

Beginning of The End to The Forever War: US Policy towards Afghanistan during Trump Administration

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Abstract

This paper aims to study how United States (US) under Trump administration conducted their foreign policy towards Afghanistan, a nation which served as one of the US main interests since the start of 21st century. Qualitative research method is used, with foreign policies analysed under the international relations realism theory. This research finds that there is a discrepancy between Trump's idea's of America First policies, coupled with a reluctance to abandon Afghanistan which the US has been involved with for two decades. This dilemma lies between the need to reduce US spending towards Afghanistan and divert the resources to other interests, while also making sure that Afghanistan remains secure without becoming a country which potentially harbours terrorists.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, United States, Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is a nation in Central Asia region with considerably strategic geographical location. It is a landlocked state which shares borders with multiple nations including Pakistan, China, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. This strategic location, including being part of the historical Silk Road trade route, has proven to become an interest and occupied by many other powers in the past, including the well-known Alexander the Great, and The British Empire, and The Soviet Union. The term “Graveyard of Empires” has been associated with Afghanistan, implying that powers who try to take Afghanistan eventually falls.

Despite being an independent nation after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, the rural people of Afghanistan consist largely of isolated tribes that tend to be hostile to each other. Warlord cultures are still prevalent in Afghanistan despite attempts from governments to transition into a more ‘modernized’ society across the nation. These warlords are still prevalent to this day and has taken part in the conflicts within Afghanistan such as during the Soviet occupation and The US invasion. In such cases there are warlords that see these invading powers as opportunity to expand their influence therefore willing to cooperate with them instead of resisting them.

During the cold war, multiple attempts to modernize and implement a more democratic system is attempted in Afghanistan by the Kingdom. Eventually leading to a coup in early 70s to form the Republic of Afghanistan. After few years however, tensions rise between the government and People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA, eventually culminating with the PDPA starting a large-scale coup d’etat to overthrow the Afghan Government. Thus, the Republic transformed into the Soviet-aligned Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in 1978. Being a communist government, the Soviets thus consider them an ally immediately and sent aid to help modernize the nation for infrastructure building. Replacing a large portion of traditional and religious-influenced culture with secular ones, The PDPA is constantly at odds with religious elites and a large portion of the rural population, which later led to massive rebellion.

The government of Democratic Republic of Afghanistan thus requested Soviet Military aid to help maintain the rebellion, and thus The Soviet occupation started in 1979. Although the Afghan people showed resistance towards the Soviet invaders, at first, they were powerless to

fight The Soviet military. Some warlords too ally with the Soviet military thus increasing their overall power. Rebel factions generally known as Mujahideen are later on formed to become a more coordinated resistance against Soviet forces. The US sees this as an opportunity to help defeat the Soviets, and thus starts helping the Mujahideen groups (which includes what's later known as Al-Qaeda, formed by Osama Bin Laden) by supplying them weapons and equipment. Some of these equipment include the then-advanced Stinger man-portable air-defence missile launcher, which was an especially useful tool to counter Soviet attack helicopters.

American assistance towards Afghan Mujahideen is an example of the early US national interest towards Afghanistan. In this context, they are trying to use the Mujahideen to defeat the Soviet, and thus to retake the country from the rule of the PDPA. Success of the Mujahideen group eventually led to The Soviets to weaken until their withdrawal in 1989. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a victory towards The United States, who had a part in helping the Mujahideen. The war in Afghanistan costs a lot for The Soviets in terms of manpower casualties and material loss. Eventually leading to an economic crisis followed by dissolution of The Soviet Union in 1991.

However, the fall of Soviet Union does not necessarily lead the people of Afghanistan to become a unified state, instead going into a chaotic disorder as tribe warlords once again take over and fight each other. In the 1990s, the Taliban was then formed with intention to establish a unified Afghanistan under supposed Sharia Law. This movement then gained supporter and gradually becomes bigger, capturing a large portion of Afghanistan by 2001 except for the Northern provinces, nearing Uzbek border. The large number of Taliban combatants does not come only from Afghans but also support from many other nations, such as Arab, Pakistanis, and Chechens. Within the Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden (who also was not an Afghan-native himself) grew to become a powerful Muslim extremist organization, seeing the western nations and their values as the enemy.

The 1998 US embassy bombings in African states and the 9/11 incident in 2001 are both attributed to Al-Qaeda, which then marks Al-Qaeda as a direct and active threat towards the United States. Having Al-Qaeda based on Afghanistan within the Taliban Government enables The US to see Afghanistan as hostile territory, therefore enabling a casus belli for US invasion of Afghanistan shortly after 9/11 incident. The US involvement in Afghanistan was initially supported highly by The US public, many of them bitter over the 9/11 incident which caused the death of over two thousand people. Thus it was rational for The American people to feel disdain for whoever caused this attack, and for them to be brought to justice as quick as possible.

The dissolution of The Soviet Union in 1991 leaves The United States as the sole remaining superpower. The international system thus shifts from a bipolar system (with two main powers competing) to a unipolar one. The US victory in defeating Iraqi military during Operation Desert Storm in earlier 1991 also boosts the confidence of The US regarding their seemingly undefeatable military might. Furthermore, 9/11 caused a lot of American citizens to feel patriotic as their nation gets attacked, and thus recruitment in the military becomes higher than ever since the second world war. It can be said that the American public right after 9/11 was not only ready to go to war, but they want to.

Within less than a month after 9/11, in October 2001 the US started their full-scale invasion of Afghanistan with the goals of toppling the Taliban from power, restoring it with democratic western-aligned government, and also to eliminate the Al-Qaeda. Securing Afghanistan as a whole is deemed necessary in order to prevent the region from being used by such organizations to become a base to conduct terrorist operations. However, the duty of installing a new government and maintaining them is not a simple one, as it will have to involve aid in building infrastructure, education, and setting up security forces. With the nation secured from Taliban power, it is deemed that they can proceed to the hunt of Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda as a whole.

Bringing down Bin Laden proved not to be an easy task. Shortly after the Invasion, US and British special forces operatives located large concentration of Al Qaeda Fighters and reported whereabouts of Bin Laden in Tora Bora region near Pakistani border. Large scale battle occurred however Bin Laden was nowhere to be found. In 2002 joint US and British forces conducted Operation Anaconda in Takur Ghar region of Afghanistan, as they suspect the region of harbor a large amount of Al Qaeda Fighters including Bin Laden himself. Coalition forces took heavy resistance as they approach Al-Qaeda positions, resulting in considerably large US casualties and few helicopters shot down. Similar to Tora Bora, Bin Laden was not found after the end of the battle and is suspected to have escaped from Afghanistan through Pakistani border along with a large number of other Al-Qaeda fighters. (Gunaratna and Nielsen 2008)

It was only in 2011, Under the Administration of Barrack Obama, Osama Bin Laden's definite location was found and a raid by US Navy special operatives were commenced which killed Bin Laden in the process. Under Obama Administration the US has ended their direct military involvement in Iraq by the end of 2011, and reportedly it was part of their goal to attempt the same with Afghanistan. With the death of Bin Laden Al-Qaeda activities were reported to have decreased (Jenkins 2011), however they still needed to make sure that Afghanistan will remain secure and do not harbor any more groups that would threaten the United States and its allies.

As previously mentioned, the process of maintaining security and nation building in Afghanistan involves several aspects including infrastructure building for modernization, implementing education and democratic values, and building the Afghan National Army. This task is proven to not be an easy one as they are not simply dealing with uniformed enemy, but regular people (mostly villagers) that has entirely different culture and are not always willing to cooperate with their interests. As combat intensity gradually decreased and the Afghan National Army (ANA) increased in size and overall power, it is determined safe to gradually withdraw the number of troops stationed in Afghanistan as The ANA should be able to keep the country safe from terrorist factions.

In 2016, the Obama administration ended with US troops still not completely withdrawn from Afghanistan, although having a smaller presence than previously. Before taking office, Donald Trump stated that it would be one of the goals to end their involvement in Afghanistan in order to be able to focus on enhancing the welfare and power of The United States on its own. Under the Trump Administration, The US both redeployed their troops to Afghanistan and start their withdrawal, eventually negotiating peace talks with The Taliban.

This paper aims to study how US under Trump administration conducted their foreign policy towards Afghanistan, a nation which served as one of the US main interests since the start of 21st century. In this paper it will be analyzed what these policies are, why they are formed, and how they are implemented. For example, the idea of withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan is not a new one, it only happened to large extend by 2020 despite Obama administration already promising to start withdrawal. This paper will attempt to elaborate how does this campaign succeed under Trump administration more than previous leaders.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is to be written through Qualitative research method, with academic journals and books regarding theories and case studies used as the main references. The previous literatures in this subject such as one written by Kadir Ustun and Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnenbusch provides a detailed case study of certain aspects of the case. In this paper those researches will be used to combine multiple perspective to create a comprehensive big picture regarding the

foreign policy of Turkey and United States towards Syria. Other sources related to the topic too will be used to provide additional perspective surrounding the subject.

Foreign policies will be analyzed using a realist point of view, in a sense that all actions of a nation-state are done in order to pursue each of their own national interest. The opposing liberal point of view would see that nations would cooperate in order to maintain peace and reduce conflict. In the realist point of view however, conflict reduction is needed in order for a nation to be able to pursue their own national interest. When nations cooperate, it means they share a common national interest to some extent. However, every nation has different needs, shaped by a lot of factors such as their economic condition and their geographical situation. Historical approaches in shaping foreign policies will also be used to contribute to analyzing international actions during this period.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Donald Trump and Domestic Environment

Since the 2016 presidential campaigns, Donald Trump has been known for emphasizing “America First” agenda, with his “Make America Great Again” slogan. His campaign is characterized by usually frontal speech emphasizing nationalistic agendas, and coupled with rallies where large amount of people (mostly supporters) gathers. Donald Trump’s background as a highly successful businessman brought the seemingly realistic perspective regarding economy building which caught interest from a lot of citizens.

Ever since the dissolution of Soviet Union, The United States as the sole superpower has been known as a “world police”, one that tries to spread their influence and agenda all over the world in the name of spreading democracy and supporting liberalist agendas. However Trump criticizes this agenda as in his views, it weakens America’s core by focusing on building other nations and intervening with other nations’ affairs too much. This idea appeals to much of the US citizens as they are starting to feel the government neglects them for interests abroad.

Part of Trump’s initial foreign policy would include abandoning many previous bilateral or multilateral agreements with other nations which he determined as non-beneficial and not having positive prospect for the future. His national-focused agendas supposedly also mean reducing their tendency to intervene in other nations’ issues, especially regarding the use of military power unless is presented as a direct threat. In-line with his background as a Businessman, he is confident of the power of business to establish relations, and to be used as a weapon. As such, sanctions are given towards North Korea and Iran, and also trade tariffs are increased for China (which eventually leads to the on-going trade war). However, the appearance of Islamic State of Iraq nd Syria (ISIS) in 2013-2014 is considered an exception that has to be dealt directly, therefore under Trump administration in 2017 The US redeployed troops to Iraq and Syria to get directly involved in combating ISIS.

One of the issues that he addressed which a lot of American citizens seem to relate to is the issue regarding immigrants. Being what a lot of people perceive to be the most powerful country, a lot of foreigners perceive the United States as an ideal place to live, the notion of it being the land of the free where one can start life over. Immigrants in the US that tend to be brought as an issue are those from Central and South America, which came through the US illegally by crossing the Mexican border. Trump repeatedly stated that he will build a wall between the Mexican border in order to prevent illegal immigrants from crossing.

However, immigrant issues in the US does not only come from The Mexican border, yet also overseas from The Middle East. Ever since 9/11, American sentiments toward The Middle East and Islam (as Al Qaeda was a radical Islam organization) shifted negatively, thus islamophobia becomes a very common occurrence in the US. Other events such as the appearance

of ISIS in 2014 and the 2015 Boston Bombings further strengthen the association of terrorism to Islam and Middle East in the American public. Furthermore, Muslim immigrants tend to be considered as people of different culture which does not easily adapt to American culture. For example, their practices of having adzan calling for prayers five times in a day is something that most considers to be alienating.

Trump himself public ally spoke against Muslims and Muslim States, including mentioning the need to disallow Muslims to enter The United States. This statement was realized in 2017 as travel bans are implemented towards several countries that are deemed to harbor potential terrorists mostly in Asia and Africa, including but not limited to Syria, Iran, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Sudan, and North Korea. Aside from cultural issues, one of the common complaints regarding immigrants such as those from Middle East and South America to many American citizens is their tendency to get employed by companies due to their will to get paid lower than standards. (Randy Capps 2007)

Despite being a Muslim nation, Afghanistan was not issued a travel ban due to their official position as being an ally of the US. A lot of refugees from Afghanistan are welcomed to stay in the US, especially people who has done service towards the US, such as Afghans who work as interpreters for US military. A lot of these interpreters are well liked by US military personnel serving in country, and they too advocate for these people to be welcomed openly to become a US citizen. A number of US personnel which saw service in Afghanistan too believe that they are making good progress in helping modernization of the country, and tends to advocate for the US to stay in Afghanistan instead of abandoning what they have fought for. (Jacobson 2010)

On the other hand, The US has suffered casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq and this thus has left a bad taste for Americans. The public opinion regarding continuing wars generally shifted negatively not long after the first five years of The Global War on Terror. (Druckman 2007) Mental health of veterans is also a large concern for the US citizens. Veterans returning from wars in Afghanistan or Iraq tend to suffer post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) which can lead to fatal consequences. A large number of US veterans are found to be living as homeless people and has a considerably high suicide rate. (Robert J. Ursano, Ronald C. Kessler and Murray B. Stein 2015)

Actions Towards Afghanistan

By 2017 at the beginning of Trump Administration, US presence in Afghanistan is considerably limited, with only about 8.400 personnel compared to 13.000 amount during 2015. Following the death of Bin Laden in 2011, Al-Qaeda has been considered as less active and dangerous, therefore Afghanistan is considered relatively stable. However, as Trump deployed troops to Iraq and Syria to combat ISIS, the possibility that ISIS fighters escape to then more stable Afghanistan is considered. Therefore, additional troops are again deployed to Afghanistan starting from 2017 to prevent the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a hub for terrorist organization, once again in-line with the original idea that justifies the 2001 Invasion of Afghanistan.

As combat encounters in Afghanistan has decreased their focus in Afghanistan shifted to security and nation building. When it comes to building and modernizing a nation, the people of said nation must first learn to accept the ‘modern’ values and ways, be willing to abandon their lifestyle which to some might be considered as ‘obsolete’. In committing these constructions, military personal is still needed to maintain security to the construction workers or other aid workers as they may still come under attack by insurgents.

Challenges presented here includes to convince villagers to accept these new values and to partake with the program. In terms of nation building, infrastructure are built along with other structures, and significantly, schools in the region with emphasis on equality where everyone, including men and woman. can join. This is hard to take to some of the more traditional Afghans

in rural areas who still embrace the idea that women are not allowed to go to school. Offers regarding financial assistance along with promises of modernization and education are given towards village chiefs and local warlords but a lot of times these offers do not seem to catch their interest. Afghan citizens in the cities such as Kabul tend to accept modernization more easily, however there are still issues with the government and leaders of the national army as corruption runs amok.

These issues altogether lead to the assessment that Afghanistan may be a lost cause, and it is not worthy of further investments unless proven that they can handle themselves. By 2019 billions of dollars has been spent towards affairs in Afghanistan. Other than the issue of modernization and democratization the society of Afghanistan, they need to make sure The Afghan Security Forces are able to fare well in combat against Taliban or any other future threats without the need to rely on US military aid. In this case a large portion of US military personnel are dedicated to training and supplying Afghan military with weapons, vehicles, and other equipment. However, similar to the case of traditional Afghan villagers, a lot of personnel in Afghan security forces are not interested in the modern ideals or nationalism, as many of them did not grow up with a unified state with strong nationalistic identities.

Another reason to keep a significant military presence is to disrupt opium production in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is known as a place where Opium poppy flowers grow naturally, and a lot of Afghan villages grow poppy as means of income. The Taliban uses these opium to be sold illegally internationally as means to secure funding. Denying poppy production in Afghanistan is done as means to disrupt financial income towards The Taliban and any possible insurgent factions.

The increased military presence however does not ensure that all the other agendas which the US imposed towards Afghanistan to be fulfilled, especially when it comes to modernization the nation. As the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria cools down, the threat of ISIS re-emerging in Afghanistan is determined as a less likely occurrence. With troops withdrawing from Iraq and Syria by 2019, Afghanistan remains the only one with major US military presence. By 2020, Trump was already willing to start complete withdrawal of troops and started negotiating with Taliban for conditional peace in Afghanistan. It is hoped that this peace agreement would help US troops to leave Afghanistan safely. Known as “Doha Agreement”, this agreement involves The US as a state actor interacting with The Taliban, acknowledged to the US as a non-state actor Emirate of Afghanistan. The decision too involves the release of thousands Taliban prisoners which are interned in The United States. This negotiation can be considered unique for The US as the Taliban is considered as a terrorist organization. It is likely that under The George W. Bush administration such negotiation with Taliban would not be held as he vowed to “Not negotiate with terrorists.” (O’Neil 2014)

The negotiations concluded that The US would set deadline for withdrawal preparations on May 1st 2021. The process of withdrawal of a military force does not merely constitute of ferrying servicemen back home, but also to bring back a large amount of heavy equipment which were brought to the war zone, such as heavy armored vehicles, helicopters, construction tools, all the way to smaller things like furniture and generators for bases which they have constructed. Therefore, it is a process of deconstructing and dismantling their own assets. A lot of these equipment end up being left in-country to be handed over to Afghan Security Forces. However, the decision to end military commitment does not mean an end to their humanitarian and nation building commitment towards Afghanistan, therefore funds are still spend towards building infrastructure, educational institutions, other financial aid, and to some extent weaponry supply towards Afghan Security Forces. By the time Trump left office and Joe Biden’s administration became effective, The US military was still in Afghanistan even though officially participating in non-combat roles. (Hafeez Ullah 2020)

CONCLUSION

Trump's supposedly isolationist behavior which he emphasized did not immediately put an end to "the forever war" in Afghanistan. The US interest towards Afghanistan concerns direct national security due to their experience with being attacked by the allegedly-Afghan based Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Therefore, establishing a secure Afghanistan is still something that is determined as necessary even though Al-Qaeda has been inactive following the death of Osama Bin Laden, and combat encounters with Taliban has generally decreased during the second decade of US-led coalition involvement in Afghanistan.

However the US themselves cannot deny that their involvement may not achieve the optimistic goals that they imposed to Afghanistan, which includes modernization Afghan society to a more democratic one. The need to keep Afghanistan secure and to deny them from future usage by terrorist organizations also result in the need to maintain the Afghan Security Forces as an effective fighting force, by training and supplying weapons to them. By 2019 it was supposedly determined that The Afghan Security Forces has become an effective enough fighting force with advanced equipment which can be used to defend themselves in case Taliban attacks once more. Despite the constant spending towards Afghanistan US analyst deems that progress is very slow if not non-existent.

There will always be two perspectives when it comes to abandoning a long-term project. First is a long-term project should be abandoned if no longer feasible and proven to not be beneficial. On the other hand, abandoning a long-term project, in which large amount of funds has been spent and, in this case, even sacrificing loss of lives of American servicemen, would mean all the progress made during the last 20 years might go to waste. Abandoning Afghanistan might lead to its return to its previous chaotic state before the 2001 US invasion, and thus once more potentially harboring terrorists, and reverting all modernization due to Taliban's rule and anti-western values. In-line with Trump's tendency to abandon previous relations with other states, it is understandable that he too would cease cooperation with Afghanistan when deemed as non-beneficial, despite the previous efforts spent

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