



After the inevitable exit

Posted at: 05/01/2019

India must be prepared for the potential consequences of withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan

- Despite the White House's spirited denial of reports that it has issued no orders for the pullout of U.S. troops, the course seems set for a thinning of American presence in Afghanistan.
- If anything, Mr. Trump's ill-judged remarks this week only underline his desire to leave: he suggested that regional players like Russia, India and Pakistan should be more involved in stabilising the situation, and mocked India for not doing enough.
- As a result, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, that began as revenge for the 9/11 attacks, evolved into a mission for ensuring democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan.
- In recent years, challenged by the resurgence of the Taliban, it has now become a mission mainly to ensure an honourable exit.

Shift in policy

- To begin with, it is time to recognise that the U.S.'s South Asia Strategy for Afghanistan, as announced by Mr. Trump in August 2017, has been discarded.
- Mr. Trump had defined the strategy with three features: that U.S. troops would remain involved in the country until "conditions", not a timeline, mandated their return; that the U.S. would put Pakistan on notice for its support to the Taliban and a political settlement with the Taliban would only follow "after an effective military effort"; and that the policy would hinge on further developing the strategic partnership with India
- Sixteen months later, it is easy to see that each element of the U.S.'s policy on the ground has shifted, if not been entirely reversed.
- The departure from the avowed U.S. position on an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" process has clearly ruffled feathers in Kabul.
- Putting the seal on the clear drift in the U.S. Afghanistan and South Asia policy from the past was the exit of Defence Secretary James Mattis,

author of the South Asia policy.

- Mr. Mattis had pushed most strenuously to keep India in the Afghan game by swinging a waiver for India on Chabahar and Iran oil purchases.
- It remains to be seen whether Mr. Trump will continue those waivers past May this year.
- The internal situation in Afghanistan is aggravated now by the uncertainty of the democratic process.

A pragmatic view

- For India, these developments may appear discouraging, but a more pragmatic view is necessary to deal with all possible outcomes.
- The U.S.'s eventual pullout as Afghanistan's peacekeeper is inevitable, and it would make more sense to prepare for it than to deny it will happen.
- New Delhi was caught off guard in 2010 when Mr. Obama planned the drawdown and discouraged India from a stake in projects there in an effort to placate Pakistan.
- Mr. Trump's administration has no doubt been much more welcoming of Indian investment in Afghanistan, but that itself is symptomatic of his desire to pare down "Pax Americana" in every part of the world.
- The removal or reduction of the U.S. presence from most theatres of action has created space for regional players: leaving Syria to Iran and its allies; Yemen to Saudi Arabia; Afghanistan to players like Russia, Pakistan and Iran; and Pakistan to China.
- Some other hard truths must be faced: India cannot replace Pakistan's position geographically, nor can it ever offer the U.S. or any other force what Pakistan has offered in the past, including bases and permission for U.S. forces to bomb its own territory.
- The decision to abandon the SAARC in favour of groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) may have provided some short-lived returns in "isolating Pakistan", but it has had the effect of cutting Afghanistan loose from Indian leadership of South Asia as well.
- India's best course with Afghanistan remains its own regional strategy, not becoming a part of any other country's strategy.
- Finally, it is necessary to recognise the cyclical nature of interventions in Afghanistan, which has been called the "graveyard of empires" for forcing all world powers to retreat at some point or the other.

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