Taliban in order to prevent ISIS from gaining foothold in Afghanistan. While China has already started to [conduct counter-terror operations in co-operation with Kabul](#), Russia is equally setting itself up to lead the peace process by holding a global peace conference on Afghanistan in Moscow.

What are Trump’s options for an un-winnable war?

Given the dark scenario depicted in the report, it seems that the US military is deeply interested in raising troop level in Afghanistan. But the question is: will sending more troops do any good when 16 years of war have led only to deterioration? What it will do is intensify the war with the Taliban and provide ISIS a ready-made scenario to gain strength.

It is obvious that the US cannot win the war against the Taliban. As a matter of fact, the question of actually winning the war has lost whatever significance it previously had. Therefore, the new question that must be raised and duly addressed is how to prevent Afghanistan from becoming another Levant?

It is again self-evident that ISIS doesn’t figure as a threat in the US officials’ calculation.

Therefore, China and Russia must step up their efforts and help negotiate a peace settlement with the Taliban. Pakistan's role is crucial in this regard and fortunately enough, both Russia and China are on good terms with Afghanistan's immediate and most important neighbour.

Therefore, the best option for the US/the Trump administration is to engage with countries that can actually pave the way for settlement. On the contrary, were the US to continue to walk the lonely path in Afghanistan, it will continue to progressively lose space and momentum to China-Pakistan-Russia nexus just as it lost space and advantage in Syria after Russia started its own military campaign in September 2015. As such, with Russia and China willing to facilitate a peace settlement, the US needs to tap into this opportunity and turn the "disastrous war" into a meaningful settlement.

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