

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The US Exit Strategy 2014 from Afghanistan has now entered one of their final phase, which happens to be the Withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US has already lessened its troops, though there were certain changes after Trump came to power. But still there is a looming confusion which exists regarding the aftermath of the event. That is how this Withdrawal will come to play and what would the Afghanistan's post-US withdrawal would look like. Moreover, Pakistan will also be affected in more than one ways. The US is going to be leaving quite a vacuum upon which many regional and foreign powers have set their eyes on. India, Iran, China and Russia are all going to be a part of the post-US Afghanistan but this might only produce more instability. Moreover, it will have drastic security, political and strategic implications for Pakistan. The picture which comes to the mind is going to be of an everlasting loop of security complexes and strategic undertones after the withdrawal.

Key words: United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Conflict, Al-Qaeda

The international realm is prepared and disposed with diverse circumstances, which contour and restructure the prevailing dynamics. A similar case is seen in terms of South Asian region, which though, is not as docile and compliant as it used to be. The region has some weak points and fragilities and most of them are relevant to war and volatile power fissures. There is a looming existence of terrorism in the region and particularly in the dangerous milieu of Afghanistan, things are rather conflictual. The region has become rather porous in terms of conflict and war, especially after the Afghanistan fiasco there are more vulnerabilities in the regional sphere. The datum is that the state has roughened up due to the post-9/11 fiasco, when the US intervened militarily in Afghanistan and a full-fledged war was launched. This war was initially fought by NATO, US and Pakistan, which meant that its spill-over in Pakistan was rudimentary. And after the spill-over the security of Pakistan was also bolstered. In fact the situation was such that the civil-military scenario of Pakistan was shot and the FATA and KP areas were shoved in extremism.

But almost 17 years after lingering in the state and roughing up the security environment of the region, the US is in the final stages of withdrawal from Afghanistan. This is confusing because it cannot be known whether it is a spiraling victory of a bad call because it will have some intense consequences for not just Afghanistan but the entire region as a whole. Moreover, it cannot be diffused which means that the South Asian region will become a concentrated and volatile region for some time till the trouble is not sorted. Therefore, this paper analyzes the aspects of contemporary situation as well as the Withdrawal Policy and also addresses the

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queries as to what consequences of the scenario will be cast on the regional fabric and what implications would Pakistan get.

Historical Overview

On 11th September 2001, the Twin Towers were attacked killing a mass amount of people in the US but it unleashed a goliath for the rest of the world, especially the Arab world. And as soon as 13th September, the War on Terror was launched and in it began as air strikes carried out in an operation termed as 'Operation Enduring Freedom' by the coalition forces of US, Canada, France and Germany. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban which were in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime were considered to be responsible and there was an overwhelming presence of them in Afghanistan. Moreover, there was the idea that OBL has been hiding out in Afghanistan. Successively, the local forces of the Northern Alliance and the Hazara-tribe fighters battled together to halt the Taliban rule with the support of allied forces. On December 8th when President George Bush promised that, "One by one we're going to find them and piece by piece we'll tear their terrorist network apart." (Lansford, 2011)

The Taliban rule was dissolved and in November 2001, the Northern Alliance arrived in Kabul to eradicate the leftovers. The US at that time led 'Operation Anaconda' so as to vacate Afghanistan from any fragments. In May 2002, the US officials said that 'major combat' in Afghanistan has ended thus established its footholds for a long term presence (Thompson, December 28, 2014). Afghanistan after the US invasion was more of a land and state with several ruptures in its economic, political and military features. Moreover, Pakistan was also hit bad, as mentioned before that the Taliban affiliates infiltrated FATA and the Agencies as well as KP and installed their Pakistani versions in the state which cracking down of the Pakistani security fabric as well.

Security Situation in Afghanistan

The years following the US involvement till date the security within Afghanistan has grown rather hostile to its state and land because the WoT left Afghanistan into a securitized state due to multiple blowbacks in the face of attacks by Taliban and their counter-attacks by the US and its allies. A chronology of these events shows that the state turned into a giant fuming ball of inter-connected security hassles. In addition, the more the US curbed Taliban and Al-Qaeda by armed operations and drone attacks, there were more blowbacks for Afghanistan. All in all the state turned into a cauldron of brewing heat well mashed up and highly dangerous.

Two points perfectly entail the security situation in Afghanistan; growth of NSAs and internal skirmishes. Firstly, there was the foreign involvement which hints at the US and other foreign powers using Afghanistan as a giant war-zone even when war was considered done for. Much of this can be claimed at the US planning strategically to

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completely break the backbone of Al-Qaeda and other groups by hitting hard at its key areas. This, as mentioned before had many blowbacks and still does. Secondly, there has been an immense regrouping and regrowth of NSA's including Taliban who still control certain key areas of Afghanistan and it is now being claimed that apart from these groups, ISIS has also entered the sphere of Afghanistan,(Al-Mukhtar, June 6, 2017) which poses threat to not just the sanctity of Afghanistan but also Pakistan and the region. Moreover, there is a tussle of ISIS versus Taliban, which makes the security precarious(Pillalmarri, June 21, 2015).

Instability: Causes and Effects

Today Afghanistan stands at the crossroads of instability, which have taken the better part of Afghanistan. A major part of instability in Afghanistan was and still is inherent in its structure and the systemic change which was brought on. There are two core features which helped in instigating instability because of the unpredictability each of them were going through; political and economic.

Firstly, the idea of political disintegration within the system of Afghanistan happens to be the most important idea behind the instability in the state. For one thing, the war on terror completely left this structure in shambles and there is somewhat of a defacto structure of government in Afghanistan, which is more or less a hybrid driven by politics and security. Not only that, it is constructed of fluctuating alliances persistent among various official, familiar, and illegitimate actors, complexes, and establishments. There are manifold internal political struggles the very first of which can be summed as, "Some of the biggest fissures among Afghan officials concern the U.S.-brokered political agreement that created the ruling National Unity Government in 2014. The deal managed to temporarily paper over the divisions among the country's competing factions by granting Ghani the presidency and Abdullah, a rival, the newly created position of chief executive officer."(Jones, June 16, 2016) There is an inherent power struggle in terms of the Taliban wanting to re-gain their lost power.

Secondly, in terms of economic instability, after the war somewhat diminished, there might have been a set-up of government but even that could not prevent the economic fallout. Obviously, the state was left in a horrific state of finance due to the lack of infrastructure or means to economic gains. Strangely, there was some growth in their economy in the years later but it was very slow and fluctuating and that is largely because it is aid dependent, which makes it vulnerable as it is estimated that, "In 2010-2011 aid (including funding to the security sector) accounted for more than 104 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, according to a World Bank report released earlier this year."(Horin, April 22, 2013) Another report claimed that, "The flow of military spending and aid has come to dominate the market sector of Afghan GDP and vastly exceed Afghanistan's ability to raise internal revenues. The central government probably cannot function or survive without outside civil and economic aid at levels

that can provide it with popular support and economic stability well beyond 2017. It cannot possibly fund effective ANSF unless the US and outside donor nations foot most of the bill.”(Lamb & Shawn, April 2012)These two features keep adding to instability in Afghanistan because they are intertwined with security and stability.

Regional Interfaces

Another factor marks the contemporary environment of Afghanistan happens to be the effects of its internal features on the region and vice versa. In short, the state has become a key factor in determining the regional roles of other states and conversely many important regional players have larger stakes in terms of Afghanistan. There are three core regional states, which are vigorously involved in the Afghanistan crisis and this involvement is marked as not just intense but effective as well; Pakistan, Iran and India.

- **India** happens to have many strategic validations when it concerns Afghanistan. The Indian government stands by Afghanistan especially its security and political fissures and it makes use of it very keenly. Moreover, the Taliban were always a point via which they could hit at the lagging security and strategic placement of Pakistan. The reason is that the Indian side believes and propagates that Pakistan has a direct involvement by the insurgent group(Price, April 2013). India has formulated an alliance with Ashraf Ghani to secure its political plans, economic inspirations and the geo-strategic enterprise of the state and has been developed by keeping in view with the conjoint antagonism of Pakistan.

- **Iran** is no doubt an important actor for Afghanistan and the regional interplay as it is a state of interest for Iran. This is because not only are the two states sharing a border which tied their security issues together but also because for Iran fundamentalism based on Sunni Wahabism and Talibanization is a big issue. Apart from that, Iran has also been politically tangled in Afghanistan in a subtle way(Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart, & Mahnad, 2014).The US and India both have also come to the realization of how valid Iran is for Afghanistan. Particularly, if the US is to withdraw, it will enhance the concerns and the prospects for Iran to move into the Afghani foyer. It is also important for Iran to see to the security situation of Afghanistan because recent endeavors show ISIS might be infiltrating and that is not in Iran’s interests.

- **Pakistan** is perhaps the most important actor in terms of the current situation with Afghanistan. The Afghan government is highly insecure and non-trusting towards Pakistan because they always see Pakistan as being the core reason of spreading Talibanization on its boundary. The two do not have the most admirable relations and it is more of a ‘yes, but’ approach which is slowly turning into a ‘do-

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more' from Pakistan to Afghanistan. On the behest, there are border skirmishes and DurandLine related issues and on the other hand there is the constant back and forth blame game between the two, "In a recent TV interview, President Ashraf Ghani emphasized the historic bonds between Pakistan and Afghanistan and the need for both countries to work together to fight terrorism. But, in the same breath, he asserted that state-to-state relations with Pakistan were a bigger challenge for Afghanistan than the existence of terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. President Ghani said that he could provide the addresses of the Taliban leaders in Quetta. He asserted that Pakistan provides sanctuaries to terrorists and trains them(Iqbal, August 1, 2016)."

Global Powers Interactions

Of course the contemporary situation of Afghanistan would be incomplete without the involvement of global actors who have their own interests and it is largely these interests which are at the core of the security situation.

- **US** still remains to be the main player though there seems intricacy. For one thing with Trump in power there was a push towards the idea of surging the war in Afghanistan, "Having previously promised to get the United States "out of the nation-building business" President Trump is contemplating sending 3,000 to 5,000 more U.S troops to Afghanistan. It's a move that is said to be strongly backed by White House National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster (reportedly leading some in the White House to dub it "McMaster's War")."(Walt, May 17, 2017)The fact that the US hit Afghanistan with MOAB(Calamur, April 13, 2017) proves that it has its stakes in the states.

- **Russia** in the contemporary Afghanistan has "a new geopolitical situation is emerging in the region, and it seems that Russia has decided not to remain "neutral" in the protracted conflict wracking the Asian country. The recent tripartite meeting in Moscow involving China, Pakistan and Russia to discuss Afghanistan security is just one example of Russia's growing interests(Saifullah, January 3, 2017)." And this is largely because of the growing ISIS shadows in the state which puts Russia into perils and, "In December 2016, Moscow disclosed its contacts with the Taliban, the group that is intent on toppling the Afghan government. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced that it is sharing intelligence and cooperating with the Taliban to fight Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group's (ISIL, also known as ISIS) militants in Afghanistan(Sharifi, February 25, 2017)."

- **China** wants to have major economic stakes in the region but also wishes to protect its own security interests regarding Xinjiang as well as the CPEC, which needs all the security stability it can to be a success.

The US Withdrawal Policy

A necessary precursor in understanding this rationality is the idea of US Exit Strategy which led to this withdrawal. The US Exit Strategy was the idea that by 2014 the number of US troops from Afghanistan will be lessened and gradually it will exit the theatre. This can be computed in the idea that, “After 15 years of fighting, hundreds of billions of dollars spent, and tens of thousands killed on both sides, Afghanistan is not better off today than it was immediately following the collapse of the Taliban regime(Ben-Meir, August 3, 2016).” Thus it was considered that as long as the employment of the NATO troops will linger the probability of violence in the future radicalization would only increase.

This happens to be the next step of the Strategy which is withdrawing of the US forces from Afghanistan. Because of the unwarranted and unhinged position of Afghanistan the US withdrawal is in protracted stage. The, “US troops reached 130,000 in 2011 but were drawn down, leaving the Afghan military in control at the end of 2014. There are now 13,500 NATO troops there(News", June 29, 2017).” In a bid during the year 2011, “Obama said 33,000 US troops would be withdrawn by the summer of 2012 or by September at the latest. The first 5,000 would return next month and another 5,000 by the end of the year(MacAskill & Wintour, June 23, 2011).”According to a chart it seems that in the initial phase of the war and US involvement in Afghanistan, there were around 10,000 to 30,000 troops in Afghanistan which expanded rather quickly in 2008 and 2012 when it reached from 40,000 to around 100,000 respectively. From 2014, this number began decreasing back to 40,000 until in 2017 it was reached to a groundbreaking 84,000(Kurtzleben, July 6, 2016).

There was an analogous decree that was perceived in 2014 as well which was the expected year for the withdrawal. “President Obama, declaring that it was “time to turn the page on a decade in which so much of our foreign policy was focused on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” he announced on that “he planned to withdraw the last American troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016(Landler, May 27, 2014).”It actually churns down to the amount of US forces in Afghanistan and it is estimated that, “The US currently has almost 10,000 troops there, operating in a supportive role to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)(Friedman & Bokhari, May 1, 2017).”

Underlying Principle of Withdrawal

There are a few core ideas behind why the US finally opted for this withdrawal and three points can be attributed to it; the prevalent circumstances, strategic games and Syrian factor.

Firstly, the factor which accounts for the prevalent situation which means two things; at one time it is the idea that the Afghan government and the ANF needed to stand on

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their own feet in terms of security and military, which points to the fact that it would be better for the US to help them in political, socio-development and economic factors. It also points to the idea that the Afghan conundrum is no longer viable for a military solution, which automatically undercut the US presence. On the other hand, it also means that the presence of the US troops were, regarding what many claim, only adding more to a jostled up security fabric not just for Afghanistan but also for Pakistan. The numbers of suicide bombings prove this, especially those which target the US troops. This pointed to the need for the US to withdraw before things could get worse and there be prompted another war. Moreover, in Afghanistan since the presence of military was not conveying solidity in the state especially with the rise in extremism which is the main reason of security threats.

The US is not leaving Afghanistan per se; it is actually deploying its allies and partners to keep a deep check on the dynamics which unfold. This has a lot of strategic value because this was the losses of the US would be cut and the US would not have to directly participate in much that is going on. It would also mean that if things clutter, the US would not be directly liable which is for the state, a strategic leverage. Finally, there is the Syrian factor which is usually ignored by most scholars. The fact is that Syrian crisis is one of the more intense and golden chances for the US to retain its hegemonic glory and with Russia involved in Syria, it became more important to focus its forces, logistics and tactics on Syria. Of course, the ISIS and the Regime are other core challenges, which for the US are far valid than Afghanistan.

Implications for Pakistan

The presence of US forces had a visible set of implications for Pakistan to cater to in the war against terror and its withdrawal is bound to have certain implications; both good and not so good. These implications can be analyzed under three points; security implications, political implications and strategic implications. Firstly, in terms of security implications, the US withdrawal can lead to some significant spiraling in Afghanistan, which will have a drastic effect on Pakistan. As already seen, the withdrawal did leave some security fissures in Afghanistan and suicide bombing became swift as was the case with the deadly Kabul attack in June 2017 (Rasmussen, June 6, 2017). This only means that there are inherent weaknesses in the security structure of Afghanistan and is bound to enter Pakistan, especially with the looming threat of ISIS. Moreover, this is bound to be a hurdle in the already going military operations within Pakistan, which are staggering on to eradicate terrorism. They have almost ousted many extremist elements but if there is a surge in Afghanistan there could be more influx of these entities within Pakistan. Moreover, the idea is also floating that some cases of Pakistani terrorist incidents lately in Parachinar have been from Afghanistan's aid. This is a lingering predicament because with the Afghan government and India in tow there is a mounting antagonism towards Pakistan and no third power to check on it, which adds to the security fissures of a Pakistan which is

on the verge of getting rid of the fabric of terrorism by conducting various military operations.

Secondly, there are the political implications for Pakistan which point to the various intricate political webs between states and non-state actors. In this situation, Pakistan will be somewhat stuck between two evils; the Taliban and the Afghan-India duo. Furthermore, two things emerge out of it, to dialogue or not to dialogue and the intricate development of tackling both the evils at one time. Another point is that in this case Pakistan's lagging foreign policy and the lack of a sound foreign policy administration things become more jarring as Pakistan will have to beckon towards the lesser of the evils, whatever that might be. Moreover, the political pressure upon Pakistan from all sides might be a little too much due to the quest of 'do more' which completely ignores the position and efforts by the state.

Finally, in terms of strategy, Pakistan will again be viewing Afghanistan after the US as both a liability and an asset. It could be a liability due to the fragility of both states which could be a bigger issue in terms of security and growth in terrorism once again. This is also in terms of the fact that RAW involvement in Baluchistan could become a hassle(Khan, May 6, 2015). And in terms of an asset because of the strategic location and the strategic power-play, Pakistan could make use of due to the CPEC(Cheema, November 25, 2015).

Impact on Afghanistan

Two things can be talked about regarding the withdrawal impact on Afghanistan; internal interactions and external interactions. Firstly, there is the idea regarding the internal security dilemmas which will either remain what they are or grow. This is also understood by the fact that the ANF, the Taliban and the ISIS tussle is serious because these entities are on altogether different planes in terms of power and influence. Moreover, there is also the fact that the political tussle between various political factions would also be affected because it will grow frivolous since each side would want a piece of the action by gaining power. This was checked under the US but after the withdrawal this might go unchecked or swerve out of control for at least some time. In terms of the social factors, the public in Afghanistan is highly mistrustful of the US troops but is also mistrusting to the Taliban and their government. In a post-Afghanistan withdrawal, the social fabric of Afghanistan will stagger along normalcy and might not get the advantages it requires. In fact this is one aspect which might be most negatively affected with the withdrawal because the government is taken up in its own issues that it might not cater to the people like the US development programs did.

And for the external aspect, the relationship of Afghanistan with other states is bound to get affected as there will be a power vacuum in the state and other states would

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want to influence this. It will become a plethora of interactions which might not be with the government at all times. The Afghan relations with India and China might improve but with Pakistan and Russia they will go to new lows and perhaps remain there for a while.

Conclusion

The US entered Afghanistan in 2001 and completely made a security mess of the state and the South Asian region. It also opened up the chasm to political and economic whirlpool which ate up the regional peace. Of all the regional states apart from Afghanistan, Pakistan was the one which was grossly affected and the ruminants are still felt in the face of aftershocks of the war. Now after nearly a decade, the US has begun slowly moving out of Afghanistan even though its posture is still somewhat confusing. Just like the effects of the war, this withdrawal is also going to have certain manifold impacts and implications for the state. The number one would be for its political and security standings, which are swiftly moving towards betterment after the Operation Zarb-e-Azb and Operation Rah-e-Rast.

The idea is that if the Taliban or even ISIS begins gaining momentum in Afghanistan, it will have a blasting spill-over in Pakistan and that might be highly destructive for not just the two states but also the entire region. And if by some chance Pakistan can escape that, it still will have to face not just the power vacuum by the US but also the immense pressure by India and Iran with their antagonistic posturing towards Pakistan as they are keen to isolate Pakistan and if they achieve that, then there will be more than trouble for Pakistan's steadily regaining position and economy. But the truth remains that the US might be slowly withdrawing but it still is a big power with many stakes for the region and the state of Afghanistan which make the entire track slippery even though the US has a good amount of reasons to withdraw, if the New Great Game shifts its gears then it might revert. But Pakistan has to step up its diplomatic and security game and carefully try to out-manuever from this scenario, which might make up for volatility inside its own boundary.

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