

QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



Quad Stakes in Stabilizing AfPak

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Stabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan and uprooting the Islamist extremist threat that is jeopardizing the future of both countries remain important goals for the long-term security of all four Quad countries. While most attention is currently on the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan remains a major front in the global terrorism fight.

The new Trump Administration will need to carefully evaluate its Afghan strategy in the coming months. The Administration must engage in an inter-agency review process that develops an integrated military, diplomatic, and assistance strategy that ensures the Taliban cannot re-take control of the country. This should involve examining plans for supporting and training the Afghan security forces so that they can fend off Taliban advances; revamping foreign assistance programs to end waste and corruption; implementing diplomatic strategies that deal with Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan; and encouraging regional cooperation and political reconciliation.

The security situation in Afghanistan is dire and the Taliban have made substantial territorial gains in the past two years since the U.S. and NATO ended combat operations. The Taliban currently controls about 10 percent of Afghan territory and another 30 percent is contested between the government and insurgents, which means only about 60 percent of Afghan territory is now under government control.¹

If the trend lines in the security situation continue and the Taliban make additional territorial gains, including taking major cities, this will facilitate the revival of al-Qaeda in the region and boost the morale of Islamist extremists across the globe. In this situation, the country would revert to its status as a global terrorist haven, not only setting back development and human

¹“Afghan Government Controls Less Than 60 Percent of Country: Watchdog,” Reuters, February 1, 2017, [at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-war-idUSKBN15G40M](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-war-idUSKBN15G40M) (accessed October 17, 2017).

rights, but also contributing to instability and conflict in a nuclear-proliferated region and setting the stage for future terrorist attacks in other parts of the world, including on the U.S. homeland.

The Quad countries understand the stakes involved in the region and have demonstrated their commitment to Afghanistan's future. At the height of its troop deployment in 2011, the U.S. had deployed over 100,000 troops to Afghanistan. More than 2,380 U.S. servicemen have been killed in the war in Afghanistan since 2001. There are currently about 9,000 U.S. troops stationed in the country that take part in counterterrorism missions and also form part of NATO's Resolute Support Mission to train and advise the Afghan forces. In addition, there are around 6,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan from over 40 troop-contributing nations. The U.S. has provided Afghanistan over \$117 billion in security and reconstruction assistance since 2001.

Australia has played an integral role in the military mission in Afghanistan, deploying over 30,000 troops to the country over the past 15 years. Australia currently has some 270 troops remaining in Afghanistan as part of the train and assist mission.² Canberra will spend more than \$100 million per year until 2020 training soldiers and police in Afghanistan in a two-year extension of its non-combat role.³ Australia's total aid contribution to Afghanistan since 2001 amounts to around \$1.2 billion.

Japan has been one of the top aid providers to Afghanistan, committing nearly \$7 billion since 2001. From late 2001 until the beginning of 2010, naval ships from the Japan Self-Defense Forces were deployed in the Indian Ocean to refuel U.S. and other international naval vessels engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom. The total operation cost amounted to \$800 million, with around \$250 million spent on supplying fuel and water to coalition forces.⁴

India, for its part, is Afghanistan's fifth largest donor and has so far provided \$2 billion in assistance, while recently committing an additional \$1 billion for aid projects in the country. In October 2011, Afghanistan and India signed a "Strategic Partnership" agreement, which allowed India to train Afghan security personnel in India. New Delhi has also donated three Cheetah military helicopters to the Afghan Air Force.⁵

Military Stalemate

While the U.S. and NATO handed over combat operations to the Afghan forces in December 2014, the Afghans continue to need U.S. and NATO support, including tactical and battlefield advice, training, logistical support, air support, and intelligence cooperation. U.S. troop casualties have reduced significantly in the past two years. In mid-November last year, however,

²Matt Siegel, "Australian PM Announces Afghanistan Troop Increase on Kabul Visit," Reuters, January 17, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-australia-idUSKCN0UV11W> (accessed October 17, 2017).

³Peter Lloyd, "Australia Extends Afghanistan Operation, Announces \$100M Per Year Until 2020," ABC News (Australia), July 8, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-08/australia-to-extend-military-presence-in-afghanistan/7582042> (accessed October 17, 2017).

⁴Kuniko Ashizawa, "Japanese Assistance in Afghanistan: Helping the United States, Acting Globally, and Making a Friend," National Bureau of Asian Research, *Asia Policy* 17 (January 2014), <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=727#footnote1> (accessed October 17, 2017).

⁵Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, October 2, 2017, p. 50, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf> (accessed October 17, 2017).

the Taliban conducted a suicide bombing on the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, killing two American servicemen and two American contractors and wounding at least 17 others.

Meanwhile, Afghan forces are suffering high casualty rates at the hands of the Taliban (over 6,000 soldiers and police officers were killed in 2016) and the insurgents control more territory now than at any time since the U.S. overturned the Taliban regime 15 years ago. The U.N. reported that Afghan civilian casualties also spiked in 2016 with nearly 3,500 civilians killed. Insurgent groups, mainly the Taliban and ISIS, were responsible for about 60 percent of the civilian deaths, while Afghan forces caused 20 percent of the civilian casualties. The U.N. held the international community accountable for 2 percent of civilian deaths, mostly from air raids.⁶

The Afghan forces are incapable of retaking territory without direct U.S. support, or of operating in multiple regions at the same time with the current level of U.S. and NATO troop levels. This is allowing the Taliban to put pressure on multiple regional headquarters simultaneously and to control rural areas. The Taliban has utilized its new territory to focus on offensive operations against Afghan forces' positions and strongholds, forcing them to maintain a defensive posture in many areas and diminishing their offensive capabilities.

U.S. and NATO forces are no longer deployed throughout the country and are unable to support the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in many districts, adding to the gap in offensive capability. In addition, the Taliban focuses its attacks in areas where the U.S. is not supporting ANSF operations. Thus the ANSF struggle to effectively defend population centers against coordinated Taliban offensives. When U.S. forces have provided direct support to the Afghans, they have been effective in retaking territory.

In congressional testimony in early February, U.S. Commander in Afghanistan General John Nicholson said the Afghan security forces had reached a stalemate with the Taliban. General Nicholson pointed to the need for an increase of a few thousand troops to advise and assist local Afghan forces in order to effectively beat back the Taliban.⁷ On the other hand, General Nicholson commented that he had the necessary forces to conduct counterterrorism missions targeting extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS. The issue of the U.S. sending additional troops to Afghanistan also was discussed in a December phone call between U.S. President Donald Trump and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, according to media reports.⁸

U.S. forces were given expanded authorities to engage in offensive operations with their Afghan counterparts in 2016 under the previous Obama Administration. This allowed U.S. troops to help fend off Taliban advances, particularly in the northern city of Kunduz and in parts of the southern province of Helmand. Increased authorities to use U.S. air power in direct support of

⁶“Afghan Civilian Casualties at Record High in 2016: UN,” Al Jazeera, February 6, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/afghan-civilian-casualties-2016-170206062807210.html> (accessed October 17, 2017).

⁷Kevin Baron, “Afghanistan Needs ‘Thousands’ More Troops, US General Says,” DefenseOne, February 9, 2017, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/02/afghanistan-needs-thousands-more-troops-us-general-says-stunning-assessment/135280/> (accessed October 17, 2017).

⁸Ehsannullah Amiri, Jessica Donati, and Gordon Lubold, “Trump Told Afghan Leader He Would Consider Troop Increase,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2017, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-told-afghan-leader-he-would-consider-troop-increase-1485294712> (accessed October 17, 2017).

the ANSF were also vital in defending the Uruzgan provincial capital from Taliban militants.⁹ The U.S. is sending 300 additional marines to Helmand province, the first American deployment to the restive province since the U.S. ended combat operations in 2014. The marines are senior officers specializing in intelligence, logistics, and administration and will backstop their Afghan counterparts.¹⁰ In the past two years, the Taliban have captured several key districts in Helmand and have been threatening the capital, Lashkar Gah, for the past year.

According to General Nicholson, the Afghan forces that are most capable of breaking the stalemate with the Taliban are the 17,000-strong Special Operations Forces. The other important goal for the mission in Afghanistan includes growing and improving Afghanistan's airpower capability. Both of these elements of the mission would benefit from a coalition troop increase, according to Nicholson. He noted the troops do not necessarily need to come from the U.S. alone, but could also come from other NATO members or coalition partners.

An effort by ISIS to establish influence in Afghanistan has complicated the militant landscape and is contributing to instability. ISIS has established bases in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces in the eastern part of the country. General Nicholson said last September that, despite recent U.S. progress against ISIS bases in Afghanistan, there remain up to 1,300 ISIS militants in the country who receive money, guidance, and communications support from leaders in Syria. They have seized pockets of territory in the east and consist mainly of former members of the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Al-Qaeda remains a threat in the region, although the group has been severely degraded by an intensive U.S. drone campaign conducted in Pakistan's tribal border areas under the previous Obama Administration. Still, there is evidence of al-Qaeda regrouping in areas controlled by the Taliban. On January 9th, Afghan security forces killed Qari Saifullah Akhtar, a top Pakistani al-Qaeda leader, in the southern province of Ghazni. Akhtar was in charge of an al-Qaeda cell in Kabul province and had previously been a member of Pakistan-based Harakat-ul-Jihadi-Islami. Akhtar was released from a Pakistani jail in June 2008, despite being implicated in two assassination attempts against former Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf and in an October 2007 assassination attempt against now deceased Benazir Bhutto.¹¹ In October 2016, U.S. forces killed Faruq al Qahtani, al-Qaeda's leader for eastern Afghanistan.

Pakistan's Role

The fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan will not succeed so long as the movement's leaders find safe haven in Pakistan. The change in the U.S. administration provides an opportunity to recommit to the fight in Afghanistan and sharpen U.S. strategy toward Pakistan in a way that convinces Pakistan's military and civilian leaders that it is in their own self-interest to crack down on the Taliban and to join a peace process. A firmer U.S. commitment to staying engaged

⁹Caitlin Forrest, "Afghanistan Partial Threat Assessment: June 30, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, July 14, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/afghanistan-partial-threat-assessment-june-30-2016> (accessed October 17, 2017).

¹⁰"U.S. to Send 300 Marines to Afghanistan's Helmand Province," Reuters, January 8, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-marines-idUSKBN14S0G5> (accessed October 17, 2017).

¹¹Bill Roggio, "Afghan Intelligence Confirms Top Al-Qaeda Leader Killed in Raid," FDD's Long War Journal, February 19, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/afghan-intelligence-confirms-top-al-qaeda-leader-killed-in-raid.php> (accessed October 17, 2017).

in Afghanistan could also help to better align American and Pakistani goals in Afghanistan. Former President Obama's wavering commitment to Afghanistan and his aggressive timelines for withdrawal contributed to Pakistan's hedging its bets with the Taliban.

The Obama Administration entered into office nearly eight years ago with the idea that it would elevate the U.S.–Pakistan partnership by instituting a strategic dialogue. In the fall of 2009, the U.S. Congress passed the Kerry–Lugar–Berman legislation, which vastly increased civilian aid to the country. By 2011, the U.S. was providing \$3.6 billion in military and economic aid annually to Pakistan. Aid levels have since decreased and in fiscal year 2017, the State Department requested \$743 million in aid for Pakistan, roughly half for security-related programs and half for economic projects.

In addition, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2017 appropriated \$900 million for Pakistan in the form of reimbursements for its military operations against militants in the tribal border areas. However, according to the legislation, the defense secretary must certify that Pakistan continues to conduct military operations that are contributing to significantly disrupting the safe havens and freedom of movement of the Haqqani network. If the Defense Secretary fails to make the certification, Pakistan will automatically be denied \$400 million of the reimbursement payments. This past summer, the U.S. withheld \$300 million in coalition support fund payments to Pakistan because of its failure to crack down on the Haqqani network. Earlier in 2016 the U.S. Congress blocked U.S. government funding for the transfer of additional F-16 aircraft to Pakistan for the same reason.

There is some hope that the new Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who was appointed last November, will pursue a broader crackdown on militants operating in Pakistan, including those that attack in Afghanistan and India. The smooth transition from one Army Chief to another and the apparent lack of interference in Prime Minister Sharif's decision-making process on the appointment sent a positive signal to both Kabul and New Delhi. It marked the first time in 20 years that the transfer of power from one Army Chief to another occurred on schedule. Bajwa's predecessor, General Raheel Sharif, is only the second Pakistani military chief ever to voluntarily resign from his position.

In early February, Pakistan put Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) founder Hafiz Mohammad Saeed under house arrest. The LeT orchestrated the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which killed 166 people, including six American citizens. The U.S. has designated Saeed as a specially designated national under Executive Order 13224, and the United Nations designated Saeed a terrorist under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1267 in December of 2008. In 2012, the U.S. offered a reward of \$10 million for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of Saeed.¹² *The Washington Post* asserted that the sudden move against Saeed may have been related to Pakistani fears that a tougher policy toward Pakistan-based terrorists was coming down the pike from the new Trump team.¹³

¹²Lisa Curtis, "How the U.S. Can Work with Pakistan to Help Uproot Terrorism," Daily Signal, February 6, 2017, <http://dailysignal.com/2017/02/06/how-the-us-can-work-with-pakistan-to-help-uproot-terrorism/> (accessed October 17, 2017).

¹³Pamela Constable, "Trump Travel Ban, Other Pressures Lead Pakistan to Rein in Islamist Militants," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/trump-travel-ban-other-

A recent report by a group of U.S.-based Pakistan experts, titled, *A New U.S. Approach to Pakistan: Enforcing Aid Conditions without Cutting Ties*, argues that U.S. policy toward Pakistan based solely on inducements and engagement is not sufficient to achieve U.S. counterterrorism objectives in the region.¹⁴ The report advises the Trump Administration to adopt a sharper, more clear-eyed approach in dealing with Pakistan on the terrorism issue and to make it crystal clear that Pakistan's policy of supporting terrorist proxies to achieve regional strategic advantage is inimical to U.S. national security interests. The report further recommends that the U.S. view its relationship with Pakistan through an Afghanistan lens and link U.S.–Pakistan relations to U.S. and NATO objectives in Afghanistan.

The report points out that Pakistan's tolerance for some terrorist groups hurts Pakistan itself, noting that thousands of innocent Pakistani civilians as well as Pakistani security forces have lost their lives to the terror scourge over the past decade. In mid-February Pakistan faced a series of terrorist attacks across the country that left more than 100 dead. The worst of the attacks was a suicide bombing of a Sufi shrine in the Sindh province on February 16th that killed at least 88 and wounded 343.¹⁵ Although ISIS took responsibility for the bombing of the shrine, the Pakistani government blamed a group called Jamat-ul-Ahrar, which is based in Afghanistan. Pakistani security officials responded to the wave of terror attacks by demanding the Afghan government turn over anti-Pakistan militants operating from Afghan territory; firing artillery into Afghan territory; closing down border check points between the two countries; and carrying out a massive domestic crackdown on militant networks.

Russian and Iranian Involvement

During his February 9th testimony before Congress, General Nicholson discussed Russia's recent attempts to undermine the U.S. position in Afghanistan through support of the Taliban and by seeking to portray such support as necessary to defeating ISIS in the region. One week later, the Russians hosted six-party talks on the issue of Afghan reconciliation with Afghan, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, and Chinese interlocutors.

Iran also is directly supporting the Taliban in western Afghanistan. At the same time, Iranian and Afghan economic cooperation has been growing. India and Iran signed a pact in May 2016 to jointly develop the Iranian port at Chabahar, allowing India to bypass Pakistan and gain access to Afghan markets.

International Aid Programs

Eighty percent of the Afghanistan budget is currently financed by international aid. The international community provides around \$4 billion annually in aid to Afghanistan, and the U.S. alone has provided over \$117 billion in reconstruction and security aid to Afghanistan since

[pressures-lead-pakistan-to-rein-in-islamist-militants/2017/02/03/fb6706ea-ea01-11e6-903d-9b11ed7d8d2a_story.html?utm_term=.01bd799424a4](https://www.hudson.org/research/13305-a-new-u-s-approach-to-pakistan-enforcing-aid-conditions-without-cutting-ties) (accessed October 17, 2017).

¹⁴Husain Haqqani and Lisa Curtis, "A New U.S. Approach to Pakistan: Enforcing Aid Conditions without Cutting Ties," The Hudson Institute, February 6, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/13305-a-new-u-s-approach-to-pakistan-enforcing-aid-conditions-without-cutting-ties> (accessed October 17, 2017).

¹⁵"At Least 88 Martyred in Bombing at Lal Shahbaz Qalandar Shrine," Geo News, February 16, 2017, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/131366-Blast-repported-near-Laal-Shehbaz-Qalandar-shrine-in-Sehwan> (accessed October 17, 2017).

2001. At the Brussels donors' conference in October 2016, the international community pledged \$15.2 billion in assistance to Afghanistan through 2020.

Although the U.S. aid footprint in Afghanistan inevitably will diminish over time, Washington must maintain programs that bolster democratic trends, contribute to economic development and regional economic integration, and job creation, particularly in the agriculture sector. These programs, however, must be insulated from the pervasive corruption that plagues Afghan society. Too much aid has been squandered over the past 15 years and the Trump Administration will have to review aid policies and programs, insisting on efficiency and results. Afghan President Ghani has taken steps to rein in corruption as well as professionalize the security forces, but much more needs to be done on this front.

Conclusion

The Quad countries can benefit by exchanging views on Afghanistan and Pakistan and looking for ways to more closely coordinate their policies and aid programs in both countries. They can also work together to encourage greater cooperation between the Afghan and Pakistani authorities against regional terrorist threats. Such steps could include increased collaboration on improving border security and swapping terrorist suspects that each side identifies as threats.

Although Afghan–Pakistani ties are currently on a downward slope, particularly after the series of attacks in Pakistan in mid-February, which Islamabad blames on militants operating from Afghanistan, the Quad countries must continue to push for Afghan-Pakistani dialogue to de-escalate the situation.

While India's historical rivalry with Pakistan limits the role it can play in convincing Pakistan to crack down on the Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries, Australia and Japan can use their diplomatic leverage to facilitate such actions.

While the U.S. and Japan have large-scale assistance programs to Pakistan on which they can coordinate closely, the U.S. and India should enhance their dialogue on aid programs to Afghanistan. The U.S. is planning to station several U.S. Agency for International Development officials working on Afghanistan at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, which will facilitate such discussions. While the Quad countries have some varying interests in the region, particularly with regard to relations with Pakistan, they share the mutual goal of fighting all forms of terrorism.

Counterterrorism should be high on the agenda of any informal or formal Quad discussions. Given the stakes for all four countries in ensuring Afghanistan does not revert to its status as a global terrorist safe haven and the critical role Pakistan must play in countering extremist trends in the region, the Quad should deepen their discussions on the security situation in both countries and look for ways to collaborate more closely in curbing terrorism in the region.

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