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As well as incredulity, the prospect of a Trump presidency in the United States must be sending shivers down the spines of the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the situation in the region is such that it will not be an easy ride under a President Clinton, either. Whatever comes, the region is likely to face tough times. But one president would unquestionably be worse than the other.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the government and the state's survival is dependent on donor budget support. The conference on Afghanistan in Brussels on October 4th and 5th was intended to provide a platform for the government of Afghanistan to set out its vision and track record on reform. For the international community, it was supposed to be the opportunity to signal sustained political and financial support for Afghan peace, state-building and development. Europe appears to still be committed to upholding the institutionally and militarily weak Afghan state, though with a repatriation deal at the expense of Afghan refugees as a quid pro quo for aid assistance. The US reiterated its commitment to continued funding levels for civilian programmes (about \$1.5 billion this year). However, it is likely that this possibility, and certainly the United States' security support in particular would be at risk under a Trump presidency. The candidate's sheer volatile unpredictability, bigoted racism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and statements on withdrawing support from NATO are creating ripples around the region. And Afghanistan would be likely to be directly affected.

The aim of the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 8th this year was for the US and its allies to raise \$15 billion to fund Afghan security forces through 2020. At the summit, which noted NATO's enduring commitment to Afghanistan, the US pledged to maintain 8,400 troops there beyond 2016 (it has requested \$3.45 billion for Afghanistan in the 2017 national budget), and President Obama also promised that he would recommend to his successor that the United States continue to seek funding for the ANDSF at or near current levels through 2020. A future President Clinton can be expected to honour these pledges. A future President Trump cannot.

Trump's mercurial and at times contradictory statements include saying that if elected on November 8th, he would demand that NATO members pay their defence contributions of 2% of GDP or else pay for their own security. This has severely rattled both NATO allies and many US national security experts – as well as the government of Afghanistan. President Ghani, under the all-too-real threat of the return of the Taliban, has recently resorted to making a controversial compromise peace pact with the notorious Afghan warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (known as the “Butcher of Kabul”), perhaps as a hedging strategy. Peace will be a tall order. Indeed, Afghanistan's dependence on the US is likely to increase, not decrease, particularly in the areas of defence and diplomacy – required to address the continued threat of terrorism and to protect them from its neighbours beyond the 2017 troop drawdown date. There is a real danger that the Afghan army could collapse without US military support and commitment. Therefore if you take away US support for the economy and security, which is likely to be needed for years to come, it does not take much to imagine the possible outcomes for peace in Afghanistan.

Either a Clinton or a Trump presidency will see Afghanistan facing the challenge of how to become less dependent on external assistance, whilst simultaneously facing an increased threat to peace and stability, and lacking the institutional mechanisms to address the issue. Clinton is likely to maintain (or maybe even increase) Obama's commitment to Afghanistan, recognising the danger of the consequences of renegeing.

Times will be tough, therefore, either way, but much tougher under a President Trump, who has openly stated that he would withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and “rebuild the USA” instead.

Pakistan

Trump's rallying cry of “America First” augurs ill for much of the world. His foreign policy is unclear, relies on sound bites, bigotry and on whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment. He has stated that he “may seek India's help on Pakistan's unstable nuclear capability”. At a time when Pakistan is becoming increasingly isolated diplomatically and regionally due to its ambivalent stance on terrorism and India's pro-active outreach to countries in the region, such a position could provoke Pakistan into an overreaction in the increasingly tense situation with India. However, Trump – true to form – has also said: “But Pakistan is semi-unstable. We don't want to see total instability. It's not that much, relatively speaking. We have a little bit of a good relationship. I think I'd try and keep it.”

Trump's other election pledge to bring back a substantial number of lost manufacturing jobs to the US could only be achieved through offsetting Asia's (and especially China's) labour cost advantage in manufacturing with a combination of tariff and non-tariff barriers. In the zero-sum “great game” of Asian powers, China's loss is India's gain. And China stands to lose big under a President Trump. This will not go down well in Pakistan (China's key ally, and India's key enemy), or in China itself.

Indeed, the Pakistani government was provoked to react to Trump in recent days over his call for the release of Shakil Afridi, the doctor who

reportedly helped the CIA hunt down Osama Bin Laden. The minister of the interior accused Trump of “ignorance”. Relations between the US and Pakistan have been improving of late, and it is rare for Pakistan to comment on US domestic politics. Trump has clearly touched a nerve.

Whilst Hillary Clinton has expressed fears of another (military) coup in Pakistan, and of terrorists obtaining control of the country’s nuclear weapons, she is nonetheless likely to continue Kerry’s policies towards Pakistan. However, she has publicly warned of the consequences of an emerging nuclear arms race, naming Russia and China, as well as Pakistan and India. She is likely to get tougher on terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil, and would likely take steps to try to calm the rising tensions between Pakistan and India, given the former’s nuclear capacity (which it is reportedly racing to increase).

In early September, prior to the attack in Uri, Kashmir, John Kerry had stated that “pretty intense blowback” made it hard for Pakistan to act against terrorist groups. But he also chastised Pakistan for failing to make a distinction between “good” and “bad” terrorists. Post-Uri, and with the escalation of India-Pakistan tensions, the US State Department has issued a direct message to the Pakistani authorities that they have a clear responsibility to exercise restraint regarding nuclear weapons and missile capabilities.

Future scenarios

President Trump: Disrupts the balance of power in Asia, shifting it in favour of India; declares Pakistan a terrorist state; cuts off US aid; Pakistan turns to China for support; the likelihood of a nuclear conflict with India increases; withdraws US financial and military support for Afghanistan; Afghanistan slides into anarchy and bloodshed, becoming a failed state; the Taliban return in force; the Daesh presence in both countries increases.

President Clinton: More of the same as under Obama/Kerry; continued support for NATO and for Afghanistan to avoid state failure and a relapse into Taliban control; but gets tougher on Pakistan’s stance on terrorism; mediates between India and Pakistan to avoid a nuclear conflict.

