

## Solving the Afghan riddle

Afghanistan, counterterrorism and defence ties are expected to be the prime issues on the table during James Mattis's visit to India next week. The U.S. Defence Secretary's trip will happen barely a month after President Donald Trump announced the latest [U.S. policy on Afghanistan on August 21](#), a blueprint that has been welcomed in Kabul and criticised in Islamabad.

Mr. Trump's policy envisages more pressure on Pakistan, no early U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, robust military action on counterterrorism and a greater role for India. It is for the first time that a U.S. President has been publicly so critical of Pakistan. In 2009, President Barack Obama had spoken of Pakistan's lack of action, but not so strongly and harshly as his successor. Sharp words on Pakistan have been said at different levels by earlier U.S. administrations too. They were also codified in the form of conditions in various assistance laws, including the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Bill. The important issue today is how the U.S. strategy differs from the past in terms of addressing concerns regarding Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, particularly in view of a shift in Pakistan's strategic priority towards China.

The situation in Afghanistan continues to be fragile. Though the Taliban has made some gains, it is not a cohesive movement and has divisions within it. At the same time it has to be understood that since 1747, Afghanistan's territorial borders have remained unchanged unlike its neighbours Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics.

### Trump offers India a role in Afghanistan

Indo-Afghan relations are unique. Just after Independence, on January 4, 1950, India signed a Treaty of Friendship with Afghanistan which also permitted opening of consulates in each other's country. Interestingly, not standing on protocol, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru signed this agreement with the Afghan Ambassador in India to indicate the importance New Delhi attached to its relations with Kabul. More recently, in October 2011, India was the first country Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement with.

The basic tenets of India's aims, policy and approach towards Afghanistan in respect of bilateral and regional cooperation remain unchanged. India has always wanted a democratic, stable and strong Afghanistan able to decide its own future.

India has a close strategic partnership with Afghanistan covering a broad spectrum of areas which include political, security, trade and economic cooperation as well as capacity development. India's assistance in the defence sector has been modest and based on specific requests by the government of Afghanistan. The cumulative level of committed Indian assistance to Afghanistan amounts to \$2 billion. New Delhi is always ready for more intensive bilateral relations. It has been at the forefront in respect of assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and can be expected to do more in different sectors. Surveys conducted by various Afghan and foreign news agencies over the years show that the Afghan people ranked Indian assistance as the most suitable because of the positive role India played in the development programme of Afghanistan. Furthermore India is considered as non-threatening with its democratic traditions upheld as a model. The Afghans also appreciate that India had never interfered in their internal affairs.

Speedy augmentation, training and supply of equipment for the Afghan National Security Forces is important to enable Afghanistan to protect its interests and maintain peace in the country. The Afghans want more help, for instance, at present for their air force. India could assist Afghanistan in training as per their requirement and supplying much-needed spare parts and such equipment as is possible without deployment of Indian troops in Afghanistan.

Asia is a region of energy and resources stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to Siberia and Russia's Far East. The energy basket needs to be exploited for the benefit of Afghanistan and the surrounding region. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline is one example. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) should help in encouraging regional economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours. Expeditious action on completion of the Chabahar port will help in increasing Afghanistan's contacts with India and the outside world.

It is essential that there is no outside interference in Afghanistan. To enable this, the infrastructure of terrorism has to be dismantled. It is important to deny sanctuary and support to the Taliban's Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network, as terrorism and insurgency cannot end without action taken against them. For any effective counterterrorism policy, all major terrorist groups operating in the area should be considered a single group. President Trump has stated in his policy statement that "Pakistan gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence and terror". The elimination of terror outfits will bring peace to Afghanistan.

Simultaneously, it is also imperative to redouble counter-narcotics efforts as Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer of opium accounting for 90% of the world's supply. Success in this field will have a positive effect on its neighbours.

India is in favour of a reconciliation process which has overall Afghan support and is based on internationally accepted redlines. India supports the Afghan quest for peace and reconciliation. Indeed peace and reconciliation were embedded in the very first international compact on Afghanistan, in the text of the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. Renunciation of violence will help this process. For regional security there must be closer involvement of regional powers in international efforts to ensure non-interference and a stable Afghanistan; this also requires involvement of the Central Asian Republics, which border Afghanistan. It is important for India to coordinate its efforts with those of Russia and Iran to ensure success. The U.S. will benefit in helping this to happen.

Unfair attempts have been made now and then to link the Afghan issue with India-Pakistan relations. There is no connection. A study of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations since 1947 will reveal that their relations have always been thorny and replete with problems except during the brief Taliban era. Even during that period there were differences on issues like the Durand Line. Neither have India-Pakistan relations, good or bad, impacted on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. India and Afghanistan have never exploited their friendly bilateral relations to harm Pakistan. This is clear from three things: (a) In both the 1965 and 1971 wars, Afghanistan was non-committal and did not support India; (b) On the Kashmir issue, Afghanistan has not publicly supported India; (c) Similarly, India has not entered the debate on the Durand Line.

Some instances in the last three decades also reflect the same viewpoint. Neither India nor India-Pakistan relations were responsible for the situation which prevailed in Afghanistan following the departure of the Soviet troops which threw the country back to medieval times and brought the Taliban to power and Al Qaeda/Osama bin Laden in the region. No extremist group — the Taliban, Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba — is based in India or has any Indian connection. The U.S. operation to kill Osama bin Laden and the recourse to drone attacks in Afghanistan were due to the situation prevailing there, which had nothing to do with India or India-Pakistan relations. Again when Pakistan decided to shift over 100,000 of its security forces from its eastern border with India to its western border with Afghanistan in 2010, India did not exploit the situation. India, in fact, has always been a part of the solution. To blame India-Pakistan relations for the situation in Afghanistan is neither fair nor just. The root cause of the Afghan problem has been clearly stated in President Trump's policy statement of August 21 and also mentioned in his address to the UN General Assembly on September 19. Now Afghanistan, and the region, await to see how it is

implemented.

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