

## The emerging blocs in the Afghan Great Game

While unveiling its long-awaited Afghanistan strategy, the US embraced India and dropped Pakistan as its ally. Broadly speaking, it occurred against the backdrop of the formation of a tripartite alliance of Russia, China and Pakistan. Donald Trump's move can further push Pakistan towards Russia and its "iron brother" China, and away from the US. Also, the two blocs differ in their approaches towards Afghanistan, and the destiny of this war-ravaged country is aligned with the interests of these states. So in this prevailing geopolitical quagmire and hostile environment, will terrorism scale down and will Afghanistan progress in terms of peace and stability?

The US and its allies have spent a tremendous amount of dollars, shed their soldiers' blood, even used a munition popularly called "Mother Of All Bombs" in order to eradicate terrorists but to no avail. It seems that the US' Afghan approach is not the right one. Besides, the interests of many rival states clash in this unfortunate land, further breeding terrorism.

The growing domestic political conflicts and the consecutive shock waves in Kabul have taken a toll on Afghanistan's fragile security. The Afghan government is engaged in the centre while the Islamic State (IS) and the Taliban are booming in the periphery.

The Taliban and the IS are two regional rivals in Afghanistan. They are competing for power, influence and territory. Although a big number of Taliban militants defected to the IS, yet the Taliban remains the most prominent and strongest terrorist organization in the country.

From the geopolitical perspective, a need for switching the alliance was felt in the region quite early. For example, a crack in the Pakistan-US relationship occurred in 2011 when the US, in a special raid, killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad and, later, 27 Pakistani soldiers. In response, Pakistan closed its border and cut supply lines to international forces in Afghanistan.

Similarly, China was already not happy with the growing influence of the US in the region. Besides Xinjiang, China also does not want the IS to expand its "Caliphate" to Pakistan since China has invested in Pakistan, for example in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

On the other hand, Russia's growing interest in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. Moscow is already engaged with the Taliban to keep the IS from sneaking into Russia. Iran followed suit.

Thanks to the IS-K (the Islamic State of Khorasan), the three countries have been brought closer. With the IS appearing in Afghanistan, Russia and China expressed their concern about the looming threat close to their borders.

A trilateral process of the three nuclear powers, Russia, China and Pakistan, was initiated last year in order to deal with the Taliban. But the process was vehemently opposed by Kabul, Washington and New Delhi since they were not taken into consideration. The reason appears to be that these countries are suspicious of the US having injected the IS into the region in order to achieve its interests and to counter China and a resurgent Russia. However, by excluding these important states, the emerging axis is less likely to bear fruit in dealing with terrorism. A shift could occur in the Taliban's policy in prioritizing enemies, though.

The IS-K is a grave menace to the region. Its geographical position is strategically important. To expand its Caliphate to South Asia, they have established strongholds in Nangarhar, Kunar and Nuristan, the eastern part of Afghanistan and a gateway to the rest of South Asia. And in the north, it is operating predominantly in Kunduz, Baghlan, Jowzjan and now in Badakhshan province, from where it can easily infiltrate central Asia and China.

Pakistan was infuriated when US President Trump asked India to deepen its economic relations with Afghanistan. Pakistan interprets India's engagement in Afghanistan as a direct threat to Pakistan. This is a misconception caused by the lack of trust between the two countries. "Pakistan should not object to our relationship with India. We assure that Kabul-New Delhi relations will not harm Islamabad," said Omar Zakhilwal, the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan.

In October, a mega trade and investment show was held in New Delhi. The US-sponsored event aimed at better regional integration and a strengthening of the economic nexus between India and Afghanistan. For Pakistan, this means the weakening of its economic leverage over Afghanistan.

All the versions of "The Great Game" will result in sheer loss to the players. Any bilateral or trilateral pacts with terrorists is a zero-sum game. Therefore, a win-win approach should be sought in order to tackle this challenge honestly. Terrorism is one of the most challenging phenomena the region has seen. No terrorist group has a proper hierarchy in Afghanistan. Even the jihadists are not loyal to their sponsors because at the end of the day they are foot soldiers who fight, and they know nothing other than waging jihad against infidels, including, sometimes, their allies.

The more cooperation there is among states, the better the prospects of stability in the region. However, in the long term, to curb terrorism in Afghanistan, a bottom-up approach is required; this means reaching out to the Afghan social structure, where the genesis of terrorism lies.

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*This is part of the Young Asian Writers series, a Mint initiative to bring young voices from different Asian countries to the fore. Comments are welcome at [theirview@livemint.com](mailto:theirview@livemint.com)*

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