

Its earlier strategy of outright victory would now be moving towards 'with drawing with grace', neither winning nor losing, but leaving with respect, unlike the Russians.

It is compelled to battle alone, as its NATO allies have refused to participate, beyond their current role.

Pitfalls in US Strategy

The ISIS and Taliban attacks are being launched from almost all directions. The Pak-Afghan border and the Iran-Afghan border are most active. The ISIS is responsible for maximum suicide attacks. Hence induction of a few additional battalions, when over thirty percent of the territory is controlled by the Taliban, would be meaningless. It would only slow the Taliban, but not stop it. Additional drone or even air strikes, seeking to target Taliban hideouts in Afghanistan and their leadership in Pakistan would have limited impact, as they could well shift to Iran, which the US would hesitate to strike. Further, with likelihood of increased collateral damage, it could come under severe international criticism, as also push more into the Taliban fold.

The Taliban never had financial problems. Its source of funding was always through Opium and this would continue. It has suddenly come into the limelight by being courted by nations

of the region, begun receiving support, sanctuaries and weapons. It is now powerful enough to officially refuse to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government, seeking first, a withdrawal of the US. The US, though desperate to involve the Taliban in talks, cannot consider withdrawal first prior to talks.

A US alone strategy for resolving Afghanistan, without indirectly involving other stake holders may only delay the inevitable, but unlikely to work. Iran is a major player with an active border and would only enhance its support to the Taliban.

US-Iran relations are at their lowest ebb. Hence, Russia holds the key as it could contain Iranian support to the Taliban, restrict its own supply of weapons, while the US simultaneously applies economic, diplomatic and even threatens cross border strikes on Pakistan, irrespective of collateral casualties. China may provide diplomatic support, but is unlikely to directly fund and supply the Taliban for the present.

However, with sanctions imposed on Russia, officially such an action appears unlikely. Ultimately, the US would need to engage Russia, even by back channel diplomacy, provided it seeks to end the conflict on favourable terms and withdraw with grace. Russian support would be key to its strategy in

Afghanistan, an aspect which the US is wary of announcing.

Indian involvement

Despite Trump's rhetoric of Indian trade surplus with the US, it is evident, they are aware that it is only India which can deliver. Its frosty relations with China, sanctions against Russia and Iran, the only regional powerhouse from whom it can draw support is India. Indian commitment and desire to stabilize Afghanistan is also to ensure peace and security in South Asia and prevent the country from becoming a terror base for the subcontinent, including moving terrorists to Kashmir. Further, Indian diplomacy can play a constructive role in resolving the internal leadership



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crisis within Afghanistan, enhancing stability.

For India too, playing a major role in the country has its own strategic benefits. A strong Indian political and diplomatic base in Afghanistan would enhance nervousness within Pak's security circles, which can be exploited, if necessary. India could use this involvement to enhance pressure on Pak to stop support to all terror groups and not just those targeting Afghanistan. Increased partnership with the US would only strengthen Indian influence in the region. It would only be effective, if the US decides to go the whole way and not withdraw in haste.

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US'S LATEST SOUTH ASIA POLICY MAY NOT SUCCEED

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Introduction

Donald Trump finally announced his South Asian (read Afghanistan) policy. The policy had nothing new to offer, despite delays and discussions, prior to its release. Extended discussions were essential because unknowns dominated known factors, since more neighbouring nations began jumping into the Afghan cauldron. There is mention of a surge in troops, greater involvement in operations including air power as Trump stated that the aim is to fight terrorists and not nation building, as also a more aggressive approach towards Pakistan, all while seeking to enable withdrawal with grace.

The policy hoped India would contribute more towards nation building and development. This implies, the US

would concentrate on battling terrorists, while India handles development, thus enhancing India's role in the nation. There is mention that India had to be pressurized to enhance its commitment, which may not be true. India always had an interest in Afghanistan and was willing to be a partner in development, not boots on the ground.

The bottom line is the US desires to withdraw with honour and leave behind a fairly stable Afghanistan. There is a hope that by the time the US withdraws, the Taliban would have been on the negotiating table. Those behind this new strategy are military personnel, who have had service experience in Afghanistan and presently are decision makers. Afghanistan is the longest military engagement of the US, continuing since 2001.

Earlier policy failures

The US has been hesitant to mention that all its previous policies in Afghanistan have failed and this is possibly their last attempt to finding a solution, before they, akin to the Russians, withdraw in defeat. Pakistan is being blamed, basically as a cover up, for their failed policies, though Pak at one time was the key factor behind the failure of the US. It missed acting against them and now it may be too late.

They are also aware, that a withdrawal without degrading the Taliban and its allies, commencement of talks with the Taliban, could convert Afghanistan, within months, into a new Syria, much more potent and dangerous, whose main targets would be the US and its allies. India could also become a victim. Thus, the words which Trump used, "The consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable".

Historically Afghanistan has never been a nation- state

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has never been a nation-state. It has always been an amalgamation of fiefdoms, dominated by local warlords, who have ruled their respective areas by the gun. Tribal affinities and loyalties have ensured that no outsider has ever been able to control the nation-state. Its boundaries have been determined by the British and other western powers,

splitting tribes across borders, ensuring that the country remains in a permanent state of turmoil. Its rugged and difficult terrain has been the bane of occupation forces and enabled tribal lords to rule with an iron fist. Strategically, this landlocked country opens doors to Central Asia, which also landlocked, is rich in minerals, exploitation of which remains restricted. Whichever government rules Kabul, only controls the cities and roads leading to them.

Al Qaeda and Taliban

The rise of the al Qaeda and the Taliban was initially a Pakistan plan, into which jumped the US, solely to compel the erstwhile USSR to withdraw. The US provided weapons and funds, which the ISI routed to the groups. Their power grew alongside their loyalty to the Pak deep state, which provided the leadership with sanctuaries, assistance, funding and support. The same remains even today, though the Taliban and Haqqani network appear to have overcome its sole dependence on Pakistan. With the Taliban spreading its wings and power and the US creating more enemies than friends in the region, other neighbouring states have jumped into the fray, aiming to hand the US, its worst defeat since the Vietnam war.

The Taliban, presently designated as an international terror group by the security council, has been involved

in diplomatic parleys with Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. With multiple nations having strategic interests in Afghanistan, isolating the Taliban today appears to be nigh impossible. Within the Moslem world, Shia-Sunni rivalry is well known. Terror groups of one sect target the other. However, where strategic imperatives come into play, Afghanistan being one, such rivalries are ignored.

Regional powers in Afghanistan

Iran borders Herat and Farah provinces of Afghanistan. There have been claims by the Afghan government that Iranian support to the Taliban has been evident in recent strikes. Reports of Iranian soldiers being killed alongside the Taliban in these provinces has been reported. Mohamed Arif Shah Jehan, the governor of Farah province told the New York Times, "The strongest Taliban here are the Iranian Taliban". The US drone strike, which eliminated Mullah Mansoor, the previous head of the Afghan Taliban, though in Pak, but was when he was returning from Iran, possibly after an important meeting, thus linking the Afghan Taliban to Iran.

Russia and China to have stepped up their interactions with the Taliban and have openly announced it. Both have advocated that the reason for their interaction was to contain the ISIS, employing the Taliban, which they consider as the lesser of the two evils.

While, this may have some truth, as both the ISIS and Taliban are rivals in the country, however there would be a deeper sinister design.

The ISIS claims to have members from Chechnya and Russian dominated nations on Afghanistan's periphery. Hence, Russia desires their containment rather than a return to their homeland. China faces similar problems as its nationals from Xinjiang province are also deep within the ISIS. The fact that these nations, in the garb of seeking a solution to Afghanistan, are officially interacting with a group, which they have themselves declared as an international terror organization, is clearly a deeper design.

Presently, US relations are strained with both these nations. For Russia, it is also payback time for US support to the al Qaeda. For China, the US is a rival, challenging it at every step, undermining Chinese claims to the South China Sea, hence would always prefer it being involved in the quagmire which it itself created. Iran and the US are anyway sworn enemies.

Iran has its own strategic interests in Afghanistan. It would desire to have ideal relations with whoever controls Kabul, including the Taliban. It supports the present government with funds, but also supports the Taliban. It would back anyone who is willing to challenge US forces. Hence, it not only harbours the

Taliban, but also provides it with every form of support.

This international involvement in Afghanistan has grown as the US reduced its force levels, only adding to the unknowns.

Pak dilemma

Pakistan's involvement is more peculiar. It created these monsters to fight the erstwhile Soviet Union, as it has always considered Afghanistan as its strategic depth. It would never desire a hostile power to rule the country. While the Taliban was in power, its Afghan mercenaries were being sidestepped to Kashmir. The US invasion did India a favour, by stopping this movement. Pak cannot control this multi-headed hydra now. Any attempt to do so, would force them to turn direction inwards to Pak. It is already stalemated by the TTP, an offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, many others would follow suit. Claims by the US of Pak resorting to selective anti-terror drives is correct, but Pak has no choice. It must consider its survival first, before worrying about US difficulties.

With China backing Pak and its nuclear weapon security, it is certain that no nation, can ever tamper with its survival. With more anti-US nations interacting with the Taliban, it is relatively safe from US actions, except drone strikes, which would continue.

US and NATO

The US headed the NATO led UN mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Aug 2003 to Dec 14. At its peak, ISAF had over a hundred thousand soldiers involved. From Jan 15, the mission was reduced to approximately ten thousand and termed as Resolute Support, which was a training, advising and assisting mission. Since Trump's ascendancy, relations between the US and NATO have only been deteriorating.

The US Secretary of State had in earlier interactions with NATO leaders suggested enhancing force levels in Afghanistan, however received no positive response. NATO nations have refused to accept US demands for a troop surge. Thus, any change in strategy including induction of additional forces in the country would have to be undertaken by the US itself.

US strategic options

The new policy announced by the US sends a few clear intentions.

It is no longer seeking elimination of the Taliban, Haqqani network and the ISIS, which has already begun rearing its head in the country. It is only seeking to degrade them to a level which could bring them onto the bargaining table, within the constitutional framework of Afghanistan.