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## No Exit From Afghanistan: Major Takeaways From Trump's Big Speech on America's Longest War

By Ankit Panda  
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On Monday evening, U.S. President Donald J. Trump delivered an anticipated address outlining the United States' goals for Afghanistan, where after 16 years of war, at least 8,400 U.S. troops remain as the Taliban and other militant groups continue to seize territory from the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Trump did not speak off-the-cuff, instead sticking to prepared remarks delivered from a teleprompter.

Contrary to leaks before the speech suggesting he would introduce a modest surge of 3,900 to 4,000 troops, Trump did not offer a specific troop level number. Moreover, he did not explicitly outline or clarify a strategic end-state for Afghanistan beyond promising terrorists a “decisive defeat.” Therein was the primary focus of Trump’s speech: terrorism and counterterrorism.

He offered what he thought sounded like a “clear definition” of victory. It was almost entirely focused on counterterrorism:

*Our troops will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition: attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over the country, and stopping mass terror attacks against Americans before they emerge.*

It was concerning early on that it took Trump roughly ten minutes into a speech on Afghanistan and U.S. policy in Afghanistan to mention the Taliban by name and address the Afghan government. The speech was framed with a recounting of the results of the United States' withdrawal from Iraq, which Trump said created the conditions for the eventual rise of the Islamic State.

As a result, Trump added, the United States could not withdraw immediately from Afghanistan, despite how war-weary ordinary Americans may be. The “consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable,” he said, adding that “hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum” for the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (the group’s Afghanistan-Pakistan branch) and al-Qaeda.

Trump, instead, promised that U.S. troops in the country would be fighting for victory and would be focused primarily on a counterterrorism mission against the Islamic State, which featured prominently and early on as the United States’ primary enemy in Afghanistan, despite estimates that its total fighter count is a fraction of the armed insurgents that fight for any number of groups linked to the Taliban.

The Taliban received perfunctory attention in the address, with Trump hinting that at one point in the future, they may be able to become part of a political solution in Afghanistan, leaving a long-standing pillar of U.S. policy untouched. What was more important, however, was just how emphatic Trump was that the United States was going to fully get out of the nation-building business.

On the question of the Afghan government, Trump appeared mostly ambivalent; he included a bit of pabulum on supporting the government, but also requested even burden-sharing with the struggling Afghan National Army in the fight against terrorism in the country. Above all, Trump’s support for the Afghan government was anything but unconditional. A gaffe — Trump referencing the “prime minister of Afghanistan,” a position that does not exist — underlined the overall attention given to the government in Kabul.

The speech didn’t just center around Afghanistan; “South Asia” was repeatedly invoked, but meant just Pakistan and India. Apart from the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbors and rivals, no other regional state, including China, Iran, Russia, or the Central Asian states, received close attention.

On Pakistan, Trump minced few words, accusing Islamabad of outright sheltering organizations that “try every day to kill our people.” He strongly hinted that coalition support fund reimbursements to Pakistan would come under additional scrutiny. In a line that will be sure to find applause in New Delhi, Trump punctuated his condemnation of Pakistan by noting that “It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and peace.”

What was left unsaid, however, was the question that has bedeviled nearly all U.S. officials and bureaucrats who’ve from time to time found it opportune to rhetorically lambaste Pakistan: how can the United States cause a change of policy in Islamabad and, more importantly, Rawalpindi, where the powerful Pakistani military leadership sits? This went unanswered in Trump’s address,

suggesting that his best plan to deal with Pakistan is to will it into submission on the back of threats to suspend military reimbursement payments.

For India, however, while the condemnation of Pakistan was welcome, Trump's speech introduced an uncomfortable dynamic. While underlining India's status as an important partner for the United States, echoing language that was present in the recent June joint statement between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Trump, the U.S. president carved out a space for India to do more on Afghanistan.

While an open-ended invitation from the United States for Delhi to do more on Afghanistan may have been welcome, Trump explicitly linked trade policy outcomes with what appeared to be India's free-riding in Afghanistan. (Delhi's contributions in Afghanistan are extensive, but mostly limited to economic matters to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing Islamabad; Delhi recently upped its assistance by \$1 billion.)

"India makes billions of dollars in trade with the United States and we want them to help us out in Afghanistan," Trump noted, introducing an uneasy dynamic into the how the United States thinks about India's role as a partner in the region. The language in the Modi-Trump joint statement on Afghanistan had suggested a more even-footed and cooperative partnership.

Indian language has in recent months sought to assuage any concerns in the Trump administration that Delhi is an eager regional free-rider on U.S. security assurances in Afghanistan. Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, for example, noted at a recent India-U.S. forum meeting that "deeply appreciate[s] the sacrifices made by the US to preserve peace, security and democracy in Afghanistan."

Much remains uncertain in how this shift in U.S. thinking toward India will be received in Delhi. A lot will no doubt come down to the details of where specifically the Trump administration sees a role for India.

Finally, some in India will no doubt be frustrated that "South Asia" in the context of Trump's speech came to mean just India and Pakistan, placing the two rivals side-by-side, with an equal degree of responsibility, if not culpability, for outcomes in Afghanistan. The condemnation of Pakistan will only go so far before this perennial Indian frustration will resurface.

The bottom line of Trump's speech, for those of us who would have welcomed a serious strategic rethink of the United State's continued presence in Afghanistan, was disappointing. Trump's lack of seriousness about a strategic end state only paved the path to additional warfighting under the aegis of counterterrorism, extending the United States' longest war indefinitely.

Whatever happens now in Afghanistan, the war is now at least Trump's war. He becomes the third president to inherit responsibility for the implementation of an Afghan war termination strategy and, if Monday's speech was any indication, his administration is not poised to succeed where his predecessors failed.