

Af-Pak Strategy: An Emerging Challenge for Pakistan's Security Paradigm

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Abstract: *The US-led coalition has been heavily involved in political, economic, and military sectors of Afghanistan for more than a decade, which is termed as one of the largest US commitments to South Asia. Af-Pak strategy under the Obama administration could not achieve the required objectives. The Trump's stance on South Asia also remained ambiguous throughout his election campaign, but it is very much clear that the present Pak-US relations mainly entrenched in post-9/11 Af-Pak issues. The US fight against terrorism in the region has remained an unfinished agenda. Taliban are again gaining ground in Afghanistan, slowly and gradually. The US, today, is not only fighting against al-Qaeda, but Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also poses a serious threat to the stability of the region. These militant organizations have developed strong foothold in Afghanistan and trying to gain grounds in border areas of Pakistan as well. The Trump administration needs Pakistan's cooperation to weed out these militants, but with new strategies. The previous tactics that the US have been applying on Pakistan, i.e., to do more rhetoric, sanctions, reduction of coalition support fund, and drone attacks, are now proved to be counterproductive. This strategy has only strained the already complicated Pak-US relations and has played an important role in intensifying prevalent anti-Americanism in various parts of Pakistan.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, Terrorism, Taliban, al-Qaeda, Af-Pak.

Introduction

The Af-Pak policy was first proposed by the US President Obama in March 2009. Af-Pak strategy was later redefined in December 2009 upon feedback, which President Obama received from his military leadership. The strategy concisely outlines the overall objective of the US towards Pakistan and Afghanistan in the region, that is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and to prevent their return to either country in the future.¹ Today, the Taliban along with Islamic State's militants in Afghanistan are a potent force and they have been assisted by political, social, and ethnic sections of the society. A decade-long war has finally proved to be a disaster, not more than a costly impasse for the US-led European allies, as the growing militancy pose a serious threat to the country in general and foreign forces in particular. Since the launch of ongoing military 'Operation Zarb-e-Azb' in June 2014, there is a sharp decline in the terrorist violence all across Pakistan, and targets are not easily accessible for militants as it used to be before 2014.²

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The 2016-US presidential elections created lot much anxiety and confusion not only in the US, but across the globe and this has been the most controversial elections in the history with regard to the US foreign policy especially in the region, where the US military is heavily engaged in terms of combat military operations. The Trump administration is in the limelight and has received particular attention as it inherited the longest ongoing foreign military campaigns in the history of this country from its predecessor President Obama.³ General John W. Nicholson, who led coalition forces in Afghanistan, has already signalled a harsher policy toward Pakistan under Trump's administration. During a session of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, General Nicholson told that ties with Pakistan would be a top most priority in his discussions with the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis and the White House, which has already given little details on its strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴

So far, President Trump is in favour of aid policy towards Pakistan, but on the other hand, he wants India to play a prominent role in the region in order to deter the threat of terrorism. President Trump has strictly opposed the ongoing activities of the ISIS in Afghanistan, but on the other hand, he has not revealed any clear strategy to defeat the Taliban and ISIS militants in border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Time and again, President Trump has been criticizing the Obama administration on social media as he is of the view that President Obama exposed his cards too early regarding military operations in Afghanistan, including the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. If, the Trump administration has any viable, convincing and different strategy to tackle with the quagmire in Afghanistan, it still remains to be seen.⁵ Surprisingly, President Trump barely highlighted Afghanistan in his election campaign.

This research addresses separate, but yet inter-related arguments regarding Afghanistan. First section looks at the challenges ahead for the Trump administration and a decision-making scenario; second section entails what choices and options are available in hand for the Trump administration; and third section offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

President Trump's Af-Pak Policy: Possible Scenario

President Trump's position on the ongoing US-led military coalition in Afghanistan, is deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan along with the increasing influence of the Islamic State as it has gained momentum and *jihadists'* attacks on government installations and foreign troops are all time high, where government does not exercise its writ. Against this backdrop, the Trump administration will have to find a viable strategy in dealing with the Taliban and *jihadists* of Islamic State. There are many issues before the Trump administration regarding South Asia that needs

serious attention. The most important question, in this regard, is how he will identify the ongoing Islamist militant movement as a terrorist movement and what will be his strategy for the negotiation process. Will he allow terrorist groups to join peace negotiation for the stability and reconciliation of Afghanistan? In this context, there is a question regarding Pakistan's role as a potential negotiator. Moreover, how will the US formulate its' relations with the National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan, which is currently known for its inability to deal with domestic security situations under the authoritarian style of the Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani. Will the Trump administration work in close collaboration with New Delhi to assign it a new powerful and asserting role in Afghanistan especially with regard to growing defence collaboration between Kabul and New Delhi? In addition to this, how will President Trump reduce the growing influence of China as an emerging regional actor in the Af-Pak region and in Kashmir as well, which have been the most outstanding issue and now the flashpoint between two regional powers, i.e., Pakistan and India in South Asia.⁶

The Trump administration is going to face serious challenges regarding terrorism, deterioration of Pakistan-India relations, Indian aggression across Line of Control (LoC), New Delhi's increasing protest against China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, and the growing influence of Moscow in the region. These are some of the issues that the Trump administration will confront within South Asia. It is also expected that the Trump administration will likely follow the same policies and strategies towards the region that are already set by his predecessor, President Obama.⁷

The Trump administration has recognized Taliban and Islamic State elements as the most potential threat to the US-led coalition interests in Afghanistan, but the decision to engage them with neighbouring Pakistan regarding peace talks and reconstruction of Afghanistan, is the most decisive and crucial one. In addition, the disillusion of any constructive role of Pakistan in case of the last attempt to engage Taliban and the Afghan government in peace talks will most likely to continue.⁸ The Trump administration seeks to explore more avenues in the search of peace. This refers to a process, which was revived in Doha, where Taliban maintains its 'political liaison office'. Being known for having not much passion and knowledge about the regional policy of South Asia, President Trump would likely to continue with the Afghan peace process and he has already emphasized bilateral negotiation between the Afghan government and Taliban. The US itself will play the role of an observer for the major developments that will take place in the region.⁹

The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is stronger than yester years. The Afghan government cannot sustain alone and it is heavily relied on the foreign

assistance particularly from the US for its military, economic and political sectors. Afghanistan would be an easy target for Taliban and ISIS militants in the absence of US-led coalition forces, and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country would only strengthen militants' position in the region.¹⁰ In contrast, President Trump might maintain Washington's interests in the region and continue to promote the current robust (offensive) mandate of the contemporary US military mission in Afghanistan.¹¹ Moreover, the new US administration like his predecessor, President Obama, would likely to rely on air power than using ground forces against Islamic State's militants and Taliban forces in border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Trump administration has already given a signal to use drone strikes as major instrument against *jihadists* and militants in order to eliminate and dismantle their networks on both sides of the Durand Line, the actual Pak-Afghan border. The Trump administration has put Pakistan in a more difficult position by increasing pressure on the Pakistan government to end their so-called support to militants and *jihadists* in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and render unconditional support to the US-led coalition forces;¹² while, ignoring New Delhi's agenda of intervention and aggression towards neighbouring states, i.e., so called surgical strikes beyond the LoC in Pakistani territory, atrocities in Indian held Kashmir, propaganda to malign the image of Pakistan at regional and international levels, etc. The Trump administration is more inclined to follow "India first policy" in the region, which they have been pursuing from time to time in order to promote their interests, and to contain China's influence in the region.

The Pakistani establishment has viewed close defence collaboration between Kabul and New Delhi with great suspicion. Likewise, India has never accepted Islamabad's influence in Afghanistan, rather created proxies in the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan to maximize its hold. Although, there is an impression in the Western world that Islamabad would not abandon its support to Taliban, but the Trump administration would never want to lose the support of Islamabad in the region, in the first place, due to two main reasons: first, Pakistan is vital to US interests in the region in order to combat terrorism; and second, the growing influence of China in the region mainly due to the CPEC, definitely persuades the Trump administration to keep smooth and steady terms with Islamabad in the long run.

In order to get desired results, the Trump administration seeks the support of the NUG, because the distance from Kabul only creates more opportunities for China and Pakistan to gain political leverage in Kabul. As a result, the Trump administration does not have much room to manoeuvre, when it comes to the current relations between his administration and the NUG.¹³ The Trump

administration has experienced new security challenges with regard to the Af-Pak region with the presence of Islamic State's militants in Afghanistan.

The Trump administration has inherited an under-resourced mess and unfinished agenda initiated by its predecessors in the form of so-called War against Terrorism in Afghanistan after assuming office. It is evident from the fact that Afghanistan remains the most troublesome country, which has not posed serious security threat to regional countries only but has invited great powers intervention in the form of financial aid, troops, and war equipment. The previous administration of President Obama failed to give a clear roadmap for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country that took place in 2014. In addition to this, it has miserably failed to prepare Afghan security forces to tackle security challenges despite pouring billions of dollars in terms of financial, humanitarian, and economic aid.

The US even after the drawdown will continue to maintain its influence in Afghanistan because of its strategic interests in this country. Al-Qaeda and now the Islamic State's presence along with the Af-Pak region has invited unending US intervention in the region. India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia have a long history of supporting a mix of Afghan central government forces, sub-state militant and *jihadi* groups. Finally, al-Qaeda and other related terrorist groups would likely view the withdrawal of US troops as a sign of triumph.¹⁴

The purpose of US surge of 2010-2012 was two-fold: first, to provide shield against devastating blow of the Taliban and other associated networks; second, to drive these militants out from main areas.¹⁵ At the same time, the basic objectives remains to train and equip the Afghanistan National Security Force (ANSF) with modern technology and to combat Taliban and other *jihadi* groups. It seems that the surge did not accomplish the required goals. Moreover, training and advising foreign security forces in a short span of time was a difficult and unattainable task to achieve.¹⁶ The ANSF has turned out to be a failure, which is unable to defend and protect national interests of the country. The War against Terrorism will most likely continue as long as donors finance the ANSF.¹⁷ Therefore, "What is clear, is that the burden of the ANSF development will fall heavily on the US and those of its allies that can and do provide effective support."¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that no other sub-region of the world have such a dangerous interaction of fundamental ideologies, conflicting interests, and regional nuclear resources.¹⁹

This analysis indicates that Afghan forces cannot do without US-led coalition continuous logistic and financial support regarding training mission. The Trump administration needs a new US strategy different from the Obama administration for every institution of Afghan society especially for the military sector. The US strategy in the region can only be effective, if it shifts attention from

setting a specific deadline for withdrawal and to provide continuous flow of aid for the reconstruction of a war-torn country's infrastructure and training of its armed forces in order to strengthen its local institutions.²⁰ It is, therefore, very much expected from the Trump administration that under his tenure, the US would weigh its choices more carefully and wisely.

Trump's Regional or Transnational Approach for Afghanistan

The US has many other strategic priorities across the globe, where it is entrenched heavily with its military. Afghanistan does not currently pose a direct security threat to the US in this context. The Trump administration seems more interested to leave the unfinished agenda in Afghanistan in the form of War against Terrorism for other regional countries to manage. In coming years, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asian States are going to play a central role in Afghanistan. In the present situation, the Trump administration wants the Afghan government to take the responsibility of managing its political, security, and economic affairs much without US and other great powers intervention.

If there is no regional consensus over how to settle the Taliban issue before US-led coalition forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a great danger of a proxy war in Afghanistan, where regional powers would try to attain maximum gain by promoting diverse ethnic or religious groups in quest of their own national interests.²¹ Such a fight would drag both India and Pakistan into the struggle for control of Afghanistan. If such like situation erupts, it is likely that other regional powers would also jump in and support their likeminded groups. It would not only be destructive for Afghanistan, but this would bring serious repercussions for regional security and prosperity. It would also lead to ethnic and sectarian ferocity across the region with proxy groups being used to attain self-vested interests along cultural and denominational identities.²² Moreover, such a regionally sponsored conflict in Afghanistan has already created a power vacuum in the aftermath of the drawdown and blocks any progress towards prosperity, economic integration, nuclear proliferation, water sharing, energy and trade.²³

The Trump administration inherited a despondent and deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which is a direct outcome of its predecessor's eight years of mismanagement and mishandling. The Obama administration eventually came up with the formula of intensifying US and NATO exertions in Afghanistan and Pakistan by increasing US troops to more than 100,000 and civilian workforces to 1,000²⁴ in order to control the deteriorating security situation. NATO-ISAF forces have also increased to 40,400 from 28,250 during this time.²⁵ The Obama administration was also given approval for military funding of Afghanistan's security forces and it increased non-military assistance. All this assistance, which was being

provided to Afghanistan on military and non-military basis, came out as a financial disaster that goes beyond many billion dollars, out of which much is believed to be lost in corruption.²⁶ The Trump administration prefers to use transnational approach in South Asia, “a transnational relationship, where you get what you pay, pressure, or threaten for.”²⁷ President Trump is likely to use all options on the table against Pakistan that include: sanctions, carrot and stick policy, cutting aid, threats, tilting to India or India first policy, use of unilateral actions in form of drone attacks, etc.

‘Un-presidential’ was one of the many labels assigned to Donald Trump throughout his election campaign. He failed to convince the world in general and the American public in particular because of very little knowledge about foreign policy matters. But, the recent results of US elections surprised everyone not just Americans but the world at large. The ‘Trump card’ is now on the table and the world wait with bated breath for the ‘Donald Doctrine’ and his approach to many challenging issues confronting South Asia, particularly with regard to his foreign policy with Pakistan.²⁸ It is to be sure that “the trend lines towards Pakistan established during the last ten years are too deeply entrenched to change over the course of the new President. There may, however, be differences in degree rather than any course corrections.”²⁹ Pakistan has already been facing immense pressure from the US administrations time and again to improve its counterterrorism policy and ban a number of militant organizations, who have been accused of playing somewhat active role in carrying out attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The US geostrategic objectives will remain the same without any fundamental and drastic changes. Pakistan will remain an important ally in the War against Terrorism in years to come. A general perception prevails in Pakistan that President Trump may receive a negative input from his intelligence agencies and policy makers in Washington D.C. about Pakistan as a distrustful ally in South Asia, which has played a double game with the Washington by securing its own strategic objectives in the region. President Trump “will likely continue with a transnational approach to bilateral engagements, and Pakistan could secure targeted military assistance in exchange for specific counterterrorism initiatives, for example, against the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). For all practical purposes, Pakistan should not expect anything new to emerge with Trump in the White House.”³⁰

The Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani wants President Trump to put more pressure on Pakistan to end its’ support to militants and *jihadists*, who carry out attacks in Afghanistan. In other words, ‘do more’ policy is going to be the course of action from Washington under the Trump administration.³¹ It is also visible from President Trump’s message on twitter about Pakistan: “Get it straight: Pakistan is not our friend. We have given billions and billions of dollars. What we get

in return is betrayal and disrespect and much worse.”³² Such twitter-statements by President Trump make things more worse and uncontrollable than to resolve the longstanding Afghan issue in a serious way. Recently, the Pakistan Army Chief has denied such allegations and asked the world to do more as Pakistan has already done a lot in this regard. Nonetheless, the Trump administration compels the Afghan government to take control of its affairs and it is much expected that the time to offer blank cheques to Afghanistan for financial and economic assistance without considering the process of transparent accountability is finally over. Under the Trump administration, President Ghani is facing pressure to eradicate corruption and to strengthen domestic institution, especially law enforcement agencies.

By early 2012, Washington started restructuring its overall security partnership with Islamabad. It became obvious, when the Secretary of Defence, Leon Panetta, during his visit to Afghanistan and India in June 2012, issued Washington’s starkest criticism by pointedly stating that “Washington was reaching the limits of [its] patience with Islamabad’s refusal to crack-down on terrorist safe havens operating in its territory.”³³ Secretary Panetta not only appreciated New Delhi’s contributions toward Afghanistan’s economic and commercial sectors in form of aid, but also expressed his full endorsement for Delhi’s initiative for providing training to Afghanistan’s armed forces and exhilarated it to continue with this training mission. He also acknowledged that New Delhi has much more to offer to Kabul than Islamabad in promoting peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan is the only country, which has paid the heaviest price being a neighbouring country of Afghanistan in the region. The ongoing war against terrorism is not only confined to Afghanistan, but entered into the border areas and today Pakistan armed forces are fighting against militants and *jihadists* in settled areas of the country. Apart from being a frontline state with the US on external front, today Pakistan is confronting with many domestic problems including sectarian conflicts, extremism, discontent in the provinces, militancy, and growing violence, which has dragged the country into social, political and economic quagmire. The Western world in general and the US in particular consider Pakistan as a ‘game spoiler’ in the region. They accuse Islamabad for protecting its own interests by giving safe asylum to many terrorists, who in turn pose a great threat to US-led coalition forces across the Durand Line. This perilous situation has given these terrorists a free hand to exploit already failing condition and they can successfully generate obnoxious propaganda on the basis of a narrative of government’s failure to provide stability and prosperity to the underprivileged people of the region.³⁴

On the other hand, the ground realities are totally different. Since Pakistan has been a key ally of Washington, it has contributed more than any other coalition

partner in the region including sacrifices of its own military personnel and civilians. Islamabad not only banned militant terrorist organizations, but it also acted in a swift manner in detaining thousands of extremists from its territory. It arrested many high-value and most-wanted al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists and handed over to US law enforcement agencies. The US is very much mindful of the fact they could not have killed and captured terrorists without the cooperation and support of Pakistani intelligence agencies. Since 9/11, Washington and Islamabad have different perceptions and strategies to combat terrorism with outstanding differences on both ends, but somehow, both unequal partners in the War against Terrorism have tried to manage their ties. This has been a difficult and complex process for both countries. Certainly, the most important and serious concern from the Pakistani military perspective has been the US untrustworthy role in the War against Terrorism and the way it has been showing its mistrust regarding Pakistan's military toils to fight terrorism.³⁵

President Obama made some conclusive changes to the Afghan policy it inherited from the Bush administration. "Most significantly, in its first year in office, it devoted to a 250 percent rise in the American force on ground (adding 51,000 troops to the 34,000 in Afghanistan when Mr. Obama took office) and urged to secure increases in non-US coalition forces."³⁶ The Obama's administration also encouraged Kabul to raise its own security forces "strong enough to prevent a takeover by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, or any other radical Islamic group; and to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda (which, of course, is not achievable in Afghanistan or Afghanistan and Pakistan alone). The third pillar of the policy that put a greater emphasis on the need for a regional approach."³⁷ However, this regional policy remains ambiguous for the Trump administration in practice as it does not clearly indicate what Trump administration actually intends to do. A strong military action to eliminate terrorists' networks that are based in border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan or a joint military, economic, and commercial collaboration between regional states and great powers in order to enhance the level of cooperation and generate economic activity.

Conclusion

The Pakistan Parliament has unanimously passed a resolution calling on the government to consider suspending supply lines to the US-led NATO mission in neighbouring Afghanistan in response to recent US accusations that the country is harbouring armed groups. "The National Assembly takes President [Donald] Trump's and General [John] Nicholson's [the top US military commander in Afghanistan] statements on Pakistan as hostile and threatening."³⁸ The resolution also urged the government to review all cooperation with the US, including the use

of air and ground supply routes by NATO troops in Afghanistan. While the US-led military alliance has developed alternative supply routes to Afghanistan, the bulk of its logistical and military supplies are still routed through Pakistan. The document also called on the government to consider the postponement of any visits by US delegations to Pakistan or by Pakistani delegations/officials to the US.

On August 21, 2017, in a speech announcing the US strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia under the new administration, Trump singled Pakistan out for particular criticism. The US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson told reporters that Washington would consider cutting aid to Pakistan, increasing the use of drone attacks within its territory and stripping the South Asian country of its status as a major non-NATO US ally. US General Nicholson also alleged that Afghan Taliban leaders were being given sanctuary in the Pakistani cities of Quetta and Peshawar. Pakistan denies that it offers sanctuary to any armed groups, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, and the government and military have rejected Trump's strategy in earlier statements. The government, in turn, has demanded that US and Afghan forces take action against Pakistani Taliban groups, it claims, are operating from Afghan territory.³⁹

Islamabad showed deep reservation over Af-Pak strategy, which considered Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas as a single zone pertaining to military operations. There are considerable differences regarding US approach of considering Pakistan and Afghanistan on the same level, when it comes to fight terrorism. Pakistan had already showed resentment regarding Obama Administration's linkage of Pakistan and Afghanistan under a single strategy. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, President Asif Ali Zardari clearly mentioned that Afghanistan and Pakistan are two different countries of South Asia with different political history and cannot be associated together in a same framework for any reason.

Pakistan is an established democracy and a country of more than 180 million people, it possesses one of the best professional military that is nuclear capable, and has an influential middle class with relatively better economy along with influential print and electronic media exercising at local, provincial, and state level. On the other hand, Afghanistan is a war-torn state with a poor democratic record, a country where drug trafficking is common with poor law and order situation and no writ of the government exists outside its capital, Kabul. The only common factor is terrorism, which is a blatant threat to their security and survival. Thus, the Government of Pakistan disapproved Af-Pak strategy. If, the US links Pakistan and Afghanistan together and it takes action within Pakistani territory to contain Taliban and al-Qaeda, then this would undermine Pak-US strategic relationship in this region. The Trump administration is more interested in looking at Af-Pak policy as a

regional strategy that requires a wide-ranging military and civilian approach, where the US can work with Pakistan and other regional countries including China, Iran and Central Asian Republics (CARs). The peace in Afghanistan cannot prevail until and unless two neighbours, Pakistan and India, resolve their outstanding issues. Pakistanis consider peace in Afghanistan is directly related to Islamabad and Delhi working out their differences, whether in relation to Kashmir or over the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan.

It is expected that the Trump administration will play a responsible role leading towards a balanced policy for Islamabad and New Delhi. If present trends persist between Islamabad and Washington in form of distrust, putting pressure to do more, blaming each other for past failures; then this will not serve any party's interests, but will bring more anarchy, political instability, and chaos to the region.

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