

Trump's Afghanistan Strategy: Implications for India

by Hemant Krishan Singh, Director General, Delhi Policy Group

"Trump's address outlining the new strategy merits wider appreciation as it carries his personal imprimatur in defining the terms of US engagement in our immediate neighbourhood."



In the midst of America's seemingly intractable political divisions and media-hyped ideological and moral contention, President Donald Trump's policy towards Afghanistan and South Asia announced on August 21, 2017 has received modest attention. But

Trump's somber address at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, outlining the new strategy merits wider appreciation as it carries his personal imprimatur in defining the terms of US engagement in India's immediate region and, indeed, the world.

After months of mixed signals and largely transactional approaches towards a host of strategic and security challenges confronting America, this is the first comprehensive national security strategy to emerge from the Trump administration, formulated after months of rigorous review and deliberation led by highly experienced cabinet professionals. This marks a significant achievement, not least as Trump himself had repeatedly questioned his national security team on various elements of the strategy which he has finally endorsed and laid out before the national audience and international community.



President Donald Trump addresses the nation from Fort Myer in Arlington, Va., on August 21, 2017 on his strategy for the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan.

[Source: The New York Times]

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

“He connected with his nativist support base by... distancing his foreign policy of “principled realism” from liberal order pursuits of the past.”

First and foremost, Trump began his remarks by addressing the concerns of his core domestic constituency and an American public fatigued with the 17-year-old war in Afghanistan. From a military setting and with the solemn demeanour of a commander-in-chief, he exhorted America to heal its divisions at home in order to be a force for peace in the world and to defend itself from enemies abroad. He connected with his nativist support base by affirming America’s unshakeable resolve to defeat terrorism, as well as by distancing his foreign policy of “principled realism” from liberal order pursuits of the past. From this realist perspective, Trump asserted that America will henceforth be guided primarily by its security interests and not by normative pretensions of nation building abroad.

they had following the US withdrawal from Iraq. This, he pointed out, was all the more so as “20 US designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world.” There was thus no real option for the US but to deepen its involvement.

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Having set that stage, Trump delivered an unambiguous and unprecedented denunciation of Pakistan for harbouring “the agents of chaos, violence and terror.” While asserting that America would “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,” Trump demanded that this must “change immediately” and Pakistan must “demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order and to peace.” In naming and shaming Pakistan, he put that “non-NATO ally” on notice for nurturing sanctuaries for cross-border terrorism, setting up the prospect of adverse and punitive consequences, in a manner and with a truculence that no previous US administration has articulated post 9/11.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump at the White House in Washington D.C. on June 26, 2017. [Source: MEA photo gallery]

Trump asserted that American strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia will change dramatically as its military plans and objectives,

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working alongside the Afghan armed forces (ANDSF), will be determined by “conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables,” creating an element of calculated ambiguity about force levels to be deployed and the period of engagement that would keep America’s enemies guessing. His pronouncement that the strategy would integrate “all instruments of American power – diplomatic, economic and military – toward a successful outcome,” was more of an axiomatic iteration than new policy. While laying out the hope that “after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of Taliban in Afghanistan,” Trump conceded that “nobody knows if or

Against this backdrop, and contrary to what he acknowledged was his own “original instinct” to withdraw from Afghanistan, Trump determined that the consequences of a sudden pullout were unacceptable as this would inevitably create a vacuum for terrorists to fill, much as

“Trump determined that the consequences of a sudden pullout were unacceptable ...”

when that will ever happen.” The search for a political solution will thus take a back seat to the more resolute pursuit of a military campaign. The American military would henceforth enjoy expanded delegation of operational authority and liberalized rules of engagement for “attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing Al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.” America would also target terrorist networks with other financial sanctions and law enforcement actions.

Afghanistan’s ruling national unity government. Apart from ending leadership squabbles at the top, the Afghan Defence and Interior ministries will have to put their house in order to empower the ANDSF in its role as the primary combatant against the Taliban.



PM Narendra Modi jointly inaugurates the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam at Herat with President Ashraf Ghani, June 4, 2016. [Source: <http://www.narendramodi.in>]

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Finally, and in an important policy shift, Trump called for the further development of the US-India strategic partnership as a critical component of this South Asia strategy. He acknowledged India’s important contributions to stability in

Afghanistan and urged India to “help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development.” Trump also made it clear that the US is committed to pursuing with India “our shared objectives for peace and security in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.” This succinct articulation of India’s role as a valued partner of the US in the context of Afghanistan breached a longstanding barrier and broke new ground.

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Trump pledged continued support for Afghanistan and its military to confront the Taliban, saying that “Afghanistan is fighting to defend and secure their country against the same

enemies who threaten us.” At the same time, he made it clear that America’s commitment was “not unlimited, and our support is not a blank cheque. The government of Afghanistan must carry their share of the military, political and economic burden.” An end to liberal moralizing related to good governance will reduce what has been a constant undercurrent of friction between the US and the Afghan government, but the latter will also come under greater pressure to curb factionalism which has undermined the cohesive and effective functioning of

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In subsequent statements, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the US National Security Adviser, has explained the new policy in the following terms: “Winning in Afghanistan is really aimed at allowing Afghanistan to be Afghanistan”; terror groups must not be allowed to control key parts of the country and population centres that could be used to mobilise resources and organise attacks that can threaten the American people, allies and partners; the Taliban may well not join talks for a political solution but the US will pursue a sound, long term, outcomes based strategy which is not time limited; and the US will look to see how its partners can do more and share more of the burden and responsibility in Afghanistan.

Predictably, there has been a lot of critical comment on Trump’s “new” strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia. Some analysts see this as “more of the same” or a minor recalibration; others have termed the policy as Trump’s path to an indefinite Afghan war. Such skepticism certainly has some justification, arising as it does from Trump’s reiteration of the long-standing but elusive American goal that “strategically applied force” will

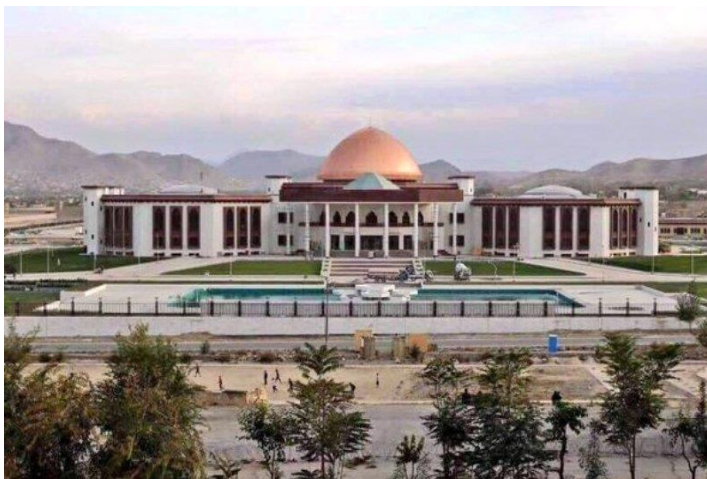
“create the conditions for a political process to achieve a lasting peace.”

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However, these presumptions must be seen in the light of several new elements in Trump’s strategy, starting with greater demands on Pakistan to end support for terror groups and the Taliban, which the Pak military and ISI harbours, trains, directs and funds since its very

inception. As Afghan leaders have repeatedly pointed out, the Taliban are not some autonomous phenomenon that can endure perennially without this Pakistani support base. Then there is a ramped up counterterrorism focus, no time line or exit strategy, no political holdback on military force, an expansion of operational authority for the US military, and no preconceived presumption of peace talks. None of these elements can provide much comfort for the sponsors or authors of terrorist acts or the brutal Taliban insurgency. For the present, it can perhaps be hoped that components of the strategy will halt the deterioration of the Afghan government’s position and check further Taliban advances.

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‘India’s symbolic gift of democracy to Afghanistan’, the new Afghan parliament building inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 25, 2015. [Source: Khaama Press]

That said, other uncertainties also abound, from Trump’s own record of policy unpredictability to several and more pressing US foreign policy priorities, Pakistan’s successful track record in getting away with repeated transgressions in the past to how or

even whether India’s objectives in Afghanistan can be aligned with US goals.

Clearly, going forward, much will depend on how this strategy is translated into specific military and diplomatic policies on the ground. But it would be a mistake for India not to

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utilise this opportunity of a major US policy change in our immediate neighbourhood to expand its contributions to stability in Afghanistan as well as India’s regional role, from South Asia to the Indo-Pacific.

This window of opportunity calls for a closer review of the implications of the new US strategy for India.

“The latitude which the Pakistani “deep state” has thus far enjoyed... has shrunk.”

In the past, India’s Af-Pak “arc of crisis” has largely remained off limits, despite an intensifying US-India strategic engagement. The US has traditionally been reticent about an Indian role in Afghanistan and accommodative towards Pakistan’s manipulation and coercive rent seeking in return for providing land and air logistical corridors to supply American troops in Afghanistan. While elements of this disconnect will persist – there continue to be voices in the US administration arguing for prioritising recognition of Pakistani interests – President Trump has now signalled clear policy shifts involving both Pakistan and India. These will at least somewhat constrain Pak behaviour and room for manoeuvre, the more so because of the possible emergence of a US-India regional nexus, greater conditionality on US military aid to Pakistan, the prospect of US military action and drone strikes in pursuit of terrorists and Taliban targets inside Pakistan, and the likelihood of targeted US sanctions against individuals and entities in Pakistan for aiding terrorists. The latitude which the Pakistani “deep state” has thus far enjoyed, enabling it to harbour terrorist groups as policy instruments for use against both Afghanistan and India, has shrunk.

There will be some discomfort in India with the conflation of Af-Pak related security issues with South

Asia, but the fact remains that targeting terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan is equally important to Afghanistan’s stability and survival as it is to India’s security interests. Concerns about Pak-sponsored cross-border terrorism are also a primary factor which frustrates India’s initiatives for broader regional cooperation in South Asia, free from the threat of terrorism. US sensitivity towards and closer coordination on India’s Af-Pak security concerns will open up more room for the India-US partnership to progress, in South Asia as well as the broader Indo-Pacific region.



The Afghan-India Friendship Dam, inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi on June 4, 2016, is seen as a sign of hope to bring economic prosperity to the Herat region. [Source: Financial Express]

“...such trends will drive home to Washington the strategic significance of the US military presence in Afghanistan ...”

There will be other repercussions as well which will challenge Indian diplomacy, including the possible intensification of an emerging Pakistan-China-Russia-Iran axis on issues related to Afghanistan, to the exclusion of both the US and India. Pakistan may be the mainstay of support for the

Taliban, but the insurgency also enjoys the backing of Iran and Russia for their own respective calculations. However, such trends will drive home to Washington the strategic significance of the US military presence in Afghanistan, which is America’s only footprint in Central Asia, and could motivate the US to coordinate its Afghanistan policies more closely with India. The problem for India with this line of thinking will be that New Delhi may also face virtual isolation in Central Asia with the exception of Afghanistan, which it must prevent; more on that later.

On its part, Pakistan stands exposed but its equities still remain particularly strong for the US, from logistical support (where there are no alternatives) to reigning in terror groups and

control over Pak nuclear weapons. China has now become an integral part of a US offset strategy for Pakistan. Reassured by the massive injection of China’s CPEC funding, Pakistani leaders like Shahbaz Sharif have already called for a rejection of US security assistance after Trump’s Afghanistan policy speech. Furthermore, the US is well aware that in any eventual political settlement with the Taliban, Pakistan will be an important actor.

“...Pakistan stands exposed but its equities still remain particularly strong for the US...”

On balance, however, these considerations may impose some limitations on policy implementation under Trump’s clearly enunciated strategy, but do not necessarily imply that Pakistan can persist with its customary bluster and brinkmanship to weather the storm. It has already been termed a client-rentier state; the damage to its reputation to also be labelled a rogue state may not be a price which Pakistan’s westward looking elites will easily concede.

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As far as India is concerned, Pakistan will no doubt seek to hold its ground on long nurtured terror assets by leveraging support from its “all weather ally” China. The US will continue to hear the refrain that existential concerns about an “Indian threat” and the unresolved dispute over Kashmir drive Pakistan’s quest for “strategic depth” in Afghanistan. However, it is by now amply clear to the world at large that India does not seek to dominate Afghanistan’s internal political space; it is Pakistan that presumes the right to determine that its deadly proxies, the Taliban, must rule in Kabul. The last time the Taliban ruled over Afghanistan, their regressive religious, social and political ideology created fertile ground for global jihadist terrorism. India will,

nonetheless, need to remain vigilant about the re-emergence of disingenuous distinctions between “good terrorists” and “bad terrorists” behind which Pakistan has sheltered in the past.

“Indian diplomacy has been at the vanguard of crafting policies towards Afghanistan ...”

Indian diplomacy has been at the vanguard of crafting policies towards Afghanistan, including India’s programmes of massive economic assistance in several sectors which has exceeded \$ 2 billion. India enjoys enormous

public goodwill among the Afghan people and leadership; thousands of Afghan students are pursuing their education in India. An expansion of India’s targeted socio-economic development and capacity building programmes which can deliver tangible benefits to the Afghan public requires priority consideration, in close consultation with the Afghan government.

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“India will not put military boots on the ground in Afghanistan, but needs to be prepared to ramp up its investment in bolstering stability in Afghanistan, including by playing a more direct political, diplomatic and security role.”

However, it should be clear to our policy makers that this component alone will not suffice. India will not put military boots on the ground, but needs to be prepared to ramp up its investment in bolstering stability in Afghanistan, including by playing a more direct political, diplomatic and security role. India will

also require to enhance its footprint in Central Asia, continue to invest in ties with Iran, and further engage Russia in collaborative efforts on regional peace and stability, especially diplomatic processes centred around Afghanistan, as well as within the SCO framework.

The challenges are daunting, but a more potent and enduring American military presence, together with India’s own diplomatic and economic initiatives, can hopefully complement each other in gradually reversing

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Afghanistan’s deteriorating situation. Whether the US will actually follow through on operationalising all elements of this new Afghan strategy remains to be seen. But President Donald Trump’s recognition of India’s important role constitutes a significant validation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s steadfast pursuit of a deeper strategic partnership with the US since he assumed office in 2014.

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, First Floor, India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003

Phone: +91 11 48202100

Website: www.delhipolicygroup.org

Email: dg@dpg.org.in; dgoffice@dpg.org.in

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