

THE SEATS AROUND THE AFGHAN ROUND TABLE

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One year ago, on New Year's Day, the Indian establishment welcomed U.S. President Donald Trump's tweet: "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollar in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!"

This year, in a Cabinet meeting on January 3, he rambled, "I get along very well with India and Prime Minister Modi. But he is constantly telling me he built a library in Afghanistan. Okay, a library... That's like, you know what that is? That's like five hours of what we spend [in Afghanistan]. And he tells it and he is very smart. And we are supposed to say, oh, thank you for the library." This left those in the Indian establishment miffed and scratching their heads, only to conclude that Mr. Trump possibly mistook the Parliament building in Kabul built by India at a cost of \$90 million for a library.

Mr. Trump is frustrated with his Afghanistan policy and is desperately seeking a way out. To be fair, when he announced his Afghanistan policy in August 2017, he had said that his original instinct was to pull out. He was persuaded otherwise by his then Defence Secretary James Mattis, Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, and Afghanistan commander Gen. John W. Nicholson, all of whom have since been replaced, making it easier for him to follow his 'instinct'.

Currently, the U.S. spends \$45 billion a year in Afghanistan, including \$5 billion for Afghan security forces and \$780 million on economic assistance. The balance is for U.S. forces and logistical support. These figures have reduced over time, as U.S. troop deployment is down to 15,000 now from 100,000 in 2010. However, over the last 18 years, the cumulative cost to the U.S. has been estimated at \$800 billion on U.S. deployments and \$105 billion in rebuilding Afghanistan. About 2,400 U.S. troops have been killed though casualty figures since 2015, when the U.S. withdrew from combat operations, are down to 12 a year. Despite expending this blood and treasure, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate. Mr. Trump's questioning of the usefulness of continuing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is justified.

The 2017 policy aimed at breaking the military stalemate by expanding the U.S. presence by 5,000 troops, putting Pakistan on notice, and strengthening Afghan capabilities. More than a year later, clearly the policy has failed. The military situation has improved in favour of the Taliban, while the Taliban and Haqqani Network sanctuaries in Pakistan remain intact.

Afghan security forces are suffering unacceptable attrition. Since 2015, when the Afghan security forces took charge of combat operations, they have suffered around 30,000 casualties. Civilian casualties are over 3,000 a year. With recruitment drying up and desertions on the rise, the Afghan security forces are down by more than 10% from their sanctioned strength.

Parliamentary elections were conducted on October 20 last year with much fanfare but the announcement of the final results has been repeatedly postponed amid allegations that more than one-fourth of the votes cast were rigged.

Unconfirmed reports that the U.S. was withdrawing 7,000 troops from Afghanistan began to circulate hours after James Mattis's resignation as Defence Secretary. The White House backtracked by subsequently clarifying that this was one of the options being explored but no decision had been taken. However, it is clear which way the wind is blowing.

The reason is that over the last 18 years, the U.S. (and coalition partners) have made a series of mistakes, of omission and commission. The Afghan Constitution, adopted in 2004, centralised power in a U.S.-style presidential system but lacking the institutions of legislature, judiciary and civil society, checks and balance were missing. Governance structures were weak as an entire generation had been lost in the anti-Soviet jihad and Taliban conflicts.

The Iraq invasion in 2003 rapidly sucked in more and more U.S. resources as the focus shifted away from Afghanistan. By 2006, when the Taliban had regrouped and begun to engage in suicide attacks and IED blasts in Afghanistan, the U.S. was unwilling to acknowledge it and preferred to bribe Pakistan to gain its cooperation.

Poppy production grew to finance the Taliban insurgency. Since 2002, the international community has spent nearly \$15 billion on counter-narcotics, and yet, in 2017, poppy production was four times what it was in 2002. International troop presence from 34 countries lacked a unified command and control and adopted different rules of engagement. British troops, deployed in Helmand, were the first to reach a quiet understanding with the local Taliban by ignoring the opium cultivation.

Hamid Karzai was President from 2001 to 2014. During the Barack Obama administration, his relations with the U.S. grew increasingly strained with both sides engaging in frequent sniping. His open criticism of Pakistan's duplicity irritated the U.S., which was even more dependent on Pakistan after the surge in U.S. troops in 2010. Mr. Obama's decision to announce the surge along with a timetable for withdrawal only emboldened the Taliban.

The strength of the Afghan security forces was hurriedly doubled to enable them to take combat lead in 2015 but lack of training and equipment soon began to take its toll. Only the Special Forces (Ktah Khas) raised in 2015 have successfully blunted Taliban onslaughts. But their numbers are limited and they are dependent on U.S. airlift and intelligence imagery.

The cumulative effect is that the U.S. has lost goodwill and its troop presence is a liability. It is hardly surprising that the U.S. is now seeking an exit. Managing the optics of withdrawal is critical though and that is what Zalmay Khalilzad, as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, is tasked to ensure. The Afghan presidential election has been pushed by three months to July 20 but it is unlikely that the election machinery can be reformed and the promised biometric ID system put in place. The national unity government led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah has lost legitimacy and cannot continue beyond July.

Since the security situation does not permit new elections, the U.S. is likely to push for a new version of the 2001 Bonn Conference to set up an interim government that can plan a Loya Jirga and an election in a year or two. The process would provide the window for a U.S. exit. The difference is that unlike in 2001, it is clear that the Taliban will be present at the table, speaking from a position of strength. This is evident from their announcement on January 8 that they were calling off the next round of talks with the U.S. on account of differences on issues relating to release of Taliban prisoners, participation of Afghan government officials and U.S. troop withdrawal. Reflecting the Taliban's growing legitimacy, Russia is planning another regional conference in the Moscow format. Pakistan had engineered a meeting of the Taliban with Saudi Arabia and the UAE while a Taliban delegation was in Tehran in end-December.

India needs to shed its diplomatic diffidence because unlike in the 1990s, India's options for engagement today are not restricted. It may not have the leverage of being a spoiler but neither does it carry uncomfortable baggage. During the last 18 years, India has earned goodwill cutting across Afghanistan's geographies and ethnicities. Instead of playing favourites, it has supported institution building and shown that its interests coincide with the idea of a stable, secure,

independent and peaceful Afghanistan. What is needed is more active and coordinated diplomacy, official and non-official, so that India remains at the table as Afghanistan's preferred development partner through its transition.

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