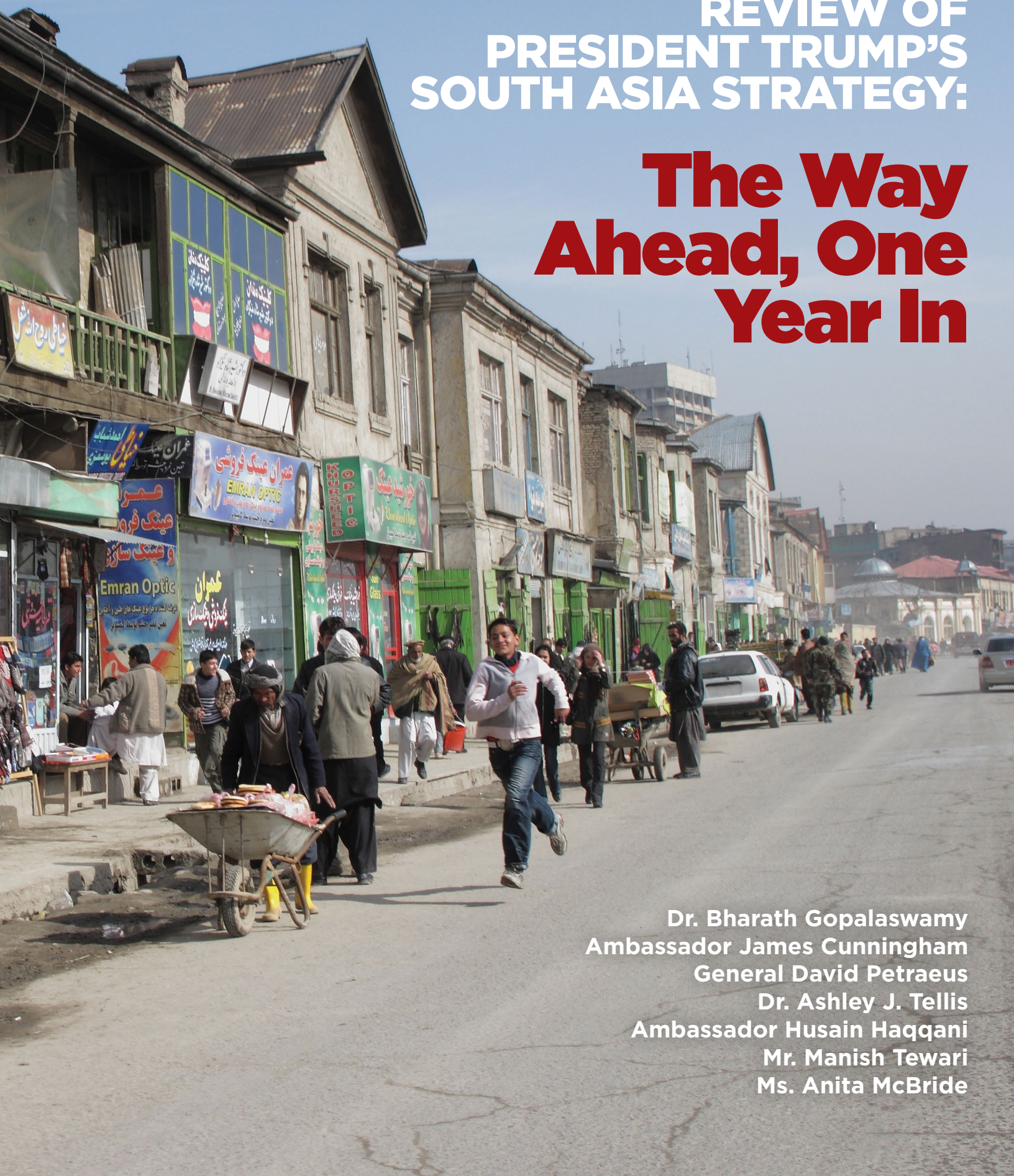


REVIEW OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S SOUTH ASIA STRATEGY:

The Way Ahead, One Year In



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Introduction

One year after President Donald Trump's announcement of his strategy in South Asia and Afghanistan, the authors believe that the administration is on the right course, but that it can, and must, do better. Improved implementation offers the opportunity to end the Afghanistan conflict in a way that advances the core US interests of defeating terrorism and demonstrating that a moderate Islamic state, aligned with the international community, can succeed.

The Trump strategy is new in important respects: its focus is to bring the conflict to an end on terms acceptable to the Afghan people and their international partners; its aim is to preserve the achievements in Afghanistan that, first and foremost, contribute to American security; it is conditions-based; it properly views Afghanistan in a regional context, with a renewed focus on Pakistan; and it provides Secretary of Defense James Mattis and his commanders flexibility in shaping the deployment and use of US forces in support of Afghanistan and the counterterrorism mission. The strategy intends to enable Afghanistan to become a more stable state—one capable of protecting its people with limited outside support—as well as to lay the foundation for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, and, ultimately, to end the conflict.

Afghanistan is an Islamic partner committed to the international fight against terrorism. As long as it remains such a partner, and continues to pursue better governance, much-needed reforms, and democratic expression for its people, the United States will be able to advance the strategy through increasing military pressure on the Taliban, and through the concerted use of international efforts to shape the diplomatic environment, to affect the behavior and calculations of the Taliban and other actors, especially Pakistan.

The strategy is still developing after a year, but is beginning to produce results—even though it has not yet been adequately explained nor, on the political side, adequately resourced. Doubts remain as to its feasibility and ultimate success. However, the authors believe that it can succeed with a renewed and visible effort at comprehensive implementation, and improved alignment of the many lines of diplomatic and political effort required to produce results. Success will require demonstrating to all concerned—especially Afghanistan's adversaries and neighbors—that the United States is committed to the strategy, and to

fostering the crucial political process required to end the conflict.

Achieving such a political process will take time, along with a multifaceted and multilateral diplomatic campaign of extraordinary complexity, even as the Afghan and coalition military effort shapes conditions on the ground. The Trump strategy corrects the most serious weaknesses of the Barack Obama administration's efforts, the most counterproductive of which was the announced accelerated withdrawal of US forces based on an unrealistic timeline, rather than according to conditions on the ground. Commitment to a timeline encouraged US adversaries to wait out US forces, discouraged US partners, and encouraged continued hedging behaviors by the countries of the region. Among the counterproductive effects was the psychological impact on the Afghans as they strive to rebuild safe communities and a functioning economy.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has made clear that he is willing to take risks for peace. His government has also demonstrated its determination to defend the country, at great cost. For years, the United States' Afghan partners have taken the lead in the conflict, and done the vast majority of the fighting and dying. Continued US funding for the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANSDF) is critical, as is the long-term international support demonstrated at the recent Brussels NATO Summit.

Afghanistan's military capabilities are growing, as its air force comes into being, military reform and new leadership take root, capable special forces expand, and the train, advise, and assist mission moves flexibly to the tactical level, where it is more effective. August attempts by the Taliban to seize portions of Ghazni underscore the need for accelerated work on strengthening ANSDF leadership and coordination. The costs to the United States of supporting Afghanistan, in resources and casualties, are a fraction of what they were through 2014, with crucial contributions made by NATO, coalition partners, and the international community.

There is widespread agreement that a military solution to the Afghan conflict is not feasible, and that a political settlement is required. This report will not address the specifics of military strategy, or internal Afghan politics and upcoming elections. Both require careful management, and work is under way to provide it. That said, it is the responsibility of the Afghan political class



Poppy plantation in Gostan Valley, Nimruz Province, Afghanistan *Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps, Public Domain.*

to ensure the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and to avoid debilitating political conflict as elections approach. The failure of Afghanistan's political leaders, both outside of and within the government, to avoid collapse of the political process would likely fatally undercut the US strategy.

This report's intent is to contribute to the implementation of the strategy by identifying what is required to effectively address Afghanistan in its regional context, and to mount the diplomatic and political effort needed to complement the military campaign. The military and diplomatic campaign must be in sync if the conditions are to be set for bringing the Taliban to genuine negotiations.

The United States and its partners have long agreed that the terms for ending the conflict must be determined by the Afghans themselves, in an Afghan-led process. The authors fully expect that the Afghan people will insist on preserving the many gains achieved in health, education, human and women's rights, economic development, freedom of the press, and democratic freedoms. How to reconcile the complexities

of modern Afghanistan and the Taliban must be an Afghan discussion.

In February, President Ghani made a courageous and far-sighted effort to open the door to such a process, announcing the willingness of the Afghan government to engage the Taliban in a political dialogue without preconditions, and without predetermining how a political process should develop. The international community welcomed his initiative, and has since worked through various channels to get the Taliban to engage, while reaffirming its own long-standing demands that, under a political settlement, the Taliban must reject violence, break with terrorism and al-Qaeda, and accept the Afghan constitution, including its protection of human rights and the rights of women.

The Taliban rejected Ghani's message, repeating its insistence on negotiating with the United States instead of Kabul. Nonetheless, there have been signs that something is stirring among the Taliban. This is likely due, in part, to the military campaign, in which the Taliban is suffering heavy losses. In June, Ghani announced a unilateral eight-day ceasefire in connection with the Eid

al-Fitr holiday, to which the Taliban responded with its own “unilateral” three-day ceasefire overlapping the Eid weekend. It is significant that the Taliban rank and file obeyed, and observed the ceasefire throughout the country. Those three days of peace brought individual Taliban members and other Afghans together throughout the country, raising hopes that new opportunities might be in the offing. Although the Taliban leadership rejected an additional ceasefire announced by Ghani after the Eid holidays, as well as Ghani's subsequent offer of a joint ceasefire, the dynamic has produced conflicting signals from the Taliban, and raised hopes that the door to a political process might have opened at least a crack. This moment provides an opportunity to employ both military and diplomatic levers, as strongly and quickly as possible.

The situation is further complicated by the depredations of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP), or Daesh, in Afghanistan. ISIS-KP terror attacks threaten the entire region, and impact the government, the civilian population, and the Taliban. There will be an ongoing need for a counterterrorism instrument, as there is no prospect for negotiation with ISIS-KP, no matter how the conflict with the Taliban unfolds. Indeed, Kabul and the Taliban have a common foe in ISIS-KP—an interest they share with the United States, its international partners, and others in the region, including Pakistan.

Implementing the Strategy: Recommendations

This report outlines the political and diplomatic lines of effort that the authors believe necessary for setting the conditions to end the conflict, and to change the strategic calculations of a range of actors, including the Taliban. The strategy requires a continued military instrument to stabilize the security situation and raise the cost of conflict to the Taliban. Just as importantly, it will also require a complex diplomatic campaign.

This is not a task only for the United States and Afghanistan. There is a critical role to be played, under US leadership, by the members of the international coalition and the many international partners who share US goals and interests in Afghanistan. They include the members of NATO and other coalition partners, the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Japan. China has a potentially important role to play, not least because of its increasing economic stake in the region under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. India is playing a helpful role, and there are new, welcome signs of growing engagement by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Marshalling the efforts of these parties to maximum effect must be at the core of the regional Trump strategy to reinforce US efforts, and to deter and dissuade those who obstruct or oppose them. This requires an extremely heavy lift, for which the United States has lacked adequate diplomatic and policy instruments. Senior officials, throughout the government and in the field, must develop and implement the complex policy that Afghanistan requires. The authors note recent progress in that regard, and welcome the appointment of US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to focus the diplomatic campaign. However, many vacancies remain and much time has been lost over the past year, limiting the US ability to take advantage of the opportunities embodied in the Trump strategy.

Many of the following recommended actions are under way, to one degree or another. It is useful to consider them as a whole, to convey the complexity of the task at hand. There is a chance to bring this long conflict to an end, but doing so will require time, commitment, and an effort commensurate to the task. To get the Taliban to the table is not sufficient; to secure their genuine participation in a peace negotiation, the following lines of effort need to be developed and coherent.

1. Demonstrate US strategic patience and commitment. This is the *sine qua non* for strategic success, the foundation on which all else rests. Clarity that the United States and its partners intend to prevail, or the lack thereof, drives the policy calculations of others. Failure to provide that clarity doomed the Obama administration's efforts, both to rapidly withdraw US forces and to get to peace talks. President Trump's decision to adopt a different approach, despite his misgivings, is to be applauded.

The world needs to hear, repeatedly and from the highest levels of the administration, what the United States and its partners intend to achieve in Afghanistan, and that they intend to succeed with a long-term vision for Afghanistan's future stability. Concerns remain that the United States seeks a short-term solution that will enable it to declare victory and leave Afghanistan—again, and with disastrous results. That suspicion must be allayed.

2. The world also needs to see that the United States is arming itself with the political instruments necessary to succeed. US international leadership is necessary to open doors, and to create the choices and opportunities that strengthen the prospects for success. The laudable hard work of career professionals, acting officials, and experts cannot take the place of political authority. Therefore, this report strongly recommends the early appointment of an empowered senior envoy, who clearly speaks for the administration, drives administration policy, and is charged with the task of developing and implementing the strategy.

The appointment of Ambassador Khalilzad will meet that requirement—if he receives clear political authority from the State Department and the White House, which signifies responsibility, credibility, and clout. Previous envoys were hampered by the lack of such a connection, and/or the task of implementing a flawed strategy on an unrealistic timeline. Vacant senior policy positions in Washington, and ambassadorial positions in the field, urgently need to be filled. Doing so will boost the prospects for Ambassador Khalilzad's success. Given the many lines of effort, the need for close coordination with partners, and US engagement with multiple actors, success requires constant

and focused leadership to provide guidance and develop the campaign.

3. It follows from the above that an active, public diplomacy campaign should buttress the strategy, domestically and internationally. It must address friendly, hostile, and skeptical audiences. To date, there has been broad bipartisan support in Congress for US efforts in Afghanistan, demonstrated through initiatives such as the Congressional Women's Caucus on Afghanistan, which monitors Afghan women's participation in and support for US military and diplomatic initiatives. This report is intended to buttress that bipartisan support. The American people deserve to know why the long-term effort in Afghanistan is in their interest, and the United States' adversaries and partners need to know, and be convinced of, its intentions.
4. Amplify the regional components of the strategy—especially with Pakistan, which has the most important external impact on prospects for success. It is widely recognized that the existence of safe havens in Pakistan makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get the Taliban leadership to seriously negotiate. While Pakistan has suffered grievously from terrorism, and sacrificed much in combating it internally, efforts to convince it to take needed action against the Taliban and Haqqani network within Pakistan's borders, and to partner with the United States, have not yet born fruit.

It is beyond the scope of this report to address how to deal with Pakistan in detail, but a constant review of messaging to Pakistan is needed, as is the elaboration of a multilateral campaign of pressure and incentives—for example, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) gray listing of Pakistan, and the June US killing of Pakistani Taliban leader Mullah Fazlullah in Afghanistan.

A redefinition of Pakistani interests is also needed. The United States still seeks a healthy relationship with Pakistan, but it and its international partners, who have an important stake in this discussion, must confront Pakistani leaders with a choice about the future of their country that prevents a continuation of the status quo.

In response to pressure from the Trump administration, some Pakistani officials have blustered that Pakistan can rely on China and Russia. That is an illusion inimical to Pakistan's development

and economic future, a framework that falls far short of the active, engaged economic-development and counterterrorism relationship that the West that can offer—or withhold. If Pakistan will not play a positive role, the United States and its partners should pursue a tough-minded strategy. The discussion with Pakistan must not be delayed, especially following the recent change in elected leadership and given the preponderance of influence of the military leadership in Pakistan's regional policies, including in Afghanistan.

5. With regard to Afghanistan's neighbors, the key issue is how to assure them that a stable Afghanistan will advance, and not undermine, their interests in the region. This should be another area of focus. Afghanistan has attempted to assuage Pakistan's fear of India by making clear that its relations with India and Pakistan are not a zero-sum game, and that India would not be permitted, via Afghanistan, to harm Pakistan and its people. In fact, India is playing a positive, mostly low-key role in Afghanistan, and could expand its assistance in development, training, business promotion, and democracy and elections, as a way of strengthening Afghanistan without impacting Pakistan's security.

Greater engagement by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with Afghanistan and the United States should be leveraged, as Washington develops closer and more effective cooperation with the Saudi leadership.

6. Dealing with the ambivalence of Iran and Russia is both desirable and complicated. Neither wants Afghanistan to fail, nor to see the return of the Taliban or the growth of ISIS. However, neither wants the peace process to result in a long-term US military presence in the region, and both are engaged in various unhelpful behaviors that should be minimized or eliminated. Nonetheless, there is a considerable overlap of interests in Afghan stability, in countering Sunni extremism, and in battling narcotics. These subjects should be pursued more effectively as Washington and Moscow seek projects on which to cooperate. The Trump administration should urge other interlocutors with better prospects of influence—including Kabul itself—to engage Tehran and Moscow. One goal might be to provide credible US assurances that a continued, but limited, US presence in Afghanistan will not pose a threat to Russia and Iran, nor will eventual Afghan success.



ANA Special Operation Forces *Photo Credit: U.S. Army, Public Domain*

7. The narcotics trade provides critical funding for the Taliban, and feeds criminality more broadly. The US military has resumed efforts to counter narcotics operations in Afghanistan, with strikes on production and storage facilities. This is likely to have limited effect, unless it is combined with renewed attempts to create stronger and more effective Afghan national capabilities, and regional cooperation aimed at both developing alternative economic opportunities for Afghans and disrupting the narcotics trade. This is an important area of shared interest among Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, other regional actors, and Europe.

The United States and its allies should attack means of Taliban financing, through bilateral and multilateral means. UN Security Council authorities to do so exist, and new ones could be sought, with additional focus on tracking financial routes, money laundering, and “legitimate” Taliban business interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Gulf—including mining, private enterprise, and real estate. International influence should be brought to bear on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf countries to disrupt Taliban finances and fundraising in the Gulf.

8. Attack Taliban legitimacy. The Taliban craves international recognition and legitimacy. Efforts to undermine its ideology through Islamic international organs are on the right track. Recent Ulema meetings in Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia were important Islamic efforts to drain ideological legitimacy from the Taliban and terrorism, and the Taliban’s reaction indicates some impact. For the United States and its international partners, there is still work to be done to delegitimize the Taliban leadership, and to make clear there is no political future for a Taliban “victory.” The Taliban must understand there will be no international recognition of gains seized by force, and that an Afghan political process and reconciliation are the only way forward.
9. The time has come for renewal of direct US contacts, though not negotiations, with the Taliban, with full transparency and in partnership with Kabul. The Taliban has rejected negotiations with Kabul, instead insisting on negotiations with the United States regarding the withdrawal of foreign forces. As of this writing, steps are under way to resume US-Taliban contacts, with proper care taken not to undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government, and to make clear that the United States

will not negotiate Afghanistan's future with the Taliban. The position taken by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during his July visit to Kabul—that the United States will “support, facilitate and participate” in Afghan-led peace discussions, and the

recognition that peace talks will include the role of international actors and forces—was the right message. The initiation of US-Taliban contacts can be used to facilitate those Afghan-led negotiations.

Conclusion

Americans have much to be proud of in Afghanistan. Though many strategic and tactical mistakes have been made over the years, and the United States must recognize and learn from them, US interests in Afghanistan endure. Shameful as it was, the Taliban regime was not the reason the United States and its partners went to Afghanistan seventeen years ago. Instead, 9/11 made it clear that the threat from al-Qaeda, and now from the other violent extremists it has spawned, was a danger to the security of the United States and the civilized world, as well as a danger to the values Americans share with most of the rest of the world. The seventeen-year effort in Afghanistan is part of a generational conflict with a violent, terrorist ideology—a conflict that, like the Cold War, may well persist even after Afghanistan is hopefully at peace. The Cold War lasted some forty years, during which many “hot spots” produced thousands of casualties. Its legacy continues, for example, in the Korean peninsula and Ukraine. Hopefully, the conflict with violent Islamist extremism can be quelled in a shorter period of time; failure in Afghanistan will undoubtedly make that victory more difficult and costly.

Despite the many mistakes and shifts in US strategy over the past seventeen years, Afghanistan has undergone a remarkable transformation—in what, in

historical terms, is an extremely short period of time. The investments of the past seventeen years have paid substantial dividends. Afghanistan's education system has been rebuilt, providing Afghans greater access to all levels of education. Over 200,000 teachers have been trained, including more than 66,000 women.¹ Economic growth has returned, lifting hundreds of thousands from poverty and empowering a new generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs. And women are being incorporated into law enforcement in increasing numbers, underscoring Afghan-led efforts to achieve peace.

Overcoming decades of violence in a poor country, even with considerable outside assistance, is a task not easily achieved. Success in implementing the Trump administration's strategy, and President Ghani's vision of peace via reconciliation with the Taliban, will validate the many sacrifices Afghans, Americans, and the international community have made. It will make Pakistan and the region more secure and prosperous, enable the withdrawal of foreign military forces, and—with continued counterterrorism cooperation with Kabul and improved cooperation with Pakistan—mark a significant advance in the struggle against Islamist terror. That is an outcome deserving of continued long-term US and international engagement, and the support of those publics.

1 “Afghanistan: Education,” USAID, last updated September 24, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>.

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This study was led by Dr. Bharath Gopaldaswamy, director, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council and Ambassador James Cunningham, nonresident senior fellow, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council.

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Each of the authors of this reports has significant experience dealing with Afghanistan and the region, coming from different backgrounds and in a variety of capacities. Many of the authors have supported the efforts of both Republican and Democratic presidents to defeat terrorism and bring peace and stability to the region, in the interests of US security and that of its many partners in this endeavor. While perhaps none agree with every word of this report, all agree on its main observations, on the recommendations above, and on the need for continued, steady US engagement and focus.

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