

Endless Regional Chaos: American Presence in Afghanistan

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The geographic location of Afghanistan has always occupied a central role in many geopolitical studies. Donald Trump's reasons for reinforcing US troops in the region are driven by the continuing US need to prevent a complete Eurasian integration among regional powers.

The April peace talks between Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Russia and China seemed to have put an end to the persistent and dominant American presence in the country. In Washington, following fifteen years of war and a series of failures, many had come to the conclusion that the time had come for the United States to return home.

Trump had throughout his electoral campaign criticized the foreign policy of his predecessors, giving the indication that he would be looking to leave Afghanistan once he assumed the presidency.

The road plan for Afghanistan laid out by the April peace talks seemed to offer the prospect of national reconciliation between the Taliban and the central authority in Kabul, assisted by parties with great interest in the country like India and Pakistan, given their geographic proximity, as well as Russia, China and Turkey.

The first talks in April 2017 capitalized on America's absence at the conference as well as on the will of the protagonists to reach an agreement after fifteen years of war and terror. Afghanistan is a key crossroad in the eastward expansion strategy that illustrates the special partnership between Russia and China, as seen with the steady progress of the Silk Road 2.0 initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union. Given Afghanistan's geographic position, sharing boundaries with Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, it is useful to emphasize the role the country could play as a commercial and energy hub in the not too distant future.

Due to incompetence or perhaps due to facing insurmountable pressures, Donald Trump is undergoing a gradual and inexorable diminution with the elimination of all the most representative members of his administration. At the same time, the appointment of military personnel to civilian roles has pushed the administration into unexplored directions not foreshadowed in the electoral campaign. Trump spoke of less US military presence in the internal affairs of other nations. But as we shall see, nothing could be further from the truth.

The appointment of Generals McMaster, Kelly and Mattis (Mattis perhaps being the most

powerful US defense secretary since the end of World War II) is Trump's attempt to withstand and bargain with the most significant elements of America's deep state. A strong military component in the White House helps ensure continuity in US foreign policy. Contrary to what was professed during the elections, Donald Trump immediately traded American foreign policy in exchange for explicit GOP backing for key legislation that will help secure a 2020 re-election. Without bills on health, tax and immigration reform being passed, there will be no arguments in favor of the GOP and Trump during the midterm and presidential elections in 2018 and 2020 respectively.

The deep state in Washington has slowly but inexorably taken over Trump's presidency, a task made all the simpler by Trump's character, which dismisses his lack of experience with an overweening self-confidence. The military component of the deep state, in concert with GOP leaders, took less than six months to quash Trump's electoral promises and turn the president's foreign policy into a dangerous reprise of the Obama and Bush years.

More and more frequently, American intervention in foreign lands lead to situations of uncontrollable chaos, with no real central authority able to govern and obey Washington's orders. The current state of the Middle East is reflective of this. In Afghanistan, Washington, especially Mattis, is cognizant of the country's rebirth under Sino-Russian leadership after fifteen years of America's presence. This is a scenario that the US deep state is not willing to tolerate.

Leaving aside Afghanistan's huge amounts of natural resources (about one trillion in precious metals), as well as its strategic location linking east and west, a peaceful Afghanistan led by a single central authority would hardly cohere with US objectives in the country. The US loves to consider itself the indispensable nation for peace in Afghanistan, when actually it is the main obstacle to peace.

For American foreign policy continuity, Afghanistan needs to remain in a chaotic situation. Above all, the US military industrial complex is not willing to surrender its political and military power in the country, only to be substituted by Moscow or Beijing. With these unofficial motives, General Mattis announced a surge of several thousand American troops to the country. It is immediately clear that numerically and tactically, four or five thousand soldiers will make no difference. The intent is purely demonstrative, as seen in Syria with a few missiles lobbed at an empty airbase. The purpose is to send a clear and unambiguous message to Russia, China, Pakistan and even India, to the effect that without American consensus, no strategic reorganization is permissible in Afghanistan.

General Mattis and all those who for decades have been constantly thinking of MacKinder's geopolitical theory (Heartland Theory) are aware of the strategic importance of keeping Afghanistan hostile towards regional powers like China and Russia. The USSR's war in defense of the country, and the socialist superpower's subsequent collapse, offers a historical warning.

In April, Moscow and Beijing, with the tacit approval of New Delhi and Islamabad, launched a peace process in Kabul that should have facilitated talks between the central authority and the Taliban to bring about a truce that would bring to an end the violence and destruction that had over fifteen years left the country bleeding in endless poverty and suffering.

The American surge will not advance American interests in the country. It will not change

the delicate balance negotiated between the parties back in April. It will not affect the efforts of Moscow and Beijing to stabilize the country. It will only buy Washington more time by bombing and killing civilians, always viewed by American generals as an acceptable and privileged option available to them.

Like in other parts of the world, the presence of American troops does not fully explain the long-term goals of military planners. Afghanistan in some respects resembles a similar situation to Southeast Asia. In South Korea, the American presence has persisted since 1950, and with it the destabilization of the Korean peninsula. As in Asia, the central purpose of the American presence in Afghanistan is to occupy geo-strategic zones in order to prevent Eurasian integration between powers like India, China and Russia. Secondly, it is the constant presence of troops and military bases in locations close to or around the two major powers of China and Russia that aims to overburden and thereby diminish the defensive capabilities of these two strategic threats. In 1962, when the USSR did something similar in response to the US deployment of patriot missiles in Turkey, it started building up its offensive capability in the Western Hemisphere using Cuba as a military base. The US was willing to go to war to halt this domestic threat and for weeks the world was on the verge of a nuclear conflict. Only dialogue between American and Soviet leaders averted this threat to human existence.

Conclusions

Washington cares for nothing other than its own interests. But twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, the world is changing, and more and more fruitful efforts to replace the chaos wrought by US policies can be seen with peaceful, mutually beneficial cooperation increasingly being the order of the day. The road to economic prosperity and a re-established unity among the Afghan people is still a work in progress, but once the country manages to establish its independence, Washington will have a hard time dictating conditions. Countries like Russia, China and India have every intention of using diplomacy and peacekeeping to prevent a dangerous escalation in Afghanistan.

India and China have some divergence over the future of the region, but by the start of the 2017 BRICS conference, they had already resolved a border dispute that lasted over two months. The ability to create diverse organizations like BRICS, AIIB and SCO provides the opportunity to begin any kind of negotiation with a legal and economic foundation. This represents a commendable example of overcoming differences through diplomacy and economic benefits.

While the United States exhales the last breaths as a declining global power, no longer able to impose its will, it lashes out in pointless acts like lobbing 60 cruise missiles at Syria or sending 4000 troops to Afghanistan. Such acts do not change anything on the ground or modify the balance of forces in Washington's favor. They do, however, have a strong impact on further reducing whatever confidence remains in the US, closing the door to opportunities for dialogue and cooperation that may otherwise have offered themselves.

Trump promised isolationism. His generals, behind the scenes, have managed to make this electoral promise come true, leaving Washington alone in the international arena in the near term.

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