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Trump's South Asia Policy: Implications for China

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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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