



US objectives in Afghanistan

US objectives in Afghanistan : Options for Pakistan

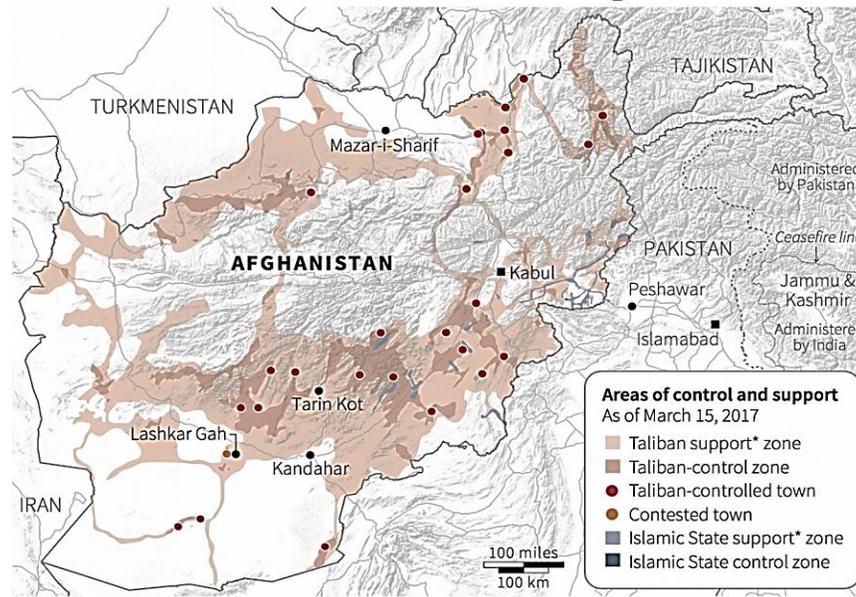


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Taliban and Islamic State control in Afghanistan



* Includes low-confidence support zone based on historical, terrain, and demographic analysis.
Sources: Institute for the Study of War, Reuters

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REUTERS

On June 12, 2017, Bruce Jones, director of the Brookings Foreign Policy Program, convened five Brookings experts—John Allen, Vanda Felbab-Brown, Tanvi Madan, Michael O’Hanlon, and Bruce Riedel—to discuss the history and future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The report titled [Rightsizing Expectations: US policy options for Afghanistan](#) provides an edited transcript of the varied assessments shared on Afghanistan.

The report shares views on 3 key US objectives in Afghanistan

1. The counter terrorism objectives
2. Counter insurgency objectives
3. Stabilizing Afghanistan.

The Counter Terrorism Objectives

Post 9/11, Counter terrorism objectives were the foundation for US intervention in Afghanistan, over the years—the US has managed to degrade the Al- Qaeda infrastructure in the Af-Pak region. Thus, in some sense the mission could be viewed as mission accomplished. However, factions of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continue to pose an eminent threat and the Afghan Taliban's lack of denunciation of the group offer uncertainties' to the US on whether Afghanistan would once again be used to carry out attacks on the US. Therefore, despite the success in debilitating Al-Qaeda in Af-Pak, the resilient insurgency now limelight's itself as the prime threat to US interests, which—based on the report—continues to pose a threat to US interests and challenges the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The issue of US troop presence in Afghanistan has often witnessed fluctuations due to political pressures, the report calls for making the American public understand—that the US has in fact always been engaged in a war against Afghan Taliban and bring to public discourse the multifaceted threats posed by the insurgency.

As the report notes:

“BRUCE RIEDEL: With the death of Osama bin Laden and the destruction of the al-Qaida infrastructure in Pakistan by the drone war, the threat from al-Qaida core is now significantly degraded. This provides at least the superficial argument that the reason for which the United States originally went into Afghanistan has been obviated; that is, the threat posed by al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan is no longer a clear and present danger to the United States homeland. This doesn't mean al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula isn't a problem, or that the Nusra Front—or whatever the group calls itself this morning—isn't a problem. But what all of this misses is the fact that, for 16 years we've been fighting a war in Afghanistan against the Afghan Taliban.

One of the biggest challenges for two administrations presiding over this war has been persuading the American people that the Afghan Taliban is an enemy that threatens the United States outside of Afghanistan.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: *I would just add that there is debate as to how closely aligned the Taliban is today with the terrorist groups, and whether the Taliban would once again allow al-Qaida to operate out of a territory it controls. The Taliban also actively battles the Islamic State in Afghanistan, which consists of several splinter groups and elements expelled from the Taliban. At the same time, the Taliban has not denounced al-Qaida officially and, while al-Qaida has been severely degraded, it has lost none of its zeal to strike Western countries and undermine governments elsewhere.”*



The Counterinsurgency Objectives:

The report terms the Afghan-Taliban led insurgency as one of the most consequential threats to US, it categorizes the insurgents as rigid and unwavering to end the war. The reasons for its resilience discussed are multifarious ranging from religious ideologies, Pashtun nationalism, governance issues to lastly—the role of Pakistan. In view of the panelists, changing religious or ethnic sentiments is an unrealistic goal but the alleged sanctuaries on the Pakistani territory plays a critical role in providing tactical gains for the insurgents and is an aspect which requires change. The Taliban and their sponsors also retain the notion that “time is on their side”—which too needs a change by prolonging and possibly enhancing the US military footprint in Afghanistan. Certain sections of Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network are seen as the most fatal to US objectives’. Suggestions to intensify pressure on Pakistan to take decisive actions against those groups, remains a dominant theme, coupled with the advice to enhance US initiatives to make cross border movements ‘less safe’- by possibly increasing airstrikes along the Af-Pak border and Quetta. However, several limitations of intensifying pressure on Pakistan—based on internal dynamics and other regional dynamics-- are also noted—recognizing those aspects, the panel seems divided in finding the right balance of sticks and carrot approaches for Pakistan and calls for a thorough, creative review on Pakistan.

As the report notes:

“The United States should intensify pressure on Pakistan to shift its calculus regarding support for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network.

BRUCE RIEDEL: *The Afghan Taliban has decided it wants to fight that war, and its sponsors in Pakistan want to fight that war. The question is whether we can figure out a way to change the dynamic in the thinking... That mindset is essentially “time is on our side, and we are winning.”*

JOHN ALLEN: *The principal threat to Kabul on any given day was the Haqqani network. So it was our intention, working very closely with our intelligence community partners, with the Afghans, and to some extent with the Pakistanis, to attack the Haqqanis at the border and constantly attrite them...*

BRUCE RIEDEL: *the people who run Pakistan's Afghan policy would want to stabilize Afghanistan with the Taliban largely in control as a Pakistani client. That's antithetical to us. I believe we need to take a much stronger attitude toward Pakistan. But I would be the first to recognize that, if we do, the president is going to have to articulate an Afghanistan policy that is not just more of the same. It's going to require a pretty big shift, and whether this administration is interested in and capable of doing that, given political realities, is an open question.*

There is no single Pakistani policy on Afghanistan; there are multiple Pakistani policies. Even within the Pakistani army, there are multiple Pakistani army policies on Afghanistan.

But in my view, none of this would be as dangerous as it is if the Taliban didn't have safe haven and sanctuary in Pakistan. It's not just the Pakistani intelligence services; there is a sizeable part of the Islamic clerical establishment in Pakistan that is openly supportive of the Afghan Taliban, and sees the conflict as a righteous and holy war, and therefore facilitates fundraising in Pakistan, and even more fundraising in Dubai. While I think there's a lot of fundraising in Saudi Arabia, Dubai seems to be at the heart of it. So if these are the sources of the Afghan Taliban's resilience, then we have to ask ourselves what among those things we can fundamentally change. We are not going to change Pashtun identity. We are not going to change the sense that we are foreigners in an Islamic country. What we can perhaps change are the sanctuaries and safe havens, although that's a very, very hard thing to do. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the Afghan state are unfortunately legion.

We have to make it less safe to travel to an Afghan Taliban base camp in Baluchistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan... it shouldn't be a once-a-year phenomenon. It should be enough that we change the perception that they are safe. Perhaps strikes need to extend to headquarters in places like Quetta. Again, I am not making a case for doing it every day, but it shouldn't seem inconceivable. This will begin to put strains on the Afghan Taliban Pakistan relationship. There also should be a coherent overall approach to the problem in Afghanistan. In addition to consideration of troop levels, rules of engagement, and drone strikes, there is also the question of how we engage with Pakistan in general, and whether we try to strengthen those forces in Pakistan that have in mind the same

outcome in Afghanistan as we do—which includes, I think, the current Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif.

BRUCE JONES: *I was once told that leaders of Pakistan’s armed services and intelligence services had reached the conclusion that, while India was printing millionaires, Pakistan’s strategic policy was based on “a 14th century pile of rocks,” and they knew that they needed to shift their strategy but lacked the confidence that they could bring the rank-and-file along, and therefore feared that moving in very deliberate ways would expose deep fractures within the security establishment.*

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: *Over the past several years, Pakistan’s civilian politicians and envoys to the United States have dismissed the concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan. But from Pakistan’s strategic perspective, encirclement by hostile powers in Afghanistan and India must be avoided. But I believe that Pakistan’s policies toward the militants, including its unwillingness for years to launch a military operation into North Waziristan to dislodge the Afghan Taliban there, despite years of intense U.S. pressure, are determined as much by incompetence, inertia, and a lack of capacity, as by calibrated duplicitous misdirection.*

JOHN ALLEN: *I wake every morning hoping that, as Bruce Riedel has written about, an extremist group hasn’t gained control of a Pakistani nuclear weapon or other fissile material overnight. And Pakistan’s is the fastest growing nuclear arsenal on the planet. But I used to believe that all opportunity for peace in Afghanistan passed through Islamabad or Rawalpindi. Unless you brought them on board, it was not possible. I’m not sure I believe that anymore. In fact, I ultimately became so concerned about Pakistani stability, and saw genuine progress on the ground in Afghanistan, that I began to say that, in the end, Pakistani stability may well pass through Kabul.*

The problem is that many Pakistanis truly believe that the United States is after their nuclear weapons. But, in fact, it’s in everyone’s interest that Pakistan remain a stable place, and the more we underscore that point publicly and privately, the better. The Pakistanis will often say it’s about managing Pashtun politics. So long as the Pashtun face in the direction of both Islamabad and also Kabul, they’d say, then we don’t have a crisis; but if the Pashtun nation ever points only toward one capitol or the other, then the

other state is going to be immediately destabilized in a very major way. Congressional delegations passing through my headquarters in Afghanistan were sometimes quite keen to go up to Islamabad and just hammer the Pakistanis. I often suggested to them that, while we have plenty of problems with the Taliban coming out of Pakistan, we could posture the Afghan forces to deal with the Haqqani threat over time. And I warned that, if all we do is hammer Islamabad, you need to think about whether we may inadvertently create a sequence of events that could quickly destabilize the country. So we've got to be very careful; Pakistan is enormously complex. There's an active insurgency in nearly every one of its provinces, and we've got to be circumspect about the demands we place on the country. This is not to suggest we turn a blind eye or not put pressure on them. Nor does it mean that we shouldn't sometimes act in a punitive way. But we do need a comprehensive approach that accounts for Pakistan's complexities.

TANVI MADAN: *It's important to remember that there are at least two other actors that have leverage with Pakistan—one is China, and one is Saudi Arabia. China has successfully put pressure on Pakistan, but only with respect to certain extremist groups. Is there a way to get China to broaden that pressure? I think we are going to naturally move in that direction as Chinese firms and workers become more active in Pakistan. But there's also the danger that the leverage will diminish as they see themselves as needing Pakistan more as they become more enmeshed because of investments there.*

MICHAEL O'HANLON: *The U.S. could also designate Pakistani individuals and organizations supporting the Taliban and impose sanctions on them. The U.S. could show less restraint in striking Taliban targets within Pakistan. There are carrots available too: trade concessions, increased aid, more assistance to the Pakistani army's fight against internal extremists, dialogue with New Delhi to mitigate Pakistan's worries about India's role in Afghanistan. But these must come on the condition that Islamabad put greater pressure on the Taliban (whose headquarters is in the Quetta area) and on the Haqqani insurgent network (in North Waziristan)."*

Stabilizing Afghanistan:

Apart from Pakistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan, the report highlights the multifaceted internal fault lines of Afghanistan. Terming the insurgency as a tactical threat, and cross border support as an operational threat. The panelists largely believe that with correct reforms and in due time, both can be obviated. However, the interlinked nexus of corruption and terrorism is seen as the most rigid and critical threat to US. Comparing the internal Afghan dynamics to Colombia— the drug kingpins along with other powerbrokers, benefiting from the war, are seen as one of the key perpetrators of the insurgencies directly or inadvertently. Even though, the concept of improving governance was a goal at the start of the intervention, it was not seen as critical the counter terror objectives, and directly implicating certain power brokers – who helped attain those counterterror objectives-- was beyond the scope of US military jurisdiction.

Nonetheless, the most consequential impact of this nexus has been on the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces.

Thus, the possible mini surge, not only intends to tilt battlefield dynamics but also aspires to bring critical reforms to improve and 'cleanse' the Afghan security forces and seek for measures to implicate those responsible for linking corruption and terrorism— which could be done by increasing ears and eyes on ground. Realizing, these complexities—the US has over the years, shifted its focus from nation building to 'capacity building'—with the idea of bringing a certain degree of security that may contribute to better governance and socio-economic betterment overtime and as stated by Michael O' Hanlon, inculcate the spirit of: "get some substantial percentage of the Afghan military and policy leadership to care more about the country than the dividends of corruption. They can care about both, but they can't care only about their own pockets"

As the report notes:

"Recognizing Afghanistan's current governance capacity, the realistic ambition of U.S. and partner assistance should be for Afghanistan to achieve standards of governance and economic performance on par with similarly situated countries in South and Central Asia.

JOHN ALLEN: --- the U.S. combat mission ended on December 31, 2014. That was not the recommendation of commanders. My own recommendation before I departed was that we keep 20,000 U.S. and NATO partner troops to maintain a “pervasive touch”. We fully anticipated a long-term follow-on mission to the NATO mission and to Operation Enduring Freedom, which is now called Operation Resolute Support, where we would see allied troops in Afghanistan in primarily a training, advisory, and professionalization role for an additional 10 to 20 years. There’s a certain triangular relationship in Afghanistan. The base of the triangle is the security platform upon which the other two converging legs—effective governance and viable economic progress—become possible. Without a secure environment, you can neither govern the country nor have a viable economy, which is emerging from 16 years of distortion from a wartime environment.

MICHAEL O’HANLON: --- you didn’t have enough eyes and ears on what’s happening at the tactical level. You want those eyes and ears so that when the really corrupt or abusive commanders are there, you can credibly go to the Afghan government.

JOHN ALLEN: We also need to go back and do the forensics on the Taliban as a threat. I would propose to you that the threat is a triangular one, where you have the ideological insurgency; you have, very importantly and perhaps even more prominent, the criminal patronage networks; and then you have the drug enterprise that fuels both of the first two. These three aspects of the threat have been present the entire time. But as commander, I had no authority to go after the criminal patronage networks, unless I could tie them directly into the Taliban military actions associated with my forces. I also couldn’t go after the drug enterprise, unless I could show the very direct relationship between a particular drug kingpin or drug lab and the Taliban’s ability to threaten my forces. So two legs of the threat were largely left unaddressed. I think Colombia is one of the prime examples of where you had an ideological insurgency serving as local security and the muscle for the criminal patronage networks, and you had the drug cartels fueling it all; and Colombia is one of the great unsung victories of our support to any particular country. We are going to find in the future a similar triangular threat. Unless our commanders have the capacity at a grand strategic level to deal with all three of those things simultaneously—using law enforcement capabilities to bring

down criminal patronage networks, and going after the kingpins in the drug enterprise—dealing with the ideological insurgency alone will never be enough. In the north and west of Afghanistan, where we had the German-led and Italian-led coalitions respectively, we defeated the Taliban. What we discovered was that we had uncovered the criminal patronage networks, which had captured entire provincial governments. Frankly, the war in the end for me was, by the time I left, less about defeating the Taliban than it was about unlimbering elements of the Afghan government from capture by criminality and corruption. I left Afghanistan believing that the Taliban is a tactical problem that, over time, we could defeat. The threat out of Pakistan is an operational threat, which, if we posture the Afghans correctly over time, we eliminate, deal with, or manage. But unless we deal systematically with the drug enterprise and the criminal capture of major institutions of the Afghan state, we will never win this war

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: *Increasing the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is important, but not sufficient. The United States and the international community must work with the Afghan government to reduce corruption and improve governance. Even taking some modest but sustained steps could make a big difference. This means tackling the most dangerous forms of corruption, particularly in the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF), rooting out discrimination against entire ethnic and tribal groups that drives local populations into the hands of the Taliban, and targeting corruption that paralyzes service delivery. It means reining in predatory criminality and destabilizing warlords one at a time, without taking on the entire system at once.*

JOHN ALLEN: *Capacity-building is different than nation-building; but it is essential. And, very importantly, we the United States need to be the convening power that injects both coherence and capability into the Afghan economy. If we want ultimately to defeat the Taliban, it's not just about the tactical fight; it's about fundamentally changing the environment in which the Afghan economy exists. It's about putting Afghans to work and exploiting the multitrillion dollar natural assets underneath the ground in Afghanistan.*

Comments:

The discussions' of this report took place during a time, when the US is reviewing its Afghan Policy—the assessments' shared, reflects that Pakistan continues to be viewed as an integral part of solving the Afghan puzzle. A renewed commitment to an enduring US stay in Afghanistan, has been enunciated by several key US officials in the recent part. Despite, visualizing a political settlement amongst various factions in Afghanistan as a desired end goal, the US seems unwilling to enter into negotiations with the Taliban from a position of weakness—considering it presently, assesses the insurgency at its peak strength. The views in this report largely blur the distinction of classifying Afghan Taliban as a local movement predominantly combatting foreign occupation. However, keeping in view the multifarious terror groups operating in the greater Asian region—the US needs to evaluate the effective gains against terrorism that can stem from resolving Afghanistan's internal political contentions. Pakistan needs to actively address the urgency of this measure to the US and other regional players and call for genuine efforts to revive peace talks especially via the QCG. The border fencing initiatives by Pakistan aimed at effective prevention of any cross border movements—amassed prominent support even from elders on the Afghan side, the recent operation against IS threats in Rajgal Valley reflect Pakistan's resilient commitment in countering terrorism. Pakistan needs to maintain active channels of communication with the US in order to convey its efforts; the multifaceted limitations on Pakistan (many of which have been acknowledged by the panelists in this report) also need to be addressed in order set pragmatic goals and reach a convergence. The US needs to enhance Pakistan's capacity and mitigate regional hostility by encouraging strong bilateral security ties between Pak-Afghan and set the stage for effective dialogue between India and Pakistan coupled with setting timeframes to act on those theoretical frameworks.

The narrative of enduring stay—apart its psychological connotations on insurgents or alleged supporters--- may impact policies of other regional players as well, who supposedly hedged bets on insurgent forces owing to diminishing belief in US capabilities. Whether convergence or divergence emanates amongst various powers, greatly depends on how the US engages them on the Afghan issue.

A recent article by Barnett R. Rubin titled 'Afghanistan and Considerations of Supply' highlights the logistical constraints on US – rising from geopolitical contentions. The small window of opportunities needs to be carefully assessed.

This report too, discusses the converging points US has had with Iran and Russia on Afghanistan and calls for assessment of the various regional opportunities. Even though, owing to the US imposed sanctions on both countries, convergence may seem unlikely. However, -- despite, the US, anti-Iran rhetoric; it alongside visualizes a more involved Indian position in improving Afghanistan's socio economic conditions and supports the Chahbar development as alternate trade routes. The new US state policy of supporting a regime change in Iran has also been declared openly. Similar is the case for Russia, their ties with the US are in flux too, it needs to be seen how the two converge in Afghanistan. The report further, mentions an interesting point about using China to apply pressure on Pakistan on tackling various groups— *"I think we are going to naturally move in that direction as Chinese firms and workers become more active in Pakistan. But there's also the danger that the leverage will diminish as they see themselves as needing Pakistan more as they become more enmeshed because of investments there."* --

Pakistan, needs to ensure that it is not left in isolation on any front and needs to remain wary of how the regional dynamics evolve and carve out policies that dictate its interests by actively aligning with various regional powers and the US for security and economic development. At the same time, the US also needs to acknowledge the offensive Indian postures. The implications of consolidating it, not only disrupt the regional strategic balance, but carry a tendency to expedite an arms race in the complex Asian arena.

It is likely that like his predecessor Obama President Trump will opt for an initial troops surge to sustain the beleaguered government of President Ghani and secure Kabul which is the center of gravity in Afghanistan. There is a distinct possibility that financial support to Pakistan that has been declining will be further cut. The US is likely to rely more on Drone strikes just as Obama did to offset the need for more boots on the ground.

This may have implications for Pakistan. With the mini-surge and enhanced Drone strikes the level of conflict may increase as the US

coerces the Taliban for reconciliation by accepting political realities. It must be noted that the Taliban have a problem in accepting the imposed Constitution and will have to change their view of governance, human rights and women's rights and moderate their major demand that all foreign forces leave Afghanistan. This will be the major challenge for Trump's Af-Pak or regional strategy. Ignoring Pakistan's concerns, or sidelining Pakistan's concerns or bringing in a new external actor to influence the situation in Afghanistan will create serious problems in the implementation of any proposed US strategy in Afghanistan.

