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## **US-Pakistan Relations in the Trump Era: Resetting the Terms of Engagement in Afghanistan**

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# US-Pakistan Relations in the Trump Era: Resetting the Terms of Engagement in Afghanistan

## ABSTRACT

In a groundbreaking speech in August this year, US President Donald Trump laid out his government's policy for South Asia, authorising more American troops to Afghanistan and insisting that Pakistan must either "do more" to restrain Islamist militants, or face consequences. Indian and Afghan governments have welcomed the new US policy approach. The major components of Trump's Afghanistan strategy—recognising Pakistan's role in providing safe havens for terrorists, escalating the war against the Afghan Taliban and preventing them from fighting their way back to power in Afghanistan, setting no deadlines for the withdrawal of American forces, and enhancing India's role in the peace and development of Afghanistan—could change the trajectory of Pakistan's relationship with the US. This paper argues that Trump's Afghan policy announcement and the subsequent pressure by the US officials are aimed at changing Pakistan's troublesome behaviour, albeit with uncertain prospects of success. It will also explore the implications of this policy for India.

## INTRODUCTION

The US–Pakistan relationship has been complex, turbulent, and transactional. Christophe Jaffrelot has termed the relationship “clientelistic”, one based on instrumental exchange, not ideological affinity.<sup>1</sup> Although for much of its history, the US–Pakistan partnership has lacked a shared vision and a coherent conceptual framework, the strategic drivers of their relationship have remarkably endured over the years. If Pakistan’s major strategic goal has been to line up support against what it views as an existential threat from India, the US’ aims have usually reflected priorities outside Pakistan: strengthening the Cold War alliance system, responding to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and conducting a war on terrorism. That the strategic objectives of Washington only partly align with those of Islamabad has been grounds for mistrust and cynicism in their bilateral relationship. Ever since the Cold War, observes Moeed Yusuf, “Pakistan used the United States to bolster its economy and military capability against Soviet-leaning India. Pakistan’s India calculus has not moved since this time, but the United States’ strategy has flipped. And herein lies the problem.”<sup>2</sup> Pakistan remains the most “censured” and “sanctioned” American ally for issues ranging from nuclear proliferation to democracy deficit, to Afghan conflict and terror safe havens.

A significant factor governing the US–Pakistan relations has been that, over the years, the American policy has fluctuated in response to various global and regional geopolitical changes. Since Pakistan continues to loom large on America’s strategic radar for one reason or the other—either as a strong ally or a difficult friend, or even a threat<sup>3</sup>—the US has followed both engagement and containment policies, or a “carrots and sticks” approach, *vis-à-vis* Pakistan. The situation in Afghanistan is only one dimension of the US’ relationship with Islamabad, and the gap between their goals has only deepened their “trust deficit.” While

Pakistan continues to seek to eliminate India's influence in Afghanistan by establishing a "friendly" regime in Kabul, the US has been trying to prevent the Taliban from regaining power in Afghanistan, to leave behind a country that is reasonably capable of keeping terrorism at bay. The nature of Pakistan's Afghan policy has become a massive hindrance to cooperation between Washington and Islamabad. Over the course of their ever-fluctuating relationship, Pakistan has continued to serve as a safe haven for the intractable Taliban.

The US cannot wish away Pakistan's geopolitical importance. In addition to having the world's sixth-largest population and a powerful army in control of nuclear weapons, Pakistan is strategically placed at the crossroads between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Pakistan is part of both the problem and the solution in the Afghan conflict. The US has been reluctant to put too much pressure on Pakistan over the issue of terror sanctuaries, as Washington has long feared political instability and internal collapse in a nuclear-armed state. This stance has, however, overlooked the risk that Pakistan is more likely to become radicalised in the long run in the absence of preventive measures in the present. Moreover, Islamabad's cooperation is critical for the US to stabilise the government in Kabul.

The primary reason for the failed US policy in Pakistan is the underestimation not only of the threat that Pakistan's security establishment poses to regional security, but also of its strategic value. Washington has not been able to persuade Rawalpindi to give up terrorism as a state policy. For many years, the US has been an avoidable victim of Pakistan's fascination with terrorism. After the 9/11 attacks, the US had to confront the fact that the Pakistan-supported Taliban regime was sheltering al-Qaeda's leadership. Osama bin Laden found refuge in Pakistan until his death in May 2011, and even today, several terrorist groups operating out of Pakistan, such as the Haqqani network

and the Afghan Taliban, continue to target with impunity American and Afghan soldiers in Afghanistan. Moreover, the US government agencies are well aware of the role Pakistan’s ‘deep state’ plays in financing, training, and protecting these groups, as well as the ones targeting India.

## **CONTEMPORARY US–PAKISTAN TIES: A BRIEF HISTORY**

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, it ushered in a momentous turning point in US–Pakistan relations. The intervention also laid the foundation for an expanded Pakistani role in Afghan internal affairs. With liberal funding from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) organised large numbers of mujahedeen groups, which it recruited mainly from the Pashtun tribal areas. Pakistan’s military dictator, General Zia ul Haq, hosted Afghan refugees in Pakistan, emerging as the “godfather” of the so-called “Afghan jihad.” Pakistan’s deep involvement in it has had far-reaching and undesirable consequences.

Exploiting its experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s involvement in India’s Jammu and Kashmir since 1989 has consisted of sending trained jihadist fighters, weapons and money across the border for attacks in the state,<sup>4</sup> fuelling an insurgency that continues to trouble India. Moreover, Pakistan went on to become the Taliban’s principal financial, military and diplomatic patron in Afghanistan. The overthrow of the Taliban following the US intervention in 2001 on the shoulders of the Northern Alliance undoubtedly transformed the regional geopolitics. However, the US fell back into the Pakistani trap again.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration employed coercive tactics to compel Pakistani ruler General Pervez Musharraf to cut his military’s links with the Taliban and join the US in its “global war on terror.”<sup>5</sup> The threat had the desired effect, at least for some time, as Pakistan joined America’s war efforts in Afghanistan. If Islamabad had

defied American demands in the aftermath of 9/11, it would have placed Pakistan in association with the actions of the al-Qaeda. Since at this point there was no delinking al-Qaeda from the Taliban, for Pakistan to refuse a partnership with the US would mean being branded as a collaborator of the terrorists.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Pakistani Army helped the US target the al-Qaeda terrorist network by arresting several of its leaders and handing them over to the US,<sup>7</sup> Rawalpindi had no intention of giving up its association with violent non-state actors, particularly because of the role it played in the Pakistani Army's aims of confronting India and Afghanistan. Along the way, Islamabad also began to collect billions of dollars in American financial and military assistance. Despite its knowledge of Rawalpindi's duplicity, Washington has not managed to force Pakistan to uphold its commitment against terrorism.

### **Relations during the Obama presidency**

America's relations with Pakistan deteriorated after the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad on 2 May 2011. It appeared to improve through a rapprochement, until a US drone attack on 22 May 2016 killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in the Balochistan province. Ties between the two countries are now overwhelmingly dependent on Pakistan's ability to cooperate in ending the scourge of jihadist terrorism and helping the US stabilise Afghanistan. Since 9/11, Rawalpindi's Afghan agenda has not converged with that of Washington.

Immediately after being elected president in December 2008, Barack Obama began speaking about a new policy direction in the US strategy in the Afghan war. He said, "We can't continue to look at Afghanistan in isolation. We have to see it as a part of a regional problem that includes Pakistan, includes India, includes Kashmir, includes Iran."<sup>8</sup> However, the



reference to Kashmir was bound to provoke protest in India, which forced Obama to abandon the idea of linking the resolution of the Kashmir dispute with ending the war in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> The US approach towards Afghanistan and Pakistan nonetheless formed a unified policy representing the region as a whole.

The Obama administration issued warnings to Pakistan’s security establishment to mend its disruptive behaviour. Many scholars rightly argue that US assistance to Pakistan has been instrumental in reinforcing its military. The US military and economic assistance offered to General Zia, and later to General Musharraf, are prime examples of how American funds have ended up reinforcing military dictators in Pakistan. Former President Obama had wanted to bring about a change in the traditional American approach. Robert Gates, the defence secretary from 2006 to 2011, has depicted in his memoir a dismal picture of the US–Pakistan relationship. While the US was focused on fighting terrorists, Pakistan wanted to retain its influence in Afghanistan at any cost. Gates writes that despite publicly defending the Pakistani Army, he knew that Pakistan was not a trustworthy ally. One of the major reasons for this defence was to avoid “endangering our supply line from Karachi.” Regarding the May 2011 Abbottabad raid that killed Osama bin Laden, Gates concedes that when the operation was being planned, he was worried that the ISI was aware of bin Laden’s whereabouts.<sup>10</sup> Ahead of the raid, no one in the Obama administration considered seeking Pakistan’s help in killing bin Laden, as past experience showed that “the target was forewarned and fled, or the Pakistanis went after the target unilaterally, prematurely and unsuccessfully,” whenever intelligence about them was shared.<sup>11</sup>

In a significant shift of the US foreign-aid practice—from a dominance of military to civilian support—Obama took the bold step of authorising the US Congress to triple civilian assistance to the Pakistani

government to an annual US\$1.5 billion from 2010 to 2014, and made the continuation of assistance contingent on the Pakistani military's non-interference in political matters. However, the subsequent climb-down on the act demonstrated America's reluctance to pressure Pakistan's military, as long as US forces could remain in Afghanistan. Also significant is the unusually candid testimony that Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave to the US Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2011, in which he called the Haqqani network "a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency."<sup>12</sup> In the same year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and CIA Director David Petraeus visited Pakistan and tried to "push the Pakistanis very hard" to end their support for terrorists in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

While urging the Pakistani government to show greater cooperation with the US to fight militants, Secretary Clinton—in a joint press conference with Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar in Islamabad on 20 October—derided Pakistan's tendency of nurturing "snakes" while expecting "them to only bite your neighbors."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta had harsh words for Pakistan when he talked about reaching the "limits of our patience" with Pakistan because of the safe havens offered to insurgents.<sup>15</sup> Panetta was referring to the terror safe havens in Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly North and South Waziristan. Yet, despite the US' insistence, the Pakistani Army did not start counterinsurgency operations in North Waziristan. Ayesha Siddiqa has pointed out that the Pakistani Army was not interested in paying heed to Washington's concerns about the Taliban groups in North Waziristan, particularly those who had "formal and informal agreements with the Pakistani army not to attack the state if the army does not attack them."<sup>16</sup> While the Pakistani Army's dominant narrative projects Pakistan as the victim of terrorism, Siddiqa held Pakistan's definition of "good and bad Taliban" responsible for its

unwillingness to target all Taliban groups.<sup>17</sup> Pakistan’s selective counterterrorism strategy—showing a limited inclination to fight terrorist groups and partnering with some to strengthen its future bargaining position in Afghanistan—has been a major bone of contention between Islamabad and Washington.

The Obama administration made various attempts to balance US relations with both the civilian and military leaders in Pakistan, despite concerns about the covert links between the ISI and terror outfits. For instance, the US State Department’s country reports on terrorism for 2014 stated that the Pakistani military undertook operations against groups that conducted attacks within Pakistan, such as TTP, but did not take action against other groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which freely operated, trained, rallied, propagandised and fund-raised in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network leaderships continued to find safe haven in Pakistan, and although the Pakistani military operations disrupted the actions of these groups, it did not directly target them.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, US actions often outraged Pakistan’s security establishment to such an extent that supply routes to the US forces in Afghanistan were shut down for several months. India’s growing influence in Afghanistan was cited as the primary reason for Pakistan to continue to maintain its links with the Taliban and other so-called “friendly” terror groups.

In December 2014, the Taliban carried out one of the deadliest terror attacks in Pakistan, killing 145 people—almost all of them children—at the Army Public School in Peshawar. The Taliban-orchestrated massacre was designed to target children of military personnel. The Pakistani Army was forced to break from its old practice of taking American assistance while simultaneously exploiting various Taliban groups as a hedge against India. Sensible voices in Pakistan demanded the end of collaboration—whether overt or covert—between the Pakistani Army

and the Afghan Taliban in fighting the government in Kabul. In the aftermath of the Peshawar attack, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani and the top US military commander, General John Campbell, to pledge mutual cooperation in fighting and capturing the Taliban commanders responsible for the assault. Sharif also emphasised that they will no longer be differentiating between “good” and “bad” Taliban.<sup>19</sup>

Obama was aware that longer-term stability and attempts to support a viable reconciliation process to end the violence in Afghanistan depended largely on working effectively with Pakistan. Given that Pakistan began to develop closer relations with Afghanistan after President Ghani came to power, there were indications that the Taliban could begin talks to end the conflict.<sup>20</sup> However, such hopes were shortlived as the Afghan Taliban continued to mount daring attacks. In particular, the Taliban launched a vicious attack on the city of Kunduz in October 2015, briefly seizing the prison and airport as President Ghani’s government completed its first year in office. This created a desperate situation for the American military in Afghanistan as they had to engage beyond merely fulfilling their mandated role of training and advising Afghan security forces. The US retaliated with air strikes over a four-day period to recapture Kunduz.<sup>21</sup>

If the Taliban’s original intention was to force the Ghani government to make concessions to begin peace talks, the tactic backfired as the US extended the withdrawal deadline. On 15 October, President Obama announced the decision to halt the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. He continued to oppose the idea of “endless war,” but asserted that a longer-term American presence in Afghanistan was vital to the security of the US as well as Afghanistan, which was beset by the Taliban, their al-Qaeda allies, and militants from the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup> Antonio Giustozzi observes that though this development

strengthened President Ghani's position vis-a-vis Pakistan and the Taliban, it also further strained America's relations with Pakistan, as President Obama became increasingly doubtful about Pakistan's commitment to negotiated peace in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> When the US undertook the targeted drone killing of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in Balochistan in late May 2016, Obama did not apologise for violating Pakistan's airspace. He declared Mansour's death as an important milestone in the efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The drone strike was also a reminder to Islamabad that it must eliminate terrorist safe havens from Pakistani soil and pressurise the Taliban leadership to join the negotiating table. Recognising that there was no substantial improvement in security, and that the Afghan security forces lacked the capacity to win decisively against the Taliban, Obama announced in the first week of July that 8,400 troops would remain in Afghanistan through 2016, deferring withdrawal timeline decisions to the next administration.<sup>25</sup>

## **POLICY SHIFT UNDER TRUMP**

Whether it is part of a “global war on terror,” or against “radical Islamist terrorism,” the Afghan conflict has been a very long one that appears far from over. Trump's Afghan policy review was necessitated due to the growing realisation in the Pentagon that America's “mission Afghanistan” was on the brink of imminent collapse. A war that was started by President George Bush in October 2001—with the hunt for the al-Qaeda attackers of 9/11—had turned into a fruitless military effort to keep Afghanistan's fragile democracy alive amidst a brutal Taliban insurgency supported and financed by Pakistan's deep state.

When President-elect Donald Trump made an early telephonic call to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, on which the Pakistani media reported that Trump had showered extravagant praise on Sharif and the

Pakistani people,<sup>26</sup> it seemed that under Trump’s administration, the US would adopt a strategy heavy on “carrots.” The effusive language of the conversation was bewildering as the relations between the two countries were tense. The major sticking points included the US demands for the release of Shakil Afridi, a doctor who had helped lead the CIA to the hiding place of Osama bin Laden; the withholding of US\$300 million in reimbursements to the Pakistani Army; and the holding up of a deal that would have allowed Pakistan to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the US.

While senior Trump administration officials concluded that Pakistan could not be trusted as an ally in the fight against terrorism, others believed that the US should not risk a full break in relations with Pakistan. However, the dominant feeling was that without more pressure on Pakistan, additional troop deployments in Afghanistan could not meet their ultimate objective, i.e., to convince the Taliban to eventually negotiate peace. Many initiatives of the Trump administration were intended to force the Pakistani military to make a clear choice between backing the US, which finances much of its military operations, and continuing to provide secret support for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network, which is fighting American and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. Consequently, the Trump administration refused to provide Pakistan with the leverage to demand substantial military and non-military aid. President Trump did not show any willingness to listen to unconvincing arguments about "good" and "bad" terrorists.

In May 2017, President Trump addressed the Arab–Islamic–US summit in Riyadh. One of the key points of Trump’s speech that infuriated many Pakistani commentators was his mention of India as one of the countries that had suffered due to terrorism, with no acknowledgement of the Pakistani Army’s contribution in fighting jihadist terror.<sup>27</sup> Trump refrained from a bilateral meeting with Prime

Minister Nawaz Sharif, even as he had a meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. An article in the Pakistani newspaper, *The Nation*, mentioned that the popular sentiment among the majority of Pakistani media delegation was that of total humiliation of the sole Muslim nuclear power, because in addition to Trump’s omission of Islamabad’s role against global terrorism, the prime minister of the so-called “frontline state” was denied the opportunity to put forth his point of view.<sup>28</sup>

The Trump administration officials publicly stated that Pakistan should be sincere about engaging the Afghan Taliban in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The US intelligence community was already convinced of the presence of terror outfits in Pakistani territory and the material support being provided to them by Pakistan’s security establishment. During a hearing on Afghanistan at the Senate Armed Services Committee in May this year, the US National Intelligence Director Dan Coats bluntly stated that the US must address the problem of “the harbouring of terrorist groups” in Pakistan before framing a new Afghan strategy. Similarly, Director of Defense Intelligence Agency Vincent Stewart argued before the Senate Armed Services Committee that Pakistan must be convinced that Afghanistan’s security and stability is in the interest of all parties involved, and “harbouring any of the Haqqani network members” will adversely affect regional security. Stewart categorically said that Pakistanis “view all of the challenges through the lens of an Indian threat to the state of Pakistan,” leading them to “hold in reserve terrorist organisations” to be used when they find Afghanistan leaning towards India.<sup>29</sup>

Vocal and consistent demands from the members of Trump’s national security team became a source of immense difficulty for the Pakistani Army. A growing number of influential voices in Washington believed that Pakistan’s current actions in Afghanistan demand continued vigilance. The June 2017 Pentagon report discussed the role



of “elements of Pakistani government” in providing support to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network inside Pakistan’s territory and the need to take action against all terrorist groups.<sup>30</sup>

The US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, in his engagements with Pakistani representatives, warned of punitive measures if American interests were threatened. In the first week of August 2017, McMaster declared that President Trump wanted Pakistan to change its “paradoxical” policy of supporting terrorists and providing safe haven to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. He also defended Trump’s strategy on winning the war in Afghanistan by giving unrestricted powers to the US military.<sup>31</sup>

### **What is the New Policy?**

On 22 August, President Trump severely criticised Pakistan for offering safe haven to what he called “agents of chaos” and accused the state of taking billions of dollars of American money while undermining the US’ presence in Afghanistan through terror groups. Declaring that the US “can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organisations,” Trump demanded Pakistan to change its behaviour “immediately.”<sup>32</sup>

Trump’s decision has come as a breather for the fragile Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani. The increased American military presence could allow his government to focus its energies on the urgent task of governance, supplementing the US initiatives for regime stability. Trump also declared that his administration will not focus on achieving idealistic goals in Afghanistan. He said, “We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.”<sup>33</sup>

In his speech, Trump mentioned that while he wanted to deliver on his poll promises by withdrawing US forces from Afghanistan, there was



no viable alternative. His “original instinct was to pull out,” he said, but he had been persuaded to curb his instincts. His core national security team knew that an abrupt termination of military presence in Afghanistan could lead to regional instability and a blow on US interests, since it would not only lead to the downfall of the fragile Afghan government but also embolden the jihadist juggernaut in the pursuit of its regional and global ambitions. Therefore, Trump maintained that key decisions in Afghanistan should be taken by military commanders and determined by “conditions on the ground and not arbitrary timetables,” because a hasty withdrawal will create conditions conducive for all terrorist groups, including the ISIS and the al-Qaeda, to thrive. The ouster of strategist Steve Bannon, a close aide to Trump who was seeking withdrawal from Afghanistan, helped remove lingering indecisiveness in the White House and quashed the insidious proposal of pursuing the Afghanistan mission with private contractors.

Trump sought to differentiate his Afghan policy from those of his predecessors by insisting that the core component of his Afghan policy “is a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions.”<sup>34</sup> In essence, the Obama administration’s policy, too, was conditional. But the timetable set for completing a withdrawal threw a spanner in creating the right security and political conditions necessary for withdrawal. The real challenge before the Trump administration lies in the creation of efficient, capable, suitably led and well-resourced Afghan security and political institutions.<sup>35</sup> Former President Obama had undertaken a similar Afghan policy review after assuming power in 2009. When Obama authorised the surge in Afghanistan, it was done with the conviction that the additional troops, combined with a more supportive attitude from the Pakistani Army and better governance from the Afghan government, would be able to defeat the Taliban. By ordering a surge in troop presence from 55,000 in early 2009 to 100,000

in 2010, the US was seeking to gain a decisive victory over the Taliban insurgency. It soon became evident, however, that the additional US troops would not stem the Taliban tide, absent the conditions required for success. The Afghan government remained as ineffective and corrupt as ever, and Pakistan continued to support the Taliban. Moreover, the simultaneous announcements that the withdrawal would begin in 2011 and the Afghan security forces would take charge of all combat operations in 2014 had deleterious consequences as they only emboldened the Taliban insurgency.

Trump's positive comments about India has unnerved Pakistan. New Delhi's role in Afghanistan is now more consequential and problematic for US–Pakistan relations. Trump called on India to step up its involvement in Afghanistan: a country where New Delhi already plays a major role. India and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2011, and this accord has translated to generous levels of Indian development assistance to Afghanistan. When it comes to India's warm ties with Afghanistan, it is the prospect of deeper security relations that really rattles Pakistan. Pakistan's paranoia about India further aggravates the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, leaving many Pakistanis to argue that the “road to peace in Kabul lies in Kashmir.”<sup>36</sup>

After Trump's speech, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explained the US policy as an effort to force the Taliban to negotiate peace.<sup>37</sup> The key presumption of Trump's Afghan policy is that the US is capable of denying Taliban success on the battlefield and forcing it to sue for peace by military means. Proponents of the military approach have convinced Trump that the current stalemate in Afghanistan will eventually tire the Taliban out and force them to come to the negotiating table. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban continue to entertain the notion that their resolve against the Afghan government and its foreign backers—coupled with the support of local populations, mostly the

Pashtuns—will soon force the foreign powers to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The Trump policy is not new in stressing the role of the military, but it differs in that this policy has empowered the local commanders to get things done. Under the Obama administration, the White House micromanaged the war to the last detail: it decided not only how many troops would be involved but also where and how they would fight. The military leadership had always been uncomfortable with this approach, as it preferred to have the authority to decide its war strategy as per the ground situations. Trump has delegated significant authority to the Pentagon to decide the troop levels and to the military commanders in the field to decide how to wage war against the Taliban. Promising “a definite change in military tactics,” Tillerson forcefully defended Trump’s military strategy as “a conditions-based strategy” that “will be dictated by conditions on the ground informed by battlefield commanders.”<sup>38</sup> While Trump’s counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan will have to depend a great deal on the use of force, which entails more violence and humanitarian risks, it is, as Michael Kugelman points out, “the least bad of a long list of very bad options.”<sup>39</sup>

## **Pakistan’s Response**

Pakistan’s response to continued American pressure has been predictable. In the aftermath of Trump’s tough talk, Pakistan began to defend its “strategic assets” in Afghanistan. Clarifying that “Pakistan doesn’t harbour terrorists,” Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Abbasi issued a veiled threat to the US, saying that Pakistan does “not intend to allow anybody to fight Afghanistan’s battle on Pakistan’ soil.” Trotting out Pakistan’s oft-repeated mantra of political settlement, he rejected Trump’s emphasis on military dimension by arguing that “the military strategy in Afghanistan has not worked and it will not work.”<sup>40</sup> Pakistani

Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif said that Washington “should not make Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures in Afghanistan.”<sup>41</sup>

Pakistan has now gone into overdrive to offset the US pressure by diplomatic outreach to China and Russia. Both Beijing and Moscow have been critical of Trump’s new position on Pakistan. Although Pakistan can survive without American aid, it is not lost on Rawalpindi that China’s anxiety regarding the security of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor will ultimately curtail Pakistan’s ability to patronise destabilising jihadist elements. Pakistan’s angry reaction to the new US policy is not new. In a country as anti-American as Pakistan, top politicians are obliged to issue strong rebukes to sharp American rhetoric. Therefore, it is a stretch to interpret Pakistan’s official belligerence as signalling a real intention on the part of Islamabad to shed its dependence on American military and economic support through diversification of options by seeking cooperation with Russia and China. There is a playing-to-the-gallery dimension inherent in Pakistan’s response.

In the aftermath of Trump’s speech, there has been a hike in anti-American rhetoric in Pakistan’s popular circles, but the sober and realist voices from Pakistan feel that Rawalpindi’s tolerance for externally oriented terrorist organisations has become strategically unsustainable. Immediately after the policy announcement, Pakistani newspapers ran headlines that criticised Trump for coercive tactics against Pakistan while also publishing nuanced commentaries calling for pragmatism and patience. A Pakistani columnist wrote that Rawalpindi’s cat-and-mouse game with terrorism “would have continued unchallenged” if Trump had not upped “the ante by laying aside the niceties and evasions that characterised the US–Pakistan dialogue under earlier presidents.” The new bluntness and proposed regional realignment offer a glimmer of hope for an overdue questioning of Pakistan’s destructive security paradigm.<sup>42</sup> Another Pakistani scholar, Rasul Bakhsh Rais, similarly

remarked, "...[due to] being at the crossroads of a complex geopolitical tangle and vulnerable to domestic challenges, Pakistan doesn't have the luxury of ignoring American threats."<sup>43</sup> An analyst who has been an advocate of greater US–Pakistan engagement has cautioned, "Pakistan can't pretend it won't hurt badly if the US flexes its muscle."<sup>44</sup> A commentator wrote, "Madness on our doorstep has already arrived." He suggested that if Trump ordered a drone strike in Pakistani territory, as opposed to the tribal areas, it could get Pakistan "embroiled in a war with the US. This is deadly serious business."<sup>45</sup> Asking the Pakistani government to "sincerely" implement the 20-point National Action Plan against militancy, terrorism and violent extremism, a former Director General of Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has observed, "The writ of the state can only be established if the distinction between strategic assets and militant threats is completely eliminated. The time for proxies is over."<sup>46</sup>

Given the current mood in Washington, it will not be easy for the Pakistani Army to avoid taking concrete action against terror sanctuaries. Pakistani generals understand the increasingly anti-Pakistan sentiment in the White House, at the Pentagon, on Capitol Hill and even within think-tanks.

## **EXECUTING THE US' NEW AFGHAN POLICY: KEY CHALLENGES**

Former President George W. Bush had transformed Indo-US relationship by de-hyphenating India and Pakistan. However, his administration tended to treat insurgencies in Afghanistan and Kashmir as two different phenomena, disregarding their common roots and support base in Pakistan. This constrained the prospects for Indo-US cooperation in the stabilisation of Afghanistan as well as counterterrorism.<sup>47</sup> Today, President Trump and Secretary Tillerson seem keen to correct this anomaly by making India an active partner in

both. Having said that, Trump’s Afghan policy and Pakistan’s responses constitute the first act in the unfolding American efforts to recalibrate its ties with Pakistan. Ever since the announcement, the Trump administration has not shown any public willingness to let Pakistan off the hook. The brief stopover of Tillerson in Islamabad, sandwiched between his October trips to Afghanistan and India, was meant to hand over a to-do list to Pakistan’s security establishment.<sup>48</sup> More high-level US visits to Pakistan are either underway or being planned. Secretary James Mattis has just followed up on the set of priorities in Trump’s South Asia strategy. The way Trump has chosen to confront Pakistan on its double dealing on terrorism and called for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan has brought about a remarkable shift in US–Pakistan relations.

Speaking before the House Armed Services Committee in the first week of October this year, Secretary Mattis spoke about Washington’s attempt “one more time” to work with Pakistan in Afghanistan before the Trump administration turns “to take whatever steps are necessary” to end Islamabad’s support for terrorist groups. Mattis’ warning to Rawalpindi about the “penalties” being “just as significant as the advantages if they choose to go a different direction”<sup>49</sup> actually points to the challenges in the execution of the policy. Tillerson’s talk of showing America’s “commitment” to the Afghan cause and giving “a message” to the Taliban that the US will not leave Afghanistan as long as it forces them “to engage with the Afghan government in a reconciliation process”<sup>50</sup> is a clear indication that the ultimate American objective is not the elimination of the Taliban but a political settlement.

There occurred a brief positive moment in US–Pakistan relations when Trump praised Pakistan’s role in securing the safe release of an American national, her Canadian husband and their three children, who were kidnapped by the Haqqani network in 2012. Pakistan’s security

establishment went into media hype about how its military successfully forced the release by effective action, acting on intelligence provided by US authorities. Trump welcomed this development on 13 October 2017, saying, “America is starting to have a real relationship with Pakistan.”<sup>51</sup>

Although senior officials in the Trump administration were far less generous than the president in assessing the significance of Pakistan’s assistance in the hostage rescue, the situation demonstrated the US’ lack of options. James Mattis was cautious in expressing the hope that Pakistan’s cooperation was the “harbinger” of Islamabad’s new approach towards terrorism, and Homeland Secretary Tom Bossert insisted that a single action did not mean “a reversal of a trend of unfortunate behaviour.” The Vice President Mike Pence, too, said that Pakistan’s support to America’s anti-terror strategy “must be continued and sustained.”<sup>52</sup> Given the limited options available with the US, the Trump administration will do everything possible to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, but the US should not have high expectations from Pakistan to deny the insurgents a safe haven on its soil. CIA Chief Mike Pompeo has said that if history is to be a guide, then Pakistan’ willingness to cooperate with the US in fighting Islamic terrorism will remain limited.<sup>53</sup>

Just before his October visit to New Delhi, Tillerson gave a speech on Indo-US relations outlining the contours of their strategic bonding for “the next 100 years.”<sup>54</sup> He spelled out the ambitious role of India in the US plans in two spheres: Afghanistan, as a part of the new South Asia policy; and the Indo-Pacific, as part of American plans to counter China. However, no clear specifics are visible on either the Afghan or the China front. The terror groups that Trump and Tillerson have referred to are those targeting Afghanistan and the US soldiers based there. Sceptics in India are asking how the new policy can be applicable for the whole of South Asia, if Pakistan is not made accountable for the terror groups



targeting India. It is well known that India's Afghan ambitions cannot be realised unless Indo-Iran cooperation (Chabahar angle) is accelerated, yet the Trump administration has been unremittingly trying to isolate Iran. The US–Iran confrontation adversely affects both Afghanistan's stabilisation and India's Afghan policy.<sup>55</sup>

While New Delhi and Washington have taken strides in aligning their strategic vision, shifting realities across the Durand Line are sufficient to pose challenges to their shared, lofty aims. New Delhi may argue that the full spectrum of options for compelling Rawalpindi to change course on destabilising Afghanistan and India have not been tried yet, but geographical factors play out to the advantage of Pakistan and rule out the success of overly coercive options. As long as the US troops remain stationed in Afghanistan, it is virtually impossible for Washington to completely disengage from Islamabad. America's dependence on Pakistan for its ground and air lines of communication to Afghanistan has given the Pakistani military considerable leverage over Washington. No matter how unreliable the Pakistani military has been in suppressing terrorist groups against Afghanistan and India, the US has not been able to execute its threats without risking the transportation lines in landlocked Afghanistan, which are crucial at a time when Iranian and Russian lines of communications are constrained for geopolitical reasons.

Trump is not the first American president to realise that Afghanistan cannot be 'solved' without 'solving' Pakistan. Barack Obama, too, arrived at this conclusion: the crux of his "AfPak" policy was not only to use Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan but also to highlight that the problem lay in Pakistan. Obama and Trump have shown dramatic differences in rhetoric and style, but overall, there has been significant continuity in their efforts in Afghanistan. And, broadly speaking, America's options for dealing with Pakistan are as limited as they were during the Obama



presidency, accounting for the stunning longevity of Pakistan’s devastatingly dangerous policies in Afghanistan.

The US’ first option is to continue the policy of treating Pakistan as a friend in the hope that Rawalpindi’s strategies might change in the future. Despite 16 years of unmet expectations, the policy would require the US government to tolerate Pakistan’s continued misbehaviours, while occasionally chiding Pakistan publicly when Rawalpindi crosses certain lines.

The second option is a minor tinkering with the first one, in which the US reaches the conclusion that any change in Pakistan’s behaviour is not possible, but Washington continues to maintain a working and transactional relationship with Islamabad without any illusion, since no viable alternatives are on the table.

Finally, the third option entails a substantial shift, wherein the US is fully convinced of the impossibility of any change in Pakistani policy and sets out to confront Pakistan with the prospect of an open-ended fight. If Islamabad is confronted with such an unwavering US commitment to Afghanistan, then Rawalpindi would likely conclude that this is not a fight that Pakistan could sustain without ruining itself in the process.

In a sense, President Donald Trump’s policy represents the transition phase from the second policy option to the third one. The indecisiveness of the Trump administration to shift its strategic posture from the transactionalism of the second option to the full-throttle confrontation of the third is clear in Mattis’s desire to try “one more time” to work with Pakistan before opting for more punitive measures as well as Trump’s tweet thanking Pakistan for helping secure the release of the US–Canadian hostages.

Despite frustration with Pakistan—in both the executive and legislative branches of the US government—reaching a peak, the

complexity of the Afghan situation coupled with fast-changing regional geopolitics has effectively prevented any consensus from emerging among Washington policymakers on the contours of the seemingly attractive third option. The public face of Trump's Afghan policy is not accurately reflecting a more fluid situation either inside the war zone in Afghanistan or inside the confused administration.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

The US' shift in policy towards Pakistan might not be as drastic for the Pakistani military as public statements of the Trump administration suggest, because the prospect of treating Pakistan as an enemy is such a frightening one that most American policymakers would rather avoid it than confront it with real seriousness. In current circumstances, it is likely that the US will treat Pakistan as what is colloquially called a "frenemy". However, reductions in military assistance and downgrading of Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally are still a possibility.

So far, there has been no evidence to suggest that blowback from terrorism due to Pakistan's nurturing of various Islamic terrorists has undermined the fortunes of the Pakistani military as the most powerful group in politics. After Trump's policy announcement, the Pakistani military cannot be expected to give up its treasured strategic investments in cross-border terrorism without a fight. It may once again propose some tactical cooperation to the US in countering terrorism in Afghanistan while pledging to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Their aid in the rescue of the Canadian couple is an early indication of this time-tested tactic.

The biggest hindrance to peace in Afghanistan is Pakistan viewing its relationship with Kabul through the prism of its anti-India obsession. Of all the terrible Pakistani policies, the Afghan misadventure ranks as one of the worst. Changing this dynamic requires reformulation of

Pakistan's strategic culture, whose central pillar is the military's stranglehold on Pakistan's foreign and security policies.

For the US, an Afghan policy review is also a Pakistan policy review. Therefore, dealing with Pakistan constitutes the most fundamental pillar of Trump's South Asia/Afghan strategy. The nature of Pakistan's Afghan policy has represented a massive stumbling block on the road to a cooperative ambience between Washington and Islamabad. Since Trump's speech, the top US officials have maintained a pressure on Pakistan. However, neither Tillerson nor Mattis has been forthcoming about the specifics of how Trump intends to achieve his declared objectives.


The renewed negotiations between Washington and Islamabad raise several questions: What kind of benchmarks will the Trump administration lay out for the Pakistani military on terror sanctuaries and the peace process in Afghanistan? What would be the rewards for Pakistan if it measures up fully or partially to the benchmarks set by the US? What coercive measures should Washington take against Pakistan?

Whether Trump's strategy proves a game changer for South Asia or a temporary deviation from the usual pattern of America's fatal attraction to Pakistan will depend a great deal on the political will in Washington to pressurise Pakistan to stop hosting terror sanctuaries on its soil.

This paper argues that the shift in the US' Afghanistan strategy poses policy implications for India, including the following:

- Pakistan may resort to political posturing for the benefit of domestic audiences, but it will not deliberately confront the US. As the US and Pakistan begin serious negotiations on the political future of Afghanistan, India will be part of the discussion. Therefore, Indian policymakers must leverage Trump's willingness to confront Islamabad on terrorism.

- In a recent study, noted South Asian expert Ashley Tellis has argued that routine calls for a “continuous India Pakistan dialogue” are “misguided” and “counterproductive” since the differences between New Delhi and Islamabad are fuelled by “Pakistan’s irredentism” and its military’s long-held policy of undermining India’s rise as a great power as well as seeking revenge for past Pakistani defeats.<sup>56</sup> According to him, the Pakistani military has “aspirations to be treated on par with India, despite their huge differences in capabilities, achievements and prospects.”<sup>57</sup> Many in the Trump administration seem to share Tellis’s views. India must strengthen its ties with senior US officials and coordinate its policies to stabilise Afghanistan.
- Under immense American pressure, Pakistan will offer tactical coordination on counterterrorism campaigns, intelligence sharing, and training and capacity building of the Afghan security forces. In early October, Pakistan’s army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, went to Kabul “to discuss matters of regional security and issues of common interest” with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.<sup>58</sup> India must remain vigilant on how Pakistan’s security establishment plays out its strategic moves in Afghanistan, since Pakistan’s emasculated civilian leadership is under a cloud and will merely be carrying out orders given by Rawalpindi.
- President Trump and senior US officials are all praise for India’s role in Afghanistan. The Trump administration’s anti-terror rhetoric vis-à-vis Pakistan has also been much appreciated in New Delhi. However, given Trump’s propensity to change his stance suddenly on important policy issues and Washington’s limited options for dealing with Pakistan, India should not be too dependent on American policies in Afghanistan.
- Finally, India should reassess its traditional opposition to integrating the Taliban into the Afghan power structure, since

eliminating the Taliban insurgency by military means alone does not seem possible. Some Taliban elements must be keen to open a channel of communication with India; it would be consistent with India's Afghan interests to make discreet contacts with them without conferring legitimacy on the group. It is important for India to understand the merits of a broader political approach in Afghanistan, which includes talks with the Taliban, without Pakistani interference. If the emerging Pakistan–China–Russia troika succeeds in turning the ongoing negotiations into a final settlement with the Taliban—with an impatient America hastily endorsing the deal to extricate itself from Afghanistan without Indian concerns being addressed—it will certainly affect India's interests. 

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