



US DRAWDOWN IN AFGHANISTAN AND INDIA'S REACTION

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The recent turn of events in Afghanistan and the region has caused a major stir in India. The relations between India and US are hitting its first low in many years.

For New Delhi, the recent move to reduce forces from Afghanistan by the Trump administration goes against the previously established policy as outlined in President Trump's South Asia strategy in 2017, which relied upon a "fight to win" approach aimed at killing terrorists. The policy also placed India as an important regional player in Afghanistan and wanted India to do more in assisting the war torn country. However, the Trump's decision for the reduction of troops reflects India's limited influence on US policy regardless of the rhetoric, as well as limited options and dependency on US for its presence and existence in Afghanistan.

The Trump administration announced on December 20, 2018, that US will pull out nearly half of its more than 14,000 troops in Afghanistan.¹ A cut of about 7,000 US troops in Afghanistan would likely mean the United States abandons much of its mission advising Afghan forces, with emphasis remaining on counterterrorism operations and securing a few military installations, such as Bagram Airfield.²

¹ Anwar Iqbal, "Alarm bells in India over US plan to cut troops in Afghanistan," *Dawn*, December 29, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1454229>

² Dan Lamothe, Josh Dawsey, Missy Ryan and Paul Sonne, "Trump orders major military withdrawal from Afghanistan as Mattis departs," *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-agitating-for-major-military-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-advisers-say/2018/12/20/0c35f874-04a3-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html?utm_term=.cacf8de3048f

Pakistan welcomed the move and viewed it as a significant development towards achieving peace in Afghanistan and in the region. However, across the eastern border of Pakistan, the announcement triggered speculation and anxiety about how this withdrawal would impact India.

Views and comments published by various media outlets in India view the US troops reduction as Washington's step towards a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, which will undoubtedly give an advantage to both the Taliban and Pakistan. *Times of India* is calling US troops reduction in Afghanistan a 'diplomatic victory' by Pakistan³ - a tone that clearly shows India's dislike of decreased US presence in the region. The presence of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan have been regarded as a critical and stabilizing factor by both Kabul and New Delhi. Also, Zalmay Khalilzad, US representative for Afghanistan peace talks, visited the region twice in recent months to hold talks with the Taliban, but skipped Delhi both times,⁴ which came as a surprise for India.

US has been encouraging India to play a more proactive role in Afghanistan. In this regard, the latter has remained engaged in Afghanistan, and trains Afghan military officers in India. However, it has refrained from sending its own soldiers to the war-torn country.⁵

India has committed approximately \$3 billion in assistance to Afghanistan. Indian funded projects include high schools in Kabul, scholarships for 1000 Afghan students in India, and a reconstruction financed by India of the Kabul parliament, as well as helping US achieve its strategic interest in the region and beyond. To India's surprise, President Trump mocked and belittled Indian contribution in Afghanistan, reducing it to the construction of a library and suggested the contribution was of no use to reconstruction efforts in the country.⁶ New Delhi was both irritated by the US president's "bizarre" outburst and disparaging remarks about its efforts in Afghanistan and appeared to have been suggesting that India should contribute troops to the war effort.⁷

³ Omer Farooq Khan, "Reduction of US troops diplomatic victory for Pakistan," *The Times of India*, December 23, 2018, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67208223.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁴ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Zalmay Khalilzad to brief India about talks with Taliban," *The Economic Times*, December 24, 2018, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67224672.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁵ Zeenat Saberin & Shereena Qazi, "Indians, Afghans react to Trump's 'Afghan library' dig at PM Modi," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/trump-wrong-mocking-india-modi-afghanistan-role-190105063051508.html>

⁶ Yashwant Raj, "In PM Modi-Trump call, India gets all-good signal on Afghanistan," *Hindustan Times*, January 08, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/in-pm-modi-trump-call-india-gets-all-good-signal-on-afghanistan/story-ZdnQF17mupfkMgZHykaNBO.html>

⁷ Yashwant Raj, "In PM Modi-Trump call, India gets all-good signal on Afghanistan," *Hindustan Times*, January 08, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/in-pm-modi-trump-call-india-gets-all-good-signal-on-afghanistan/story-ZdnQF17mupfkMgZHykaNBO.html>

The expected US move came days after Taliban reiterated their demand for withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from the Afghan soil in talks with Washington in the UAE.⁸ The reduction of troops from Afghanistan has stirred alarm bells in India. India believes that the consequences of lesser US troops in wake of talks with the Taliban will have far reaching consequences for India. Not only does India have four consulates across Afghanistan and an embassy in Kabul, but also a large number of ongoing development projects.

The reduction can impact directly on India's Afghanistan policy and create hindrance in its two major objectives: first, to curtail Islamabad's influence in Kabul; and second, to gain access to vast energy markets in Central Asia.⁹ India on the other hand, has heavily relied upon US support and presence in Afghanistan for maintaining security and stability. With this umbrella gone, India's policy overtures towards Afghanistan are likely to face severe challenges. Furthermore, India has not been particularly satisfied with Washington's efforts to hold reconciliation meetings with the Taliban without adequate consultations with New Delhi.¹⁰

A letter to the Pakistani Prime Minister by President Trump seeking cooperation in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table underlines the reality and importance of Pakistan for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. For all the tough talk that the Trump administration has been doing, US most certainly is not in a position to provoke or isolate Pakistan. The letter came as a surprise for New Delhi as the foremost driver of India's Afghan policy is to ensure that Pakistan does not manipulate the terms of reconciliation between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul.¹¹ Bringing Pakistan on board the peace talks would certainly have been a bitter pill for New Delhi to swallow.

The importance of Pakistan and a change of narrative in US has come as a rude shock for many policy pundits in India who previously tried to isolate Pakistan in the region, and who have for long painted it not as a solution to the Afghan problem but the problem itself. With the new changes in the air in Kabul, India now faces new challenges in Afghanistan. For New Delhi, President Trump's

⁸ Omer Farooq Khan, "Reduction of US troops diplomatic victory for Pakistan," *The Times of India*, December 23, 2018, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67208223.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁹ Harsh V Pant and Vinay Kaura, "India Faces a New Reality in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/india-faces-a-new-reality-in-afghanistan/>

¹⁰ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Zalmay Khalilzad to brief India about talks with Taliban," *The Economic Times*, December 24, 2018, [//economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67224672.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67224672.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

¹¹ Avinash Paliwal, "Time to Recalibrate India's Afghanistan Policy," *The Hindustan Business Line*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/time-to-recast-indias-afghanistan-policy/article25550071.ece>

letter underlined the painful truth of America's continued relationship with Pakistan and its importance in a peaceful Afghan endgame.