

Trump's Afghan Surge

Regional Diary

The much anticipated Trump administration's Afghanistan review highlighting a road map for further American engagement is finally ready. Last week's statement made by Donald Trump is his first major strategy towards South Asia.

What does the Trump review entail? What it means for Afghanistan? More importantly, from a regional perspective, what it means for South Asia as a region?

The Trump Review

Three issues are important to begin with. The first one is Trump's decision to engage with Afghanistan further, contrary to his earlier position. Early this year, he commented publicly that it was time for the US to get out of Afghanistan. The *New York Times* quoted him commenting earlier "Why are we continuing to train these Afghans who then shoot our soldiers in the back?" and on another occasion emphatically writing "Afghanistan is a complete waste. Time (for the US troops) to come home!"

Clearly, what he spoke last week outlining his new engagement in Afghanistan is a reversal of his own earlier conviction. He was courageous enough to accept in public about the change of heart on exiting from Afghanistan. He said: "My original instinct was to pull out, and historically I like following my instincts. But all my life, I've heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office."

Second important issue – is the process through which Trump arrived at his decision. It is not an individual decision to continue in Afghanistan; rather, it is an institutional decision based on Trump's discussion with the military Establishment and yielding to the latter's position. According to reports, though he has posed uncomfortable questions to the Generals on the American surge in Afghanistan, he yielded to their requests.

So the review is just not Trump's and not based on an arbitrary decision. This is a result of a well discussed process. Though the critics of Trump's review highlight that there is not much of substance in the review speech, one should agree that it is a result of a process and consultation within the administration. Obviously, a Presidential statement is likely to highlight the road map, than to explain in details with nuts and bolts of an actual action plan.

Third important issue – is the response from Afghanistan, for whom the review is meant for. The Afghan government has wholeheartedly welcomed the review; a statement by the Afghan Ambassador in the US published and available in the public domain do highlight the positive response from Afghanistan. Of course, Taliban is unhappy; what else can one expect from them?

The New American Surge in Afghanistan

Now, on specific aspects of Trump's Afghanistan review; few pointers are important while analyzing the Trump statement. First, it is an open commitment without a deadline, contrary to what Obama did. The previous President made it public that the US would exit Afghanistan in 2014. Taliban wanted to wait him out. Trump's statement does not have a similar deadline.

A country like Afghanistan cannot be rebuilt in a matter of sixteen years. Commentators repeatedly emphasise that Afghanistan is the longest American War. Given the Afghan history, can anyone do better in rebuilding a country from a scratch? Consider the Afghan judiciary for example; since the 1970s, it has undergone multiple paradigm shifts. From communist based in the 1970s and 1980s to Mujahideen in early 1990s to Taliban in late 1990s – the Afghan judicial process has witnessed numerous institutions and actors. How easy it would be for the Afghan judiciary to build its own institution?

Invariably every institution in Afghanistan faces a similar challenge. It is easy to criticize the Afghan government for not doing enough, or for not completing the nation building process. How to erect modern democratic institutions in an essentially tribal society with deep divides?

Trump should not repeat Obama's mistake. His statement is positive in this sense – for it does not have an exit deadline.

Second, Trump's Afghan review boldly talks about an American military surge in Afghanistan. In this context, it is important to note that Trump is talking about a new entry and not an exit, which Obama started as a part of his strategy. For Trump, the US “must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives. The men and women who serve our nation in combat deserve a plan for victory. They deserve the tools they need and the trust they have earned to fight and to win.”

The statement thus does not talk about an honourable exit, but rather a “honorable and enduring outcome” for the US. What does this mean? Unlike Obama, Trump means business and is not likely to run away from the Afghan situation. Taliban Beware.

Third, Trump's new surge wants to ensure that there is no vacuum in Afghanistan that would provide space for other actors. For him, “a hasty withdrawal (from Afghanistan) would create a vacuum for terrorists, including ISIS and Al Qaeda, would instantly fill just as happened before Sept. 11. And as we know, in 2011, America hastily and mistakenly withdrew from Iraq. As a result, our hard-won gains slipped back into the hands of terrorist enemies...The vacuum we created by leaving too soon gave safe haven for ISIS to spread, to grow, recruit and launch attacks. We cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq.”

One could interpret the above point as new American objective in Afghanistan. Losing the hard fought achievements in Afghanistan, according to Trump is not an option. This obviously means, the US is not

going to walk away from Afghanistan, giving space either for the Taliban or the ISIS.

From Af-Pak to Afghanistan and Pakistan

Until recently, the predominant American strategy in the region is to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan through Pakistan. The conceptualization of “Af-Pak” meant, that Pakistan has a predominant role to play in stabilizing Afghanistan and controlling the Taliban.

One could not totally fault with the Af-Pak conceptualization in post 9/11 period. The primary physical access to Afghanistan came through Pakistan. Most of the contacts (what were believed as “assets”) in fighting against the Taliban were based in Pakistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan – two countries did not share just a border – but history, people, culture etc. So, when the Af-Pak was conceptualized – it aimed at stabilizing the “Af” through “Pak”.

The US pumped in funds and aid – both in economic and military terms into Pakistan as a part of its Af-Pak strategy. However, over the years, there is a steady realization in the US that “Af” cannot be stabilized through “Pak”; rather, the latter is the primary reason for the instability in former.

Obama administration was well aware of the Pakistan conundrum in Afghanistan. The fact that the American strategy to neutralize Osama bin Laden cannot be shared with Islamabad in advance highlighted the deep suspicion in the US administration about Pakistan's role. But, he did not open up a direct fight with Pakistan on Afghanistan. Besides regular drone attacks (that too limited to the Tribal Agencies of Pakistan) and few cross-border attacks, Obama administration tried to work with Pakistan through carrots and sticks approach.

Trump's position on Pakistan is unequivocal: “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond”. The general expectation is Trump would use more of sticks and less of carrots. Will this yield the necessary result for the US in Afghanistan? Much would depend on Pakistan's likely response to the Trump strategy, which needs an independent analysis.

Finally, does the new surge open up a space for India in Afghanistan? Trump has openly welcomed an Indian role, which seems to have upset Islamabad even more. Will this increase tensions between India and Pakistan even further? Or can India find a space for itself in Afghanistan on its own, as has been the case so far? India has already invested more in Afghanistan and should be willing to expand further. This also needs a separate analysis.

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