

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan — India Must Brace for Impact

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Date: 06 August 2019

In yet another policy flip-flop that has become emblematic of the Trump Administration, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, has said that he received a directive from the President, Donald Trump, to reduce troops in Afghanistan before November 2020. That is the month and year in which the United States will go to its presidential polls. Trump has made no secret of the fact that he is keen to withdraw from Afghanistan. He committed to this withdrawal in 2016 during his election campaign itself. Only after much consultations, after getting elected in 2017, did he [decide](#) not to pull out troops immediately and to actually enhance US military presence. However, extricating America from hotspots of the world has been a major promise of his. In December 2018, he had suddenly announced a pullout from Syria. Since then, he has nuanced his position by [allowing](#) a small contingent of 200 troops to remain there. As the presidential election gets nearer, Trump, as a candidate, is likely to push for withdrawal from the Afghanistan war, which has become unpopular in the US. This, of course, has ramifications for India.

India has invested heavily in Afghanistan, both diplomatically and financially. It has supported democracy in the country, hoping to see that landlocked State achieve political stability. The construction of the Afghan Parliament building was funded by India, in a major show of symbolism. New Delhi has also invested around US\$ 3 billion in development aid to Afghanistan. According to its own statements though, this aid has largely been humanitarian in nature. According to statements of Government officials that have been extensively [reported](#) in several reputed Indian newspapers:

“This partnership is built on the specific needs and requirements worked out with the government of Afghanistan. It is aimed at the welfare of the people of Afghanistan and for a tangible improvement in the lives of its people. India seeks to build capacities and capabilities of Afghan nationals and its institutions for governance and delivery of public service, develop socio-economic infrastructure, secure lives and promote livelihood.”

While this approach may well have generated goodwill among Afghans for India, it is difficult to foresee the extent to which it could develop into tangible influence in the country, if the US withdraws military support to the Afghan government, as is looking increasingly likely. Going by President Trump's mercantilist policies, the US will, in addition to stopping its military support, gradually cease its economic support, too. In fact, US financial support to the country has already seen a [sharp decline](#) — a trend that has been ongoing ever since Trump came to power.

The progress made by Kabul since 2001 notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is that Afghanistan remains almost entirely dependent on foreign aid to sustain itself. The US withdrawal may see Afghanistan fall off the world map, causing the aid it receives from around the globe to dry up almost totally. In such a scenario, the socio-economic stability of the country would come under even greater strain than is presently the case.

Despite statements by the Taliban that it will not force its will across Afghanistan, there are many reasons to be sceptical about such pious statements of intent. The Taliban leadership has [stressed](#) that any new dispensation in Afghanistan will have to abide by Islamic rules in the country. Women's welfare, justice delivery systems and general governance will have to be according to religious scriptures. Since these rules are open to wide ranging interpretation, it is anybody's guess as to what they would be should the Taliban return to power in Kabul. Even if there is some shared power structure in Kabul, the Taliban is likely to insist on the primacy of its Islamic credentials. Economic stagnation due to the loss of foreign aid could, indeed, lead to an even more rigid socio-religious stance by the Taliban.

Like most Islamic states, a Taliban-centric government in Kabul is likely to insist on bringing its Islamic identity to the forefront of its foreign policy quite as much as it is likely to do in its domestic policy. Its relations with Pakistan, which has learnt to play this game effectively over the years, will improve, while those with India will probably deteriorate. One silver lining for New Delhi is that a Taliban-ruled Kabul will also deeply worry China and Russia, both of which have interests in the region. The Uighur trouble in Xinjiang and Islamic radicalism in Central Asia pose significant threats to Beijing and Moscow alike, even though both the powers currently believe that the US presence in their backyard is an even larger threat.

A month ago on June 25th, Mike Pompeo on his visit to Kabul, had [said](#) that the US was targeting September 1st of this year for a peace deal with the Taliban. We don't know if

the US maintains that goal. Nevertheless, it is clear that time is running out for Delhi to formulate its post-US-withdrawal policy for Afghanistan.

India needs to weigh its options carefully. Foresight in analysing and assessing how the situation in Afghanistan will evolve, and then preparing the Indian approach accordingly is essential. India was slow to react the last time Afghanistan fell into chaos. As a result, Pakistan gained the upper hand in the geopolitics of this turbulent region. This had drastic consequences for New Delhi and culminated in the humiliation the country faced during the [IC-814 hijack](#) crisis. If New Delhi wishes to avoid a repeat of that deplorable saga, it must act now, while it still has people in Kabul to vouch for it.

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