

Why India should buy into Donald Trump's Afghanistan war

Will Donald Trump's new approach to South Asia work? Its success depends on whether India is convinced that Trump's America is a partner to be trusted—and whether India itself is willing to step up its engagement with Afghanistan as the US president has suggested.

Let's be clear: the Afghanistan strategy Trump has laid out looks more sensible than what Barack Obama promised in 2009, when he announced his "surge and exit" policy at West Point. There are two big differences, both of which give India reason to trust Trump's approach more than it did Obama's.

First, Trump didn't announce a timetable for withdrawal. Obama famously declared the war in Afghanistan would be over by 2014. As many in India—a country with an unfortunately extensive experience of counter-insurgency—pointed out at the time, it's vital to avoid giving insurgents a sense that they can wait out a war. (One Indian columnist quoted Jay Leno to bolster his point: "Obama announces he'll bring the troops home in 18 months; the Taliban says they will keep fighting for 19.") Your choice to become an insurgent depends not just on where you live, but on your evaluation of the chances of winning in a well-defined timeframe. Obama's deadline doomed his policy from day one.

Second, although both Obama and Trump mentioned "safe havens" for insurgents in Pakistan, Obama initially insisted that "mutual trust" was the basis of the US-Pakistan relationship and spoke only of targeting "groups that threaten our countries." This bought into Islamabad's distinction between Islamists that threaten Pakistan and those that threaten India and other countries. (The Obama administration's view of Pakistan grew harsher over time.)

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Trump, on the other hand, immediately specified that he was focused on "groups that threaten the region and beyond." His administration has privately underlined this point to Pakistan. And it's demonstrated its resolve in public, when last week it included a major Kashmir-focused militant group on a State Department list of terrorist organizations.

Yes, it's worrisome that Trump's view of international relations is constantly transactional: He mentioned the "billions of dollars" that India "makes" in trade with the US as a reason it should help in Afghanistan. But one of the few times that view fits with reality is when it comes to dealing with the Pakistan military; that's precisely how Pakistani generals view their relationship with the outside world as well.

Some wonder if the US has any leverage with Pakistan that it hasn't already used. Congress has been adding more and more conditions to military aid to Pakistan. And when Obama made his speech in 2009, the US was investing \$870 million dollars a year in Pakistan; last year it invested only about \$70 million. (China has increased investment tenfold to compensate; it pumped in almost \$1.2 billion last year.) Plus, of course, the Pakistani military will always control the best land route to Kabul.

But India feels there are multiple ways in which the US could be tougher on the Pakistani establishment. Some are now being explored: A US government spokesman has already said sanctions on specific Pakistani officials might be introduced.

Let's accept for now that Trump's speech and his government's actions help address India's

general distrust of US commitment to the region. It's then India's turn to live up to its own aspirations; if it expects to be a "net provider of security" in its region, in the words of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, then it will have to commit to helping stabilize Afghanistan.

To be fair, India is already doing a great deal, as the Afghan ambassador in New Delhi pointed out recently. It has built roads, electricity lines, a dam and even the Afghan Parliament building. Thousands of Afghan officers are trained in India. It sponsors hundreds of schools.

But it is also true that India could do more. It spends less than 10% of its minuscule foreign aid budget on Afghanistan, while delays in New Delhi continue to hold up cooperation in infrastructure. Some Afghans complain that fear of Islamabad's reaction has kept India from selling arms that the Afghan Army badly needs.

Yes, Pakistan's military will bristle at any expanded Indian presence in Afghanistan. But, like any irrational belief, there's no real way to convince them that Indian actions can contribute to stability—and hence to Pakistan's own security. Such paranoia is hardly legitimate justification for Pakistani—or Indian—inaction.

If India wants to become a source of regional stability, then it must start acting like one—and spending like one. That's what makes sense for India, whatever Donald Trump may say or do in the years to come. **Bloomberg View**

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