

ISAS Insights

No. 456 – 23 August 2017

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America's Reset of Afghan Strategy: Potential Realignment of South Asian Geopolitics

The United States President Donald Trump's reset of Afghan strategy marks an important discontinuity in America's approach to South Asia. Washington's new strategy, crafted after an agonising reappraisal of American goals in Afghanistan and the means to achieve them, has come in the face of Trump's own personal skepticism about continuing the American military involvement after 17 futile years. Whether it succeeds or not, Trump's new assertiveness in Afghanistan is bound to intensify the current churn in the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent.

C Raja Mohan¹

With United States (US) President Donald Trump announcing a reset in America's Afghan policy on 21 August 2017, South Asia's international relations are bound to enter uncharted waters once again. Trump's policy speech at Fort Myers near Washington DC was not merely branded as an American search for a favourable outcome in Afghanistan after nearly 17 years of a frustrating war; it was billed as a major revamp of American policy towards Pakistan and

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India. Therein lies the significant prospect of a dramatic restructuring of South Asian geopolitics.

To be sure, many powers have contributed to the political churn in Afghanistan and, with it, the turbulence of the Indian subcontinent over the last many decades. However, there is no denying that the US has been the prime mover. The then-Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan at the end of 1979 and withdrew amidst great political humiliation a decade later. The Europeans and Japanese have shown different degrees of interest and engagement with Afghanistan as part of their alliance commitments to the US. Many have seen China's recent focus on Afghanistan as setting the stage for a fundamental transformation of South West Asia.

It is the US, however, through its actions and inactions – the support to anti-Soviet *jihād* in the 1980s, its decision to turn its back on Afghanistan in the 1990s and the ferocious return to in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks on New York and Washington – that has had the greatest impact on Afghanistan and, with it, on the regional and international relations of the Indian subcontinent.

As Trump confessed in his speech, his personal instinct was to end the costly and frustrating war in Afghanistan. It was that instinct that compelled him to closely question the current strategy and tactics in Afghanistan and demand that his national security team come up with a different pathway towards success over the last seven months.

Trump justified the importance of continued engagement with Afghanistan by arguing that any precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan would hurt American security interests by boosting international terrorism which is so entrenched in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He also declared that “our nation must seek an honourable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices”² in blood and treasure made over the last 17 years.

At the same time, with an eye on his political base that is deeply wary of endless American military adventures, Trump promised that his administration is not interested in Afghan nation-building and that its focus will be on fighting and winning against terrorism. He also affirmed

² “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia”, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, United States, 21 August 2017.

that, “the heaviest burden will continue to be borne by the good people of Afghanistan and their courageous armed forces” and that “Afghanistan is fighting to defend and secure their country against the same enemies who threaten us. The stronger the Afghan security forces become, the less we will have to do.”³

Explaining his new emphasis on “principled realism”, Trump declared that, “we will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. Those days are now over.”⁴ The president went on to affirm that, “Instead, we will work with allies and partners to protect our shared interests. We are not asking others to change their way of life, but to pursue common goals that allow our children to live better and safer lives.”⁵ According to Trump, this principled realism would be, moving forward, the guiding principle for America’s decisions.

Trump acknowledged that military force alone will not resolve the current challenges in Afghanistan. However, he insisted that “strategically applied force aims to create the conditions for a political process to achieve a lasting peace.”⁶ As part of this effort, Trump has laid out some clear goals in Afghanistan and a five-fold strategy to achieve them.

Trump defined America’s objectives in Afghanistan “as attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”⁷ On the approach to the Taliban, Trump left the door open for a future political settlement but expressed deep skepticism about such a prospect while emphasising full support for the current government in Kabul.

The first of the five elements of the new strategy outlined by Trump is a departure from his predecessor President Barack Obama, who set timelines for American troop withdrawal after announcing in 2009 a dramatic surge in US forces to nearly 100,000. Trump, however, declared that, “We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables, will guide our strategy from now on.”⁸ This is expected to give the US strategy greater political room for manoeuvre in Afghanistan.

In the second element, Trump talks of ‘the integration of all instruments of American power – diplomatic, economic and military – toward a successful outcome.’⁹ This addresses the widespread criticism that the US was too narrowly focused on the military dimension and did not use all available instruments to shape the outcomes in Afghanistan.

The application of this approach is most evident in the third dimension of Trump’s strategy that recasts US policy towards Pakistan, whose geography puts it in a pivotal position vis-à-vis Afghanistan. “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organisations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond”,¹⁰ Trump declared.

While acknowledging that the Pakistani people have been major victims of terrorism, Trump did not mince words in accusing the Pakistani state of double-dealing in the fight against violent extremism. He pointed to the fact that Pakistan has “sheltered the same organisations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars; at the same time, they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting.”¹¹

Trump insisted that this “will have to change” and “change immediately”. ‘No partnership can survive a country’s harbouring of militants and terrorists who target US service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilisation, order and to peace’,¹² Trump added.

As he ended America’s acquiescence of Pakistan’s troubling policies towards terrorism, Trump also demanded that India play a larger role in stabilising Afghanistan. “We appreciate India’s important contributions to stability in Afghanistan, but India makes billions of dollars in trade

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

with the United States, and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development.”¹³

This fourth element involving India marks a big shift from the previous American administrations. Although both the George W Bush and Obama administrations were well disposed towards India, they sought to limit the Indian role in Afghanistan for the fear of upsetting Pakistan. By calling on India to do more, Trump has discarded the perception in Washington that India is part of the problem in Afghanistan that had to be managed. He now sees New Delhi as a necessary part of potential solutions for Afghanistan.

The fifth and final element of Trump’s approach is to end Washington’s micromanagement of the war in Afghanistan. The president revealed that he has “already lifted restrictions the previous administration placed on our war fighters that prevented the Secretary of Defense and our commanders in the field from fully and swiftly waging battle against the enemy.”¹⁴

Trump also promised that he is expanding authority for American armed forces “to target the terrorists and criminal networks that sow violence and chaos throughout Afghanistan.”¹⁵ American retribution, Trump added, “will be fast and powerful”. To the skeptical domestic audiences, Trump is promising that America is cutting loose from self-imposed limits in Afghanistan and will fight to win the war in the country.

Taken together, Trump’s new approach marks significant discontinuity in the US policy towards the Indian subcontinent. Until recently, it appeared that America was exhausted with the war in Afghanistan and was ready to throw in the towel. Washington’s dithering in the last two years of the Obama Administration seemed to match Trump’s personal reluctance to continue the war in Afghanistan. Trump’s decisions now suggest that America is not going to leave without one last effort to salvage Afghanistan. While skeptics at home might question the sustainability Trump’s new approach, other major powers and regional actors will now have to adapt to the shifting dynamic in Afghanistan.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Trump expects the European allies of the US and Japan to contribute to the new strategy in Afghanistan. However, he made no reference to China and Russia that have sought to carve out a larger role for themselves in Afghanistan in recent years. Amidst uncertain relations with Moscow and Beijing, Trump's new assertiveness on Afghanistan could add to the complexity of the engagement of the US with the two Eurasian powers.

However, it is in South Asia that the consequences of Trump's new policy will manifest themselves. For the government in Kabul, on the defensive amidst the Taliban's territorial gains in recent years, Trump's assertive approach is a welcome relief. It gives some much-needed breathing space for Kabul.

The Taliban, which was confident that it can simply wait out the Americans, will now have to recalibrate its strategy. It is Pakistan, however, that faces the greatest challenge from Trump's new policy to the region. With Trump demanding an immediate end to terror sanctuaries on its soil, Pakistan may find finessing the issues involved a lot more difficult.

India has every reason to welcome Trump's new tough line towards terror sanctuaries in Pakistan that New Delhi has made a central theme of its recent regional and global diplomacy. What is not clear though is the level of enthusiasm in New Delhi for deeper involvement in Afghanistan. India has traditionally been risk averse when it came to strategic commitments beyond its borders.

On his part, Trump's emphasis has been on India's contribution to the economic stabilisation of Afghanistan. This should not be difficult for New Delhi, so long as the ground conditions improve for developmental activity in Afghanistan. Trump did not call for a direct Indian military role in Afghanistan but he talked of building on "shared objectives for peace and security in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region" with India.

The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a little bolder than its predecessor in its regional policy as well as in the engagement with the US. The eventual Indian security role in Afghanistan could emerge as a response to potential changes on the ground and more intensive consultations with Washington rather than a clear a priori decision.

Trump's new Afghan policy is certain to add to the current geopolitical turbulence in South Asia. India's relations with China have entered a difficult phase and there is some concern in New Delhi about Russia's new warmth towards Pakistan and the Taliban. Moscow and Beijing, of course, have their own apprehensions about New Delhi's new strategic embrace of Washington. Meanwhile, China's profile in Pakistan's international calculus has rapidly risen, but it is not clear whether Islamabad would want to abandon its traditional ties with the US and the West.

So very often in the past, developments in Afghanistan have had consequences for relations among the South Asian nations, and between them and the major powers. Trump's new approach to the region now is most likely to force the pace of a potential realignment of the Indian subcontinent's geopolitics.

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