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## Uncoordinated pull-out from Syria & Afghanistan; Likely to raise the threat of terrorism in the Indian subcontinent

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### Introduction

In August 2018, EFSAS released a [commentary](#) on the date of the one year mark since the United States' (US) President Donald Trump decided to create and enact a new "*South Asian Strategy*". This strategy, released in August 2017, was conceived to tackle the Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan, or in other words to "*double down*" on the commitment of the US in order to solve the '*Afghan problem*', which eventually resulted in the US sending an extra 3,000–4,000 troops to Afghanistan along with other military infrastructure. However, despite this plan having been in place for a year, violence has further escalated in Afghanistan over the course of the latter half of 2017 and 2018. Attacks increased monumentally from both the Taliban and the Islamic State (or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province – ISKP – as it is associated in Afghanistan).

It is not unfamiliar to many that the 18-year-old Afghan War has been the longest for the US in its history, which has led to the US, its citizens, NATO allies, and most importantly, Afghans themselves, become exhausted and desperately ravenous for a solution. Many have argued that more troops and military aid have not achieved the desired results on the ground and therefore it is unlikely that the Taliban would be defeated by this use of force; the Taliban is a chameleon-like group, well-groomed in adapting to change and resorting to new war strategies. Thus, it is plausible that the only way forward seems to be dialogue with all parties involved and a U-turn in the action plan after three US Presidential administrations have already abstained from face-to-face talks with the Taliban. The Taliban's, and the IS', main goals are to see foreign troops leave the region and remain a strictly Afghan (or rather, Taliban/ISKP lead) country. Therefore, it is not a surprise that there has been a large push for the US to engage in talks and negotiations with all stakeholders in Afghanistan – particularly with the Taliban.

In the beginning of the summer of 2018, it was speculated and quietly acknowledged that the US had begun such dialogue with the Taliban's leaders. Several envoys and top governmental officials from the US first began observing talks, and in the fall, relations escalated to full force meetings and discussions about negotiations, led by Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad, a US diplomat, who earned the title of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the Department of State. This is to be acknowledged as a fresh approach to the Afghanistan conflict and a nod towards much-needed peace.

Then as 2018 came to a close, President Trump's erratic foreign policy style abruptly divulged a new approach to Afghanistan out of thin air: the pull-out of half of all US troops from Afghanistan, which would be around 7,000 men and women. The strategy in mind is to have all troops removed within a short timeframe. This is in stark contradiction to his administration's last plan of action which increased the number of troops. The decision to remove half of the US armed services personnel goes against many objections within his Cabinet, the Pentagon, and amongst his advisors as they fear it could make the situation on the ground in Afghanistan more precarious. The announcement to remove half of the troops from Afghanistan shortly followed Trump's notice that he was also removing all US troops from Syria – an announcement of such critical dimensions that it made the US Secretary

of Defense, Jim Mattis, a retired four-star general, to finally break with the President and submit his resignation shortly thereafter. Mattis' letter stated that President Trump had *"the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours"* and reiterated his core belief in America's alliance and partnerships, specifically with NATO. Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, followed Mattis' example and also submitted his resignation. All throughout, members of Trump's administration were left aghast by his decision to leave Syria and Afghanistan, as were the country's allies, especially those involved in the NATO missions of the region, who are fighting against both the Taliban and the Islamic State.

One could argue that President Trump's urge to remove the US' armed forces from Afghanistan is a new strategic action, which could initiate a possible peace process after almost two decades of war, and as such, is a move that many have been yearning for a long time. Many have criticized the US for involving itself with Afghanistan under the George W. Bush administration at the first place, and thus it has been speculated that the presence of foreign troops in the area could have propelled negative sentiments in the region, spurring the formation of terrorist outfits and hatred towards the West. Nevertheless, President Trump's new *'Afghan Plan'* appears impulsive, being founded upon little policy recommendations, lacking coherency, facing extreme hurdles, and overall, being extremely problematic. Trump has flip-flopped his Afghan policy several times – during his political campaign he propagated for a *"hands off"* approach, then during his first year of Presidency he was made to go against his wishes and as a result increased the number of troops, and at present time he has switched back to his original thoughts. Therefore, the foundation of his recent approach is not based on securing peace, but could be seen as simply trying once more to appease his supporters and maintain his stance on isolationism. The same goes for the decision to back out of Syria. The way the events within the coming months play out, could have lasting negative repercussions not only for Afghanistan, but for the entire South Asian region, bearing the risk of triggering more violent conflicts and unrest.

In regards to the removal of US troops from Syria, such scenario exacerbates lots of ongoing problems in the Middle East, South Asia, and especially Afghanistan. The decision to remove US troops from Syria was largely opposed by Jim Mattis, leading to his resignation, and many analysts and experts have since warned that such move would be very costly and will have far-reaching effects that could resonate in many areas thus possibly impacting Europe and North America, which could witness an increase in terrorist attacks. Syria has been the main base in fighting terrorism and the Islamic State insurgency, thus becoming a focal point for various international actors and allied powers, which have dedicated time, money, and manpower to its stabilization. When the statement of withdrawing forces from Syria was made at the end of 2018, no other ally forces, amongst the anti-Islamic State coalition, had been notified or consulted in the making of this decision; hence, the move appeared as a betrayal to some of the coalition's key allies, such as France, Britain, and Germany, and those on the ground who have done the bulk of fighting in the war on terror. European allies have made it clear that as members of the anti-Islamic State coalition, they would have liked to have been considered and that consultation in regards to the pull-out would have been very useful. Both French and British troops will now be left to lead the coalition on the ground with small numbers. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has twice during the month of February contradicted all of President Trump's statements concerning the defeat of the Islamic State and affirmed that the Berlin headquarters of Germany's foreign intelligence BND remain dedicated to peace in Syria which is *'still a long ways away'*. In addition to Chancellor Merkel's remarks, the former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, further

voiced his concerns adding that a US withdrawal would *“be a victory for Russia, Iran, Turkey, Turkish proxies, and the Syrian regime”*.

Trump’s Presidency in office is built upon an isolationist strategy – Trump hopes that by pulling out troops from the country (and Afghanistan), other NATO and international allies will step in to take America’s place. His complaint is often that many of America’s allies do not contribute in the same weight as the US does. However, Jorge Benitez, who is a NATO expert at the Atlantic Council, has made the analysis that this move would most likely have the opposite effect. He says that *“a large pullout from the region would likely result in similar cutbacks from allies there and run counter to Trump’s objective of improving burden sharing”*. This could largely hurt not only relations between all members of the Islamic State-coalition, but distract and thus have an adverse impact on the mission on the ground.

Although witnessing two distinct situations, two different countries, and within two separate global regions – the Middle East and South Asia – the pull-out of troops in both are somewhat interconnected and the decision in regards to Syria largely affects that of the situation within Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. As US and NATO forces squeezed out the Islamic State in Syria and dismantled the physical Caliphate there, the bubble effect moved the Islamist terrorists to Afghanistan – the ISKP. Fighters fled from Syria, moving to places such as Afghanistan, as well as throughout northern and western Africa. However, Islamic State militants in Afghanistan date back to 2014, when NATO combat troops withdrew from the country and handed over responsibility to Afghan security forces – a scenario that could now replay itself or be amplified. The Afghan government at one point estimated that there were somewhere between 3,000–5,000 Islamic State fighters in the country; some members originated from the Taliban and then switched to the ISKP in an attempt of *‘rebranding’*. Throughout 2017 and 2018, there were a large number of Islamic State terrorist attacks within Afghanistan and territorial clashes began to occur between the Taliban and the ISKP; yet, the presence of the ISKP in Afghanistan has dwindled somewhat. Nevertheless, with these new policy approaches applied to the regions, there are many different scenarios that could play out in Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. President Trump’s administration plan to remove troops from both countries negates any progress which has been made in the fight against terrorism and its spread by far; the threat will increase twofold – one, from the Islamic State, and two from the Taliban. Not only this, but these coinciding removals of US presence might reopen old problems and create new ones, from strained foreign relations, through geopolitical games, to human rights violations, which would inevitably shape the future course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## The Effects on Terrorism

### **A. Pull-out From Syria**

President Donald Trump’s formally declared reason for removing US troops from Syria is the claim of *“mission accomplished”*. He stated that he expected a formal announcement as early as the week of 11 February that the coalition fighting against the Islamic State had reclaimed all of the territory previously held by the radicalized group. The statement of *“mission accomplished”* refers specifically to the eradication of the group’s physical caliphate in Raqqa and that the Islamic State currently no

longer has a dominion over any certain ground. (A caliphate is an Islamic State under the leadership of an Islamic steward with the title of caliph; the Islamic State has proclaimed a worldwide caliphate, claiming religious, political and military authority over all Muslims worldwide). This might be indeed true, and could be considered a major success, yet many warn that just because there is no physical caliphate, the group has not be entirely vanquished and its aspirations are still alive. Large numbers of fighters have retreated from Iraq and Syria, fleeing to parts of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Turkey, still remaining indoctrinated and very active in pursuing their cause. Ironically, despite this proclamation, on 16 January 2019, there was an attack claimed by the Islamic State of a suicide bomber which killed civilians, US troops, a Pentagon civilian, and a contractor.

Many analysts and international top officials caution that having the mindset that the Islamic State is *“completely defeated”* is a dangerous one. The Geneva Centre for Security Policy in a report titled, *‘Dead or Alive? The Future of the Islamic State’*, written by Dr. Christina Schori Liang, has stated that *“even though the IS has lost most of its physical caliphate, it is still far from diminished”* and that *“Jihad has entered a new stage”*. Dr. Christina Schori Liang continues saying there still remains a *“growing collective Muslim identity that is convincing young Muslims to see themselves as a collective community”*, especially so as the prejudice against Muslims rise in western countries. In addition, the Islamic State still continues to weaponize the Internet with extremist propaganda in order to radicalize, recruit, and exploit young vulnerable Muslims. Dr. Christina Schori Liang concluded that Salafi-Jihadist groups will endure due to the stark rise of civil wars and unrest, which nurture these types of insurgencies. That type of unrest still exists in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Pakistan, and African countries like Chad, Libya, and Mali, thus providing space for these groups to flourish and conduct their operations. Political scientists at the RAND Corporation, Dr. Colin Clarke and Dr. Chad Serena, view the Islamic State as a highly adaptive body just simply within the midst of a transitional phase. Dr. Daniel Byman, Senior Fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, agrees with this by analyzing that *“the end of ISIS is simply a new beginning for the Islamic State”*.

On 5 February, the top commander of US Forces in the Middle East, General Joseph Votel, told a Senate committee that he was not asked for advice in regards to the US troop pull-outs, while reiterating that *“the fight against ISIL and violent extremists is not over”* and those who have gone into hiding *“still have the potential to return”*. The same analysis can be seen and heard over and over again, and yet Trump marches forward with his plan to eliminate troops from Syria. As of now, it is reported that military equipment has begun to be pulled out from the country. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, tried to acknowledge allied powers’ concerns in the fight against radical groups by saying that troop withdrawal was *“essentially a tactical change... not a change in the mission”* and that even though US military personnel will not be on the ground, the US would continue fighting the war in its capacity of supervising the situation. However, Al Jazeera reports that Major General James Hecker, the Vice Director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee that *“there will be a decrease in the amount of pressure that we will be able to apply”* and would be *“difficult to keep up the pressure”* towards the Islamic State. President Trump recently beseeched European countries from which foreign fighters had left to fight with the Islamic State outfits, to repatriate all foreign fighters to their country of origin and prosecute them there, as the US tries to pull-out and leave, hurrying up along the process so that it does not have to deal with this problem any longer.

In November 2018, researchers from the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Liesbeth van der Heide, Charlie Winter, and Shiraz Maher, released an analysis of the potential future of the Islamic State, especially after the demise of its physical caliphate. The title of the research was *“The Cost of Crying Victory: Policy Implications of the IS’ Territorial Collapse”*. *“Crying victory”* happens to be exactly what the US government is doing right now and the article warns policy makers of doing the same. Van der Heide, Winter, and Maher further provide policy recommendations for policy makers globally in regards to fighting terrorism. The first and foremost recommendation is to *“sidestep any policy fatigue at all costs”* and *“recognize the territorial collapse of the caliphate does not constitute full defeat as the jihadist ideology remains alive”* – both of which Trump has already ignored with his policies. They indicate that 20,000–30,000 fighters still remain at large in Syria and Iraq. The report then warns that the Islamic State is likely to redouble its efforts and further strengthen its affiliates in countries like Afghanistan in order to secure its franchise. Even with fights against the Taliban, the caliphate’s Khorasan Province has been ascendant still throughout the last year. They say *“notwithstanding the fact that it is operationally confined to a small territory to the east of the country, its ability to deploy suicide terrorism in the rest of the country is staggering and show few signs of abating”*. The US is pulling out of both countries, meaning there is a potential for the Islamic State to grow within both territories, if not connect on a larger scale, and destabilize operations in both.

### **B. Pull-out From Afghanistan**

The US first invaded Afghanistan and began its war against the Taliban in 2001 after the 11 September NYC attack. At this time, the terrorist group was at its peak and ruled large swaths of Afghanistan in conjunction with Al Qaeda. The defeat of the Taliban was quick after the intervention in 2001, subsequently to which the Americans set up a government in Kabul. For the last eighteen years, the US with its allies in Afghanistan have been diligently trying to maintain a stronghold in the country to ensure the Taliban would never again rise to power, thus keeping the group to the sidelines, in addition to fully supporting the government they had set up. The mission on the ground had many cogs and has always demanded large amounts of time, energy, and money. However, even after eighteen years, \$2 trillion spent since 2011 in the Middle East – according to an estimate by PolitiFact – too many army and civilian lives, and countless time and energy, the Taliban now hold just as much terrain as the group did originally back in 2001 before the war. Up until 2018, the US did not wish to talk face-to-face with the Taliban due to apprehensions that this would give some sort of legitimacy to the terrorist group. Yet, apparently the US has grown tired of its ceaseless war in the region, considering the recent motion for initiating a dialogue with the Taliban. Consequently, the announcement of President Trump’s decision to pull-out troops from the country came at a very delicate and fragile time – for the first time in the history of the Afghan war, US and Taliban officials had begun to engage in possible peace talks.

Recently in 2019, relations have progressed and talks have gathered pace. Zalmay Khalilzad has labored in talks with Taliban leaders and is due to meet with them again at the end of February. The talks have resulted in some sort of loose framework, which could eventually lead to the removal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, bring an end to the war, all within a rumored timeline of 18 months for this to happen. The Taliban are not offering much in return for the removal of US presence besides a guarantee that no other terrorist group, like Al Qaeda or the Islamic State, would be allowed to use Afghanistan as a foothold to launch attacks. What needs to be noted is that the Taliban are in it for

the long haul – after all, eighteen years later the group has managed to hold its ground against the largest military in the world. Those who have studied the Taliban believe that Trump making it known that the US is tired and intends, no matter what, to free itself from Afghanistan, has actually surrendered any leverage it may have had in negotiating; if the Taliban know the US Army will eventually leave, they will just wait until this happens and then take over, thus gaining control over the country like they did at the end of the last century. This could rekindle threats of terrorism within Afghanistan towards the country's people as well as potentially looking outward towards the West.

The last three consecutive US Presidents also attempted envisioning a sustainable Afghan strategy, yet unfortunately, all three did not experience much success. At first it seemed possible that Donald Trump was somewhat changing this narrative, but in reality, he has fallen into the same patterns as both the Obama and the Bush administrations – the so-called *'timeline'* pattern. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama made the mistake of setting time limits to everything enacted in regards to Afghanistan, always with the eventual purpose of getting out as quickly as possible. Time and time again, this method proved faulty and resulted in rushed policy making or creating additional issues. The same can be applied to Obama's Iraq policy when he pulled US troops out of the country too quickly, which eventually led to the Islamic State's rise and influence. There have been multiple sources reporting that the current peace negotiations with the Taliban consist of a deadline for US' troops and other foreign troops to begin pulling out of Afghanistan by the end of the next 18 months; again, this is something the Taliban can just wait for if the group has been enduring conflict for this long already. Also, some analysts argue that a hasty withdrawal would create another vacuum for terrorists, with the possibility of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda filling this vacuum. That was exactly the case before 2001 when Taliban rebels beat the Soviets and then the US troops pulled out. Ryan Crocker, a former US ambassador to Afghanistan, has said *"if we (the US) withdraw as we're talking about in an 18-month timeline, you will simply see the Taliban move in and retake the country. We've also seen this (method) before, at the Paris peace talks with Vietnam"*. This would eventually leave the US and the rest of the world essentially with the same terrorism problems, which it faced at the beginning of the century.

A rushed and poorly conceived deal might enable armed Taliban members to also overpower the Afghan government. The Taliban have been very resistant in holding any talks which involve the Afghan government, as the terrorist group maintains the stance that the establishment is simply a 'puppet' of the Americans. However, one could question the fact that since the Taliban are already holding talks with the US, why would such allegation even matter to them. One major critique of the entire attempted peace process is that the Afghan government, headed by Ashraf Ghani, is largely uninvolved. With talks between Zhalilzad and Taliban officials, no members from the government have been present. What makes the situation even more precarious is that in the week of 4 February, Russia has become involved inviting Taliban leaders and members of the government opposition party to Moscow to enroll in dialogue with *'Afghan leaders'*. Contrary to a widespread belief, these *'Afghan leaders'* do not hold any seats within the current Afghan government and are most likely trying to come into power should a new government be set up that would involve the Taliban. Twice now has Ghani's government been side stepped, a natural course for disaster in any peace process, which will likely result in unrest and make it more likely for insurgent groups to take over once the US presence is gone. President Ghani has repeatedly issued statements of his dissatisfaction in the lack of participation of his government in those processes, and has assured the Afghan people that there will be no peace negotiations unless the government is involved in all processes, and has the final say. If



all parties are properly given a platform in the peace process, common security forces could be built with a peace agreement that sequences the implementation of withdrawal and reconciliation that would ultimately lead to the integration of incumbents and insurgents. It is unlikely for the Taliban to overthrow a government in which they are participants of, or at least are supporting in a certain way. After all, insurgent groups within Afghanistan are mainly dissatisfied with how the country is being run and therefore demand greater representation.

Since 2014, it has been the Afghan security forces themselves whom have been fighting the most against insurgency groups in the country. During this time, however, it was when the Taliban also gained momentum. Many fear that with the pull-out of US support on the ground, the Afghan military will struggle to cope. And even though peace talks are under process, the Taliban has not let up in their attacks, claiming that a ceasefire will not take place until all foreign troops have gone, which has also lowered the morale of the Afghan security forces, owing to the large numbers of casualties. Reports from watchdogs and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) relay that the strength of the Afghan defense forces has declined to its lowest levels since 2014. In 2015, NATO launched an operation to train, advise, and assist Afghans in the fight against terrorism, which unfortunately did not prove very fruitful. With the US now tired of its participation, there are fears that the efficacy of those programs will deteriorate even more. One of the largest threats to the situation in Afghanistan is the decline of international financial support. Many efforts are needed to improve training of men on the ground, recruiting women, improving the retention rate of the armed services, education, and English language skills. Allied forces can donate as much military equipment as they want but they need manpower to operate this equipment, the know-how to do so, and engineers to maintain equipment in order to fight terrorism on the ground and build a strong country. Education should not merely rely on military strategies – there are many opportunities that lie here to help stimulate growth in Afghanistan, which would have natural trickle effects.

Another worrying condition of the peace negotiations in this tentative framework is the mandate from the US that has the Taliban committing to *“do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals”*. This essentially sounds as if the Taliban would be fighting in place of the NATO allies against the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, or any other terrorist group in Afghanistan, which is quite reminiscent to some past scenarios. In the 1980s and 1990s the US armed rebel groups to fight against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, which ultimately led to the genesis of the Taliban. Therefore, questions arise why the US would be willing once again to let the group be responsible for its own commitments in terms of security in the region. It is also a lot of power to place within the hands of a non-state group, especially if the peace negotiations are non-inclusive of the Afghan government. It is plausible that more harm than good would arise out of this agreement and thus heighten the threat of terrorism.

As earlier mentioned, the uncoordinated troop removal from both Syria and Afghanistan is bound to inflict negative implications in regards to terrorism to the entire Indian subcontinent. At the beginning of February, the US Director of National Intelligence, Daniel Coats, sat before the Senate Select Committee and predicated, as well as warned, of the repercussions for the US and the West in regards to terrorism, if President Trump continues with his plan, especially in respect to Afghanistan. He warned that *“terrorism will continue to be a top threat to US and partner interests worldwide, one place particular in South Asia”*. He mainly analyzed the effects troop withdrawal from Afghanistan would have upon Pakistan, India, region of Jammu & Kashmir, and Afghanistan itself.

First, is that of Pakistan. Coats focused on the militant groups and insurgent leaders that live within Pakistan saying these individuals will continue to take advantage of the safe havens that has been provided for them by Pakistan, due to the country's reluctance to deal with terrorists. This would possibly allow extremists to continue launching attacks in the region and even abroad, since they would be able to reunite with active members in Afghanistan. It is suspected that the Pakistani military establishment would be pleased not to have US presence so close to itself, thus welcoming the withdrawal. Some say the withdrawal could actually embolden Pakistan's generals, since that would give them more leverage in supporting militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which could be eventually used in attacks against India. Therefore, the removal from Afghanistan could additionally strain the already strenuous relations between India and Pakistan. In 2002, a Brookings' article deliberated upon the link between Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir and Kabul, stating that President Bush at the time of invading Afghanistan did not understand the closely knitted relationship between the two. This is partly due to the *'tangled web of terrorist networks in the region'*. It was a problem then and remains a problem now. Indian analysts describe resurgence of extremist violence in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir as one of the major causes of concern within India, which could stem from the withdrawal of US troops in Afghanistan. According to them, there is a chance that this will further open the diversion of jihadi fighters and proxies from Afghanistan to the Kashmir Valley, threatening to increase the levels of violence in the area. In 2018, the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) predicted that if *"another Mumbai 2008-style attack, where Lashkar-e-Taiba fighters rampaged through the city for four days, killing 164 people, were carried out by Pakistan's military proxies, it could trigger a severe confrontation between the two nuclear armed states"*.

On 14 February 2019, 49 Indian paramilitary police officers were killed in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir in an attack claimed by Pakistani based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad, carried by a 22-year-old suicide bomber. It is believed to be the deadliest attack on Indian security forces in the disputed territory for decades, which could be enough for the CFR's prediction to come true with the world finding India and Pakistan in the throes of war. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has responded to the attacks saying those responsible for the bombing will *"pay a heavy price"*. Mr. Coats has estimated that the conflict between India and Pakistan, especially during an election year, could heighten tensions and therefore further escalate ongoing terrorism in the region. Now as conflicts reach a potential climax between the two nations, a US pull-out in Afghanistan will severely strain any sort of regional stability there may be. With terrorism continuing in Afghanistan, Islamic State's presence lingering, and intensification of terrorism in the Kashmir Valley fueling instability between India and Pakistan, one wrong move could lead to regional instability and dire consequences. The US has identified South Asia as an epicenter for terrorism and religious extremism, and therefore should have greater interest in ensuring peace in the region, yet its actions seem to be counter intuitive towards itself and the rest of the world.

One final outcome could be a civil war within Afghanistan that could end up breeding new terrorist outfits and problems altogether. There is also uncertainty in respect to whom will fill the void once the US leaves. A New York Times article warns that *"citing a threat faced by the rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan as an excuse, Iran may choose with Russian help to deepen a proxy war in Afghanistan that could undermine an already struggling government"*. Hopefully, Iran would want the opposite and establish peace alongside its border for the sake of stability.



## Conclusion

Further dialogue is scheduled to take place within the upcoming weeks between the US' peace envoy led by Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban officials. The world waits in suspension as it is possible that there might be an end in sight to a war that has occupied so much time and space, and has affected those reaching far and wide. The chance of peace for Afghanistan and the opportunity for quenching terror and violence from at least one group is most definitely welcomed. It can be understood why dialogue was not wished beforehand with the Taliban, but appears that this is the most hopeful outlook at this point. However, the approach being currently taken is likely to do more harm than good and leading policy officials need to be aware of that. While such endeavors, as also other attempts to sit across the table with the Taliban in search of the long-elusive peace in Afghanistan, are welcome developments, the absence of insistence that the terrorist outfit eschew violence prior to ushering it onto the table does raise serious concerns. Another major flaw in Afghanistan has always been setting time limits and expiration dates for action plans. Such processes cannot be rushed and there should be no end date announced since this could just motivate the Taliban to simply *'hold on'*. Donald Trump has made it clear that eventually US troops will leave Afghanistan no matter what, which has put him at a disadvantage; he needs to retract his statement and demonstrate to terrorist outfits that the US will continue to squelch them if necessary.

Secondly, more actors need to be engaged in the policy planning, both US allies that have helped in the fight against terrorism and most definitely the Afghan government inclusive of Ashraf Ghani. Any discussion of peace that does not include the Afghan government will be futile and inevitably bring additional problems. In respect to the Afghan people, it feels as if they, the ones who will have to live with whatever decisions are made, have been the most neglected and last to be consulted. Therefore, it is of major importance to have an inclusive dialogue with the people from the region in order to attend to their needs.

The American government should also be aware that crying victory and rushing missions in both Afghanistan and Syria will have overarching consequences that cannot be undone. Analysts and experts warn that the Islamic State is far from being defeated in Syria and therefore the threat of terrorism remains. Leaving another void will once more create a vacuum, which might be filled by unwanted parties. A hastily conducted US troops pull-out from Syria and Afghanistan will most likely aid in an increase of terrorism in those respective countries, altogether with the rest of the Middle East and South Asia.

It takes only a couple of glances in the history books to demonstrate that the US should not rely on other terrorist groups to fight terrorist groups if the Islamic State does indeed rise to a power of a physical caliphate again. The US needs to take a more careful approach to end the problems that it claims to solve.

The US, which entered Afghanistan uninvited in November 2001 to further its own post-9/11 security objectives, must bear in mind that 17 years later it cannot walk away and abandon the country to the mercy of the very same extremist Taliban forces it helped oust.

