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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Maini, T. S. (2017). Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction. *IndraStra Global*, 3(9), 1-3. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54016-4>

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Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction

indrastra.com/2017/09/Trump-s-Straight-Talk-India-s-Reaction-003-09-2017-0015.html

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Image Attribute: U.S. President Donald Trump said that his approach in Afghanistan would now be more pragmatic than idealistic. | Photo Credit: AFP, Dated: August 21, 2017

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 the 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.

About the Author:

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Cite this Article:

Maini, T.S., "Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction", IndraStra Global Vol. 3, Issue No: 09 (2017), 0015,



AIDN0030920170015 / INDRASTRA / ISSN 2381-3652

Cite the Dossier:

Maini, T.S., "Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction", The Dossier by IndraStra Vol. 1, Issue No: 1, Sep 2017, Article No: 2, pg.9, <http://www.indrastra.com/2017/09/Dossier-Vol-1-Issue-No-1-Sep-2017.html> | ISSN 2381-3652

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