

## Trump's Afghanistan Strategy and Emerging Alignments in the Region: Implications for India

AKSHAY RANADE

**ABSTRACT** US President Donald Trump's new Afghanistan strategy for America's longest war has potential to drastically alter existing regional relations. The policy, announced after an exhaustive eight-month-long review process, attempts to give a new direction for future US involvement in Afghanistan. Becoming president at a time when old alignments are undergoing transition, Trump's task has not been easy. Given the constraints, however, Trump's Afghanistan policy has been well-articulated and appears to address the contemporary realities by taking account of past inadequacies. Yet the vagaries of global geopolitics are posing challenges to an effective outcome of Trump's strategy. This brief examines Trump's Afghanistan strategy, how it differs from previous US approaches, and how it triggers new alignments in the region. Lastly, the paper ponders what the new policy means for India.

### TRUMP'S AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY: CONTINUITIES AND DEPARTURE

As US President Donald Trump spoke about his strategy for South Asia, he did so with candour and said that it in fact contradicts his "instincts" on the Afghan problem. Trump had earlier

campaigning with a promise of ending US presence in major conflict areas and was particularly critical of his country's involvement in Afghanistan, calling for a complete withdrawal on a number of occasions. While the policy was enunciated with little operational details, it extended the US presence indefinitely.

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This evolution of policy only shows the complex nature of the problem in Afghanistan, which successive US administrations have tried to tackle but for which viable solutions have yet to be found. Understanding Trump's Afghanistan strategy therefore demands an examination of how it departs from previous ones, and what pillars constitute such a strategy.

The first pillar, which Trump calls "core", was a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. Trump declared, "Conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out."<sup>1</sup>

Former US President Barack Obama's call for US withdrawal from Afghanistan had invited a fair amount of criticism for its time-bound withdrawal plan, as it revealed too much to the adversary. Further, the conditions in which Obama had planned the withdrawal also gave rise to concern that it was a sign that Washington had accepted defeat, in turn giving the Al-Qaeda a powerful propaganda tool;<sup>2</sup> there was also the danger that the extremist elements would find room to expand again. However, there were signs that Obama was reconsidering this plan with "security conditions becoming precarious" in Afghanistan. Obama thus allowed more troops to be stationed in Afghanistan, leaving it to his successor to make further decisions.<sup>3</sup> Trump's apparently categorical reversal of the time-based approach thus counts as a first point of departure from his predecessor.

The second pillar that Trump talked about in his policy speech was the "integration of all

instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military—toward a successful outcome". This implied that talks with the Taliban was on the table. However, Trump gave priority to supporting the Afghanistan government "as they confront the Taliban."<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration, too, attempted to open talks with Taliban.<sup>5</sup> However, the approach of Trump appears to be sequential: first creating a conducive environment for negotiations before opening up the talks. Trump's insistence that the US is not in Afghanistan for "nation-building" again implied that Washington will not be micro-managing the policy for Afghanistan and will instead be acting 'just as a facilitator'. This means that the focus was on 'defeating the Taliban' to enable Afghan government to govern peacefully. This indication that the US will prioritise support to the Afghan government in its fight against the Taliban is further indication that Trump is departing from Obama's strategy.

Trump's third pillar—and arguably the most significant for India—was his change of approach to Pakistan. Trump declared: "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond."<sup>6</sup> Trump's open criticism of Pakistan for its "duplicity" in Afghanistan however is not new as far as US policy is concerned. For instance, in Obama's 2009 policy review, he stated that one of the main goals of his policy was "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan."<sup>7</sup> Identifying what he called Pakistan's "double game", Obama warned Pakistan to constructively support the

dismantling of safe havens in order to continue getting support from the US as it will not be “offering a blank cheque to Pakistan.”<sup>8</sup>

While Trump reiterated the same sentiment, he has gone a step ahead by openly inviting India to have an active role in Afghanistan. This, in effect, disregarded major Pakistani concerns with regards to Indian presence in Afghanistan. All the previous US administrations, though identifying Pakistan's perfidy in its Afghanistan policy, stopped short of encouraging a bigger role for India out of fear of alienating Pakistan. The indispensability of Pakistan in Afghan affairs was too significant to be ignored. Trump, however, seems to have moved beyond this as he seeks a stronger strategic partnership with India in the region. Trump's apparently audacious move has its sceptics,<sup>9</sup> to be sure, and it will certainly have ramifications in the regional alignments. Yet this undoubtedly becomes the most significant departure for the US' Afghanistan policy.

This shift in Washington's course—no doubt, significant—has received mixed reactions. The most prominent concern is regarding the apparently tough stance that Trump is taking against Pakistan: Will the US be able to walk the talk with Pakistan, given its geographical importance for the US in Afghanistan? The other concern is in the extent to which the US can exercise its leverage with Pakistan given its proximity and all-weather friendship with China. There appears to be a consensus, however, that Trump's policy direction will have implications on geopolitical alignments taking shape in the region. The success of the policy would therefore be contingent upon how well it

adapts to the changing circumstances and realities as major power competition is expected to be played in the region.

## **EMERGING DYNAMICS IN THE REGION**

Trump's strategy is indeed a significant, and arguably audacious, departure from the earlier course. What is interesting is how emerging dynamics in the region will affect the possible outcomes in Afghanistan following the enunciation of such strategy. Some of these dynamics would indeed be premised on Washington's new policy direction, while others have been happening more independently. Taking account of these changing alignments is critical in crafting a possible policy response for India.

### **The Pakistan Dilemma**

A key aspect in Trump's Afghanistan strategy is his new approach towards Pakistan. The open chastising was a clear reflection of Washington's frustration with Pakistan's dual policy in Afghanistan. However, Trump's “conditional” support to Pakistan—contingent on taking strong and credible action to address terrorism in the region—would certainly push Pakistan closer to China and Russia. Coupled with an anticipated increase in India's participation in Afghan affairs, Trump's move has rattled Pakistan. It expressed its displeasure when its National Assembly passed a resolution rejecting “hostile and threatening” statements made by President Trump while outlining his new policy direction.<sup>10</sup> The same resolution urged the Government of Pakistan to consider various steps to mitigate the circumstances of this ‘Washington Shift’, among them, commencing “diplomatic

initiative, *particularly in friendly countries in the region*, to inform them of Pakistan's counter terrorism strategy and successes and the repercussions in the region of failed US policies (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> The indications are clear that Pakistan is eyeing new alignments in the region to offset any possible setback from deteriorating ties with the US. China and Russia would feature prominently in these equations; both countries have assured diplomatic support to Pakistan in light of possible US actions.<sup>12</sup> This raises a fundamental question as to the extent to which the US will be able to exercise its leverage vis-à-vis Pakistan in view of this growing affinity with China and Russia. Given that there is little incentive for Pakistan to change its course, the concern is pertinent that Trump's warnings to Pakistan may not result in anything worthwhile for the US' objectives. Further, as Trump calls on India to be more active in the region, Pakistan would grow more wary and look for balancing options in China. In this sense, Trump's policy appears to serve as a strategic opportunity for China.

### China Seeks Opportunity

In his speech, Trump was particularly silent on China. This might be an indication that little is expected of China in substantially assisting the Afghanistan government. China's interest and approach in Afghanistan has evolved substantially over the years and today, it is a mix of domestic concerns with Islamic extremism and its strategic interests in Afghanistan. However, it is the latter which seems to be dominating the China policy in the region where the role of Pakistan is extremely critical. Though sharing a concern for Islamic extremism, one of the ways through which

China has attempted to tackle the issue is by opening up channels with Taliban.<sup>13</sup> Beyond that, China has also been investing in Afghanistan with major mining projects, some of them allegedly with the patronage of Taliban.<sup>14</sup> China has also attempted on its own to build a credible profile to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan, using multiple regional, subregional, and international forums for such engagements. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA); Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, U.S. and China; and the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) made up of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and China. Thus China, on its own, has been working through various mechanisms, some of them initiated by China like QCH, to steadily increase its profile not only in Afghanistan but also in the region.

In the matter of taking up the issue of terrorism, China has overlooked Pakistan's tacit support for terrorism and on the contrary, it has come in strong support for its ally. China, for instance, came out in direct support of Pakistan after the assassination of Osama bin Laden by the US.<sup>15</sup> China also repeatedly blocked India's attempts to add terrorists based in Pakistan in lists maintained by the United Nations.<sup>16</sup> Even in response to Trump's criticism of Pakistan, China openly sided with Pakistan by arguing that it is in "the frontline of fighting terrorism, has made sacrifices in fighting terrorism, making an important contribution to upholding peace and stability."<sup>17</sup> Given China's interest in the success of the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC), it is clear that Pakistan will remain indispensable for China. It is therefore clear that the strategic considerations of China in Afghanistan outweigh its concerns emanating from its domestic issues, and Trump's new policy provides China with an avenue to intensify its strategic pursuits. Considering the nature of the alliance between China and Pakistan, and the utility of Pakistan as a strategic check against India in the region, it is unlikely that China would attempt any policy change vis-à-vis Pakistan. This makes it difficult for the US to exercise a decisive pressure on Pakistan due to Pakistan being firmly supported by China.

### Russia's Taliban Outreach

Another factor compounding the complexity of the current situation is Moscow's continuing outreach to Taliban, and its warm ties with Pakistan. Russia, too, on its own seems to be eyeing a greater role in the region and consequently is seen to be engaged in its own "double-game" in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Russia's interest in Afghanistan appears two-fold: one is to restrict the influence of Islamic State and stop it from spreading into Central Asia which is still considered by Moscow as its sphere of influence; and second is to balance and contain US hegemony in the region. To attain both objectives, Taliban is the most critical entity and thus Russia has been attempting to move closer to Taliban in recent years. There are reports suggesting a possibility of Russians arming the Taliban.<sup>19</sup> Even on the diplomatic front, Moscow is attempting to build a loose coalition of nations with similar strategic objectives. For instance, in December 2016, Russia, Pakistan and China discussed, eschewing Afghanistan, ways to prevent IS

threat and presence in Afghanistan from spreading into Central Asia. They agreed to a "flexible approach to remove certain figures [of Taliban] from sanctions lists as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement."<sup>20</sup> This was the first time that Russia joined hands with Pakistan and China to collectively ask the UN Security Council to lift sanctions against select Taliban leaders, which was a reflection of convergence of these three countries over Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> Russia's curious support to CPEC and its call to link it with the Eurasian Economic Union project is another indication of Russia attempting to accommodate Pakistan's interests, something that is of concern for New Delhi. Further, the convergence of interests between Russia and Pakistan is bringing the two nations closer than they have ever been, to the extent that Moscow is actively considering opening the arms market to Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> This will be a major step after the joint military exercises with Pakistan. Pakistan is necessary for both China and Russia in the regional equations. Trump's distancing of Pakistan further intensifies it to the extent that Pakistan is now seen as central in determining the future alignments in the region. Together with Russia, the Pakistan-China-Russia axis could be a formidable one.

### The Iran Factor

Similarly, Iran has grown increasingly close to Taliban, which tends to complicate the realities further. Iran, like Russia, shares concerns of growing IS presence in Afghanistan and would want to keep that influence in check. Though initially Iran's strategic objectives in Afghanistan had allied with those of the US, there appears to be a growing resentment in

Iran with heightening IS presence in Afghanistan. There is also fear in Iran that US military forces in Afghanistan might be used to target Iran's nuclear facilities. Indeed, there have been incidents of Iran attempting to sabotage US-Afghan strategic agreement by putting direct pressure on the Afghan Parliament as well as the Karzai government.<sup>23</sup> In a direct attempt to check the increasing influence of US in Afghanistan, Iran has steadily been attempting to intensify its links with Taliban by means such as supplying Taliban with weapons and funds.<sup>24</sup> Iran's unease with growing US presence in Afghanistan would certainly have amplified with the Trump administration announcing a continuation of the Afghan war indefinitely, as Trump has been visibly harsh on Iran to the extent of considering to decertify the nuclear deal. The convergence of strategic interests and avenues to expand their influence has led to increased presence of both Iran and Russia in Afghanistan, to the extent that analysts view a possible 'cooperation' of Moscow and Tehran in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> The undergoing regional dynamics and subsequent realignments have created a direct impact on the regional consensus that existed briefly. Trump's new South Asia strategy is likely to facilitate the alignments further.

The realities that Trump's new policy will have to tackle are these changing alignments. What is worse, these alignments will perceptibly be cemented by growing anti-US sentiments in the region. With Pakistan moving closer to Russia and already firmly in Chinese camp, the complexities are only going to intensify. The irony is that Trump had hinted on a regional solution in Afghanistan, but there appears to be none. Thus the critical

issue is that although the policy sounds right, it is not certain to what extent the ground realities and changing geo-political situations will allow a favourable outcome. There will have to be a certainty that the US is not treating this as a tactical arrangement, reverting to form later when Pakistani sensitivities and perceived indispensability weigh in once again. Indian policy will have to consider these factors, bearing in mind a triangular relationship between Russia, China and Pakistan, with Iran as the "X-factor".

## IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

India was quick to respond to Trump's new Afghanistan strategy by welcoming his "determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges facing Afghanistan and confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists."<sup>26</sup> For India, Trump's emphasis on terrorism, and Pakistan's direct involvement in abetting it, was a strategic scoring point. However, there was more for India to cherish in the new strategy: for New Delhi, the US' recognition of India's pivotal role in stabilising and ensuring peace in Afghanistan has amounted to Washington's most decisive shift yet in India's favour. While previous US administrations identified India's role in Afghanistan, they stopped short of anticipating substantial Indian engagement due to fear of courting Pakistan's displeasure. Trump's decisive departure on this front is crucial with two significant implications for India: one, it was clear that Pakistan is fading in US calculations and it was ready for a higher Indian profile in Afghanistan; and second is that India can now look for a more systemic engagement along with the US, in Afghanistan

in particular, to counter Pakistan by acquiring the necessary strategic depth. Though it is unlikely that India would get involved in any direct military engagement in Afghanistan, the prospects for a deeper engagement for a broader goal of ensuring peace and stability in the region exist. President Trump hinted this in his policy address, when he said that the US is “committed to pursuing our shared objectives for peace and security in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>27</sup>

An examination of the implications for India requires an understanding of the new realignments discussed earlier in this brief. While it is true that Trump's policy in Afghanistan brings a positive change—as far as New Delhi is concerned—what India should anticipate is that the power equations are going to be redrawn and it will have to adjust to these concurrent developments to craft an effective policy response.

India has two strategic interests that have guided its Afghanistan policy in the post-Taliban era: preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary to plan and execute terrorist and other anti-India activities; and ensuring stability in Afghanistan to assure itself of a gateway to Central Asia. India's role in Afghanistan during the US' involvement can be seen in three distinct periods.<sup>28</sup> The first period (2001-2007) started with the recognition of India's important role during the Bonn conference. The second phase, beginning in 2007, saw India being increasingly marginalised by the West due to Pakistan's displeasure. This was seen in India's exclusion from the 2010 International Conference on Afghanistan held in Istanbul. India, however, had continued to engage with

Afghanistan, spanning various sectors including socio-economic development, health, and infrastructure projects like hydel power plants and the Afghan Parliament.<sup>29</sup> India also built on an institutional framework for strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries, the cornerstone of which was the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in October 2011. Kabul sees that it has gained a lot from the relations with India through various aid programmes such as infrastructure development, capacity building, small development projects, as well as food security assistance. India has also been contributing in peace-building efforts in Afghanistan by means such as training Afghan security personnel. As it deals with terrorism, Afghanistan is sensitive of Indian concerns regarding cross-border terrorism and likewise has supported India when it raises the issue on various global forums. The convergence of the two nations' interests, buoyed by mutual trust, has been at the core of these bilateral relations.

As India continues to build on its good relations with Afghanistan, the third component of Trump's new Afghanistan strategy becomes critical. Trump's new policy meant that there is realisation in Washington about India's critical role and that it was now ready to accept it, overcoming Pakistan's' apprehensions. It is thus expected of India to enhance and expand its engagement with Afghanistan, with a broader aim of ensuring peace and stability in the country. At the same time, Trump's new policy has paved the way for regional re-alignments of power that must be accounted for in understanding possible Indian response.

With Trump's new policy, India must expect increased Chinese involvement in the region as an ally of Pakistan. Further, growing affinity between Russia and Pakistan would be a matter of concern in New Delhi. In December 2016, Russia along with China and Pakistan convened a trilateral dialogue that sought to initiate peace negotiations with Taliban and the Afghan government. India made its displeasure known about being excluded; Afghanistan echoed India.<sup>30</sup> Though Russia invited India in the subsequent six-party talks that included Iran and Afghanistan, the fact that there is growing affinity between Russia, China and Pakistan has by then become clear. With the new Trump policy and Washington's embrace of India, it is likely to intensify. The challenge for New Delhi is to balance this evolving power equation.

India must navigate to a more pro-active Afghan strategy on both economic and security spheres. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted a bolder approach towards Afghanistan. India's pledge of US\$1 billion in fresh aid to Afghanistan during Afghan President Ghani's visit was a sign of the strengthening of the ties between the two.<sup>31</sup> In the security sphere, the government has stepped up by supplying attack helicopters to Afghanistan, a move which evidently displeased Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> India is also considering striking a deal with Afghanistan in repairing their aircraft and entering into an arms deal.<sup>33</sup> Having trained Afghan National Army officers and soldiers for four years, India is now planning to train Afghan police as well.<sup>34</sup> India should build on these existing efforts and, with Washington's acceptance of India's role in Afghanistan, aim at a more institutionalised

cooperation in the economic and security domains.

Apart from bilateral efforts, India must actively initiate regional cooperative mechanisms to deal with the issues in the region. As an aspiring major power, India ought to assume responsibility of taking proactive initiatives in the issues having direct strategic relevance to India. India so far has lacked in taking such initiatives. As new alignments take shape, Trump's new policy will likely intensify the re-alignments and consequently, the regional consensus is getting disturbed. India must take the lead in efforts to build this consensus in a manner consistent with both its commitments and needs in Afghanistan. The situation of Afghanistan, after all, is of direct security concern for India. Russia's exclusion of India in the trilateral meeting should be a concern for India; the perceived closeness of Pakistan with China and Russia, too.

It is in India's interest to actively work on building a regional consensus by identifying convergences among stakeholders in Afghanistan. This should actively involve the Central Asian states who share similar concerns with regards to the instability in Afghanistan. Such a framework will have significant implications: one, that India will be able to shape a framework that suits India's interest and will accommodate possible Indian constraints; and second, it will help to leverage the capabilities of regional states with common strategic objectives to collectively work in the region. Countries like Russia and Iran, whose policies have recently also changed would be critical in this regard. India should



actively explore these possibilities and initiate a framework that India can be part of and that can help mitigate the setbacks that might result from possible re-alignments. [ORF](#)

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Akshay Ranade** is a Research Intern at Observer Research Foundation.

## ENDNOTES

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Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773.

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Website: [www.orfonline.org](http://www.orfonline.org)