



The seats around the Afghan round table

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India must shed its diplomatic diffidence as a stakeholder, even with the Taliban's presence

- Mr. Donald Trump, President of USA is frustrated with his Afghanistan policy and is desperately seeking a way out.
- To be fair, when he announced his Afghanistan policy in August 2017, he had said that his original instinct was to pull out.

Failure of the Afghan policy

- Currently, the U.S. spends \$45 billion a year in Afghanistan, including \$5 billion for Afghan security forces and \$780 million on economic assistance and balance is for U.S. forces and logistical support.
- These figures have reduced over time, as U.S. troop deployment is down to 15,000 now from 100,000 in 2010.
- However, over the last 18 years, the cumulative cost to the U.S. has been estimated at \$800 billion on U.S. deployments and \$105 billion in rebuilding Afghanistan.
- Despite expending this blood and treasure, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate.
- Mr. Trump's questioning of the usefulness of continuing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is justified.
- The 2017 policy aimed at breaking the military stalemate by expanding the U.S. presence by 5,000 troops, putting Pakistan on notice, and strengthening Afghan capabilities which has clearly failed.
- The military situation has improved in favour of the Taliban, while the Taliban and Haqqani Network sanctuaries in Pakistan remain intact.
- Afghan security forces are suffering unacceptable attrition.

Accumulating mistakes

- The reason is that over the last 18 years, the U.S. (and coalition partners) have made a series of mistakes, of omission and commission.
- The Afghan Constitution, adopted in 2004, centralised power in a U.S.-

style presidential system but lacking the institutions of legislature, judiciary and civil society, checks and balance were missing.

- Governance structures were weak as an entire generation had been lost in the anti-Soviet jihad and Taliban conflicts.
- The Iraq invasion in 2003 rapidly sucked in more and more U.S. resources as the focus shifted away from Afghanistan.
- Poppy production grew to finance the Taliban insurgency.
- The strength of the Afghan security forces was hurriedly doubled to enable them to take combat lead in 2015 but lack of training and equipment soon began to take its toll.
- The cumulative effect is that the U.S. has lost goodwill and its troop presence is a liability.
- It is hardly surprising that the U.S. is now seeking an exit.
- Since the security situation does not permit new elections, the U.S. is likely to push for a new version of the 2001 Bonn Conference to set up an interim government that can plan a Loya Jirga and an election in a year or two.
- The process would provide the window for a U.S. exit.
- Reflecting the Taliban's growing legitimacy, Russia is planning another regional conference in the Moscow format.

What India should do

- India needs to shed its diplomatic diffidence because unlike in the 1990s, India's options for engagement today are not restricted.
- What is needed is more active and coordinated diplomacy, official and non-official, so that India remains at the table as Afghanistan's preferred development partner through its transition.

The Hindu

