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## Afghanistan: Imperatives for United States Permanent Forward Military Presence

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Contemporaneous and unfolding geopolitical dynamics in South and South West Asia generated by the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral interventionist stances on Afghanistan dictate strong imperatives for establishment of US Permanent Forward Military Presence in Afghanistan.

The US President would be well aware that if US-backed and supported Iraqi Forces could break the back of the ISIS and clearing their strongholds, then there is no earthly reason why the Afghan Army Forces with similar US-backing and US aerial support cannot unshackle Taliban-controlled areas within Afghanistan. The problem is of military neutralisation of Taliban and other groups' safe havens in Pakistan territory bordering Afghanistan. Pakistan safe havens of the Taliban and Haqqani brothers' hideouts within Pakistan must be liquidated by US military actions in tandem with stability operations within Pakistan.

Pakistan Army's disruptive involvement in Afghanistan is the challenge which the United States has shirked for seventeen years in addressing and neutralising. Pakistan-apologists in United States have mistakenly pleaded that Afghanistan's stability cannot be secured without Pakistani help. Even if arguably true what prevents the United States to forcefully and substantially twist Pakistan Army into compliance with US security interest in Afghanistan. Pakistan Army is not a part of the solution but the major problem and challenge itself.

The United States military involvement in Afghanistan for nearly seventeen years now has been the longest in American history. US President Trump's latest directives on US Afghanistan strategy is a most welcome change of gears. The United States intentions in 2017 on Afghanistan are now clear in that there are no timelines for graduated withdrawals but with a new purpose in place to create conditions in Afghanistan in that it is secured against terrorist attacks by the Taliban and other Pakistan Army associates from safe havens in Pakistan.

President Trump has also signalled clearly that the United States will prevent nuclear weapons/materials falling into hands of such terrorist groups operating from Pakistani safe havens and which could be used against the United States or against US Allies and friends.

My SAAG Papers on Afghanistan of over a decade and a half have repeatedly emphasised that US Forces Commanders and US Forces were not to be blamed for lack of American success in Afghanistan. They were fettered by “political micro-management from Washington D,C”. This arose from a misplaced US respect for sensitivities of the Pakistan Army generals who were double-timing the United States, particularly General Musharraf as Pakistan President and Army Chief. Mercifully that phase seems to be over now. It is gratifying to note that President Trump in his address highlighted in the very same words that there would be no more of political micromanagement from Washington D.C. and that US Forces Commanders would have full independence in conduct of military operations.

President Trump issued a warning to Pakistan on this account when in his recent address he stated that: “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens. Pakistan has much to gain by partnering with our efforts in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbour terrorists”. President Trump must now demonstrably enforce this warning.

In my assessment of watching Afghanistan events for two decades plus, it is my conclusion that Pakistan is not overly worried about such American warnings and that Pakistan Army generals have a compulsive obsession to be virtually the ‘colonial masters’ of Afghanistan. With Pakistan having jumped into the Chinese bed and the concretising of the China-Pakistan Axis, Pakistan has no fears of any American reprisals arising from its terrorism interventions in Afghanistan. With Russia also lining up with the China-Pakistan Axis the Trilateral so arising should be a serious geopolitical concern for the United States.

In essence the picture obtaining in 2017 is that the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral wants to muscle into Afghanistan and prompt an American exit from Afghanistan. What logically follows thereafter is an American exit from South West Asia. The moot question that emerges in the wake of the foregoing is that whether the United States stature as a Superpower could retain this exalted status by “abdicating” from the critical regions of South and South West Asia?

And if the above materialises what would also be at stake is United States global predominance and also the unravelling of its domination of the Asia Pacific. With the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral embedded in Pakistan and Afghanistan coupled with their domination of Central Asia, the United States might as well retreat behind the Oceans to Continental United States. Would the United States opt for such strategic diminution and isolation?

The eventuality outlined above if it materialises arises definitely from the United States flip-flop on its national security interests and stakes in Afghanistan and its critical positioning in the American global strategic calculus. United States Afghanistan strategy so far can best be described as transactional, reactive rather than proactive, ambiguity in American long-range strategic intentions, and US Military Commanders in Afghanistan being stymied by intense “political micro-management from Washington D.C.

In 2017, while President Trump moves away from a strategy of time-lines to a strategy dwelling on conditions on the ground, the same will not suffice to convince the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral to lay -off from their strategy of political and military interventions to destabilise Afghanistan and make American presence there untenable. The Trilateral is convinced that the United States is not committed to a long-haul presence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan to be made secure and stable to facilitate its emergence as a moderate democratic Islamic Republic embracing modernity would require a long spell of peace and stability free of terrorist and suicide bombings from Islamic Jihadis ensconced in safe havens in Pakistan. This cannot be achieved by incremental additions and subtractions of US Forces from Afghanistan based on US readings of the ground situation. What is required and expected of the United States is to provide “Existential Deterrence” by a “US Permanent Forward Military Presence” in Afghanistan on the lines of US Forces permanently stationed in Japan and South Korea. In both the latter cases, the US Forward Military Presence of about 30,000-49,000 US Troops has ensured regional peace and stability first against the Soviet Threat and now against the China Threat.

In Afghanistan, Pakistan’s diabolical strategy to destabilise Afghanistan is being facilitated by the China-Russia factor emboldening Pakistan to defy American warnings not to provide safe havens to the Taliban and Haqqani brothers to attack not only Afghan Force but also US Forces and so also nations like Indian Mission in Kabul. Regretfully, United States has not launched any strong and decisive military reprisals against Pakistani infrastructure supporting disruptive attacks on Afghanistan.

The United States is therefore faced with the inescapable strategic imperative of establishing “US Permanent Forward Military Presence in Afghanistan”. It is my firm assessment and reflected in my earlier writings on US involvement in Afghanistan is that a US Permanent Forward Military Presence in Afghanistan is a pressing imperative not only for the stability and security of Afghanistan but also in the larger interests of US global National Security interests with particular reference to US embedment in South and South West Asia.

The United States has to recognise from one glance at the map that the United States has no Permanent Forward Military Presence between Europe and Japan and South Korea. The United States also cannot forget recent history where American distractions in the Middle East have created a strategic void in South East Asia allowing China to muscle into that region.

A US Permanent Forward Military Presence in Afghanistan therefore on the lines of US Forward Presence in Japan and Korea would

provide multiple strategic advantages to the United States as follows: (1) Strong deterrence in position in Afghanistan against Pakistan as the habitual serial offender disrupting Afghan peace and security. (2) Pre-empt Afghanistan being once again turning into an Islamic Jihad Factory against the United States and the region with the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS establishing them firmly on Afghan territory, (3) Provide the United States a military presence in the South West Asia region with options to influence events in Central Asia, South West Asia including The Gulf and of course checkmating Pakistan's strategic and military delinquencies. (4) Impede China militarily exploiting the China Pakistan Economic Corridor as a contributory factor in Chinese Navy presence in Gwadar and dominating North Arabian Sea approaches to Straits of Hormuz.

Afghanistan as a land-locked country will present sizeable logistics challenges to the United States in sustaining a US Permanent Forward Military Presence with Pakistan in an adversarial posture against the United States and not permitting traditional logistics route traversing through Pakistan. But the United States has many other options to offset this limitation by the use of Iranian access routes —something that India is using. As a last option, the United States has the use of the military option against Pakistan to bring it to heel. Pakistan-apologists in the United States have overplayed this limitation to persuade successive US Administrations from using this option

Finally concluding this analysis it needs to be stressed that the United States having employed all possible political and military options in Afghanistan without substantial success chiefly because of a lack of a long-haul commitment in Afghanistan is left with no other option in 2017 but to reverse gears and establish a US Permanent Forward Military Presence in Afghanistan as the United States Western Outpost supplementing its Forward Military Outposts in Japan and South Korea. The strategic and military advantages that will so accrue to the United States are immeasurable.

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