

## Dealing with the Taliban hand

Less than a year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, last August, it lies in tatters. It is fraught with implications for New Delhi, none of them heart-warming. Mr. Trump had made New Delhi happy when he had summed it up succinctly; he had studied the situation for eight months “from all angles” and had come up with the solution. His Afghan policy was going to be robust. As he put it, “We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.” He blamed Pakistan for giving safe haven to “agents of chaos” and later cut off security assistance to Taliban’s greatest benefactors and backers.

Even six months ago, at the end of January, Mr. Trump said, “We are going to finish what we have to finish in Afghanistan.” The implication was that he was going to stay the course. He had declared: “We don’t want to talk with the Taliban. There may be a time, but it’s going to be a long time.” Now the next thing we know, about 17 years after invading Afghanistan to rid it of the Taliban, the white flags are out, and the U.S. is setting the stage for direct talks with the very enemy it vowed to vanquish. True, we have to weigh this against previous attempts at dialogue with the Taliban which ended in failure. The problem is that this time the U.S. may want the talks to succeed, which means handing Afghanistan over to the Taliban and their chief backers, the Pakistanis, beribboned and gift-wrapped.

Even so, the new American move comes at a time when the Taliban ranks have swelled since the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation pulled out in 2014 and they seem to be surging ahead in many parts of the country. It comes after the U.S. stopped releasing figures for the territories or populations under Taliban control, or the numbers of their fighters. It comes at a time where the data and assessments on the strength and the combat capabilities of the Afghan military and police are no longer readily available, amidst reports of severe erosion of their fighting capabilities. It comes when the UN grimly noted — late last year — rising opium production. Citing the latest Afghanistan Opium Survey figures (released by the Afghanistan’s Ministry of Counter Narcotics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) it said that opium production in Afghanistan had increased by 87% to a record level of 9,000 metric tons in 2017 compared with 2016 levels. The area under opium poppy cultivation had also increased to a record 328,000 hectares in 2017, up 63% from 201,000 hectares in 2016. It comes at a time when a strategy that relies mostly on counter-terrorism operations — the vastly reduced number of troops (less than 15,000) are mainly on security assistance and training and other hand-holding assignments — is not paying sufficient dividends. It comes after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani literally sued for peace, saying that he was prepared to recognise the Taliban — previously referred to as terrorists — as a legitimate political group, offered to release Taliban prisoners. and proposed dialogue, a suggestion that was quickly and contemptuously spurned. The intervention in Afghanistan has never looked quite so ramshackle.

It has not resulted in many critical primary military and strategic objectives being realised, the denial of safe havens (mostly in Pakistan) to the Taliban, the reduction of their fighting capability, and to effectively dis-incentivise Pakistan’s zeal and ability to nurture the Taliban. The opposite has happened. Rawalpindi correctly surmised that the longer it was able to play the game of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, the less stomach the endlessly gullible Americans would have to continue sinking troops, money and shrinking political capital into another quagmire. It has also helped Pakistan that the American President, no stranger to U-turns, has turned spectacularly fickle so far as Afghanistan is concerned. He has more than half his term left, which leaves plenty scope for him to change his mind again.

All the same, if the talks with the Taliban proceed apace, it does not matter so much where the talks will be held or how much control the Pakistanis are able to exert over their wards during the

talks. What matters is this: what the Taliban, and thus more importantly, Pakistan, are able to wrest from the negotiating table. Withdrawal of the remaining international troops will be the main aim. At the end of it, the Taliban and other Pakistani proxies, who have orchestrated a string of deadly attacks on Indian interests with a view to deter New Delhi, will have the run of what passes for a country; a nation that has not yet been built. Where would that leave New Delhi?

The American move comes when there is pressure to limit any kind of engagement with Iran, which would have been a logistical pivot for further inroads into Afghanistan. Already, with the exit of Hamid Karzai, the strategic comfort that New Delhi had in Kabul stands diminished, and by extension, the kind of intelligence operations New Delhi may have had the option to conduct with deniability. Pakistan's aim will be to reverse all the gains India has made at great cost over the years in Afghanistan. With strategic depth in Afghanistan that Pakistan has dreamt of becoming a reality, Islamabad will have more room to incubate and move around the various anti-India groupings, including those active in Kashmir, as was the case earlier, especially in Lya Pakti. With the prospect of the Taliban slouching towards Kabul to be born again, most of New Delhi's bets may be off.

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