

Afghanistan, India, and Donald Trump

What's the news?

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- Donald Trump will take over as the 45th President of the USA on Jan 20 next year, at a time when the U.S. remains engaged in the longest war in its history — the war in Afghanistan. He will be the third President to deal with the war launched in 2001.

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- Even though 'Operation Enduring Freedom' ended in 2014 implying an end to formal combat operations, the U.S. still maintains troops under 'Operation Resolute Support'.

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What are the gains and losses?

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- The U.S. alone has spent more than \$800 billion in Afghanistan, of which \$115 billion has been spent on reconstruction.

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- The ISAF suffered 3,500 fatal casualties, with the U.S. bearing 2400 lives. The Afghan civilian and security forces casualties are estimated at 31,000 and 30000 respectively.

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- At the NATO summit in Warsaw, it was agreed to maintain the international troop presence till 2020 while providing annual support of \$4.5 billion for the Afghan security forces.

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- Some progress has been registered. Life expectancy and Literacy rate have both gone up. The number of children in school is now more than 8 million (from 9 lakhs). But, this progress can be sustained only if peace can be restored.

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What are the different political approaches?

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- Former president of Afghanistan, [Mr. Karzai](#) referred to India “as an old friend” and Pakistan as “a brother and conjoined twin”. It really does capture Pakistan’s critical role.

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- Eventually, he became exasperated with Pakistan’s rebuffs and tried, unsuccessfully, to open up his own channels for dialogue with Taliban.

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- [Mr. Ghani](#) went a step further. He tacitly accepted Pakistan’s demand that Afghanistan diminish the salience of its relationship with India, if Pakistan would play a positive role to ensure political reconciliation.

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- However, as insurgency grew, he publicly blamed Pakistan of sending “a message of war” when he had held out a hand of peace.

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- In their own fashion, both Mr. Bush and Mr. Obama saw the Pakistan problem but were content to manage the situation rather than push for a solution.

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Did Pakistan overreach?

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- What [Pakistan has been seeking is to exercise a veto over Kabul’s relations with Delhi](#), which the Afghans are unwilling to concede.

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- Pakistan’s policies towards both India and Afghanistan are determined primarily by the Army which sees India as an existential threat.

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- Since relations with India are unlikely to normalise in the foreseeable future, the only way out for Pakistan to play a constructive role in Afghanistan is to accept the idea of Afghan sovereignty and autonomy and refrain from making it a zone of India-Pakistan rivalry.

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- Unless Pakistan changes its attitude, political reconciliation in Afghanistan will remain unlikely.

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What about Taliban's role?

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- The challenge for Kabul is that it has to engage in multiple reconciliation processes — with the Taliban and with the Pakistani army.

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- The hardline Taliban represented by the Haqqani network is determined to continue the fight militarily.

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- However, even the more moderate who are willing to talk demand the exit of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. Not only could this bring about a collapse of the fragile coalition but it would also reduce the international financial support.

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- [Power sharing can be worked out](#), but no government in Kabul can accept this Taliban redline.

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What is the "India factor"?

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- India has had the [most effective economic cooperation programme](#), having spent more than \$2 billion and committed another billion dollars earlier this year. Indians have also lost lives in deliberate but this has not diminished the Indian role.

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- It has only cemented Afghan-Indian relations which are now developing a military dimension. Never again will India be forced to close down its embassy in Kabul as it happened during the Taliban regime.

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Concluding remarks

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- When Donald Trump takes charge, he will find that he has little choice in the matter. A complete withdrawal is out of question.

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- His challenge will be to change the calculus of the Pakistani establishment,

increase capabilities of the Afghan security forces, and, in 2019, support an election in Afghanistan that brings about a more cohesive government.

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- In all this, he will find the Indian government to be a reliable and trusted partner.

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