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INTRODUCTION

On August 21st President Trump unveiled the broad contours of the US Afghan and South Asian Strategy. The resolve as announced seeks to find favourable enduring outcomes of the US investments and sacrifices in Afghanistan. The US perceives that exiting Afghanistan under the current dynamics could create a power vacuum enabling transnational terror groups to usurp power. The US also accounts for its broader security concerns that necessitate an enduring stay.

The core pillars of the new ‘Afghan-South Asian’ strategy as laid out by President Trump include: a shift towards a condition based approach, utilisation of American diplomatic, economic and military capabilities to fulfil security objectives, transitioning from a military effort towards political reconciliation in Afghanistan, managing the Pakistan-US ties and lastly, developing a strategic partnership with India on shared objectives in the ‘South Asia and Indo Pacific region’.

A critical point of the new strategy involves the broad regional hyphenation. With Afghanistan at the crux; the new US commitment of an enduring stay seeks to simultaneously manage its multidimensional objectives in the broader Asia Pacific and Eurasian zones.

The contours of the Afghan policy maintain a strong essence of the past strategies, thus creating speculations of predictable outcomes. “What has essentially changed?” Remains a widely debated point of inquiry not only amongst regional players but also within the US.

The critical change lies in the broad regional hyphenation, as this also broadens the concept of security beyond the issue of terrorism. But, a murky vision for the path ahead stems from the issue that while the new the new strategy acknowledges catering to broader US objectives, it continues to discuss the means to various ends solely through the prism of the terrorism crisis in Afghanistan.

The current day Global East is a dynamic region witnessing major tectonic shifts. Core ethos of the states are dictated by their multifaceted security interests. On the parallel the broader region is also inclining towards principles of multilateralism. In a panoramic view, the paths forward to the unanimous end goal of global stability and prosperity are yet defining their convergence.

Amidst this reality, critical high level meetings-- on the tripartite US, Pakistan & Afghanistan level-- have taken place since the US policy announcement. The aim of this paper is to discuss the policy directions enunciated by each State on the Afghan
issue, understand the various perspectives and discuss the opportunities for the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan’s path forward under the light of the broader global shifts.

PAKISTAN’S VISIT TO THE US

On 19th September, PM Shahid Abbasi embarked on his US visit. He presented Pakistan at the 72nd UNGA session, discussed Pakistan at the CFR (Council on Foreign Relations) and engaged in a meeting with VP Pence. Soon after, The FM carried out meetings with the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the NSA McMaster. He also delivered talks at the USIP and South Asia Society.

PM Abbasi, during his speech at the UN reiterated the national commitment to peace and stability in Afghanistan. He highlighted Pakistan’s priceless sacrifices in the global counter terror campaign and denounced all scapegoating efforts.

He committed to a continued Pakistani effort against decimating transnational terror groups such as ISIS-K and its affiliates TTP, JuA and Al Qaeda, that are trying to find traction in Afghanistan.

He also pointed out to root causes of the indigenous Afghan crisis and discussed the adverse socio-economic impacts of prolonged wars on the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. He suggested focused operations against transnational groups and called for restraints on a continued militaristic approach against indigenous political issues. He suggested expedited political reconciliation locally and through the QCG along with expediting socioeconomic development efforts of Afghanistan; so that terror groups may stop exploiting crevices once a certain degree of political harmony and national stability emerges.

He expressed concerns over the socio-economic setbacks Pakistan faces as a result of Afghan instability. He also pointed out to the safe havens miscreants find under such instability in Afghanistan- that have been used to carry out attacks against Pakistan. He called on the Afghan Government and the Coalition to support and complement Pakistan’s ongoing efforts to strengthen border control and monitoring.

Lastly, he reminded them that while Pakistan is willing to continue supporting all feasible and reasonable solutions. It is not willing to fight the Afghan war on Pakistani
soil, nor would it endorse any approach that prolongs and intensifies the suffering of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan and other regional countries.

Echoing Pakistan’s stance at the UN, PM Abbasi elaborated the national take on Afghan situation during his CFR talks.

Discussing the issues of a complex terrain, resource limitations, the section of the border area where Afghans are yet to install their posts and the cross border movement of Afghan refugees; he explained how such crevices are often exploited by various sorts of criminals and drug lords birthed in Afghanistan. These issues add strain to Pakistan as well and often cater space to anti-Pakistan elements to perpetuate attacks.

He denounced the perception of sanctuaries on Pakistani soil, and highlighted Pakistan’s repeatedly proposed mechanism for stringent border management, expedited refugee return and effective intelligence sharing against threats.

He showed commitment towards improving bilateral ties with Afghanistan and remaining engaged with US on various levels to move the relation forward in a constructive matter.

He affirmed Pakistan’s stance on supporting the global war against terror in line with its national interests and intend to partner with the U.S. to defeat terror in the area, to find peace in Afghanistan, and provide stability to the region. He also discussed the national desire to expand Pak-US ties beyond Afghanistan and deepen a mutually beneficial economic relation.

Speaking on Pakistan’s stance on Afghanistan’s internal issues, he raised a critical point; stating that it is often forgotten that the Taliban are Afghans thus it is up to the Afghan government how they reconcile with the disenfranchised segments of the society. However, keeping in view the outcomes of several years of war and the direct adverse impact Afghan instability poses to the region he shared Pakistan’s assessment that more war is not the solution and instead serious efforts to pursue an Afghan led political settlement needs to emerge. It is also believed that the meeting between PM Abbasi and VP Pence culminated with a resolve to remain engaged and start dialogue to reach convergence on the path ahead.
FM Khawaja Asif also held talks with General McMaster and Rex Tillerson, it is perceived that the meetings concluded with resolves to remain engaged and hold talks on the Afghan issue. The State Department has not yet elaborated on outcomes of the talks and has said “We typically don't provide fulsome types of readouts, we don't do a play-by-play, a blow-by-blow of everything that happens in our private diplomatic conversations. I know our conversations with the Pakistani Government continue to be frank”

The FM also held key talks at USIP and South Asia Society, during which he reiterated Pakistan’s stance on the Afghan crisis. He also elaborated on the various intricately interlinked internal Afghan issues that pave the way for widespread instability and provide space to miscreants. He suggested a sincere regional and US effort to provide socio-economic relief to the Afghans and urged expediting a political solution to the fractious Afghan politics. He discussed the prospects of peace stemming from regional connectivity and economic growth and encouraged regional initiatives towards mutual prosperity. He discussed India’s posture in Afghanistan and brought to light some proofs that reveal hostile Indian agendas.

While speaking on Pak-US ties, he advised US to consider the gains of regional connectivity projects and work towards enhancing its soft power in the region. During the USIP talk the issue of sanctuaries was raised, to which the FM responded by denouncing the allegations and called for support to improve border management and expedite the refugee repatriation. However, a critical point raised by Dr. Moeed Yusuf at the talks, was that while the Pakistani grievances are justified and truthful, the current reality is that the US is largely convinced otherwise. So how does Pakistan intend to effectively move past this deadlock, dispel such notions and reorient its global image? These are crucial points of introspection.

AFGHANISTAN’S VISIT TO US
President Ghani welcomed the new US strategy at the UN and during his talks at the CFR recently. The critical change towards a conditions based approach, in his view has paved a path of certainty. He stated that the global struggle between forces of terror and forces of order finds its platform in Afghanistan. This issue according to him places Afghanistan and US in a binding relation. Presenting his view on Pakistan, the president believes that the new strategy has opened an opportunity for Pakistan
and Afghanistan to work together. He shared his view that without peace between the two countries, an internal political reconciliation would not suffice. Despite acknowledging the current flaws in governance and vowing to improve the role of Afghan institutions, president at certain points did incline towards unjustly placing blame on its eastern neighbor.

He stated that soon after assuming power, he realized that Pakistan and Afghanistan differ over fundamental national interests. Presenting an overview of his recent talks with Trump; President Ghani expects a possibility of comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan on regional security.

While presenting his views on Taliban, he supported an intra-Afghan dialogue along the paradigm of Hezb-I-Islami reconciliation and stressed his prerequisite of subtracting all foreign influences on Taliban.

He believes that the new US strategy conveys a strong message to the insurgents that militaristic approaches are no longer effective. In his view, a true democratic process would reveal the negligible level of support Afghan Taliban accumulates.

An interesting question was posed to the President during his talks at the CFR. He was asked that since the Taliban harnesses support through the socio economic grievances and rising civilian casualties resulting from the war how can enhanced air power and military action by the US and NATO allies resolve the core issues and end the war? The President held the Taliban and other factors responsible for the current chaos. However, this is one of the core points of introspection for the Afghan leadership. It may realistically look into analyzing the root causes of the conflict, and move towards devising peaceful strategies that truly end the tragedy.

The President also discussed his vision of regional connectivity. He envisioned deeper connectivity and energy security with Central Asia and beyond. He positioned China and India's role in Afghanistan’s economic development as equal. He discussed the scope of connecting China - Afghanistan- Central Asia and beyond. On the parallel he highlighted the significance of connecting India - Iran - Afghanistan and beyond through the Chabahar port. This is perhaps the second point of introspection for Afghanistan. In the light of genuine regional connectivity and collective prosperity, a key regional player and an integral part of regional connectivity needs to be recognized. Pakistan on its part has extended the economic olive branch to
Afghanistan. A trend for improved economic ties with Afghanistan needs to be pursued and the bilateral trust deficit needs to be overcome.

**PAKISTAN’S VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN**

On 14th September, Pakistan-Afghanistan-US meetings were held in Afghanistan. According to ISPR press release a Pakistani delegation led by the DGMO attended these meetings to discuss counter-Daesh cooperation and Pak-Afghan military cooperation.

According to the official press release, areas of mutual security interests were discussed and the three sides expressed commitment to eliminate Daesh.--- “In the Pak-Afghan Bilateral meeting, important issues linked to cross border fire and attacks, counter terrorism, coordinated actions on respective side along Pak Afghan border and detainees exchange were discussed. Both sides agreed to make progress in line with the commitments made at recent high level meetings and formulate an action plan which will contribute towards improving security along the Pak-Afghan border through enhanced cooperation.”

On the 1st of October, another critical initiative to improve bilateral ties was taken by Pakistan. The COAS visited Kabul and held a meeting with President Ghani. According to ISPR press release, “both sides agreed on the framework for working towards peace and stability. There was also a consensus on regular and focused dialogue to evolve the bilateral relation. Issues related to long term peace, cooperation against shared threats, coordination between counter terror campaigns, intelligence sharing, trade and commerce were discussed. The COAS offered Pakistan’s complete support in achieving shared security interests including training and capacity building of Afghan Security Forces.”
ARMED SERVICES SENATE HEARING ON THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

On the 3rd of October, the Armed Services Senate Committee convened a hearing on the political and security situation in Afghanistan. A range of components of the new Afghan-South Asia strategy were discussed with General Dunford and General Mattis. The summary of the core points expressed by the senators and the witnesses are discussed below.

ON THE US STRATEGY
The goal of an extended stay in Afghanistan is to ensure that South Asia cannot be used to plot transnational attacks against the US or its allies.

The conditions-based approach sets the stage for regional and Afghan national change. The new strategy, is “R4+S,” which stands for regionalize, realign, reinforce, reconcile, and sustain. The first R, regionalize, recognizes challenges exist beyond Afghanistan. The strategy adopts a geographic framework with a holistic, comprehensive view. India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China were considered at the outset rather than focusing only on Afghanistan and then introducing external variables late in the strategic design.

The military objectives for this new strategy are to: 1. defeat ISIS and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and ensure that other terrorist groups are unable to launch attacks against the US or its allies. 2. Develop Afghan forces. 3. Support President Ghani's effort to secure key population and economic centres.

The aggressive action and use of airpower is to attain tactical victories, that would ultimately lead to reconciliation.

However, the development of the peace process depends on the Afghans, the United States on its part intends to provide the Afghan Government and the Afghan Security Forces the support they need to bring an end to the war.
ON PAKISTAN
The prime concerns that were raised by the senators, regarding Pakistan- were related to the issue of alleged safe havens.

According to General Mattis, the US is working with the international community, NATO, to ensure a ‘going in’ with a unified position vis-a-vis Afghanistan. Adding to that he said will be a very specific number of things that US deals with Pakistan on, and those will be balanced with the appropriate levels of firmness, as the US sets a new relationship with Pakistan.

He also noted that few countries have lost as many troops fighting terrorists as Pakistan. He suggested that by working with the regional allies and partners, and working with international partners, there is a way to bring a ‘whole-of-government’ approach to this to deal firmly with the issues to try to move it back into a positive direction between the NATO allies and Pakistan.

According to the generals, an effective bilateral relationship is required between Afghanistan and Pakistan to manage the border area. They were encouraged, with General Bajwa’s visit to Afghanistan. According to the generals, he had positive meetings with the Afghan leadership. The US leadership was also engaged in those meetings. They believe that there is a commitment now to address issues and improve coordination along the border area.

ON TALIBAN
Admitting that the US has faced a difficult 16 years’ period in Afghanistan the generals stated that they have managed to blunt the terrorists’ offensive moves over the years.

NATO strikes in support of the improving Afghan Security Forces, has created disarray among various enemy groups in Afghanistan, have caused the Taliban to expend resources, constrain their movements, and limit their ability to conduct major offensives.

The South Asia strategy reinforces to the Taliban that the only path to peace and political legitimacy is through a negotiated settlement. A political settlement in Afghanistan is only possible if the Taliban rejects support or conduct that classifies as terrorism.
Some senators remained sceptical as to what would compel the Taliban this time around to enter negotiations. To which, General Dunford explained that for many years, there was a decidedly short-term view. And one issue that was really evident was hedging behaviour by the Afghan people, by the Taliban, by regional actors, because there was always a sense that the United States was going to pull out soon. The Taliban also fed that message to their fighters, and that is how they motivated their people year after year. But, the conditions-based approach has changed that. According to him, they have already started to see this in the intelligence, the Taliban no longer have a short-term horizon to motivate their people.

Another interesting view shared by General Dunford was on the new approach towards reconciliation. He stated that the framework, to date, has always been the idea to bring in the entire organization, not peel off smaller units. However, President Ghani has taken a different approach to the Taliban, and success in peeling off some groups has already been witnessed.

According to General Mattis’s view on bringing Taliban to negotiate, he said that the Taliban are under increasing pressure and due to the loss of some of their leadership, has become increasingly fractious. Which in some ways is good, but politically, it makes it more problematic to try to find who actually speaks for the Taliban.

ROLE OF REGIONAL PLAYERS
At the start of the hearing, the generals expressed their concerns regarding Russia and China. General Mattis described the scope of the new strategy as keyed to various regional factors simultaneously.

Elaborating on the US concerns regarding China, he hoped for cooperation but also to strategically confront them if US interests are at risk. He also concurred with Senator Peters concerns regarding China’s Eurasian economic initiatives.

While speaking exclusively on China’s role in Afghanistan, he envisioned key areas for cooperation in terms of counterterrorism.

General Dunford also agreed with General Mattis’s view on US-China counterterrorism cooperation in Afghanistan. He also stated that the Afghan
Government welcomes Chinese support. He viewed Chinese support as crucial in terms of development funds adding that the US is not going to be in a position to provide those funds by itself.

Speaking on India’s role in Afghanistan, General Mattis stated that the Afghan government welcomed India’s development support. Recalling his meeting with Indian leadership he stated that they are committed to continuing and even broadening their development support and their support of the Afghan defence forces in terms of repair of their equipment, training their officers and NCOs in their Indian military schools, and training the medical doctors for the Afghan Army. He also said that during his visit, ways to expand US-India collaboration for long-term regional stability and security were also discussed.
CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the recent meetings suggest likelihood of a positive trajectory in the trilateral ties. So far, there appears to be renewed consensus on the war against terror efforts and effective border management. However, an examination of the policy outlines offered by the three states highlights some critical divergences. There is a need for continued trilateral engagement on various levels and a need to clearly address various concerns and create relevant solutions accordingly.

The US is no longer dealing with the sole aspect of terrorism originating from Afghanistan. Its regional policy takes into consideration a broader perspective of security and stability. Pakistan, naturally does not seek to undermine the progress of any state. Therefore, it is imperative to vigilantly assess the areas of cooperation that open up between the bigger powers. Pakistan also needs to proactively look towards expanding its ties with the regional players in multiple areas.

The connectivity and development efforts need to be expedited and lucrative frameworks to attract regional players could be designed.

The PM at the CFR proposed an expansion of Pak-US ties, beyond the prism of counter-terrorism. Such an expansion is necessary. It is imperative to view the new US strategy from two distinct prisms. One of counter terror, and the second of US strategic interests. Pakistan and US could address concerns stemming from each prism in their true light and work towards relevant convergence. It is crucial to ensure that the prospects of cooperation, development and mutual economic prosperity between US and other key regional players are only expanded via Pakistan’s terrain.

The US now looks towards the Afghan Government to take charge of governance and other socio-ethnic contentions. The Afghan leadership must own up to the internal issues instead of unjustly displacing blame. Keeping in view, the internal Afghan complexities, it would require immense perseverance from President Ghani’s end to grow the recent positive Pak-Afghan developments. The COAS during his visit to Kabul discussed the scope of enhancing security ties, those initiatives could vastly improve the bilateral ties.

Furthermore, Pakistan and Afghanistan serve as an integral piece for regional connectivity and prosperity. Afghanistan needs to be convinced to act in its own long term national interests. Pakistan could push towards creating integrative economic
frameworks with Afghanistan through CPEC along with development support from China and US.

Lastly, the new US strategy envisions the initial military approach as a US effort and describes the conclusive reconciliation strategy as an Afghan government responsibility. However, several voices are of the view that this prolonged military approach has entrenched the chaos, to a point where the insurgency may be lost in translation and is possibly finding traction due to various other socio-economic reasons. This poses a regional threat. Hence, a regional consensus on the Afghan issue supports a political solution. The initiatives to revive the QCG talks is a positive start.

Furthermore, one can no longer say with certainty what propels someone to join a movement, an enhanced military offense thus shuts space for rehabilitation; instead inclines towards becoming a matter of human rights violation and increases the chances to keep the war loop alive. General Mattis himself recently pointed out the concern of losing contacts to reconcile with in the ranks of Taliban. The dangers of such a possibility already finds its parallel in Kashmir.

The new US strategy discusses the scope of an enduring stay. It also encapsulates interests beyond counter terrorism. In a sense, subtracting the ‘please’ and the ‘thank you’, this is a superpowers request to stay. Therefore, the US needs to take appropriate steps as opposed to opting for an isolated path in the region. Pakistan on its part, needs to incentivize on its own significance and expand its cooperation space with the US and Afghanistan, and other regional players.

The visits by high level US delegations to Pakistan and generally positive discussions are a good sign. The QCG meeting being held in Muscat is also a welcome development.

Somewhat troubling are reports of IS finding a foothold in Afghanistan’s ungoverned spaces and their linkages with the Islamic State Khorasan and other groups. This can have spill over into Pakistan. Pakistan’s border management and security arrangements are important in this context. Afghanistan resolving issues with Afghan Taliban and Pakistan offers the best chance of defeating such elements.