

The Afghan Checker Board

What is the issue?

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- Trump administration's Afghan policy spelt out a clear disregard for Pakistan and also stressed the need to exterminate Taliban.

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- But over the recently, several envisioned provisions in that policy document seem to have been compromised completely.

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What is the status of Trump's Afghan policy?

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- **Vision** - Trump's Afghan policy document stated that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan was primarily focused to eliminate terrorism and establish peace.

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- Further, it added that U.S. had little interest to stay put for long to ensure the rebuilding of Afghanistan or controlling it for geo-political leverage.

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- The policy also had viewed Pakistan negatively for its tacit support to terrorist groups and contrasted it with India's constructive role in Afghanistan.

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- **Reality** - With just about 6 months having passed since the policy document was released, much seems to have diverged from the stated vision.

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- While Trump seemed determined to finish off the Taliban back then, he currently is opening up to the idea of negotiating a settlement with them.

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- Also, in his urge to vacate forces from Afghanistan as soon as possible, he might even seal a deal with the Taliban soon, which is a risky proportion.

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- Notably, if such a deal were to aid Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, it would favour Pakistan and negatively affect India's option in the region.

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What is the present status of Taliban?

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- **Status** - Taliban ranks have swelled across the territory of Afghanistan since the "North Atlantic Treaty Organisation" (NATO) pulled out in 2014.
- U.S. currently maintains a small force on its own in Afghanistan (15,000 personnel), which is primarily to handhold Afghan troops to build capabilities.
- The increasing clout of Taliban and its territorial expansion is proving to be a clear setback to both the Afghanistan government and the U.S.
- **Indicator** - Taliban relies on illegal drug trade to sustain its finances, and the estimate of opium output from Afghanistan is indicative of Taliban's clout.
- In this context, "Afghanistan Opium Survey" indicates that there has been an 87% increase in opium output in 2017 from the 2016 levels.
- Significantly, area under "Opium Poppy Cultivation" has also increased over 63% between 2016 and 2017 and currently stands at 3.3 lakh hectares.
- **Diplomacy** - Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had proposed peace with Taliban and even proposed the release of Taliban affiliated prisoners.
- Further, he vouched to recognise Taliban as a legitimate political group with whom his government was ready to hold talks with.
- These political positions are a clear mellow down from their previously held designation as terrorists, who need to be eliminated.
- These advances are indicative of the shaky ground on which the Afghani political landscape is balancing itself on.

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What are the implications for India?

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- The outcomes of any deal with the Taliban will keenly watched in the neighbourhood as that would change Afghanistan's political dynamics.
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- If the demand for complete withdrawal of the foreign troops is granted, it would easily enable the re-establishment of Taliban administration.
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- The resurgence of Taliban would work to Pakistan's favour and would considerably limit India's strategic options in the region.
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- This would aid the reversal of the gains that India has made over the years in Afghanistan (at great costs), to secure its security situation.
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- More significantly, presently the U.S. already creating major hurdles in India's outreach to Afghanistan through travel networks in Iran.
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Source: The Hindu

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