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Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

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U.S. strategy on Afghanistan and South Asia: Pakistan's Key Role

Patryk Kugiel

The new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia is based in large part on the continuation of policy towards the region. The most important differences under President Donald Trump are the lack of a military operation end date and criticism of cooperation with Pakistan. The key to success of the strategy is to cut off the Taliban from support on the Pakistan side of the border. Therefore, in addition to stronger international pressure on Pakistan, it is necessary to cooperate on some of that country's strategic interests, including regulation of the border with Afghanistan.

On 21 August, President Trump presented his administration's "Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia". It has several pillars: a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions on the ground; integration of all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military; a different approach to Pakistan; further development of the strategic partnership with India; and lifting restrictions on and expansion of authorization (rules of combat) for American armed forces in the field. Contrary to Trump's assertions, however, the administration's policy is mostly a continuation of strategy under prior President Barack Obama, both in goals (limited to killing terrorists and not nation-building) as well as instruments employed (like the focus on good governance within the Afghan government). The major changes are the now open-ended military mission and the much harder line on Pakistan. The extension of American engagement in Afghanistan, contrary to Trump's previous statements and personal instinct, ended the strategic uncertainty of the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul. It also sends a signal to Russia, China, and Iran that the U.S. will not leave and allow a power vacuum in the region. That could pave the way for a political settlement with the Taliban, because it shows that the group's calculation of a quick withdrawal of foreign forces is wrong. Even without an outright military victory, this revised strategy may bring about a political solution to the Afghan conflict.

Pakistan's Role. Despite recognizing the contributions and sacrifices of Pakistanis in the fight against terrorism, Trump was the first American president to so openly criticise Pakistan's role in the Afghan war. According to the president, "Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror". He observed that, "We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting", and warned that Pakistani policy "will have to change, and that will change immediately". Hence, the perception building up for years in Washington that Pakistan is part of the problem rather than part of the solution to the Afghan war has prevailed.

It was thanks to the assistance of Pakistan that the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and by 2001, Pakistan was one of only three countries that recognized their government. Although after the attacks of 11 September 2001, Pakistan joined the "global war on terror", the Taliban and other extremist groups (such as the Haqqani Network) took refuge on the Pakistani side of the border until they could begin returning to Afghanistan in 2005. The ability to replenish material and obtain financing and recruits, as well

as plan new attacks, meant that the settlement of the Afghan conflict became unachievable. Pakistan had indirect influence not only on military operations in the region but also on the peace process, torpedoing direct talks with the Taliban if they were to take place without its participation.

Pakistan's apparent ambivalence towards Afghanistan is motivated by two factors: its competition with India and desire to secure so-called "strategic depth" in Afghanistan in case of a Pakistan-India conflict. As well, there is the unregulated status of the Pakistani-Afghan border on the so-called Durand line running through Pashtun territories. Ensuring a friendly government in Kabul is rational from Pakistan's point of view. It mitigates threats to the security and survival of the state. Pakistan is also trying to use its engagement in Afghanistan to extract concessions from India regarding Kashmir.

U.S.-Pakistan Relations. The diagnosis of the reasons behind the current deadlock in Afghanistan as presented by Trump has not been accompanied by a detailed plan for how he will achieve what has eluded his predecessors. The U.S. has many of the right tools, metaphorically from sticks to carrots, to influence Pakistan. Since 2002, the country has received over \$33 billion from the U.S., including \$18.8 billion in civilian and military aid, and \$14.5 billion related to logistic support of NATO forces. The U.S. remains the largest donor of official development assistance (nearly \$800 million in 2015), the second-largest recipient of Pakistani exports (16% in 2016), and an important source of foreign investment. The Americans have already threatened halting military aid and cancelling Pakistan's status as a "major non-NATO ally". They may also exert economic pressure by holding back IMF or World Bank loans, necessary for the Pakistani economy. In the absence of anti-terrorism cooperation, U.S.-led forces may also increase the frequency of drone attacks and even special operations inside Pakistan. Inviting India to play a greater role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan can also be seen as an element of pressure on Pakistan. Finally, the U.S. may eventually recognise Pakistan as a "state sponsor of terrorism", which would result in sanctions and international isolation.

Pakistan has rejected Trump's accusations and strongly criticized the new American strategy. In reaction, it put aside consultations on Afghanistan and suspended bilateral contacts. It took until 23 October for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to visit Islamabad, but the meeting only confirmed the mistrust between the two sides on Afghanistan. The U.S. strategy has also been criticized by China, a traditional ally of Pakistan, and by Russia. These countries can provide Pakistan with key diplomatic support (e.g., by blocking UNSC resolutions), help its economy (China plans investments worth more than \$45 billion as part of its Belt and Road Initiative), and military assistance (Pakistan is the main buyer of Chinese arms). The deterioration in bilateral relations between the U.S. and Pakistan could lead to the suspension of the Pakistani supply route for forces in Afghanistan, as happened in 2011.

It seems, however, that the U.S. will not want an open dispute with a country possessing nuclear weapons or risk weakening the civil authorities and further radicalisation of Pakistani society. What's more, with the U.S. involved in the fight against the Islamic State group (IS/ISIS/ISIL) in the Middle East and given the tensions over North Korea and Iran, it will try to avoid engaging in another international crisis. Taken together, this means the strategy is limited in its ability to move Pakistan to change its attitude towards cooperation on Afghanistan and will not result in much more than harsh rhetoric unless the priorities of the Pakistani military and intelligence elite change.

Conclusions. Strengthening U.S. cooperation with Pakistan in the fight against cross-border terrorism is the most important condition, apart from improving the quality of the Afghan government, for a real improvement of the security situation in Afghanistan. Completely cutting off the Taliban and other extremist organisations from support and bases on the Pakistani side of the border would enable, if not outright military victory, a peace agreement. In another scenario, the lack of change in Pakistani policy will mean maintaining the status quo—additional NATO forces will protect the government in Kabul from falling, but will not break the deadlock in the armed struggle. Although the U.S. will not lose this war, the prolonged presence will constantly require resources and the attention of it and its allies. In the long term, this may lead to a worst-case scenario—growing war fatigue, withdrawing international troops from Afghanistan, and a Taliban return to power. This would mean success for certain Pakistani strategists but would carry the risk of a new civil war in Afghanistan, a humanitarian crisis and emigration, and full destabilisation of the country, creating more opportunity for terrorist organisations.

Therefore, the U.S.'s other partners, including the EU, should use what instruments they have, such as development aid, military cooperation, and trade, to increase pressure on Pakistan. At the same time, to improve the chances of Pakistan changing its policy, the U.S. should take Pakistan's strategic concerns more into account. For example, the U.S. can help negotiate with Afghanistan recognition of the Durand Line as an interstate border. Further, greater transparency in India's operations in Afghanistan could also ease tensions and build confidence in the region. Pakistan's international partners should convince it that zero tolerance for all terrorists is in its best interest and a condition for ensuring its stability and development.