

## A new chapter in the US's South Asia policy?

In a dramatic reversal from his earlier position on the war in Afghanistan, US President Donald Trump has recast the Barack Obama era's "Af-Pak" policy dramatically. "Let's get out of Afghanistan," Trump had tweeted on 11 January 2013. "Our troops are being killed by the Afghanis (sic) we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense! Rebuild the USA." Now as president, Trump is having to revisit his earlier assumptions. The Obama administration was intent on drawing down American troops and that too within a specified time frame, thereby allowing the Taliban to wait out the American forces.

Trump's plan will lead to the deployment of an additional 4,000 soldiers to train and buttress Afghan forces. Contrary to official US data, there are already 12,000 Americans serving in the country, and not 8,400, a number bandied about since the Obama administration. With Trump signing off on a larger deployment to Afghanistan of around 4,000 troops, this number would jump to around 16,000. The new strategy, we are told, will be dictated by "the conditions on the ground" not "arbitrary timetables". The Pentagon deems such a move necessary to avoid the collapse of the US-backed government in Kabul but it would hardly be a force capable of dramatically changing facts on the ground a few years after a surge to some 100,000 American troops at the beginning of Obama presidency failed to do so. Trump acknowledged that although his "original instinct was to pull out ... a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists,"—an outcome Washington clearly wants to avoid even when disenchantment with Afghanistan's polity is strong.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani thanked the US for supporting "the joint struggle against the threat of terrorism". The Taliban predictably panned Trump's strategy, warning that "the Afghan Mujahid nation is neither tired nor will it ever get tired in pursuit of winning their freedom and establishing an Islamic system." But the Taliban are no longer a cohesive force and are being challenged by the Islamic State. On the other side, the anti-Taliban camp is also a divided one with regional states playing one faction off another. Iran, Russia and China have moved beyond simply siding with the enemies of the Taliban and are busy cultivating influence with the main Afghan jihadist movement.

Along with an expansion in American military footprint, the second aspect of the new strategy is a strong focus on Pakistan to make sure it abides by its commitments. "Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence and terror. The threat is worse because Pakistan and India are two nuclear-armed states whose tense relations threaten to spiral into conflict," Trump observed in his speech. "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond," he added. For Pakistan, the message was unambiguous with words like "change of approach," "a break with the status quo," and "no partnership can survive a country's tolerance of militants and terrorists."

Pakistan has leveraged its centrality in America's Afghanistan policy for decades now, securing billions of dollars in US civilian and military aid. Given the geographical constraints facing the US supply lines, reliance on Pakistan has been a constant. Indeed, during previous tensions between Washington and Islamabad, Pakistan has restricted the movement of trucks carrying supplies to US forces in landlocked Afghanistan. Confronting Pakistan is, therefore, easier said than done but Trump has put Pakistan on notice by placing it alongside North Korea and Iran, countries which are being watched closely by his administration. The US secretary of state further piled up pressure on Pakistan by underlining ways that Washington could press Pakistan by means such as withholding military aid and reassessing its status as a major non-Nato US ally.

Washington's annual economic and security assistance to Islamabad had been falling anyway. After peaking at more than \$3.5 billion in 2011, the US had been scaling back its aid for Pakistan

since then, with funding falling below \$1 billion. Pakistan, of course has a new benefactor in China which was quick to leap to its defence, saying that, "We believe that the international community should fully recognize Pakistan's anti-terrorism efforts."

The third part of the Trump strategy is his outreach to India, saying a "critical part" of his administration's South Asia policy is to further develop the US's strategic partnership with India. "We appreciate India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan, but India makes billions of dollars in trade with the US, and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development," Trump said, underlining India's role in Afghanistan and the need to do much more. New Delhi has welcomed the new approach, saying it shared Mr Trump's concerns over safe havens and "other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists."

Trump's policy is a remarkable turnaround for Washington which had wanted to keep India out of its "Af-Pak" policy for long for fear of offending Rawalpindi. India was viewed as part of the problem and now Trump is arguing that India should be viewed as part of a solution to the Afghan imbroglio. It is now for New Delhi to effectively leverage the positive trend in America's South Asia policy—not only for its own interests but also for the greater good of its regional friends such as Afghanistan.

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