

AFTER WITHDRAWAL OF US TROOPS FROM SYRIA, INDIA'S CHALLENGE IN AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Just a day after the US President Donald Trump announced his decision to withdraw troops from Syria, reports began coming in of a larger, and much more significant, drawdown from Afghanistan. The Trump administration has decided to withdraw roughly 7,000 troops from Afghanistan. This decision will have major consequences for peace in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood. It was increasingly becoming clear that Mr Trump was too impatient to stick to his own Afghanistan strategy announced in August 2017. Curbing his isolationist instincts, Mr Trump had then decided to commit more resources and personnel to the Afghan war. A year later, Mr Trump had grown weary and decided to enter into a Faustian bargain with the Taliban. Consequently, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-born US diplomat, was appointed to pursue talks with the Taliban.

The US announcement of withdrawal should have ideally followed some concessions by the Taliban. Far from conceding anything, the Taliban has refused to negotiate with the current Afghan regime, deeming it to be illegitimate. Moreover, during a Moscow-mediated talk this November, the Taliban representatives brought the issue of US withdrawal front and centre. It is delusional to think that the Taliban will offer concessions after the US withdrawal if it did not while the US troops were in full strength in Afghanistan. The reason for Taliban's resilience is the support and succour it receives from Rawalpindi. Pakistan's leverage in Afghanistan is set to grow.

These are not good signs for India which has two main interests: a) preventing any extremist group from taking over Afghanistan, and b) maintaining the economic cooperation with the Afghan government and civil society. India's problems are exacerbated because American withdrawal comes at a time when its views on Afghanistan are at significant variance with other traditional regional partners like Russia and Iran. India should not let go of its connections with the elements of the erstwhile Northern Alliance. In case of instability, only allies on the ground can help New Delhi get a seat at the table.

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