

## **Afghanistan Post US Withdrawal: Implications for Regional Stability**

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### **Abstract**

*The withdrawal of the US and allied forces have a detrimental and long-lasting impact on the Afghan and adjoining regions. The study underlines consequences germinating with U.S. drawdown impact on Afghanistan, in the backdrop of its historical perspective, leading to the present situation while reviewing the alignment of its neighbors around a positive priority for a stable political transition on its recovery, reconstruction and stability. The withdrawal enabled Taliban to inflict a devastating defeat on the armed forces of Afghanistan. Thus, they took over Kabul without facing any stiff resistance from any faction. Since then, Taliban have been ruling Kabul without facing any security challenge from any ethnic faction from inside. However, Taliban rule has intensified the security structure of the region. The changing nature of regional security has impacted the internal security situation of Pakistan once again. Furthermore, this article highlights Afghan variables while identifying possible scenarios in keeping with the aspiration of its people and internal dynamics. It also underlines prospects of a regional consensus for peace and stability inside Afghanistan while identifying the role and influence of regional/ global powers in keeping with their interests and concerns.*

**Key words:** Afghanistan, Taliban, regional security, peace, insurgency, stability.

### **Introduction**

Afghanistan has been termed as a 'Graveyard of Civilizations'. Afghan turbulent history is brimming with invasions, wars, conflicts and internal fighting including the ongoing Global War on Terror (GWOT) by United States and its allies, thus making it a tribal federation than a unified state. Pak-Afghan relations mostly remained undulating from friendly to hostile despite of having common religious, historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social ties while viewing each other with suspicion and unsatisfied expectations. Since independence irritants like Durand line, Pukhtunistan issue and allegations of interfering with each other's security/ internal affairs coupled with regional/ global geo strategic gains remain responsible for non-maintenance of Pak-Afghan cordial relations. Pakistan, the US first knight on the other hand received 3.5 million Afghan Refugees, superfluity of arms, ammunition and drugs trafficking; medaled with economic and military sanctions (Pattanaik, 2013). After the withdrawal of Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan had to bear its

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negative fallout and complexities, which got pronounced by a Mujahedeen Movement in response to the continual state of chaos and power struggle (Musharraf, 2006). Pakistan made resolute efforts to bring peace inside Afghanistan by uniting the Mujahedeen groups, strengthening religious, cultural, political and economic ties alongside negotiating peace settlements. (Marsden 1998).

In November 1996, US outlined its Afghan policy in United Nations Security Council (UNSC), outlining Taliban as indigenous people, demonstrating enormous residing power alongside complete support of Afghan majority, particularly Pashtuns and controlling more than two-third of its territory (Raphel, 2004). Fall of Kabul coupled with swift capture of Kandahar in September 1996, surfaced Taliban movement (Marsde, 1998). Subsequently Taliban defeated warlords while imposing Islamic Law. Rabbani Regime, fostered close ties with India, which forced Pakistan to support the Taliban morally, diplomatically, militarily and logistically (Dennis , 2001). Pakistan was the first country, which recognized the Taliban regime on May 25, 1997.

Taliban began developing close ties with Osama-bin-Laden in order to enhance their autonomy and reduce their dependence on Pakistan. In 1990, Osama-bin-Laden had established a militant camp near Jalalabad to send in financial support and fighters so as to reinforce Taliban campaigns in the Northern Afghanistan. Taliban came under intense political, diplomatic and economic sanctions from 1999-2000 (Kean, 2004). After 9/11, US demanded Taliban government to hand over Osama Bin Laden, but they refused to do so. The US was left with no option but to respond militarily under the UN auspices. President Bush out rightly declared a global war against terror (GWOT), in response to these acts of terror, thus resulting in a unified global response based on exploitation of international law of weak/ suppressed classes alongside use of cutting-edge technologies (Rapoport, 2012). Furthermore, in the aftermath of 9/11, Bush administration persuaded a foreign policy demonstrating US ability to fight against its enemy (Joshua, 2004).

US immediate response resulted in missile attacks on suspected terrorist sites inside Afghanistan but more importantly, it was followed by a famous telephone call by President Bush to General Pervez Musharraf, then President of Pakistan, stating, '*Either you are with us or against us in GWOT*', a clear threat of either being bombed back to '*Stone Age*' or become a US ally in its war effort inside Afghanistan (Pervez, 2006). Pakistan joined the so-called GWOT with undefined objectives and end state, being tangent to its sovereignty and national interests. In order to

safeguard the security and integrity of Pakistan, General Musharraf, took a U-turn against Taliban and decided to join hands with US/ coalition forces in GWOT thus becoming a frontline state in providing intelligence, military and logistical support (Sadiq, 2016). By December 2001, the Taliban after suffering heavy casualties withdrew to the Afghan frontiers. Osama bin Laden alongside his Al-Qaeda affiliates took refuge in the mountains of 'Tora Bora', with war declaration against Pakistan (Barfield, 2011). Later these Taliban re-emerged; inflicting heavy losses on both US led coalition forces and Pakistani Armed Forces/ Para Military Forces, Government Institutions and local populace across Durand Line, which in turn altered global/ regional dynamics.

This article will elucidate the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and its implications on regional security while focusing on the conditions of the regional order and foreseeable future of Afghanistan immediately after U.S. withdrawal of the country and challenges for Afghanistan and regional players.

### **US Presence Inside Afghanistan: Background and Motives**

The strategic aim of US alongside Kabul was to defeat the ongoing Taliban insurgency inside Afghanistan alongside disrupting, dismantling and eventually defeating al Qaeda and uprooting terrorist safe havens inside Afghanistan or Pakistan (House, 2009). Furthermore, US had long seen India as a potential ally against rising China, however, India saw the opportunity to cease US support but alongside promoting her own geo-strategic position to play independently, especially against US pressure (Bharat, 2002). Post 9/11 scenario created an environment where Indo-US interests converged. India thus conveniently tagged the Kashmiri freedom movement with international drive against terrorism (Jamwal, 2002) alongside funneling international pressure against Pakistan. Resultantly Pakistan found its anti-India policies echoing against the international mood of countering terrorism, emanating from her western borders in general and Afghanistan based Taliban in particular.

Re-emergence of Taliban is yet another controversial issue at the international forum, which resulted in broadening mistrust and creating gaps in anti-terror cooperation between Pakistan and US led Coalition Forces. After the fall of Taliban Regime, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan never considered Al-Qaeda as its core enemy versus Taliban thus shifting their focus on Al-Qaeda rather than keeping equal surveillance and pressure on both. Taliban as a result of this negligence on

part of US and coalition forces got an opportunity to regroup and strengthen their strongholds.

The US troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2014; however, there is still a large number of US and international forces presence in the country (Rutting, 2009). The Afghan conflict today involves a large number of state and non-state actors actively pursuing vested motives. India due to the pro India Afghan Government was pursuing an active role in the political, diplomatic, security and socio-economic spheres thus adversely affecting Pakistan's political, security and social fabric.

Pakistan has her rightful interests in Afghanistan emanating from geographic linkages, historical ties and more importantly common economic bondages/ future. Pro Indian, Afghan Government acts as a catalyst for Indian interests in the region in general and Afghanistan in particular, thus magnifying existing challenges for Pakistan both at regional and global levels. The 22 June 2011, announcement by President Obama regarding US drawdown from Afghanistan marked the beginning of a new endgame. On the external front with the ongoing peace talks of US, Afghan Government and the Taliban leadership, the signed of an endgame are already obvious with both regional/ international powers contesting to safeguard their interests (Asghar, 2017). The reasons for US presence in Afghanistan is to safeguard their national interests in the region, however, it is also a fact that Afghanistan is not yet ready to govern the state without the foreign assistance. (Pattanaik, 2002).

Pakistan remains vulnerable to face serious political, security and economic challenges, upstaged by the stakes of regional and international players further reinforced by Pakistan's internal situation/ vulnerabilities. Pakistan Army military operations code-named '*Operation Zarb-e-Azb*' and '*Operation Radd-ul-Fassad*' alongside fencing of Durand Line has harnessed terrorism to an extent, but much needs to be done.

### **Post US Withdrawal: Implications and Scenarios**

Afghanistan is amid transition that will set the stage for its future trajectory, only time will determine the course of its trajectory; being a stable or turbulent one. Given the fluidity of the emerging regional political, economic and security mosaics analysts envisage various possibilities while underlining the return of 1990s situation. Pessimistically in post US Afghan draw down scenario, for both US and its allies it will be a nightmare if there is a power vacuum; break down of Kabul regime/ institutions; escalation of the ongoing conflict with Al

Qaida and its associates multiplying and Taliban taking over the reigns of Kabul; regional/ global players manipulating their respective political, economic and military aspirations (Hyman, 2014).

Afghanistan lacks major transition drivers including leadership, political stability, good governance, viable economic management, self-sustenance, elimination of corruption, accountability, success of ongoing peace process/ dialogues and the legitimacy of Afghan electoral process. In post US Afghan draw down scenario, scholars envisage Afghanistan returning to 1990s era incase US and its allies abandon their ongoing/ pledged support or else Taliban facing strong resistance from non-Taliban ethnic groups and lastly break up of Afghanistan with eastern & southern parts under Taliban control and northern parts under other ethnic alliances (John, 2013). Another scholarly view subjugates post US Afghan drawdown environment to the performance of ANSF; firstly, visualizing ANSF to succeed in confining Taliban in certain areas with continuous flow of foreign aid/ assistance and Afghanistan progressing, secondly supporting strategic stalemate between Taliban and ANSF, with tactical successes and setbacks on both sides and thirdly total failure of ANSF and Taliban movement gaining momentum/ success. All these claims are now non-existent, as Taliban have over taken Afghanistan without any bloodshed. However, Pak-Afghan relations remain fraught with mistrust, insecurity, false allegations, divergent interests, poor border control mechanisms, refugee's repatriation etc. even after Taliban takeover of Kabul.

### **Regional Aspirations and Concerns**

US rebalancing to Asia Pacific coupled with prevailing Middle East environment may contribute in thinning out Afghanistan's and adjoining regional significance in post US draw down scenario thus reducing global economic assistance and direct military involvement. (Maizland, 2020). However, Afghan/ CARs internal fragility, emergence of regional failed state(s) and their potential for fuelling terrorism/ extremism will keep region simmering for US/ NATO/ ISAF. US/ West will therefore have to remain cognizant of internal stability and progression of Afghanistan, CARs and adjoining region (Donnelly, 2011). US long-term self-sustaining regional economic and security influence demands regional peace/ cooperation in particular Pakistan's support. Regional rivalries could kindle yet another new '*Great Game*' thus demanding US engagement for regional/ global security and economic integration.

China and Pakistan share close diplomatic, economic and security ties. China's primary regional focus remains energy security through gaining economic trading space. However, China remains speculative of US presence and enhanced Russian regional influence alongside extremism, arms and drugs plaguing her territory from bordering regions. The US-India strategic partnership is aimed at containing Chinese expansion in particular Asia Pacific region. China thus remains concerned with US, Japan, Australia and India; labelling them as 'Eastern NATO'. In post US Afghan draw down scenario China is desirous of Afghan peace, stability, development and reconstruction alongside deepening economic and security ties. Beijing appointed a special envoy to Afghanistan on 18 July 2014 thus manifesting a desire of long-term strategic partnership. Russia is concerned with the negative fallouts of regional extremism, instability and inflow of arms/ drugs from her hostile neighborhood. Furthermore, Russia wants to magnify her regional security and economic spheres. Russia considers US/ NATO/ ISAF military presence inside Afghanistan alongside enhanced Chinese growing influence over CARs, Afghanistan and adjoining region as hurdles to her regional/ global resurgence aspirations. In post US Afghan draw down scenario for its meaningful regional assertion Russia needs to possess requisite military capability and sound economic capacity alongside establishing understanding with regional/ global players in particular China and US for her envisaged roles in CARs and Afghanistan.

CARs are confronted with numerous political, diplomatic, economic and security threats which if exacerbated could bring them to the brink of failed states category. Autocratic rules, poor governance, weak state institutions, porous borders, threats of Islamic militancy/ terrorism, drug/ arms trafficking, rampant corruption and human rights violations further magnify their political, security and stability complexities. Multiple inter state irritants/ rivalries including Uzbekistan's big brotherly disliked attitude; Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan close bondages with Russia; Uzbekistan's struggle to unshackle itself from Russian dominance; Kazakhstan urges of becoming a regional military power; Amu Darya water sharing disputes; claims on sharing Caspian Sea riches and ethnic moorings unless resolved appropriately have the potential to precipitate into interstate conflicts. Caspian Sea is considered to be a potential flashpoint for confrontation amongst its littoral states including Iran.

Pakistan since inception is successively being sucked into the blue yet it is surviving against all odds thus acquiring unique status on global mosaic. GWOT has inflicted huge political, diplomatic, economic and

security fall out on Pakistan thereby retarding basic essential requirements including health, education, food, shelter, energy/ water resources, communication infra structure etc. Furthermore, it demanded colossal human sacrifices, enormous civil/ military efforts, consumed scarce resources and inflicted heavy material losses in mitigating the decades long Afghan sufferings and collaborating with US/ NATO/ ISAF in achieving their politico-economic and military objectives; an effort which above all after all these years is not even well recognized/ appreciated. Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship remains turbulent due to differing political ideologies alongside issues like Durand line, Pukhtunistan, Baluchistan insurgency, cross border terrorism/ terrorist sanctuaries, Indian factor, Afghan refugees, defence co-operation and implementation of Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA).

Afghanistan remains an important component of Pakistan's foreign policy as well as a crucial factor for regional peace and stability. Pakistan is desirous of cementing her relations with Afghanistan at strategic levels. Pakistan facilitated the opening of Taliban Doha office and further assisted in providing safe passage to Taliban for their meaningful engagement in the peace talks/ process. Pakistan maintains high level political, diplomatic and security contacts with Kabul regime to strengthen bilateral relations, mutual trust and confidence. Ministerial level bilateral efforts/ visits are being regularly conducted to reduce ethnic friction between Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities. Pakistan offers thousands of educational scholarships to Afghan students annually. Pakistan is hosting millions of Afghan refugees since Soviet invasion thus exacerbating security challenges and economic strains. Pakistan is pursuing a liberal visa policy to facilitate people-to-people contact alongside soft passport control mechanisms at crossing places in particular Torkham and Chaman borders (Shahid, 2020). The Taliban factor alongside civil/ military engagement in curbing menace of terrorism has fueled unrest in former FATA/ Baluchistan regions, magnified ethnicity, religious fundamentalism/ sectarianism and acts of terrorism/ violence (Sareen and Pandey, 2020).

Pakistan's weak economy and its heavy reliance on foreign debts remains a sore concern for its policy makers as in the absence of strong and sustainable economy coupled with heavy debt trap, they cannot pursue policy objectives (Khan, 2019). In post US draw down scenario Pakistan needs to reduce its reliance upon foreign loans/ aid provided by IMF and World Bank through adoption of sound economic/ monetary policies. In post US Afghan draw down scenario Pak-Afghan bilateral trade may see

a downward trajectory owing to diversification of Afghan trade market and war economy. Pakistan would also like to extend APTTA beyond Afghanistan to CARs primarily Tajikistan. Diplomatic acumen and military preparedness remain key enablers for achieving economic integration and strategic equilibrium (Khan, 2019). Terrorism remains tangent to on-going China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects and their subsequent implementation/ growth by providing high value targets both to internal, regional and global hostile forces. The on-going Indo- China regional strategic race will only benefit India if Pakistan becomes an insignificant entity thus posing minimal plausible threat to India. In post US draw down scenario India is likely to utilize regional/ global terrorist outfits to target Chinese-financed CPEC projects while remaining unseen (Gul, 2014).

### **Retarded Peace and Reconciliation Process**

Cumulative negative impact of GWOT and its fallout on our political, diplomatic, economic capacity and security fabric has made Pakistan dependent upon foreign aid/ assistance thus remaining exploitable by regional/ global powers. Decades long mental and physical pain thus merits peace, negotiation and reconciliation efforts with cohesive national back up inclusive of all state / non-state actors in the backdrop of ongoing successful military operation (Rahim, 2020).

US negotiated and signed an agreement with the Taliban at Doha on 29 February 2020; an entity which always remained un-recognized by both US and West. Furthermore the binding agreement did not include Afghan Government; underlining cause to this effect has been the fact that US want to leave Afghanistan, with or without inking an agreement. Pakistan on the other hand has assured Afghanistan for extending her complete support in order to bring peace/ stability to both Afghanistan and the adjoining region (Sheikh, 2020).

### **Drone Strikes: Negative Fallout**

International law concludes that US/ NATO/ ISAF cannot violate Pakistan's territorial sovereignty as retribution by launching drone strikes against Haqqani network or any such outfit using former FATA region to attack targets inside Afghanistan as the active attribute-ability of such non-state actors has not been established. A military act as self-defense can be qualified only after an armed attack against another country has been committed (Soofi, 2011).

### ***China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)***



CPEC project will have profound impacts on the economic development of Pakistan but it will also bring few challenges in the form of political instability, ideological conflicts, insurgency, separatist movements and terrorism. Pakistan will have to apply more efficient diplomacy to allay the competing concerns of potential spoilers. Pakistan's armed forces will have to play a proactive role to limit the hostile activities in the country and ensure completion of CPEC projects through provision of additional security. Russian interest with China and CPEC will be a way to counter the Indo-US nexus.

### **Domestic Challenges and Governance**

Pakistan's geo-strategic location with China, India, Iran and Afghanistan being immediate neighbours alongside Russia and CARs in close proximity underlines its regional centrality/inevitability in security, energy, trade and commerce sectors. China's economic and commercial expansion towards the Middle East, Africa and beyond through its '*One Road-One Belt*' paradigm may not be possible without CPEC which remains equally significant for Pakistan's security and economic regional/global mosaics (Shahid, 2020). Pakistan is faced with numerous internal challenges including terrorism/militancy, political instability, incompetent/dishonest judiciary, poor/corrupt governance, and a fragile economy coupled with complex human development issues. Both domestic challenges and Indian machinations undermine Pakistan's ability to expeditiously implement CPEC projects. Endemic corruption coupled with scarcity of public services has rendered the Government ineffective.

### **Low Human Development**

Pakistan's low Human Development Index is likely to limit its human resource potential for expansion of CPEC projects. Furthermore, the poor, uneducated and dissatisfied populace remains susceptible for exploitation by terrorist outfits and their extremist ideologies. In a post-US draw-down scenario, a healthy, educated and skilled Pakistani youth can transform the country especially if it is given the limitless opportunities that CPEC has to offer. Our political elite alongside relevant Government officials/departments need to realize that without education and skills, our youth potential is at risk of becoming a liability in case not timely harnessed.

### **Energy Shortfall and Climate Change**

Pakistan's economic potential is adversely affected due to energy shortages consequently enhancing industrial/manufacturing sectors

intricacies in declining exports and developing trade networks. A number of thermal and hydropower projects have been initiated as part of CPEC to remove energy shortages and empowering 'National Grid' which in turn will magnify our economic potential. Climate change and global warming remains prevalent and reality, which cannot be prevented by Islamabad alone; however, a global focus and cooperation are needed.

### **Foreign Funding/ Support to Afghanistan and Adjoining Region**

In past foreign installed Kabul regimes crumbled once the political and financial supports were withdrawn in reference to USSR and Najibullah regime equation. In post US Afghan drawdown scenario Afghan President and CEO may lose popularity being brokered by US democratic process thus requiring continuity of foreign political, diplomatic, security and economic aid for survivability. Furthermore, indicators like global economic recession and regional policy shifts reflect that long term foreign support/ funding will not remain assured at present levels. Both global powers and analysts are unanimous on regional powers remaining integral part to Afghan durable solution with Pakistan playing a major role (Shanty, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Afghanistan can be termed as a '*teardrop on the cheek of time*'. Afghanistan remains a traumatized state with over thirty years of unprecedented infighting. Resultantly, Pakistan in particular and the adjoining region in general have experienced associated complexities for decades. Furthermore lack of political, diplomatic and institutionalized inaptitude/ capacities is adversely affecting Pakistan's socio-political, diplomatic, economic and security mosaics. Pakistan's societal mosaic remains confronted with poverty, illiteracy, inadequate health facilities, unemployment and above all increasing political/ social insecurities. Pakistan at this critical juncture requires sincere leadership with educated/ politically aware masses to survive and swipe away the prevailing filth. Pakistan should also focus upon its fragile economic mosaic as an economically strong, vibrant and satisfied polity insulates the country against external threats. Pakistan today stands at cross roads to either embark upon its journey to progress and prosperity while introducing stringent governance and accountability mechanisms in key domains or to take a road with no destination in sight. Furthermore Pakistan is required to make conducive internal/ external strategic choices in synchronization with its masses for sustainable regional peace and development. The

choices we make today will have consequences for decades to come. If chaos prevails in Afghanistan, the regional and extra regional countries are likely to bear the brunt with severest fallout for immediate neighbors, especially Pakistan. Most importantly Pakistan must not shy away from her responsibilities and play a constructive role for stability and progression of Afghanistan.

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