



US NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS



Dr Shalini Chawla

Senior Fellow, CAPS

01 January 2018

On December 18, 2017, the Trump administration issued its National Security Strategy (NSS) which seeks to outline US concerns, its internal and external security challenges, interests and policy options for the future. The document is important, as it lays out a list of threats, a wish list of capabilities and proclaimed actions, but it does not constrain the actions of the US policy makers.

The NSS met with expected criticism as there seems to be some amount of contradiction between what is stated in the document and what is practised by the Trump administration. An “America First” National Security Strategy is based on the “assessment of US interests” and is a “strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology”. The 55 page document aims to protect the American people, the homeland, the American way of life and promote American prosperity, but does not talk about issues like: building democracy, nation building and addressing vital global concerns of climate change. These issues were important not so long ago under the Obama administration.

In the NSS, India is recognised as a ‘leading power’ and seen as an opportunity and a partner. On the other hand, Russia and China have been clearly categorized as ‘revisionist’ powers that are challenging America’s power and influence and “attempting to erode American security and prosperity”.

Russia and China have been highlighted as wanting to shape the world “antithetical to US Values and interests”. According to the NSS, China seeks to “displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model and reorder the region in its favour”. Russia “seeks to

restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders". India's role is primarily seen as an ally for "sustainable balance of power" in South East Asia and Western Pacific Ocean. The US intends to "deepen" the "strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean and throughout the broader region" including South and Central Asia. The NSS places emphasis on India enhancing its 'economic assistance' in South and Central Asia.

The NSS position on Pakistan is blunt and harsh and not different from the stance the US has gradually adopted over the last few years. The US-Pakistan relationship has been strained over the last six years and took an unyielding shift with the announcement of President Trump's Afghan policy which carried a firm message for Pakistan. Trump excoriated Pakistan for harbouring criminals and terrorists. Islamabad has received lavish American financial and military assistance amounting to approximately \$33 billion between 2002 and 2017. However, there has been a steady decline in US aid post Osama's killing in 2011, which convinced a majority of Americans that Islamabad was not sincere in its efforts to counter terrorism.

The NSS reiterates the warnings to Pakistan, seeks to "press Pakistan to intensify its counterterrorism efforts" and abstain from engaging itself in 'destabilizing behaviour' with Afghanistan. Washington's concerns regarding the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal are highlighted in the NSS.

The document lists out American concerns regarding the "probability of an Indo-Pakistan military conflict that could lead to a nuclear exchange". India's official nuclear doctrine which adopts a no first use and asserts massive retaliation clearly demonstrates India as a responsible nuclear power and does reduce the probability of the nuclear armed conflict. On the other hand, Islamabad's unwritten doctrine relies largely on "first use" and adopts an irrational posture. Islamabad has been very proud of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), which further add to instability in the South Asian region.

The NSS view on engagement with Afghanistan is centered around US security interests, and according to the document, failure of the fragile states would 'magnify threats to the American homeland' and thus US seeks "a stable and self-reliant Afghanistan". Trump's policy in Afghanistan, which rejects nation building and focuses on targeting terrorists, is unlikely to change the outcome of the 16 year old conflict.

Although the NSS brings cheer to India, it does not address India's core interests. Pakistan faces US warnings once again and a bigger question here is whether the US threats and warnings will

actually compel or motivate Pakistan to change? Further, how will the US stance impact the India-Pakistan relationship?

There is a higher likelihood of Pakistan becoming immune to US warnings. China's growing assistance to Pakistan over the last few decades, and now, over \$50 billion investment in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, have considerably reduced Pakistan's reliance on the US military and economic assistance. With the US taking a tough stance on China, the future seems to be headed towards increasing US-China tensions over issues related to territorial sovereignty, cyber security, trade and foreign investment. US-China tensions and confrontations could complicate situation in South Asia which would invariably impact India. Balancing ties with China might get even more complicated for India. The Pakistan and China alliance has disturbing security and strategic dimensions for New Delhi and the alliance is likely to get a further impetus with the US positioning. The evolving Pakistan-Russia military relationship is also likely to be bolstered with the US stance on Russia.

US warnings till now have had short term impact on Pakistan's behaviour, leading to a few appeasing acts by the Pakistan military. Islamabad's belief in terror, and its support to terrorist organisations, remains unaltered. Another set of warnings is unlikely to alter Islamabad's mindset and policy choices. China's growing support has given ample military and psychological confidence to Pakistan's India strategy, which relies on asymmetric warfare. New Delhi needs to seriously evaluate the implications of the NSS while formulating its future regional strategy.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: US National Security Strategy, India-Pakistan relations, US-Pakistan relations.