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What Trump's Afghanistan Policy Means for India

The Trump administration seems to expect more Indian involvement in Afghanistan. Is that wise?

By Sourina Bej
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Beyond the friendly diktats and signature hugs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States on **June 25 and 26** had some overlooked signals on the future of Afghanistan policy. With the United States still mulling over its new direction, India has much to consider when it comes to President Donald Trump's Af-Pak policy.

The **joint statement** concluded during Modi's visit emphasized the need for development in Afghanistan and was appreciative of Indian efforts in this regard. The statement also announced that Washington would co-sponsor the India-Afghanistan Export, Trade and Investment Fair in September 2017. Yet Trump has also indicated such support that would require considerable participation from India in bringing what the statement called "increased stability and prosperity in Afghanistan."

Is India ready for deep security engagement in Afghanistan? Will this be required as Trump's Af-Pak policy is unveiled?

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A clearer picture will emerge once U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis puts forth the revised Af-Pak policy later in the month. But policy rhetoric to date has seen the United States fit Pakistan into its counterterrorism narrative while also highlighting the constructive role played by India in stabilizing Afghanistan. This may hint that the United States would want India to be part of the anti-terror campaign by anchoring its soldiers in Afghanistan. As Trump defines India's Afghan burden, it would be interesting to see how India takes on the regional dynamics.

In Afghanistan, India has been successful in boosting economic ties and displaying its soft power. A **Pentagon report, titled "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,"** released early in June, labelled India "as Afghanistan's most reliable regional partner." The same report took a dig against Pakistan, reminding readers of the "Afghan-oriented militant groups" that "retain freedom of action inside Pakistani territory" and are supported by "elements of the Pakistani government."

India has already upped the security ante in Afghanistan. Apart from training Afghan National Security Forces inside India, Modi has gone a step further and supplied Kabul with **eight MI 25 attack helicopters**, thus ticking off one of the demands from then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai's wish list to India during his 2013 visit. Although New Delhi has so far been reluctant to put boots on the ground, do these steps indicate a possible security involvement?

The ground for a deeper engagement in Afghanistan was laid when Trump's National Security **Adviser H.R. McMaster discussed the situation in Kabul with his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval**, a week after the U.S. military dropped the "mother of all bombs." Prior to that, Doval had made a quiet visit to the United States for a **few days in March**, during which he met the Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly and McMaster to discuss Afghanistan. Hence as the United States surges troops and adopts a hardened approach toward the Taliban, India might support the stand militarily.

First, however, India should carefully consider Trump's reading of terrorism. Like his Republican predecessors, Trump views terrorism to be a West Asian construct and believes that a tough flexing of muscle is the required prescription. This means that, should New Delhi engage in Afghanistan, India would have to weigh how this choice would impact its relations in West Asia, especially Iran and the Chabahar deal. Afghanistan has long served as U.S. base to overlook Iran, and the Pentagon report believes Iran's support to the Taliban and Haqqani Network in Afghanistan is "not expected to wane." With a deteriorating Iran-U.S. relationship, Indian officials are concerned and yet relieved at the same time as their hard-won Iran deal has not been eclipsed yet. In addition, with the current Gulf Cooperation Council crisis (the core of which is Qatar-Iran relations) it will be tricky enough for India to meander through its relationships in West Asia without adding the complication of Afghanistan.

Closer to home, a more-than-economic engagement in Afghanistan could rattle Pakistan. The United States has sent mixed signals on Pakistan policy. Prior to Modi's visit, a **bipartisan bill** was introduced in Congress to reduce ties with Pakistan. Yet U.S. moves to manage Pakistan for achieving desired ends in Afghanistan, as much as they are welcomed by India, shouldn't be seen as an inclination toward New Delhi in overall Af-Pak policy. Immediately after Modi's return, **U.S. Senator John McCain undertook a visit** to Kabul as well as Islamabad. Reiterating this strategic partnership, McCain said there could be "no peace without Pakistan's cooperation." Does this indicate a courting of Pakistan, damage control, or a balancing act while the United States defines its new policy? It's still unclear, and India should take note.

China will also watch closely. With the United States increasing its foot soldiers in Afghanistan and India persuading Washington to support its stance on the Belt and Road, China will cautiously watch how Af-Pak politics play out. The joint statement issued during Modi's visit was the first time the United States and India have together come out publicly against China's debt financing, connectivity projects, and human rights record. This irked China, and it has warned India against getting close to the United States. China's larger agenda in the region should be read accordingly. As China and Russia increase their influence in the region, it is unlikely that United States would pursue a withdrawal policy.

Until now India has pursued a balanced approach, restricting its engagement in Afghanistan only to the economic realm to avoid a backlash from Pakistan. India's policy of circumventing Pakistan and engaging in Afghanistan, thereby putting covert pressure on Pakistan, could rebound if China engages fully with Pakistan. If India looks to engage in Afghanistan with the United States, in return for a similar gesture in case of an offensive in its neighborhood then it should keep in mind that such cases will rarely be considered in the White House. India should adapt to Trump's transactional method of foreign policy but at the same time maintain an independent policy in Afghanistan.

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