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U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: Old Wine in Trump's Bottle

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ABSTRACT:

The Afghan government, along with the United States does not have what it takes to substantially win against the Taliban on the battlefield, but they do not want to lose either. So, the new U.S. strategy on Afghanistan that has come after much reviews and reassessment among Trump's inner circle of advisers is designed to avoid losing, rather than winning in Afghanistan. From a presidential candidate who believed that the U.S. should pull out immediately from Afghanistan to a president who has now owned the war publicly, President Trump has come a long way in a short time. However, it is still unclear what the new troop surge in Afghanistan is meant for, and what it sets to do, what has not been tried and tested already.

The Afghan government, along with the United States (U.S.) does not have what it takes to substantially win against the Taliban on the battlefield, but they do not want to lose either. So, the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan that has come after much reviews and reassessment among President Donald Trump's inner circle of advisers seem to be geared more towards not losing in Afghanistan, rather than winning it. Taliban's resurgence and the rise of *Daesh* in Afghanistan has seen the security situation deteriorated, and reconciliation talks with the Taliban have not gone anywhere substantial to bring a political solution. As noted in Trump's speech, reconciliation talks with the Taliban have been pushed to a low priority in the American scheme of things.

This might be reflective of the increasing traction that U.S. military generals have gained under the Trump administration- wherein, the role of the State Department has been diminishing. For instance, the office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan has been dismantled. In view of this, even if the diplomatic utility of this office were to be questioned, the Trump administration does not seem to be keen to allay the concerns that the U.S. diplomatic sinew is being severely downplayed. So, Trump's emphasis on using all elements of American power to win in Afghanistan at least, currently, cannot be taken too seriously.

What does Trump's policy statement suggest? At the foremost, nation building has become some sort of a pejorative term [1]. As the speech pointed that the U.S. was not interested in

nation-building, and was rather going to kill terrorists. This newfound attitude cannot escape the fact that the U.S. has a stake in making sure that the Afghan government does not slip further in its ability to hold territories and thereby, give better governance to the people of Afghanistan. However, it can be argued that there is nothing really new in Trump's strategy, except a realization of the limits of what the U.S. can do in Afghanistan as well as the extent to which it can impact the strategies of other regional players.

In the backdrop of America's South Asia policy, it is to note that the Trump administration's approach towards Pakistan was in the offing for some time now. Debates had been raging in the American beltway, as to how the U.S. should deal with Pakistan, a non-NATO ally in the war on terrorism, but one whose actions, particularly in counterterrorism has hardly aligned with that of the U.S. Any counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism effort is bound to face an uphill task, as long as the insurgent groups or the terrorist elements find shelters in other countries. Trump's harsh words for Pakistan were echoed even during his National Security Advisor H R McMaster's earlier visit to Pakistan [2]. In his speech on the new strategy, Trump emphatically said: *"Pakistan has also sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting"*[3].

However, the operationalization and realization of this verbal pressure on Pakistan is likely to remain challenging. The Americans till now do not have much of an alternative to the Pakistani route for the logistics supply needed in Afghanistan. Moreover, it remains to be seen how the Trump administration handles the Pakistani military stronghold over Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy which at least currently does not seem to be aligned with the U.S. vision or for that matter Kabul has for Afghanistan.

From a presidential candidate who believed that the U.S. should pull out immediately from Afghanistan to a president who has now owned the war publicly, Trump has come a long way in a short time. Unveiling his Afghanistan strategy, he said that *"the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable"* and that, as the troop surge is imminent, the Trump administration *"will not talk about numbers of troops"*[4]. Taking a gibe at Obama's *"surge and exit"* policy, he said that the strategy will be set based on ground conditions, and not timetables set in Washington.

However, it is unclear what the troop surge is meant for, and what it sets to achieve. If the U.S. is interested mainly in its counter-terrorism role, as the speech seems to suggest, then what is the troop increase meant to achieve? Trump stated, *"From now on, victory will have a clear definition. 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"*[5].If the troop increase is meant to assist the Afghan forces to fight the Taliban, to a point, where the latter is forced to come to the negotiating table, what new is it going to achieve that roughly 100, 000 forces could not achieve at one point of time?

Moreover, the speech was totally oblivious to the conditions in Afghanistan, wherein, other actors such as China, Russia, and Iran have been injecting their presence by engaging with

the Taliban in one way or the other [6]. What led such forces to come into play was the vacuum that got created by the uncertainty of the U.S. strategy compounded by the ineffectiveness of the Afghan forces to stem the tide of the Taliban. This has been further added by the *Daesh*factor that has created conditions in which these countries have been hedging their bets to secure their respective interests given the rapidly shifting politico-security scenario in Afghanistan.

Another element of Trump's speech was the potential for greater alignment with India. While applauding India as *"the world's largest democracy and a key security and economic partner of the United States,"* and appreciating *"India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan"*[7], Trump also simultaneously framed the expectations from India in terms of a quid pro quo of India's trade turnover with the U.S. [8]. This is suggestive of the fact that in the coming days, Washington and New Delhi need to do a lot more transparent talking. This is in terms of India's potential to contribute towards an economically viable, politically stable, socially inclusive Afghanistan supported by an enhanced security apparatus. In this pursuit, the trilateral talks between India, the U.S., and Afghanistan needs to be augmented in order to get a sense of what Kabul wants India to want to do in Afghanistan.

Thereby, it is prudent to take into consideration Pakistan's insecurity regarding India's role in Afghanistan and it would be ideal for India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the longer term, to develop more transparency on what India or Pakistan should do/not do in Afghanistan. However, in the current context, what India can/cannot do in Afghanistan should be determined by what Afghanistan want India to do, and not by what Pakistan does not want India to do in Afghanistan.

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