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Canada and NATO can Nudge Afghanistan Back onto the Right Track

by Lindsay Rodman
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On Aug. 21, President Donald Trump announced an American recommitment to the conflict in Afghanistan. He promised additional troops, no timelines and a strategy that would ultimately lead to clearly defined “victory.” As of the writing of this paper, Secretary of Defense James Mattis has signed additional deployment orders for up to 3,500 U.S. troops, but little else has been disclosed about how the American approach to the 16-year-old conflict, and specifically the NATO-led Operation Resolute Support, will change.

In his announcement, Trump asked “our NATO allies and global partners to support our new strategy, with additional troop and funding increases in line with our own.” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg responded by stating that “NATO remains fully committed to Afghanistan,” highlighting the 12,000 NATO troops currently serving, and the plan for additional commitments from 15 countries. This non-statement from NATO likely appeased the Trump administration for the time being, but it did not signal NATO’s appetite for a reinvigorated effort in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, these announcements provide a much-needed reason to be hopeful about a conflict that is withering from North American consciousness while it seems to be floundering.

Operation Resolute Support is NATO’s mission. Trump’s announcement about high-level American commitment should be welcomed, though it raises some important follow-up questions. No mission is worth its blood and treasure if its members are not committed to a successful outcome.

Commentators on all sides have noted, rightfully, that there was no substance behind Trump’s announcement, nor was there any substance behind Stoltenberg’s statement. There are many unanswered questions about what this new strategy for Afghanistan might look like. Trump’s announcement appeared to be more of a tasking to his leadership rather than a statement of a fait accompli, thus opening up an opportunity for NATO to influence the strategy while it is still in its formulation. This is an opportunity that should not be squandered. Canada in particular, as a NATO member state with one of the strongest and most trusted relationships with the United States, is well-poised to lead this effort.

Trump has mentioned many times that he believes questions of national security strategy should be discussed behind closed doors. The administration’s silence regarding the details of his new strategy likely derives from both this principle of secrecy and the fact that they do not have much to announce quite yet. Therefore, a country such as Canada – one engaged at all levels with the administration and with the special access afforded members of the Five Eyes community, is best positioned to be in the room, on behalf of NATO, as the strategy solidifies in the next couple of months. Notably, Mattis has embraced a more transparent approach to troop numbers in Afghanistan. That may signal a willingness to share information, publicly or privately.



A number of important issues will arise as the U.S. develops its strategy for Afghanistan. A Canada-led NATO effort in strategy development should pose the following questions to the United States, and require satisfactory answers before full-throated support can take place:

- First, Trump emphasized the importance of defining “victory” in Afghanistan. In essence, he is asking for a well-articulated mission statement. Seeking clarity and forcing a good articulation of U.S. and NATO objectives in the region will be important. Trump will only be able to claim political points and declare victory once these objectives are achieved, which is to everyone’s benefit.
- Second, both the United States and NATO must think carefully about how to approach Pakistan. Trump put Pakistan on notice in his speech and signalled that he will be looking instead to India, thus potentially jeopardizing a relationship that is an absolute requirement for success in the region. The United States and NATO must carefully think through what they will ask of Pakistan, and which political levers can be pulled to achieve a good outcome.
- Third, there can be no success in Afghanistan without a political solution, and a sustainable path to Afghan self-sufficiency. Although Trump signalled that he would be “integrat(ing) all instruments of American power – diplomatic, economic and military,” public discussion has primarily focused on the military. In mid-September, the U.S. Senate is finally considering a nominee for ambassador to Afghanistan, but other relevant leadership positions in the U.S. government remain unfilled. Any proposed military solution must be coupled with a robust political and economic plan, supported by a sufficiently skilled, resourced and manned bureaucracy in Washington.
- Fourth, NATO partners may seek some clarity and assurances about the use of private contractors in Afghanistan. Erik Prince, the infamous former Blackwater CEO, maintains connections to the White House. His plan to privatize the war was among the final few options that Trump considered for Afghanistan. Many Americans breathed a sigh of relief after Trump’s Afghanistan speech, as it did not explicitly include a role for contractors. Nevertheless, the administration maintains ties with many contractors, and NATO would do well to clarify what should and should not be on the table moving forward.

Finally, NATO should offer up a ‘deal’ to rename and rebrand the mission. Even the name “Operation Resolute Support” implies lack of ownership and the never-ending commitment that has plagued this conflict from the outset. Renaming the effort will signal to Trump that NATO believes in the fruits of the strategy development process. It will also give him a political win, which can be exchanged for even more support and buy-in from the United States with respect to Afghanistan and better public management of the relationship with NATO more generally.

As of now, it seems there is little political appetite in Canada for large-scale recommitment to Afghanistan, especially not without a well-articulated way forward. Canada cannot achieve that



way forward without taking the first step of asking the tough questions that need answers. Whether the Trudeau administration has enough popular support and political capital to significantly increase the Canadian commitment will be a question for tomorrow. Trump has already stated that the United States will expand its commitment, and through diplomacy alone Canada and NATO have the opportunity today to shape the mission for the better.

The new Trump administration strategy has been maligned as “more of the same” for Afghanistan, and lacking in a real vision of what “winning” could possibly mean in Afghanistan. Those critiques would be fair, if the strategy development process were complete. Now is the time to ensure that the strategy is successful. Many people around the world, including in Canada, are reticent to give Trump a political victory. But this is not about him. It is about NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, and the future of that country and that region. We all owe it to NATO and to Afghanistan to take advantage of the window of opportunity that opened when Trump made his speech on Aug. 21.

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Lindsay L. Rodman is the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow (Canada), placed at the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS). She is a U.S. attorney and an expert in U.S. defence and foreign policy, and recently joined CFR (a U.S.-based think tank) and CIPS after leaving the Obama Administration, where she served in the Pentagon as Senior Advisor for International Humanitarian Policy. Prior to her political appointment, she was an active duty judge advocate in the U.S. Marine Corps, serving in various roles, including as Deputy Legal Counsel to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and as the Operational Law Attorney for 1st Marine Division (FWD) in Afghanistan. Her last duty assignment as an active duty Marine was in the White House as Director for Defense Policy and Strategy at the National Security Council. She remains in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves. Prior to joining the Marine Corps, Lindsay was an associate at the law firm of Arnold & Porter LLP (now Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer) in Washington, DC. She is a graduate of Harvard Law School (JD, 2007), the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (MPP, 2007), and Duke University (AB Mathematics, 2003).

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