

## Trump's Afghan policy is tougher than Pakistan expected

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The shift toward rival India is a setback for Islamabad

For several months US generals have been descending on the Pakistan army's general headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi to meet the army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. They have been trying to persuade him before the announcement of Washington's new Afghan policy to close off sanctuary for the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan.

Although the army, which makes Islamabad's foreign policy, publicly denies that the country is harbouring Taliban, privately military and civilian officials admit it and say they are doing everything they can to get rid of the militants. But neither the US nor its Nato and international allies – and certainly not the neighbouring states – any longer trust Pakistan to act.

And that is why Donald Trump in his speech on Monday berated the country. "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe heavens for terrorist organizations," the president declared. "But that will have to change. And that will change immediately," he added. The implied threat is that ultimately the US could impose sanctions on Pakistan.

Pakistanis were expecting a rap on the knuckles. But Mr Trump went further. He said the US would "further develop its strategic partnership with India" and ask India to contribute more to stabilise Afghanistan. That will enrage GHQ.

Since 9/11 the army has felt threatened by India's diplomatic and economic advances in Afghanistan, which include more than \$2bn worth of aid and infrastructure projects. That is why the army maintains its links with Islamic militants – not just Taliban but also other militant groups involved in fighting in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Such policies are becoming increasingly unacceptable to the international community.

Islamabad had expected Mr Trump's south Asia strategy would, at the very least, include a US-led diplomatic effort to draw India and Pakistan into peace talks and try to end their rivalry over Afghanistan so US and Afghan forces could get on with defeating the Taliban. Instead, the opposite has happened. Mr. Trump wants to draw India further into Afghanistan and clearly has no regard for Pakistan's strategic concerns or worries about an Indian pincer presence on its borders.

Moreover, Monday's speech made no reference to Iran and Russia which, according to US intelligence, are also directly supporting the Taliban. Pakistan is no longer the militants' only friend.

Pakistan foreign policy in recent months has been near disastrous. There are running conflicts with three neighbours – India, Iran and Afghanistan. The stance on the Afghan Taliban helped undermine trust between the military and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and it has brought international criticism. Mr. Sharif had long wanted a settlement in Afghanistan, but he had not pursued the issue vigorously. In Pakistan there is much talk about a deep state that takes geostrategic decisions without government or parliament authorization.

Only China has stood by Pakistan, and did so again on Tuesday. "We believe that the international community should fully recognise Pakistan's antiterrorism," said the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying. Pakistan had made "great sacrifices", she added. Pakistan has helped the Taliban since its emergence in 1993, primarily as a bulwark against Indian influence.

But many Afghan Taliban have become deeply embedded in the country's business, property and trading; their children go to Pakistani colleges and universities. Forcibly ejecting them could prompt an Afghan Taliban backlash against the army, which is already fighting the Pakistani Taliban.

Islamabad has long called for peace talks between the militants and the Kabul regime so the Taliban can go home as part of a political settlement. Yet here, too, the US and Nato have doubted the extent of Pakistan's sincerity and willingness to put real pressure on the Taliban to stop their attacks.

However, Pakistan does have one card up its sleeve if the US becomes too hostile: the country provides the only land route for the supply chain to US forces in Afghanistan. Islamabad has used that card before, in 2011 stopping container traffic when relations with Washington got testy. It could do so again.

If the new Trump strategy is implemented in a hurry it will almost certainly lead to a serious rupture between the US and Pakistan and an escalation of tensions with India and Afghanistan. That would further isolate Islamabad and plunge south Asia into a cauldron of hostilities in which the two largest players are armed with nuclear weapons.

Both carrot and stick are needed to change Pakistan's policy, but the Trump administration has shown little aptitude for diplomacy. Inviting India to become the Trumpian hegemon in south Asia would stir up a hornet's nest and is likely to make GHQ only dig in its heels over putting any pressure on the Taliban.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, including 'Pakistan on the Brink'. Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017.