Donald Trump's flawed South Asia policy

FROM A BYSTANDER

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DONALD Trump on August 21, 2017, by laying out America's path forward for Afghanistan and South Asia, has re-entered the new Great Game—reminiscent of the 19th century rivalry between Britain and Russia.

Commander-in-Chief Trump arrived at three fundamental conclusions about America's core interests in Afghanistan. *First*, he wants to have an honourable and enduring outcome—i.e. win the war. *Second*, he reversed his earlier position to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. US troops will remain based on conditions on the ground and as long as necessary. *Third*, Trump accused Pakistan of giving safe haven to terrorists. He warned Pakistan that its partnership with the US cannot survive if Pakistan continues to harbour terrorists. He declared America was developing its strategic partnership further with India and wants Delhi to be more forthcoming in Afghan affairs. What was most outrageous was when Trump said, "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists".

Afghanistan is known as the "Graveyard of Empires". Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said, "If America doesn't withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, soon Afghanistan will become another graveyard for this superpower", indicating a surge in attacks. Taliban, fattened by money from smuggling opium is well-armed and better organised. It is less corrupt and enjoys loyalty in the countryside, controlling over 40 percent of the territory.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is pleased at Trump's strategy and happy that fresh American troops were coming again. But Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah, elected through a fraudulent election, runs a kleptocracy unable to give moral leadership to the 190,000 demoralised individuals of the Afghan National Security Force. Afghanistan is not a democracy by any definition—it is a tribal society with allegiance to the tribal chiefs—not to Ashraf Ghani in Kabul.

US has always toyed with the idea of resolving Afghan crisis without Pakistan. To put pressure on Islamabad, which is a non-Nato US ally, Defence Secretary Mattis cancelled USD 350 million of USD 900 million military aid to Pakistan in 2017. Pakistan does not seem worried as its relationship with China is now worth USD 110 billion—with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) bringing in USD 4 billion in 2017.

The Pakistani government, politicians and media reacted strongly to Trump's plan. Pakistan Foreign Ministry described Trump's allegation as "a false narrative". It said a military solution is not possible and only an Afghan-owned politically negotiated solution can lead to peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif briefed the Senate on August 24 that the high-level meeting attended by PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and all the service chiefs strongly rejected Trump's accusations. Islamabad is peeved that US wants to develop a partnership with arch-rival India.

Pakistan is no doubt guilty for raising the Taliban and other outfits that have spread terror both in Afghanistan and India. The Taliban has kept Pakistan's rival India at bay in Afghanistan. Pakistan will no doubt continue to support the Taliban until it gets a compliant government in Kabul. With the current face-off with India over Kashmir, Islamabad feels deeply insecure and sees Afghanistan as its strategic depth. Pakistan's security concerns are linked with Afghanistan.

To Delhi, which always accuses Pakistan of providing safe havens to militants, Trump lambasting Pakistan sounded sweet. Indian MEA statement welcomed Trump's Afghan plan. Trump said that India was a "critical part of the South Asia strategy". This partnership is the outcome of Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2017. Did Trump's overtures to India strengthen Delhi's position to end the Doklam stand-off with China?

The triangular narrative of relations among Pakistan, Afghanistan and India is extremely complex. Trump cannot resolve the Afghan crisis with Indian assistance alone, excluding Pakistan. On the contrary, it will raise tension in the subcontinent. However, India should not be overtly happy that Trump has castigated Pakistan. Surely, Delhi will not relish Afghanistan having a common border with India and Taliban knocking at India's gate. For Delhi, fighting militants in Kashmir, Pakistan is a buffer between India and terrorist-infested Afghanistan. But India has given in to the old adage—my enemy's (Pakistan) enemy (Afghanistan) is my friend.

Fighting over 16 years, spending over USD 1 trillion and even after losing 2,400 troops there is no sight of victory for America in Afghanistan. Trump's 4,000 additional troops, in addition to the 8,500 already there, will hardly change the military balance in Afghanistan. In 2010 Nato-led troops numbered 140,000 but could not secure the country from the Taliban.

US pressures on Pakistan will undoubtedly push Pakistan closer to China, Russia and Iran—regional players in the new Great Game. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on August 22 reaffirmed China's support to Pakistan asserting that Pakistan was on the front line in the struggle against terrorism and had made "great sacrifices" and "important contributions" in the fight.

Russia lately has been normalising relations with Pakistan, and according to some unconfirmed reports, is in communication with Taliban, supplying arms. A reversal of the Afghan war-game is not unlikely—Russia fuelling Taliban to ensure an Americans defeat in Afghanistan, as America did with the Mujahedeen to oust Russia in the 1980s. Shiite Iran, under pressure from America over its nuclear deal, has maintained communication links with Sunni Taliban. Tehran may assist the Taliban to get rid of the common enemy America from its backyard. On the other side of the Game— it will be US and India with probably token representation from some US allies.

Donald Trump said he studied Afghanistan in great detail. But Pakistan Tehreeq-e-Insaf (PTI) Chief Imran Khan commented that Trump had no understanding of South Asia. Trump blames Pakistan for America's deeply flawed and failed Afghan policy.

Trump's plan is flawed with no clear objective. He mentioned a political settlement with the Taliban—he should embark upon this path and try to find a negotiated settlement for Afghanistan rather than counting body-bags. America should also make sure that tensions between Pakistan and India do not spiral into a catastrophic nuclear conflict.

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PHOTO: AFP

Why we need gender-sensitive disaster planning

ANITA JAHID

Over the last decade, awareness of climate change and its impacts has risen dramatically but some key areas have been missing from the debate. The gender aspect, for Bangladesh, is one of them. It is imperative that the impacts of natural disasters on women are reviewed in detail.

AT present, issues leading to global warming and climate change have arguably become a global priority. Scholars today recognise various vulnerable populations and claim that the impacts of climate change are not spread equally in terms of location, economic status, gender or age. Several studies on the impacts of climate change have identified Bangladesh as one of the most vulnerable countries of the world. Bangladesh faces different natural disasters almost every year, including floods/flash floods, cyclones, storm surges, extreme temperature and drought leading to loss of life and damage to infrastructure and adversely impacting livelihoods. Bangladesh is among the countries most vulnerable to tropical cyclones, and the sixth most vulnerable country to floods. Its citizens are vulnerable to the hostile effects of natural disasters as most of the primary livelihood opportunities are dependent on environmental conditions and access to natural resources.

However, women and men experience disasters differently due to some social and cultural reasons and existing gender norms. Natural disasters magnify the existing inequalities, reinforcing the disparity between women and men in their vulnerability to, and capability to cope with, a disaster. In Bangladesh, women are more vulnerable because of gender disparities in different social, economic and political institutions. Poor women are more likely to die or suffer fatal and non-fatal injuries. During the last few disasters in Bangladesh, it was found that the death rate for women was almost five times higher than for men. Women and girls tend to have less access to, or control over, assets including the resources necessary to cope with natural disasters, such as information, education, health, and wealth. And it is inequities endured on a daily basis—not just in times of disaster—that create greater risk for them and reduce their life chances.

It is often stated by different disaster reports that during the natural disaster, men were able to warn each other as they met in public spaces, but they rarely communicated information to the rest of the family. Some aid agencies reported that in Bangladesh the disproportionate number of female deaths is due in large part to the social norm that women should not leave their house without permission from their husbands. Many children and women die because the men weren't at home to permit them to leave the house and they wait for their relatives to return home and take them to a safe place. It is also evident that due to social restrictions women have very limited access to opportunities to learn to swim or climb trees—skills that may be necessary to rescue themselves in the event of a disaster. Moreover, the society accepts that the female role in a community is to remain at home to perform domestic duties and take care of children, the elderly and others in the family, livestock, food and other assets. Being the primary caretakers (or caregivers) of the family, women stay behind in times of disasters, instead of running to safety. In general, women often have limited access to healthcare, education or other skill-building exercises, which causes them to suffer more during disasters.

Besides the immediate impacts of a disaster, it is often the post-disaster recovery phase that exposes women to even greater gender-based risks. Based on evidence gathered from the last few disasters in Bangladesh, it is apparent that women and adolescent girls in shelters and camps for displaced persons suffer from sexual and gender-based violence, which includes physical, mental and emotional violence committed due to the gender of the victim. Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and trafficking. Also, post-disaster impacts aggravate the cases of gender-based violence, domestic violence, forced and early marriages. The traditional division of roles tends to intensify more the daily workload of women. Hence, natural disasters add an extra burden on top of existing problems in Bangladesh, with women on the receiving end.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) reports that, whether in developing or developed countries, there is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to die as a result of disasters, and if they survive, they suffer more than men in their aftermath. Over the last decade, awareness of climate change and its impacts has risen dramatically but some key areas have been missing from the debate. The gender aspect, for Bangladesh, is one of them. It is imperative that the impacts of natural disasters on women are reviewed in detail. Particularly the single women, female-headed households, women with disabilities and older women, as well as adolescent girls, are in need of greater attention.

The government of Bangladesh passed a climate change strategy in 2009 with action plans, and the National Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA) was also developed to further advance climate-friendly development and adaptation measures. But until now, initiatives on climate change lack gender sensitivity. Women have had little chance to express their needs and opinions and get involved in climate-related decision-making. It is evident that women are not included adequately in disaster risk reduction or resilience planning. Their needs are yet to be addressed in the government's disaster management strategy.

This also indicates that the resulting response and reconstruction efforts tend to overlook the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women when disasters strike. Therefore, the impacts of climate change on women should be explored. Emphasis should not be placed merely on women's greater vulnerability but on how to reduce these vulnerabilities to make them more resilient. They should also be included in every decision-making process aimed at reducing their vulnerabilities. Women should be considered an integral part of disaster risk reduction planning and capacity building programmes.

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A child in the flood-affected Gobordhan village of the Lalmonirhat upazila trying to collect water from a tube-well as the people of the upazila suffered from a lack of clean drinking water. This photo was taken on July 11, 2017.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Rigging support
5 Buttes' kin
10 Chocolate imitation
12 Come up
13 Quartz variety
14 Joust need
15 Pitch's kin
16 The works
18 Flowed into
19 Become sharply attentive
21 Some sisters
22 Utterly
24 Usher's place
25 Staunch
29 Sister of Amy, Jo, and Meg
30 Lent ender
32 Fall mo.
33 Nettle
34 Stopped fasting
35 Approves
37 TV talk star
39 Locker room item
40 Jefferson, e.g.
41 One of Harry's teachers
42 Heaters

DOWN

1 Sings like Ella
2 Heathens
3 Turkish peak
4 Turn bad
5 Outdoor promenade
6 Hurler's stat
7 Wicked
8 Climb
9 Bun toppers
11 Hippie's predecessor
17 "Guys and Dolls" songwriter
20 Steal
21 Seasonal songs
23 Under wraps
25 Judge
26 Senators' home
27 Roma's land
28 Hate
29 Winter wear
31 Doesn't own
36 Slangy agreement
38 Pants part

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER
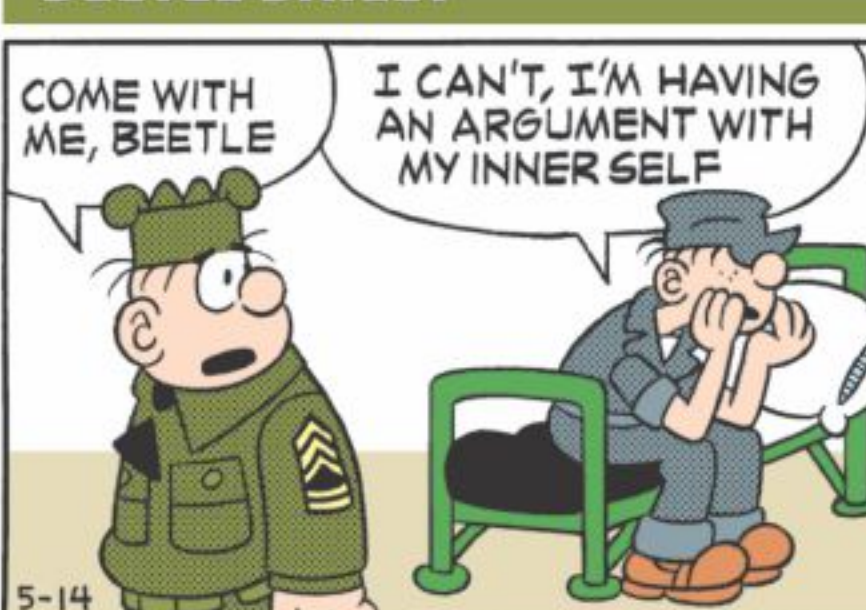
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BABY BLUES   BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT