

## **Afghanistan: New US Strategy Proves Popular**

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Observers welcome a promised troop surge and increased pressure on Pakistan.

US president Donald Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan has won widespread support among Afghan officials and analysts, although some remain sceptical about Washington's commitment to a fresh counter-insurgency push.

The strategy involves a modest troop surge and increased air support to give Afghan forces a more decisive advantage over the insurgents, as well as stepping up pressure on Pakistan to act against the Taliban.

Trump's August announcement of a new strategy of "principled realism" surprised many observers, as he had made clear during his campaign that he believed the US should distance itself from foreign conflicts. Coalition forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 2014, although a limited number of US troops remained in an advisory and support capacity.

But Afghan experts welcomed the move, arguing that a weakened Taliban would be more open to substantive negotiations with the Kabul government.

"If the US is serious in its decisions regarding Afghanistan and the region, the new US strategy will be both useful and effective," said military affairs analyst Jawed Kohistani.

"The increase in US forces in Afghanistan will be a setback for the Taliban which will force them to start negotiating, preparing the ground for peace talks."

Despite a surge in Taliban attacks around the country throughout October, Afghan defence officials said that security conditions were improving steadily as a result of the new US strategy.

"All the districts and cities of 34 provinces of the country, apart from nine districts, are under the control of the Afghan Security Forces," said Afghanistan's defence ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri, adding, "The enemy is becoming weaker day by day and their battlefield morale has plummeted."

Although few details have been released relating to actual troop numbers or the practicalities of air support, Waziri said that the effect was already being felt on the ground.

"Black Hawk helicopters will be handed over to the Afghan government according to the new US strategy and two have already been transferred to the Afghan Air Forces," he continued. "These helicopters have been very effective."

In the central province of Ghazni, local journalist Mohammad Asif Ghaznawi also said that security conditions were improving.

"The morale of the Afghan Security Forces has risen and heavy blows have been delivered against the sanctuaries of the Taliban," he said, adding, "Many airstrikes have been carried out on enemy hideouts and they are steadily losing ground."

US secretary of state Rex Tillerson made a surprise visit to Afghanistan on October 23 during which he met President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and national security advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar in Bagram air base.

According to a statement released by the US embassy in Kabul, Tillerson discussed bilateral relations, counter-terrorism and Kabul's ongoing peace process with the armed opposition during his trip.

The secretary of state, who went on to visit Islamabad, made clear he had some "very specific requests" for Pakistan to take action "to undermine the support the Taliban receives and other terrorist organisations receive".

This strand of the strategy has been greeted with particular enthusiasm in Afghanistan.

"As everybody knows, the terrorist centres are located in Pakistan - and Pakistan will be pressurised by this strategy," said Afghan lawmaker Kamal Nasir Osoli. "Political isolation and pressure will force Pakistan to stop supporting terrorists."

He said that US actions had already affected Pakistan "to some extent" adding, "If such conditions continue, the country's security conditions will improve."

IWPR was unable to obtain any comment from the Pakistani embassy in Kabul.

Not everyone has welcomed the US strategy. While Afghan president Ashraf Ghani has been outspoken in his support for the plan, his predecessor Hamid Karzai publicly condemned the measures.

“America’s new strategy for Afghanistan does not bring us a message of peace but a message of more hostilities and increases regional rivalries,” he said.

Others remained unconvinced that Washington would fulfill its promises.

Political analyst Ahmad Saeedi said that the US had previously launched campaigns of this type in other countries for propaganda purposes, but had ultimately failed to implement its plans.

“The US wants to threaten and frighten the insurgents and also show them that the US hasn’t tired of war in Afghanistan... but I think this won’t be so effective in weakening the morale of the enemy,” he said, adding that putting such a strategy into practice “won’t be so useful given the presence of a weak and corrupt government like the current Afghan government”.

The insurgents themselves dismissed the US threats. In a telephone interview, Taleban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told IWPR, “The continuation and extension of the war is a required part of the new US strategy, but the Taleban are ready to fight against the US... We have gained some good experience of conflict in the last 16 years and we can fight against Trump’s new strategy too.”

Mujahid added, “The US has entered a new phase of war in Afghanistan by sending fresh troops to Afghanistan and the US will be destroyed by these wars; the US would be better off thinking about options for peace rather than war.”

He also poured scorn on the theory that fresh US military action would push the Taleban into peace talks with the Kabul government.

“Our war is against the US and we want to hold talks with the US,” he said, adding, “Making peace with Afghan government is useless and makes no sense.”

Kabul’s peace efforts have had some limited success. Last year, militant group Hizb-e-Islami renounced violence and their leader, former warlord Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, received a formal pardon.

However, Hizb-e-Islami’s view of the new US strategy was similar to that of the Taleban.

“We have said repeatedly that the new US strategy for Afghanistan will not be successful and that we have always wanted the US to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan,” said Fazal Ghani Haqmal, from the Hizb-e-Islami media team. “We continue to insist that this strategy will not work because it emphasises and requires the continuation of the war.”

Haqmal concluded, “The US would have brought peace and stability to Afghanistan in the last 16 years, if war had been the solution.”

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