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Perspectives on Trump's South Asia Policy

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Preface

On August 21, United States' President Donald Trump provided the road map to America's next South Asia strategy, mainly centered on America's Afghanistan Policy. Given the United States, longtime involvement in the region, America's Afghanistan policy plays a key role in United States overall foreign policy. Given the primacy attached, Trump's speech reflected two very significant factors: First, there was a clear identification and condemnation of Pakistan as a significant actor contributing to terrorism. Secondly, there was greater confidence expressed in India's role in the region at large and Afghanistan in particular.

Keeping this context, the present series attempts to articulate three key questions:

1. What does Trump's new South Asia policy hold for U.S., India, and China?
2. Is there a continuity/change in America's policy and what can be further expected?
3. What will be the larger implications of Trump's new South Asia policy, if any?

To address the queries, the series is divided under three perspectives- American, Indian and Chinese.

Reflecting on America's foreign policy under the Trump administration, Dr. Monish Tourangbam argues that the new U.S. strategy on Afghanistan is designed to avoid losing, rather than winning in Afghanistan.

While arguing from an Indian perspective, Tridivesh Singh Maini suggests that while it is tough to predict how U.S. policy will pan out towards Afghanistan, one major shift in Trump's approach is that unlike previous US administration's he has not really drawn any red lines for India's role in Afghanistan.

Drawing on the Chinese perspective, Dr. Sriparna Pathak argues that as China shares an "*all weather friendship*" with Pakistan, public shaming of Pakistan for shielding terrorists is clearly not something that is acceptable to China. However, with respect to terrorism, China has its own woes emanating primarily from its Xinjiang province. Therefore, the American policy in South Asia, which in all probability will see greater American involvement in the region, will have to be carefully considered by the foreign policy mandarins in Beijing.

Amrita Jash

Editor-in-Chief, IndraStra Global

U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: Old Wine in Trump's Bottle

Dr. Monish Tourangbam

ABSTRACT:

The Afghan government, along with the United States does not have what it takes to substantially win against the Taliban on the battlefield, but they do not want to lose either. So, the new U.S. strategy on Afghanistan that has come after much reviews and reassessment among Trump's inner circle of advisers is designed to avoid losing, rather than winning in Afghanistan. From a presidential candidate who believed that the U.S. should pull out immediately from Afghanistan to a president who has now owned the war publicly, President Trump has come a long way in a short time. However, it is still unclear what the new troop surge in Afghanistan is meant for, and what it sets to do, what has not been tried and tested already.

The Afghan government, along with the United States (U.S.) does not have what it takes to substantially win against the Taliban on the battlefield, but they do not want to lose either. So, the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan that has come after much reviews and reassessment among President Donald Trump's inner circle of advisers seem to be geared more towards not losing in Afghanistan, rather than winning it. Taliban's resurgence and the rise of *Daesh* in Afghanistan has seen the security situation deteriorated, and reconciliation talks with the Taliban have not gone anywhere substantial to bring a political solution. As noted in Trump's speech, reconciliation talks with the Taliban have been pushed to a low priority in the American scheme of things.

This might be reflective of the increasing traction that U.S. military generals have gained under the Trump administration- wherein, the role of the State Department has been diminishing. For instance, the office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan has been dismantled. In view of this, even if the diplomatic utility of this office were to be questioned, the Trump administration does not seem to be keen to allay the concerns that the U.S. diplomatic sinew is being severely downplayed. So, Trump's emphasis on using all elements of American power to win in Afghanistan at least, currently, cannot be taken too seriously.

What does Trump's policy statement suggest? At the foremost, nation building has become some sort of a pejorative term [1]. As the speech pointed that the U.S. was not interested in

nation-building, and was rather going to kill terrorists. This newfound attitude cannot escape the fact that the U.S. has a stake in making sure that the Afghan government does not slip further in its ability to hold territories and thereby, give better governance to the people of Afghanistan. However, it can be argued that there is nothing really new in Trump's strategy, except a realization of the limits of what the U.S. can do in Afghanistan as well as the extent to which it can impact the strategies of other regional players.

In the backdrop of America's South Asia policy, it is to note that the Trump administration's approach towards Pakistan was in the offing for some time now. Debates had been raging in the American beltway, as to how the U.S. should deal with Pakistan, a non-NATO ally in the war on terrorism, but one whose actions, particularly in counterterrorism has hardly aligned with that of the U.S. Any counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism effort is bound to face an uphill task, as long as the insurgent groups or the terrorist elements find shelters in other countries. Trump's harsh words for Pakistan were echoed even during his National Security Advisor H R McMaster's earlier visit to Pakistan [2]. In his speech on the new strategy, Trump emphatically said: "*Pakistan has also sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting*" [3].

However, the operationalization and realization of this verbal pressure on Pakistan is likely to remain challenging. The Americans till now do not have much of an alternative to the Pakistani route for the logistics supply needed in Afghanistan. Moreover, it remains to be seen how the Trump administration handles the Pakistani military stronghold over Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy which at least currently does not seem to be aligned with the U.S. vision or for that matter Kabul has for Afghanistan.

From a presidential candidate who believed that the U.S. should pull out immediately from Afghanistan to a president who has now owned the war publicly, Trump has come a long way in a short time. Unveiling his Afghanistan strategy, he said that "*the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable*" and that, as the troop surge is imminent, the Trump administration "*will not talk about numbers of troops*" [4]. Taking a gibe at Obama's "*surge and exit*" policy, he said that the strategy will be set based on ground conditions, and not timetables set in Washington.

However, it is unclear what the troop surge is meant for, and what it sets to achieve. If the U.S. is interested mainly in its counter-terrorism role, as the speech seems to suggest, then what is the troop increase meant to achieve? Trump stated, "*From now on, victory will have a clear definition. Attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing Al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge*" [5]. If the troop increase is meant to assist the Afghan forces to fight the Taliban, to a point, where the latter is forced to come to the negotiating table, what new is it going to achieve that roughly 100, 000 forces could not achieve at one point of time?

Moreover, the speech was totally oblivious to the conditions in Afghanistan, wherein, other actors such as China, Russia, and Iran have been injecting their presence by engaging with

the Taliban in one way or the other [6]. What led such forces to come into play was the vacuum that got created by the uncertainty of the U.S. strategy compounded by the ineffectiveness of the Afghan forces to stem the tide of the Taliban. This has been further added by the *Daesh* factor that has created conditions in which these countries have been hedging their bets to secure their respective interests given the rapidly shifting politico-security scenario in Afghanistan.

Another element of Trump's speech was the potential for greater alignment with India. While applauding India as "*the world's largest democracy and a key security and economic partner of the United States,*" and appreciating "*India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan*" [7], Trump also simultaneously framed the expectations from India in terms of a quid pro quo of India's trade turnover with the U.S. [8]. This is suggestive of the fact that in the coming days, Washington and New Delhi need to do a lot more transparent talking. This is in terms of India's potential to contribute towards an economically viable, politically stable, socially inclusive Afghanistan supported by an enhanced security apparatus. In this pursuit, the trilateral talks between India, the U.S., and Afghanistan needs to be augmented in order to get a sense of what Kabul wants India to want to do in Afghanistan.

Thereby, it is prudent to take into consideration Pakistan's insecurity regarding India's role in Afghanistan and it would be ideal for India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the longer term, to develop more transparency on what India or Pakistan should do/not do in Afghanistan. However, in the current context, what India can/cannot do in Afghanistan should be determined by what Afghanistan want India to do, and not by what Pakistan does not want India to do in Afghanistan.

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Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction

Tridivesh Singh Maini

ABSTRACT:

While focusing on India's reaction to Donald Trump's August 21st address to the US nation, this piece gives a brief overview of reactions in Pakistan (both by the civilian leadership and the military). The piece will then give an overview of reactions in India, to both the harsh words used by Pakistan, as well as the US President's call to India to do more in Afghanistan. While it is tough to predict how US policy will pan out towards Afghanistan, one major shift in Trump's approach is that unlike previous US administration's he has not really drawn any red lines for India's role in Afghanistan.

On August 21, in outlining United States Afghanistan Policy, President Donald Trump specifically brought to the fore Pakistan's role in providing safe havens to the Taliban and Haqqani network- which lie close to the Afghanistan border. As Trump stated: *"We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations'... 'But that will have to change. And that will change immediately"* [1]. Adding to Trump's speech, U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson argued that Pakistan could lose its non-NATO ally status if it did not do more to counter terror.

It would be pertinent to point out, that days before Trump's address on August 21, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) commander, Joseph Votel, who led a delegation to Pakistan, had made it clear in no uncertain terms to the upper echelons of the military as well as political leadership, that action should be taken against terror groups targeting neighboring countries (a clear reference to certain groups creating problems in Afghanistan)[2].

During his address, Trump also asked India to be more active in Afghanistan. As he said: *"We appreciate India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan."* He further mentioned, *"[b]ut India makes billions of dollars in trade from the United States and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development"*[3].

To note, so far New Delhi has provided USD 2 billion of economic aid, and committed to providing USD 1 billion during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to India in September 2016 [4]. India has also been providing arms and helicopters and that Afghan officers receive training in India's defense and police academies [5].

Trump's speech evoked varied responses. To say so, as the Pakistani military and the civilian leadership reacted aggressively to Trump's straight talk. While countries such as China, Russia, and Iran reacted by rushing into Islamabad's defense. The panic in Pakistan was witnessed in the heightened anxiety among Pakistan's political and military leadership. To say so, as Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khwaja Asif, is undertaking a visit to China, Russia, and Turkey to discuss Afghan policy and drum up support for Pakistan [6]. Furthermore, Chief Minister of Punjab (Pakistan), Shahbaz Sharif also gave a strong statement saying that Pakistan should stop accepting U.S. aid [7].

While India expressed mixed reactions, with some analysts arguing that it will be back to business very soon for Washington, given the fact that even in the past U.S. has warned Pakistan, but soon after it boiled down to square one. There is some truth in this because while Trump may be of the opinion that Pakistan is not doing enough to fight terrorism, there are many in the State Department who have opposed a reduction in military aid to Pakistan. For instance, when in May 2017, military aid had been reduced from USD 265 million to USD 100 million, the State Department was vociferous in its opposition to such a cut. The Department argued that Pakistan is pivotal for U.S. counter terrorism strategy, and that its support is important for the peace process in Afghanistan [8].

Here, it would be pertinent to point that while Trump may talk tough against the Pakistani army, and also ask India to do more in Afghanistan, but only a few days after the speech, the US had urged India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir issue. For instance, on August 23, a State Department Spokesman posited that: *"one of the things that we [U.S.] would do is ask or encourage India and Pakistan to sit down together and engage in direct dialogue that is aimed at reducing tensions between both of those countries"* [9]. Thus, reflects the ambiguity in U.S. position.

To suggest, even if Trump were to be tougher on Pakistan as compared to earlier U.S. Presidents, Islamabad has the solid backing of Beijing, which has high stakes in Pakistan. Islamabad in the meanwhile will also try to reach out to other countries, to garner support. Its foreign Minister Khwaja Asif is already visiting a number of countries as has been mentioned earlier.

Those who have welcomed Trump's speech have argued, that while past Presidents may have told Pakistan to do more [10], none of them have been so direct and tough. Trump's call to India to do more in Afghanistan has received mixed responses [11]. While the hyphenation of India's role in Afghanistan, with India-US economic ties, has caused some surprise. Yet, what is evident from Trump's statement is that the Pakistani Army no longer has a veto over Afghanistan policy.

While on the other end, for very long, India has been encouraged to play an important role in rebuilding Afghanistan, with clear limits, by previous U.S. administrations. The fact that Trump's speech chartered new territory is quite evident from the panic reaction of the top civil leadership and military leadership. A statement issued in the aftermath of a meeting of the National Security Committee (NSC) convened by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi

expressed the view, that India cannot become a net security provider in South Asia, given its strained ties with all its neighbors, and its attempts to '*destabilize*' Pakistan [12]. New Delhi would, however, take note of the statement of the Trump administration where he lauded India's contribution towards the economic construction of Afghanistan and ruled out the expectation of sending Indian troops to Afghanistan, while also stating that India's role in Afghanistan is largely economic [13].

In conclusion, while many would be skeptical *vis-à-vis* the Trump administration's tough stance towards Pakistan, arguing that the U.S. President is far too '*transactional*' to the degree of being simplistic, and that he lacks the gravitas to walk the talk. Unlike earlier U.S. Presidents who too have been frustrated with Pakistan's continuous support to groups, Trump's message to Pakistan that it cannot be business as usual, in his address, and the actions of his administration have been unequivocal.

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Trump's South Asia Policy: Implications for China

Dr. Sriparna Pathak

ABSTRACT:

This article looks at China's possible courses of action, post-Donald Trump's declaration of a new policy towards South Asia. Given the fact that China shares an "all weather friendship" with Pakistan, public shaming of Pakistan for shielding terrorists is clearly not something that is acceptable to China. However, with respect to terrorism, China has its own woes emanating primarily from its Xinjiang province, and several defectors from the province have been reported to have taken refuge in Pakistan. Additionally, China's energy interests find a place in Afghanistan. Therefore, the American policy in South Asia, which in all probability will see greater American involvement in the region, will have to be carefully considered by the foreign policy mandarins in Beijing.

After U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement of a 'new policy' in South Asia [1], on August 21, 2017, multiple efforts have been undertaken to spot the changes and the continuities in the policy. The policy as outlined by Trump is the blueprint to America's step forward in Afghanistan and in the South Asian region at large [2]. Expressing the American people's wariness after 16 years since 9/11, Trump in his speech stated that this tiredness is most evident in Afghanistan. Laying out the drastically negative consequences that will follow a hasty withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan, Trump mentioned the possibility of terrorist outfits like ISIS and al Qaeda filling the vacuum created by the U.S. pullout. Sharply criticizing Pakistan, he also stated that there are 20 U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations that are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan- the highest concentration in any region in the world. He minced no words in stating that Pakistan often gives safe havens to agents of chaos, violence and terror.

The newness of the strategy can be traced in the fact that the U.S. troops will stay in Afghanistan for an open ended period of time. In the words of David Petraeus, a former U.S. Army commander in Afghanistan, America is looking at a possibility of a military presence in Afghanistan that is similar to what is in South Korea- more than six decades now [3]. While the continuity in the policy, can be derived from the fact that all tools of engagement including military, economic and diplomatic will be used to tackle the challenges of terrorism in the region. For this purpose, Trump also called for greater efforts from India, which in his words is "a key security and economic partner for the U.S." [4].

While Trump did not mention China, in particular, however, to tackle the scourge of terrorism, it needs a concerted effort from all the great powers of the international system; and China clearly is a great power of the 21st century. However, on August 22, coming to the defense of Pakistan, in the wake of Trump's strong warning to it over provision of safe havens to terrorists; Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying stated that Pakistan is on the front lines of fighting terrorism, has made sacrifices in fighting it, making an important contribution to upholding peace and stability [5]. Hua's statement is in line with China's previous stance on Pakistan's efforts in dealing with terrorism. On June 28, a day after India and the U.S. asked Pakistan to rein in cross border terror, China defended Pakistan stating that Islamabad has been on the frontlines of the fight against terrorism. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang told reporters in Beijing, "*China thinks that the international cooperation against terrorism should be enhanced and stepped up. The international community should give full recognition and affirmation to Pakistan's efforts in this regard.*"[6]. To note, China's protective attitude towards Pakistan has previously been exhibited by its veto at the United Nations on listing Pakistani based terror outfit JEM's head Masood Azhar as an international terrorist.

To argue, United States new policy on South Asia which in all probability will target Pakistan will not be a welcome change for Pakistan's "all weather friend" China. To say so, as China, on its part has also been at the receiving end of terrorists taking shelter in Pakistan. The main terrorist threat in China emerges from the Western province of Xinjiang. Reportedly, in its effort to combat separatist Uighur groups, China is apparently seeking to establish military bases in the part of Pakistan that borders the province of Xinjiang [7]. For instance, in May 2014, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) urged all Taliban groups to target Chinese interests in the region, especially embassies, companies, and Chinese nationals [8]. The separatists hide mainly in the troubled North Waziristan region, where they are treated by their Pakistani Taliban hosts as guests of honor, militant and Pakistani intelligence sources say [9]- raising Chinese concerns.

In the past, China has pressed Islamabad to crack down on Pakistan-based Uighur terrorist groups. It was under pressure from Beijing that Pakistan banned the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU); extradited ETIM leaders to China and carried out military operations to dismantle ETIM's bases in Pakistan. In fact, the operation launched by Pakistan's military in North Waziristan in June 2014 that reportedly focused on the ETIM and the IMU was at Beijing's call.

China clearly needs Pakistan in its efforts in reining in terrorism. Beyond this issue, China also needs Pakistan for the success of its grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as witnessed in the construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Therefore, shielding Pakistan from any international reprisal, which has the possibility of sanctions beyond the normal disrepute in global politics, will be a constant in Chinese foreign policy.

The changed South Asia policy which means a longer U.S. presence in Afghanistan brings the possibility of both the desirable as well as the undesirable for China. If the US presence as

stated by Petraeus is similar to what has been in South Korea, then it is definitely not something that is a welcome change for China. With the U.S. installation of THAAD in South Korea, Chinese suspicions of the U.S. being too close for comfort and having the geographical proximity for surveillance is not something China would seek. In case of Afghanistan, the border between China and Afghanistan is 76 kilometers long beginning at the tripoint of both the countries with Pakistan and ends at the tripoint with Tajikistan. China does not share boundaries with South Korea, but it shares boundaries with North Korea. A greater role of the U.S. after the installation of THAAD is not acceptable to China. If any such similar activities were to be taken in a place that shares direct boundaries with China, then that would not be acceptable to Beijing's interest.

In its role to stabilize the Afghanistan- Pakistan region, in June 2017, China formally initiated a mediation bid to ease Afghanistan's tensions with Pakistan and to encourage the two countries to work jointly to counter terrorism and to promote regional peace. Beijing's diplomatic overtures came as relations between Kabul and Islamabad continue to sour over mutual allegations of sponsoring terrorism on each other's soil. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to Kabul in June, where he met with President Ashraf Ghani and other senior Afghan officials to discuss ways to improve ties with Pakistan. An official statement later quoted Yi as telling his Afghan interlocutors that "if required, China will be ready to observe and explain steps" both Pakistan and Afghanistan are taking against terrorism and extremism [10].

Since 2010, China has increased its economic aid and investment in Afghanistan, notably with the announcement by Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) pledging US\$3.5 billion to develop Aynak Copper mines.

China's appetite for energy is already well documented. Afghanistan fits the bill perfectly for Chinese interest. Afghanistan possesses large iron ore deposits stretching across Herat and the Panjsher Valley, and gold reserves in the northern provinces of Badakshan, Takhar, and Ghazni. Employment opportunities for the Afghans have received a boost with the Chinese investment projects by virtue of electricity-generation projects, for mining and extractions and a freight railroad passing from western China through Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan. A stable Afghanistan through American and Indian efforts would clearly ensure a more stable environment for Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan. Unlike the U.S. which has also taken military measures to rein in terror, China has taken no such step in Afghanistan, and its efforts remain purely economic. In the words of Robert Kaplan, while the U.S. is sacrificing its "*blood and treasure*", the Chinese will reap the benefits [11].

However, as a matter of fact, in Afghanistan, American, Indian and Chinese interests actually converge. While China can generate employment and tax revenues to stabilize the Kabul government and reduce the scope for terrorism, American and Indian military and diplomatic efforts can attempt a safer region. Clearly, in these terms, the new U.S. policy becomes a desirable option for China. However, what makes the new policy undesirable is the fact that the possibility of stronger international rebuke against its "*all weather friend*" Pakistan. This is again linked to China needs to keep its own backyard in Xinjiang safe from terrorists, and

also to keep an irritant alive for India- which of course does not share the greatest relations with China. To suggest, if China seeks to prioritize furthering its economic interests through Afghanistan, it then has to tone down its support for Pakistan in the light of the new U.S. policy on South Asia. However, for reasons ranging from U.S. proximity to its boundaries, there can be a greater possible involvement of India in Afghanistan and Pakistan is most likely to receive greater criticisms due to its track record on terrorism. While if China prioritizes Pakistan, then the new policy is definitely not going to be a welcoming one for Beijing.

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