

Will the Afghan ‘Graveyard of Empires’ Be Donald Trump’s Last Stand?

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Is NATO in a tailspin or is Trump going to rejuvenate it in Afghanistan? US generals believe a summer war with the Taliban is just what he needs. But who will call the shots?

The impeachment of Donald Trump is a subject now permeating American news outlets as the number of those who believe the US president won’t make it to the end of his term increases. Yet, it may well be his own bungling, capricious foreign policies, marked not by their idiotic rationale but more by their stark U-turn on what he has stated himself in the run-up to the US elections, which could prove to be the fatal blow to his presidency.

Afghanistan is a country so vast and so ungoverned that Alexander the Great struggled to conquer it in three bloody years. Even the British in their heyday period of glory lost three wars there in what became more recently called the ‘graveyard of empires’ by scholars and historians. And Russia knows only too well the price of intervention after the former Soviet Union pulled out of the Central Asian country in 1989.

Even President Obama knew the only smart thing to do for US troops was to get out of the wretched place. During George W’s time in office, the US had at one point a staggering 100,000 troops [stationed](#) there, yet still failed to have any real impact on both destroying the Taliban or even, remarkably, securing the Afghan capital.

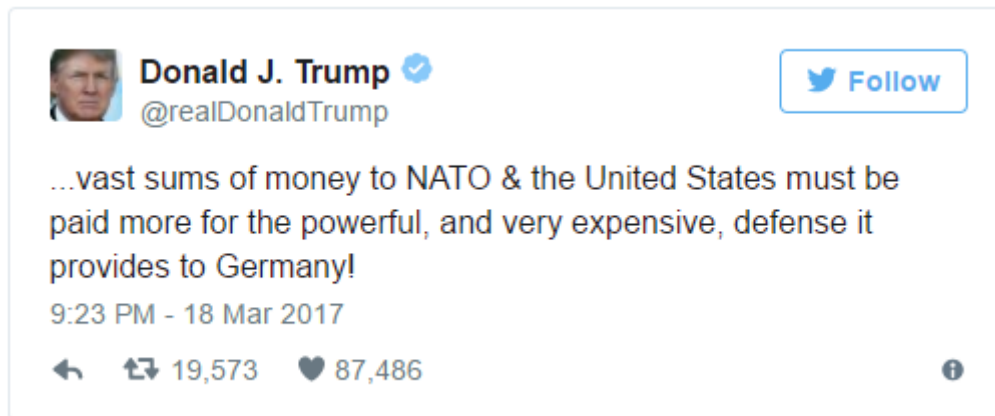
Trump himself scolded Obama in his last days in office and tweeted that the US should get out of these “middle east wars which had cost six trillion dollars.” Remarkably, he even [tweeted 13 times](#) that Obama should not bomb Syria, which he has himself done just [this week](#) and of course before with the Assad airfield Tomahawk attack.

Afghanistan is like a mesmerizing gem or some kind of addiction for many who cradle it. Once this heroine has consumed you, you can never see anything in a clear light again.

And so Trump has got the Afghan fever, but it is hard to see how he will come out of Afghanistan a winner, as the stakes are so stacked against him, it may well be what Iraq was to Tony Blair: a self-prescribed suicide pill.

Just recently, there have been a growing, if not an alarming, number of NATO inconsistencies which have been confusing US media with regards to Trump. Can his earlier churlish endeavors to threaten to break up the Brussels-based defense organization really be taken seriously in the light of recent developments in the Middle East – plus also a [meeting](#) in May of NATO chiefs who have a new blueprint for Afghanistan?

At first glance, Trump's [support](#) of a 'Muslim NATO' seemed logical, in that throwing his weight behind such an organization – which will be led by Saudi Arabia – kills many birds with just one stone. However, that view not only shows NATO he is serious about being its number one adversary, but it also enriches the relations he has with the Saudis, who dream of nothing more than delusional glory and influence. If Trump can make the House of Saud powerful and give it an imperial patina in the Middle East, as it was years before when Iran was crippled by Western sanctions, then he can ask whatever he wants for in return from Riyadh. It also angers the Europeans who will, in theory, never be allowed under a NATO mandate to carry out ill-conceived sorties, like bombing Libya, for example, which for many was a new low point for Russia-US relations, despite the jets used being British and Italian.



The Germans are coming

Despite its identity crisis and poor performance, dismantling NATO is not as easy as it seems and, like most of what Trump threatens to do, is not likely to be wound down. The Germans flatly [refused](#) at the end of March to pay the two percent of GDP criteria on defense, arguing that international aid should be bundled into the equation. They have also [harbored](#) a few delusions themselves about having their own NATO-type organization, which they would lead and other EU member states would support.

And so what is Trump up to? Divide and rule the old NATO? In Afghanistan, the NATO-led coalition was always top heavy with American troops and awkwardly had a great many non-NATO members that made up the ISAF. Perhaps Trump believes that if the US is running a NATO-led campaign there once again, with a new, febrile momentum to scale back the Taliban, then he can use that as leverage in Brussels: 'Hey, we're running the Afghanistan campaign which has NATO as merely a name,' might be the rhetoric. He may also be thinking foolishly along the lines of the neocons in the late 80s who wrongly believed that the US had won a proxy war against the Russians. Can he win in Afghanistan against Russia, who some in his administration [say](#) is supporting the Taliban?

Command hierarchy vague

The important thing about the Afghanistan, NATO-led campaign is that NATO does not really lead it. The set up of international foreign armies is so loose and open to interpretation that in 2007, the EU even harped on about a new 'pillar' to the command hierarchy. And just for good measure, the Americans always had an entirely separate contingent of soldiers there in the event that they could go rogue and do their own thing when the politics didn't go their way. Arguably, it is this ambiguity what Trump will hope to capitalize on and so far from supporting NATO in Afghanistan; he could set out to further its demise.

Taliban season kicks off, but who's got the ammo?

But he just doesn't understand what he's getting into. I would argue that the US president is confused and bewildered. To think that after so much ground has been lost to the Taliban, who now control something like 60 percent of the entire country, that a small increase in the numbers of US troops there will make a difference is imbecilic.

These days there is no strategy to win any war. The US generals in NATO are just talking about making sure that the Americans don't lose any more ground. There is no macho game plan with any bold title. The current initiative is entirely illogical, as now the Taliban have so much control, and the current 13,000 ISAF coalition has only proportioned something like 2,000 to actually fight the group – the rest are there training the Afghanis. Despite one small victory in Kunduz province against the Taliban, in reality, it is taking longer than anyone could have imagined. Afghanistan is the fourth most corrupt country in the world and graft plays a huge role in Taliban gains.

Trump's generals have also got the numbers wrong and can't be planning a major turn around but small, bite-sized victories. They are in a hurry because the weather has changed and the fighting season has started. But their furor has clouded their judgment.

An extra 15,000 over the entire country might make some small waves (if these are all fighting), but it will, in the long run, only fan the flames of the insurgency and give the Taliban the oxygen it needs to fight to the end. To make things even more complicated, not only would US forces have to fight against much higher numbers of Taliban, but now ISIL and Al-Qaeda are also there as well. Although ideologically array, these three groups will inevitably form an unwritten pact to pool their resources against American soldiers.

Expect US body bags, more US journalists using 'graveyard of empire' in their copy and endless references to Tom Hanks in the 'Charlie Wilson' Hollywood movie. It's going to be a hot summer.

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