

# A CROSSROADS IN KABUL

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India's Afghan policy is at a crossroads. A period of adjustment has become essential following US President Donald Trump's unilateral announcement that he is pulling US troops out of the conflict-ridden country. Another development is the "framework" deal between the US and Afghan Taliban after six days of discussions at Doha. Washington's hasty timetable — 18 months — to disentangle itself from the Afghan quagmire has narrowed the US's options. India too is trapped in a strategic blind-spot in Afghanistan.

Trump is the third, and perhaps the last US president, to try to wind up America's costly military involvement in Afghanistan. But the announcement of a drawdown before the final peace deal with the Taliban is concluded was certainly a blunder. More fighting and political instability in Afghanistan would be damaging, as much for Indian interests as for regional stability.

For Pakistan's security establishment, Trump's frustration at the current military stalemate in Afghanistan is a godsend — it can re-engage with Washington, largely on its own terms. Trump has frequently criticised Pakistan for turning a blind eye to the Taliban's insurgency. But he now appears reconciled to Pakistan's centrality to the endgame in the region. The role of Pakistan is going to expand significantly, with the US depending upon it to implement the interim deal. This will be a diplomatic victory for Pakistan.

James Mattis, who was forced to resign as secretary of defence following irreconcilable differences with Trump, was against the pullout. The head of the US Central Command, Lt General Kenneth McKenzie, had argued that Afghanistan would be doomed to a downward spiral if abandoned by the US at this critical juncture. But Trump decided to ignore Pentagon's advice.

Fully aware of the deadline, the Taliban are playing their hand well, trying to secure maximum concessions from Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy, without offering anything meaningful in return. The Kabul government is nowhere in the picture. The Taliban's determined refusal to engage the Kabul regime constitutes the biggest obstacle to a meaningful intra-Afghan dialogue.

In all probability, the Trump administration is going to finalise the deal with the Taliban without consulting President Ashraf Ghani, leave alone taking into consideration New Delhi's concerns. All talk of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process has vanished. The Afghan presidential election, originally scheduled in April, stands postponed till July. But if Trump expects a positive outcome from the Khalilzad-led negotiations before July, he seems to have set an unrealistic target.

Despite being an important stakeholder in Afghanistan, India finds itself increasingly marginalised in negotiations involving the key regional players. New Delhi is concerned about the vital role that all the powers are giving to Pakistan. Iran and Russia, two of India's closest allies during the Northern Alliance's battle against the Taliban regime in the 1990s, seem out of sync with New Delhi's interests.

Since the Taliban's ouster, Washington's financial, diplomatic and military support to the Kabul regime has allowed New Delhi to avoid direct military involvement in the Afghan conflict. India's developmental approach has earned it immense goodwill among the Afghan people. However, the "soft power" strategy has limitations. The manner in which Trump hit out at India's contribution towards Afghan stabilisation is largely symptomatic of his fundamentally transactional view of India's relationship with the US.

India cannot send troops to Afghanistan since there is a domestic consensus against it. But ironically, without any military footprint, India cannot convincingly push for Pakistan's exclusion from the peace process. New Delhi today has little influence over Afghanistan's future.

An emboldened Taliban is sure to impinge on security scenario in India's troubled Kashmir Valley. The outfit seems positioned to emerge as the ideological bulwark of Kashmir's renewed insurgency. Pakistan's security establishment, in cahoots with the Taliban, will likely project a potential American exit from Afghanistan as a vindication of its policies.

Trump is unlikely to be bothered even if America's disengagement in Afghanistan is viewed as a strategic defeat. Trump's criticism of India's Afghan policy and his plans to exit could cast serious doubt on the US's role as a strategic ally for India. Trump's ill-conceived strategy gives India a chance to reconsider its long-standing belief that it has the US's backing in Afghanistan.

Drawing attention to the ongoing diplomatic manoeuvres over Afghanistan, India's army chief, General Bipin Rawat, recently asserted that India "cannot be out of the bandwagon" because if "you are not sitting on the high table you will not know what is happening". It is time for New Delhi to engage the Taliban to secure its interests. India also needs to reassess its policy choices in close coordination with Russia and Iran, constantly reminding them that a complete surrender to the Taliban's demands will be detrimental to their own security.

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