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US Strategy in Afghanistan: An Indian Perspective

By Tara Kartha

Synopsis

The recently announced US strategy for Afghanistan was welcomed by the Indian Government but does not address underlying Indian concerns. Indian diplomacy has to convince major strategic partners of the advantages of a US strategy that aims at “killing terrorists” in Afghanistan.

Commentary

THE ANNOUNCEMENT of the much-awaited United States strategy for Afghanistan by President Donald Trump was welcomed by India as a positive step in contributing to stability. In confronting the issue of safe havens there is much in the strategy to satisfy New Delhi.

Firstly, it reaffirms US commitment to Afghanistan at a time when the Taliban control or contest 40 per cent of the country, and Afghan forces are suffering heavy casualties. Secondly, it continues badly-needed US aid to Afghanistan, though with a cautionary caveat that there would be no “blank cheques”. There is no doubt that Afghanistan needs to urgently root out corruption and improve delivery. Thirdly, the strategy unequivocally calls upon Pakistan to end safe havens and support to terrorists “immediately”. Fourthly, and the most commented on, was the paean of praise for India, which strengthens India-US strategic bonds.

Halfway House Strategy?

Yet, there are reasons for unease in New Delhi. An increase of US troop presence by about 4000 will hardly bring serious change in the ground situation. With the president veering between his preference for pulling out altogether and those arguing for a

robust troop increase, what has been announced is a half-way commitment that will bring a half-way outcome.

A strategy that seeks to “kill terrorists” requires an overwhelming presence on the ground that will prevent terrorist movement and separate them from the population. This is the key that will open the doors to development initiatives and stabilisation.

Similarly, there is the somewhat mixed message to Pakistan. While recognising the very real costs the Pakistani Army has borne in terms of lives lost, it also sends a strong message of the limits of its own patience. President Trump unambiguously warned Pakistan that it could choose to “gain” from cooperation or “lose” from continuing to give terrorists safe havens.

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan’s National Security Committee strongly rejected what it called the “scapegoating” of Pakistan, and responded by calling for an end to safe havens in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Khwaja Asif declared that emissaries would be sent to Moscow and Beijing to seek support.

The China Factor

In the event, this seemed unnecessary. Chinese news agencies reported on 24 August 2017 that top diplomat Yang Jiechi had told Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that Pakistan’s sovereignty and “reasonable security concerns” needed to be respected. A similar statement came from Russian Presidential envoy Sergei Kabulov who insisted that Pakistan was a “key regional player”.

The US strategy to pressure Pakistan to end terrorist sanctuaries will succeed only if Beijing weighs in with some quiet pressure of its own. China may publicly warn against US attacks on Pakistan, but it has reason to fear an outflow of terrorism into Xinjiang.

It would also want to protect its investment in Pakistan from the severe tensions that would follow if the US launches strikes inside Pakistan. Russia has similar fears, but seems more taken with a zero sum game with the US in terms of spreading its influence in the region.

Indian Decision Making

A third aspect that is cause for some resentment in Indian strategic circles is the president’s reference to nuclear weapons in Indian and Pakistani hands. Clearly, the nonproliferation lobby continues to have adherents in policy circles. The so-called “existentialist” threat to Pakistan from Indian presence in Afghanistan has been touted regularly, if vaguely by well known American analysts.

Under what possible circumstances India and Pakistan would engage in a full-fledged nuclear war over Afghanistan is impossible to imagine. While it is clear that Islamabad would prefer that India has no role at all in Afghanistan, there is nothing to indicate that the two countries see the Afghan theatre as a life and death struggle of survival.

A fourth aspect is more to do with Indian decision making. The reference to India “making billions” on trade with the US unnecessarily links generous Indian aid to a “do

more” position. Prime Minister Modi has made his commitment to Afghanistan clear by increasing aid by a billion dollars in September 2016.

Indian aid is at present divided into funding small development initiatives, and several large projects like the Afghan Parliament building and the Salma dam, both of which have been inaugurated. With a view to getting both Indian objectives for more connectivity, and Afghanistan’s need to vastly increase its exports, larger aid commitments are needed towards promoting a trade corridor linking Afghanistan to Chabahar and beyond to Central Asia.

The US strategy could be construed as a “go ahead” for big-ticket projects, but whether this would include transit through Iran is quite another matter, and will be the focus of Indian diplomacy in the months ahead.

Getting It Together – Kill the Terrorists

US strategy reflects not only the divisions within the Washington establishment, but also the difficulties of a world where the US no longer reigns supreme. In aligning with the US, India has lost friends like Russia and Iran, who are being wooed assiduously by China.

Meanwhile, terrorism in the region is rising. India has recently seen the first incursion of Al Qaeda into Kashmir, with the setting up of Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind, headed by a local militant Zakir Musa. There are reports that Islamic State fighters are returning to Afghanistan and to parts of Central Asia.

India and the US clearly have common interests in ending terrorist activity in Afghanistan. The challenge for Indian leaders is to persuade Russia and Iran, among others, that a US strategy aimed at “killing terrorists” will prevent a boiling over of the Afghanistan pot that is sure to singe everyone in the vicinity. At present, it is likely to be an uphill task.

Tara Kartha was formerly Director, National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India. She contributed this to RSIS Commentary. She can be reached at kartha.tara@gmail.com.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg