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Issue Brief

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Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia: A recipe for disaster

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"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. Pakistan has much to gain from



partnering with our effort in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists. In the past, Pakistan has been a valued partner. Our militaries have worked to together against common enemies. The Pakistani people have suffered greatly from terrorism and extremism. We recognize those contributions and those sacrifices. But 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. But that will have to change. And that will change immediately. No partnership can survive a country's harboring of militants and terrorists who target US service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and to peace."¹

The onus of US failure in Afghanistan has once again fallen on Pakistan. In a much awaited Afghanistan and South Asia policy of the new Trump administration, Pakistan has been singularly singled out by President Trump as he announced the core pillars of his strategy to prosecute the US war in Afghanistan on August 21, 2017. Even before President Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia, in July 2017, Washington refused to pay \$350 million in military aid to Pakistan following the

¹ Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia

inability of the US Defence Secretary to certify that Pakistan has taken sufficient action against the Haqqani Network.²

President Trump claimed in his speech that his original instinct had been to pull out of Afghanistan, but sitting behind the desk at the Oval Office, he found it obligatory to study Afghanistan in great detail. Both that and his meetings at Camp David with his Cabinet and generals forced him to see the error of his original thinking to arrive at three fundamental conclusions:

1. That the US must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made.
2. The consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable.
3. The security threats that the US face in Afghanistan, and the broader region, are immense.

Hence, there will now be a dramatic change in the US strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia. This strategy will now be based on the following:

1. It will shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. Rather than setting out timetables, conditions on ground will be the guide.
2. The new strategy will be an integration of all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military.
3. Change the US approach in dealing with Pakistan. The US will no longer be silent on terrorist safe-havens in Pakistan for all terrorist groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond.
4. Develop strategic partnership with India.
5. Expand the authority for US armed forces to target terrorists and criminal networks creating chaos in Afghanistan.

Although the new strategy has not succumbed to some of the outrageous unorthodox approaches that were being suggested including the 'East India Company approach' with a 'Viceroy' and replacing US

² 'US withholds \$350 m of military aid from Pakistan', *Financial Times*, July 21, 2017.

troops with private contractors such as Blackwater - now Academi - President Trump will not only be looking to break the will of the terrorist organizations in the region, but as an ardent businessman will most certainly also be looking to be repaid for the billions of dollars spent on Afghanistan and Pakistan. His appetite for the economic windfall - more than \$1 trillion in untapped mineral resources in the form of copper, iron, and rare-earth metals buried in Afghan soil - has already been wetted by the CEO of American Elements, Michael Silver.

Even though President Trump may have had a crash course on the history of Afghanistan and South Asia, these lessons seems to have conveniently forgotten the frontline role played by Pakistan in the US war on terror. It was the fallout of this war that has brought the wrath of terrorist to Pakistan, and, the region. The pivotal support provided by the Pakistan to the coalition forces against the Taliban too seems to have fallen on the wayside just because the government in Afghanistan has played the underdog to President Trump, harassed by its most ardent opponents - the Haqqanis.

Also, the new strategy does not only overlook the perennial conflictual relationship between Pakistan and India, it deliberately panders to this rift in the highly polarizing comments made by President Trump praising India and chiding Pakistan. Surely, the policymakers in Washington besides brushing up his history, must have tutored Trump on the very real national security threat that Pakistan sees from its neighbor on its eastern border. It would be beyond the scope of this piece to even talk about the covert and insidious role that this neighbor now seeks to play against Pakistan as it undertakes its so-called development activities in Afghanistan. Playing one against the other will not only hurt the counter-terror initiatives, it might even inspire the government in India to take an even harder approach towards Pakistan. Such an eventuality will be most counter-productive to any peace efforts in Afghanistan, and South Asia. If anything, the new Trump strategy is a recipe for disaster rather than peace in Afghanistan.

Even as the Trump administration may be mulling over its options to deal with Pakistan including increasing drone strikes inside the country, withholding American aid or revoking its status as a major non-NATO ally, on the balance, it would be wise for President Trump to remember that it is not just American patriots and soldiers that must be honored, but also the fallen soldiers, and civilians - men women and children - in Pakistan that have laid down their lives in a war that was so forcefully imposed on them.