

## Afghanistan and a new hyphenation

US President Donald Trump's much anticipated speech outlining his administration's approach to the quagmire in Afghanistan was uncharacteristic. It was cogent, coherent, logical, even compelling, and stayed on message. It was what one would expect of any significant foreign policy initiative but unlike most of the speeches that have become the hallmark of a president used to letting his stream of consciousness flow unfettered. A disappointed headline in *The Atlantic* summed it up as: "Trump's Depressingly Normal Speech About Afghanistan".

The speech bore the indelible imprimatur of Trump's national security council and department of defence teams, and only the lightest of touches from the state department. It made three key arguments: first, threats emanating from Afghanistan and the "broader region" pose a clear and present danger to the US; second, a rapid US disengagement would create a vacuum for terrorists to fill, which is "predictable and unacceptable"; and third, the US needs an "honourable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices" that it incurred in men and material over 17 years. To buttress his argument Trump asserted that "20 US-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan", even though the actual number, according to the state department, is just half of that.

Trump identified three pillars to deal with this reality: first, diplomatic, economic, and military instruments of US power to leverage a "successful outcome"; second, to jettison the Obama administration's approach where the timetable for entry and exit of US forces was announced in advance, and instead use the element of surprise by deploying forces at a time, place and duration of Washington's choosing, and measure effectiveness on conditions on the ground; and, third, "to change the approach on how to deal with Pakistan" while building on the "strategic partnership" with India. Trump justified the absence of details as strategic ambiguity; critics argued that this reflected his lack of attention to detail.

The hardball Trump policy on Pakistan echoes former President George W. Bush's "with us or against us" threat to Islamabad in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. While most Indian officials and experts would be tempted to gloat over Pakistan's fall from the stature of a "non-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) ally" to a quasi-terrorist state, this approach is unlikely to advance India's interests.

First, the ability of Islamabad to outmanoeuvre Washington's strong hand is matched only by the inability of the US to carry through its threats. There is almost no scenario where the US can achieve its objectives in Afghanistan without the support of the Pakistan military. This is partly on account of the porous Durand Line and partly the logistics-heavy requirements of the US military, which makes supplies through Pakistan (in the absence of an alternative route) indispensable. Moreover, the young Trump administration has not had the best record of translating policy into action, except episodically. This is even more likely in the case of Pakistan, given the latter's nuclear arsenal which will prove to be the ultimate guarantor against the US.

Second, even if the US was able to neutralize Pakistan, China has emerged as a key player in the great game over Afghanistan and has the potential to be a spoiler of US and Indian interests. Unsurprisingly, both China and Russia rushed to defend Pakistan after Trump's speech. Unless the US appreciates the Chinese threat to its objectives and can devise a policy to manage Beijing's assertiveness in both the South China Seas and South-Central Asia, there will be no "successful outcome" in Afghanistan.

This is where the new hyphenated US-India strategic partnership can play a crucial role. India, in close coordination with the US and its allies, could spearhead the development agenda in

Afghanistan. While India has been doing this bilaterally and in a limited way through triangular cooperation with the US (where the US funds training of Afghan police in India), it needs to step up its game. New Delhi needs to play a bridging development role with Western donor countries, which it is reluctant to do. Such an initiative would secure India's development assistance and investment, and also ensure the sustainable development of Afghanistan.

Additionally, given the Trump administration's abhorrence of Iran, even when it might serve Washington's agenda in Afghanistan, India could become a conduit; especially in partnership with other US allies—notably Japan and South Korea—who are also keen on business with Tehran. Here, an India-Japan-South Korea consortium (with the US as an absent partner) could revive the Chabahar route to Afghanistan and, perhaps, manage the crucial supply chain to support US operations in the region.

Such a move might also make the China-Pakistan economic corridor redundant, thus giving Washington an upper hand in dealing with both China and Pakistan. Clearly, despite several formidable challenges, the new US-India partnership over Afghanistan, along with the cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, would serve New Delhi's economic and strategic interests well by aligning Washington closer to them.

Of course, the biggest challenge to Trump's Afghan policy could come from Trump himself. The Twitter-happy fingers of the president could, in 140 characters or less, demolish the policy so painstakingly crafted over several months. Given India's high stakes in the region, that is still a risk worth taking.

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