

Afghanistan endorses Trump's revised strategy; Taliban warns of 'graveyard'

The Afghan government on Tuesday embraced President Trump's commitment to "fight to win" in Afghanistan, but the insurgent Taliban vowed the country would become a "graveyard" for U.S. troops if they don't withdraw.

Trump said in a televised speech Monday night that he was lifting restrictions on commanders in the field imposed by the Obama administration and increasing pressure on Pakistan to stop providing a safe haven to militant groups along its border.

Cautioning against a "hasty withdrawal," Trump will likely send several thousand more U.S. troops to the war that has dragged on for nearly 16 years. He said he wouldn't discuss specific troop levels or deadlines.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani welcomed Trump's "enduring commitment" in "this global conflict."

"I am grateful to President Trump and the American people for this affirmation of support for our efforts to achieve self-reliance and for our joint effort to rid the region of the threat of terrorism," he said in a statement.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid dismissed Trump's strategy and said it offered "nothing new," Al Jazeera reported.

"If America doesn't withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, soon Afghanistan will become another graveyard for this superpower in the 21st century," he said.

Last week, the Taliban sent an "open letter" to Trump, reiterating its calls for U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said he welcomed Trump's new approach. More than 12,000 troops from NATO and its partner countries have been training and supporting Afghan security forces since 2015.

“NATO allies and partners have already committed to increasing our presence in Afghanistan,” Stoltenberg said. “Our aim remains to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists who would attack our own countries.”

China defended Pakistan, its close ally. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Pakistan lies on the front line of the anti-terrorism struggle and has made “great sacrifices” in battling insurgents.

Pakistani security officials accused Trump of shifting blame for U.S. failures in the war, the Guardian reported.

Naeem Khalid Lodhi, a defense analyst and retired general in the Pakistani military, said: “They are shifting blame to Pakistan,” the Guardian reported. “Pakistan should not remain silent against such U.S. behavior and we should work to build a new political and strategical bloc with big powers like Russia and China.”

Before Trump’s speech, Pakistan’s army said it had done all it could to tackle militants.

“Let it come,” Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor told reporters of Trump’s decision, according to the Pakistani newspaper Dawn. “Even if it comes ... Pakistan shall do whatever is best in the national interest.”

India welcomed Trump’s demand that Pakistan stop offering safe havens to terror groups, something India has long complained of.

India’s Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement that it appreciated Trump’s “determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges faced by Afghanistan and in confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists.”

British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon said, “The U.S. commitment is very welcome.” Britain and other European allies pledged in June to increase troops to support Afghanistan’s military.

Fallon said he talked with U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on Monday and they “agreed that despite the challenges, we have to stay the course in Afghanistan to help build up its fragile democracy and reduce the terrorist threat to the West.”

David Kilcullen, an Australian military analyst, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that Trump's speech set a "fairly low bar."

"I think this is carefully shrouded in triumphalist rhetoric, but it is actually quite a modest set of strategic goals," he said.

Contributing: The Associated Press

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