

THE US EXIT STRATEGY: IMPACT ON WAR ON TERROR IN AFGHANISTAN

**DR. NAZIR HUSSAIN AND
M. NAJAM-UD-DIN FARANI**

In the contemporary global security environment the fate of major nation-states rests on the way they deal with non-state violent actors. Terror has become a global phenomenon. The more global it becomes, the greater the threat to the existential legitimacy of nation-states. In the aftermath of 9/11, to make terrorism a global phenomenon, terrorists have found leverage in the long-drawn-out theatre of the war on terror in Afghanistan. The protracted nature of the war on terror serves the interests of the terrorists much more than that of the coalition forces fighting terrorism.

Since the inception of this war the United States and its allies have wanted to accomplish their objectives efficiently inside the Afghan territory. This efficiency was demonstrated by the US and its allies in the initial phase of the war. However, since 2003 the Taliban resurgence after the beginning of the Iraq war and their spring offensive of 2006 have resulted in a receding trend for the US and its allies. Taliban have scored more successes in the post-2006 period as compared to their gains in the pre-2006 days. As a result the US has had to review its policy of war against terrorism in Afghanistan.

Even before 9/11, the problem of terrorism was still part of the US foreign policy. At the end of the Cold War era and with the advent of the Clinton administration, the US had to deal with a variety of existential threats. The first instance of terrorist existential threat during the Clinton era that came into the spotlight was the bombing of the World Trade Centre on 26 February 1993, killing six and injuring 1,000. Other major terrorist attacks targeting US citizens included: Oklahoma City explosion in a federal government building on 19 April 1995; attack on Al-Khobar Towers (Damam, Saudi Arabia) on 25 June

Dr. Nazir Hussain is Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad and Najam Farani is a freelance Security Analyst based in Islamabad.
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1996; and suicide attacks on US embassies (Kenya and Tanzania) on 7 August 1998.

Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US had not taken any comprehensive global initiative against terrorism. It was during the era of George Bush Jr. that the collapse of the twin towers in New York resulted in a loss of nearly 3,000 lives. It was the ‘Pearl Harbor’ event for the Americans in the 21st century. The Bush administration believed the seeds of 9/11 were in the Afghan terrain, ruled by the Taliban. Consequently, a global war against terrorism was launched by the US in response to the perceived existential terrorist threats. This war was initiated on the very ground from where the Americans proclaimed victory against the former Soviet Union. The initial declared objectives and scope of the war on terror, as a US-led multilateral venture, were defined by the United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR).

In order to define the war on terror, these resolutions can be divided into two categories: pre-9/11 and post-9/11 resolutions. The pre-9/11 resolutions include UNSCR 1214, 1267, 1269, while the post-9/11 resolutions are UNSCR 1368, 1373, 1377, 1383, 1386, 1390. UNSCR 1214 demonstrates the United Nations Security Council’s concern for the civil war within Afghanistan and the role of the Taliban in it.⁽¹⁾ UNSCR 1267 established the “sanctions regime” against Al-Qaeda by reaffirming the Security Council’s commitment to “Afghan integrity and sovereignty” while keeping in view the commitment of UNSCRs 1189 (1998), 1193 (1998) and 1214 (1998).⁽²⁾ This resolution was further modified by UNSCRs 1333 (2000), 1390 (2002), 1455 (2003), 1526 (2004), 1617 (2005), 1735 (2006), 1822 (2008), 1904 (2009) and resolution 1989 (2011), in order to strengthen the capacity and resolve of the sanctions regime against Al-Qaeda.⁽³⁾ UNSCR 1269 reaffirmed UN’s resolve against terrorism and emphasized its focus on counter-terrorism strategies.⁽⁴⁾ UNSCR 1368 condemned the 11 September attacks which were meant to hamper American sovereignty.⁽⁵⁾ On 7 October 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom was launched by the Bush administration, in order to topple the Taliban regime and eliminate the terrorist organization named Al-Qaeda.⁽⁶⁾ UNSCR 1373 emphasized UN’s resolve against terrorism by magnifying its counter-terrorism posture. UNSCR 1377 expressed UN’s declaration on global efforts to combat terrorism.⁽⁷⁾ UNSCR 1378 elucidated support for a transitional government in Afghanistan and condemned the Taliban regime for supporting Al-Qaeda network within Afghanistan.⁽⁸⁾ UNSCR 138 endorsed the Bonn Agreement on Afghanistan.⁽⁹⁾ UNSCR 1386 approved the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for keeping peace, order and security within Afghanistan.⁽¹⁰⁾

The UNSCRs were meant to establish a joint US-led multilateral venture against terrorism. These resolutions aimed at eliminating the Taliban regime from Afghanistan. These resolutions also sought to legitimize the US moves towards the elimination of Al-Qaeda network. Liberalization and democratization of a reconstructed Afghanistan were thought to be the consequential outcomes of these resolutions, which the Americans thought

would also be heartily accepted by the Afghans, a thought which continues to remain unrealized.

George Bush was not able to get the results that he wanted from the Afghan war on terror. The incoming US president, given the increasing domestic compulsions, felt the urge to review the Afghan war on terror. This led to the need for pronouncing the US exit strategy from Afghanistan. Since 9/11, the Afghan war on terror drifted in strategy from Bush's 'engagement' to Obama's 'end game' announced in December 2009. US President Obama's exit strategy outlines a timeframe for the departure of US troops from Afghanistan, starting from July 2011 up to 2014. Instead of directly combating terrorists, the US would support the Afghan regime and train its forces to make them self-reliant, in maintaining peace and order, within the Afghan borders, after the 'withdrawal' of US forces. It consists of limiting the US focus on eliminating the 'safe havens' of Al-Qaeda across the Pak-Afghan tribal border region, highlighted under the contours of 'AfPak' policy.⁽¹¹⁾ It further includes the initiation of a reconciliation process concerning Afghan nation-building effort while keeping in view the bigger picture of stability at both the regional and international levels..

There have been three instances of exit scenario in Afghanistan by the foreign forces, first followed by British troops in 1842; the second scenario emerged when the Soviets decided to exit Afghanistan in 1989 and the third and last one emerged in the form of US Afghan exit strategy. Afghanistan is already passing through the middle phase of this US strategy and only time will decide its fate.

This paper will attempt to determine the nature of the US exit strategy, i.e. whether it is a disengagement or a transition strategy. The study will also address the issue of the inherent clash between initially declared objectives of war on terror in Afghanistan and the objectives of contemporary US exit strategy. It will also explore the clash of red lines among the regional actors on the issue of US end game in Afghanistan and the probable future withdrawal scenario that will reveal itself in the meantime. The relevance of a research inquiry depends upon its utility for understanding the current dynamics of any past or present phenomenon, while synthesizing a discovery about the phenomenon with the discoveries already made about it. The utility of this research lies in the synthesized understanding and discovery of the core issues, addressed by the US Afghan exit strategy, in view of the contemporary war on terror, going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Theoretical framework

The explanatory understanding of US exit strategy from Afghanistan and its impact on the Afghan war on terror can be adjudged by the utility provided by frame analysis of different stakeholders involved in defining the Afghan theatre of war on terror and its consequent futuristic prospects. Frame analysis requires the services rendered by frame theory.

A theory which tends to elucidate the conceptualization and contextualization of problems, issues or any phenomena by means of using the

decisional perceptual lenses of actions and choices is defined as frame theory. It helps in understanding the decision making process. It explicates the marketing and selling of optimal choices, prioritized by decision-makers.⁽¹²⁾ It also clarifies the perceptual academic lenses by addressing the following issues involved in frame analysis: framing; prioritization among different frames; counter frames, and impact of frames.

The suggestion of utilizing frames in the social science discourse was first given by Gregory Bateson in 1955 for understanding the contextual impact and influence of perceptions and presumptions on the construal lenses, while trying to elucidate any situation under study.⁽¹³⁾ Erving Goffman's work "Frame Analysis", written in 1974, is considered a pioneering text on frame theory and frame analysis.⁽¹⁴⁾ He is considered as the key exponent of frame analysis. Goffman tried to explicate his views on how people evaluate their decisions, while interpreting different perceptual narratives of diverse individuals, living in diverse social spheres.

According to Karen Feste, "a frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue."⁽¹⁵⁾ Frames are the functional interpretative lenses through which we can understand the discrete features of reality. There is only one objective world, i.e. the subjective world. The frame analysis, generated by the application and utility of different frames is to subjectively interpret the reality under observation. In this manner, frame analysis provides an objective approach to deal with the subjective reality of our social science world. According to David Levin, situations can be defined with the help of frames, constituting three essential elements; "problem, protagonist and solution."⁽¹⁶⁾ The process of framing, defined by these aforementioned variables, would help us understand the US exit strategy and its impact on the war on terror in Afghanistan.

Framing helps in the understanding of the application of various lenses and how they are used by individuals. The application of multiple filters provides an opportunity to decide preferences among a set of various frames. The understanding of prioritization process, relating to the available cluster of frames, offers us an insight into the interactive relationship between status quo frames, counter frames and their consequential outcomes. From a holistic point of view, frame analysis, frame theory, framing and frames collectively provide an academic theoretical platform to understand the decision making process.

Interacting frames do have an impact on each other. Such an interactive discourse between different frames may result in the formulation of new frames. The very nature of the interaction among different frames can be defined into three broader categories; conflictual, harmonious and grey. The frame theory helps in the articulation of interaction between different frames via interpretation of different contextual situations.

In comparison to the status quo defined before 9/11, a new situation emerged for the US in its foreign policy formulation. The 9/11 tragedy was a global game changing event. It affected the existential frames of states and other stakeholders. The state affected most by 9/11 was Afghanistan. The first venture of global war against terrorism began in Afghanistan. The 'Operation Enduring

Freedom' and the resultant ouster of the Taliban regime affected the frames of Afghans as they were the primary affected party. The other main stakeholder, violently affected by the aftermath of 9/11 and 'Operation Enduring Freedom' was Pakistan. It provided the logistic support to the US forces in carrying out its operations on the Afghan soil. Pakistan had to face the retaliation of enemy forces, being the primary supporter of US forces in Afghan proximity.

The frame theory is helpful in understanding the evolution of the status quo in the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the aftermath of both 9/11 and the pronouncement of US exit strategy from Afghanistan. In order to define the scope of the Afghan war on terror, the UN Security Council Resolutions are also helpful in framing the scope and initially defined objectives of the war against terror. In this regard, this research study has focused on the frames provided by the UNSCR 1214, 1267, 1269, 1368, 1373, 1377, 1378, 1383 and 1386.

In order to evaluate Bush's engagement in the Afghan war on terror to Obama's end game announced for Afghanistan, this research study includes the frames of former president George Bush. The sources of Bush's frame have been taken from the statistics associated with the event of 9/11.⁽¹⁷⁾ Tom Templeton and Tom Lumley highlight some interesting as well as ironic statistics associated with the framing of 9/11. In order to frame the achievements claimed by George Bush in Afghan war against terrorism, the research study includes a document from the archives of White House titled "Waging and Winning the War on Terror."⁽¹⁸⁾ One of the major counter frames, generated from within the US against Bush's frame of war on terror, was given by Senator John Kerry, in his 2004 presidential debate against George Bush.⁽¹⁹⁾ He criticized George W. Bush for not having a withdrawal frame for the US war against terrorism.

The official texts of US President Obama's speeches are helpful in framing the US exit strategy from Afghanistan. Two speeches delivered by President Obama are important for framing this strategy. The first speech, which promulgated the US exit strategy from Afghanistan, was given by President Obama on 1 December 2009. The second keynote speech which highlights Obama's frame on the US exit strategy from Afghanistan was given on 22 June 2011. In order to further contextualize the US exit strategy the research study analyzes the frames of US financial crisis of 2008, Iraq war, Obama's electoral campaign promises for exit from Iraq and a renewed focus on Afghan war on terror in Afghanistan.

Karen A. Feste has given the presidential frames of Clinton, Bush and Obama, regarding the problem of terrorism. She describes Clinton's approach to tackling terrorism as "conflict avoidance" approach; Bush's approach to tackling terrorism as "fighting" approach and that of Obama as "problem solving" approach.⁽²⁰⁾ Her work is of great significance considering the interpretation of interaction between the US presidential frames and terrorist frames. On the other hand, Gilles Dorransoro's research report is helpful in framing US counter frames against the ongoing US-Afghan exit strategy and its impact on war against terror in Afghanistan. This document particularly focuses on the differences in opinion between the US civil and military establishment on the

US course of action in Afghanistan. The cost of war is also an important variable which frames the US exit strategy. In order to define cost of war while examining the US exit strategy the research has included a journalistic as well as an academic investigative analysis.⁽²¹⁾

In order to access the interaction of US frames with the frames of other stakeholders in the Afghan war on terror, the research study includes the Afghan as well as Pakistani frames, from the point of view of the state. *The IPRI Factfile* (2011) a regular publication of the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, is quite helpful in framing Afghan and Pakistani frames on various issues concerning the US exit strategy and its impact on the war on terror in Afghanistan. These issues range from negotiations with Taliban, costs of war, regional dynamics and perceptions of stakeholders pertaining to post-US withdrawal scenario.

Therefore, the frame theory and frame analysis has great research potential, which needs to be applied and utilized in the study of international relations. Its application in the study of US exit strategy and its impact on Afghan war on terror provides an innovative approach to the study of US exit strategy from Afghanistan.

Frame analysis and US exit strategy

The US exit plan for Afghanistan is, as stated above, in its middle phase. In these troublesome times, there is a greater degree of probability that some unexpected developments might take place, which may not have been framed in the existential status quo frames. The frame theory, in this regard, provides an important structural framework to interpret and get a little closer to the deduction of such prospects, where actors might not be able to find themselves at the losing sight of things. It enhances the probability of better decision making via effective analysis, relating to the scheme of things and available set of choices.

The frame analysis of US Afghan exit plan requires the study and framing of official narratives of the stakeholders at the state level of international relations analysis. It also requires the examination of non-official frames of experts and political writers or commentators. For the sake of convenience, this research study would include the examination of the following frames:

- Bush's frame of 9/11 and Afghan war on terror
- Obama's frame of end game in Afghanistan
- Afghan frames of post-withdrawal milieu
- Pakistani frames
- Costs of war

Bush's frame of 9/11 and Afghan war on terror

"Tuesday, 11 September 2001, dawned temperature and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied

themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River, the United States Congress was back in session. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run. For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travellers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine.”⁽²²⁾

The above excerpt from the 9/11 Commission Report defines the operating US frame of routine before the catastrophic attacks were being initiated on that day. This very passage clearly illustrates the conception of an ordinary American citizen to the highest US executive official, regarding the safety and normality of everyday routine life. Then everything changed for Americans. Nineteen terrorists hijacked four United Airline flights — 11, 75, 77 and 93.⁽²³⁾ Two hijacked flights went for the World Trade Center, one attacked the Pentagon and flight 93 presumably was meant to attack the White House.⁽²⁴⁾ A total of 2,823 people lost their lives as a result of these horrific attacks.⁽²⁵⁾ The probable estimated US financial losses, in the aftermath of 9/11, were 21 million dollars.⁽²⁶⁾ A state of insecurity prevailed in the US, with president Bush, addressing the nation three times on that day.⁽²⁷⁾ The UNSC passed resolution 1368, the very next day, condemning the tragic event.⁽²⁸⁾ On 20 September 2001, while addressing the joint session of Congress, president Bush declared “War on Terror.” His declaration first culminated in the form of “Operation Enduring Freedom”, initiated on 7 October 2001. A lot of achievements were proclaimed by the Bush administration in the war against terror, ranging from removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, providing structural support for democratic setup in Afghanistan to establishing more than 200 schools, distributing 25,000 textbooks and training 7000 textbooks across Afghanistan.⁽²⁹⁾

Obama’s frame of end game in Afghanistan

In order to understand Obama’s frame regarding the US exit plan for Afghanistan, this research study will categorize Obama’s frames into two types: precursor frames from 9/11 to 2009 and existential frames.

In precursor frames, impacting Obama’s frame of end game for Afghanistan, the foremost precursor frame is Bush’s frame for war on terror in Afghanistan. President Obama agreed with the former president in principle, in lieu of supporting and financing war against terrorism. There were certain issues in Bush’s policy of war against terrorism, on which Obama had a disagreement with him. The seeds of that divergence can be derived from Senator Kerry’s criticism of Bush’s policy on war against terror, during US presidential electoral debates of 2004.⁽³⁰⁾ Senator Kerry believed that it was not in the interest of America to stay engaged in the Iraq war (2003) for a longer period of time, as it was costing a lot to the taxpaying American citizens and the US forces, given the US objectives in Afghanistan. According to Senator Kerry, America needed a viable exit strategy from Iraq, in order to have a renewed focus on the Afghan

terrain, via a vigorous policy on Afghan war against terror. President Obama, before becoming the president, voted against the launching of the Iraq war.

Adding to the already existing problem of bringing compatibility between the strategies and objectives of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was another problem that faced President Obama — the financial crisis both at domestic and international levels (2008). As a consequence of that crisis, a series of banks and insurance companies, including; Fannie Mae (FNM), Freddie Mac (FRE), and Merrill Lynch (MER), faced bankruptcy.⁽³¹⁾

During his presidential electoral campaign in 2008, Obama promised to focus on financial and economic recovery at the domestic level. The only way to do that was to limit the American involvement in the war against terror, by cutting back the financial and human loss while creating new job markets for American citizens.

All of these abovementioned framed issues led President Obama to announce his reviewed policy for the Afghan war on terror under a two-pronged strategy, i.e. the Af-Pak policy (March, 2009) and the US exit strategy from Afghanistan (December, 2009). In order to analyze Obama's existential frames on the US exit strategy, this study includes selected frames from his 22 June 2011 speech:

- “10,000 troops will be removed by the end of this year”⁽³²⁾
- “33,000 troops by the end of next summer”⁽³³⁾

The troop withdrawal statistics, illustrate his commitment to the roadmap laid down by his end game for Afghanistan. It also indicates that the exit strategy would be carried out in phases in order to make it compatible with the volatile and complex changes in the future environment.

Describing his vision of an Afghan state he stated “We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place”⁽³⁴⁾ adding that it would be controlled and run by its own people with minimal foreign assistance. Given Afghanistan's revenue-expenditure imbalance the need for future foreign assistance remains imperative. The solution needs to be based upon a realistic analysis of the costs — that have been far greater — than the benefits that have been generated. It's about time the US presence in the region was reduced and security responsibility transferred to Afghan forces. It also highlights the US intent to help reconstruct democratic institutions and rebuild stronger foundations, replacing the contemporary security scenario with a stable future for Afghanistan.

“We are starting the drawdown from the position of strength.”⁽³⁵⁾

With this statement Obama implies that the Americans and the world should not take US-Afghan exit strategy as a retreat or a defeat. It should be taken symbolically as a sign of nearing the completion of one phase, in which Americans eliminated the figurehead of Al-Qaeda organization and America's number one enemy, i.e. Osama bin Laden, on 2 May 2011. The allied forces have also made life difficult for terrorists along the Pak-Afghan tribal terrain. The US forces also continue to work towards improving counterterrorism strategies in southern Afghanistan where the Taliban have a strong hold. In this manner, Americans are drawing out their forces from Afghanistan in the aftermath of Osama bin Laden's death.

- “4500 Americans have given their lives in Iraq and over 1500... in Afghanistan.”⁽³⁶⁾
- “Over the last decade, we have spent a trillion dollars on war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times. Now we must invest in America’s greatest resource, our people.”⁽³⁷⁾

In these statements President Obama makes reference to the financial and human loss that the United States has faced in this ongoing war against terrorism. In policy and strategy formulation, a good leader or the decision maker should consider the equation between sacrifices and benefits. If sacrifices exceed the benefits, it is high time for a decision maker to review policy. Barack Obama with his remarks makes it clear that the focus of policy must shift towards addressing domestic issues by restructuring the economy, providing job opportunities for the masses and overcoming the financial crisis of 2008. This statement is also indicative of the fact that the domestic pressures against the ongoing war against terror would be reflected in terms of US foreign policy changes.

- “We will continue to press Pakistan to expand its participation in securing a more peaceful future for this war-torn region.”⁽³⁸⁾

In the early days of his presidency, Obama called an inter-agency review of policy regarding Pakistan and Afghanistan, in which according to Bruce Riedel, the president said that “no issue on his foreign policy agenda was more important than the fate of Pakistan.”⁽³⁹⁾ He considers Pakistan an important strategic partner and player in the resolution of the Afghan imbroglio. But given the track record of political and strategic cleavages within the ruling administration of Pakistan, the US president believes that a two-pronged strategy is required to engage Pakistan in reaching a consensus on the peaceful future of the Afghan war on terror. On the one hand, this strategy would necessitate the financial and political support of the political administration in Pakistan via the Kerry-Lugar Bill and through other diplomatic means. On the other hand, it would also require a keen observation and check on the activities of the Pakistan military, given that certain powerful sections within the US are of the view that there is duplicity within the character of the Pakistan military. The US found this view credible considering that certain sections of the Pakistan military still support the Taliban. The way forward for the US policy makers, in this regard, is to continue to press ahead (with Af-Pak policy) as well as garner support from Pakistan, particularly in the context of negotiations with Taliban. The next step in the wake of this two-pronged strategy is to convince Pakistan that it should forcefully act against the Haqqani network in its tribal belt, which according to the US is acting as a linchpin in its counter-terrorist strategies in Afghanistan.

- “When threatened, we must respond with force — but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

The present ongoing application of US reviewed strategy requires a targeted approach, so it yields better results that would provide Americans with a peaceful environment, while making way for an honourable exit of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. This statement is also indicative of Obama’s

approval for the implementation of “Biden’s plan” in Afghanistan, which calls for targeted operations against terrorists in Afghanistan.⁽⁴¹⁾ Biden’s plan can be best exemplified by the use of drones in Pak-Afghan tribal belt.

- “Some would have America retreat from our responsibility as an anchor of global security and embrace an isolation that ignores the very real threats that we face. Others would have America over-extend ourselves, confronting every evil that can be found abroad. We must chart a more centred approach.”⁽⁴²⁾

Here, President Obama describes his “problem solving” approach for the Afghan war on terror.⁽⁴³⁾ He believes that following a mixed strategy is the way forward in Afghanistan given the sensitivity of continuously changing circumstances. Without getting overambitious, the US should follow a middle flexible path, in view of securitizing its vested interests in this region.

There are certainly official as well as non-official sections within the US, who believe that by following this ‘way forward’ in Afghanistan, America will inevitably face defeat. For example, Henry Kissinger comments that the US Afghan exit strategy is “a mechanism of failure.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Kissinger is of the view that the US like always is going for an exit, instead of an outcome of this ongoing war. James T. Conway, a Marine Corps commander, is of the view that following the timeline set by the Afghan exit strategy would provide sustenance mechanisms to terrorists randomly dispersed in this region.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Only time will decide whether the blueprints of Gen. Patreaus’ Iraq exit plan will yield the same results for Obama’s end game in Afghanistan or not.

Afghan frames of post-withdrawal situation

- Afghan frame of historical resistance against foreign occupation.

The modern history of Afghanistan shows a repetition of local resistance against foreign occupation forces. Their resistance has always forced the occupiers to formulate withdrawal strategies. There have been three instances of exit scenario in Afghanistan by foreign forces: the first followed by British troops in 1842, in which only a single trooper survived among the 42,000 invading troops, on their way back home; the second scenario emerged during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, when the USSR decided to exit Afghanistan in 1989, in view of the roadmap laid down by the Geneva Accord of 1988. The Soviets lost the war, but they were successful in peacefully transporting all their troops home safely, as compared to the trauma the British forces faced in 1842. The US Afghan exit strategy, with a time frame from July 2011-2014, is the third instance in which the invading troops have opted for a withdrawal strategy, considering the increase in domestic, regional and international pressures on the US in the form of human and financial turmoil, faced by the Obama administration, in the wake of the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the financial turmoil of 2008.

Afghans initially welcomed the US and its allied forces against Taliban and Al-Qaeda but in the wake of ever rising civilian casualties and the increase in Taliban’s resurgence the Afghan government has realized that it must take responsibility of its own issues. Given this realization, Afghans would

appreciate the financial and moral assistance from the US in the longer run, but the lessons learnt from the historical exit models suggest that Afghans would not welcome any huge presence of US forces for a longer period of time, as a consequence of domestic reasons or of foreign proxy involvement in Afghan affairs. For this very reason, President Hamid Karzai showed his full support for Obama's plan to limit US presence in the country and transfer security responsibilities from the US and allied forces to the Afghan National Army.

- Afghan frame of political reconciliation

Political reconciliation among different Afghan ethnic groups is an important tenet of US Afghan exit strategy. Political reconciliation and military reintegration were originally part of General Patreaus' exit plan for Iraq, which has now been contextualized in the US Afghan exit strategy. Americans do not see Afghan political reconciliation as a process of inducing nationhood among the Afghans as they have realized that Afghan identity or nationalism already exists and does not need to be built. There is a strong rationale to believe this argument as within the 30-year civil war, no Afghan group has gone for secessionist movement. Secondly, the process of rooting nationalism takes a lot more time as compared to the time frame given by the US Afghan exit strategy. The US officials do not want this process to be taken as Americanization of different Afghan ethnic groups. All that the US wants from this process is an initiation of dialogue among different Afghan groups and consensus between regional stakeholders over a stronger and stable future for Afghanistan. Americans tend to support the statebuilding process over the nationbuilding process, considering the overall regional security scenario. The Congressional Study Report of June 2011 suggests that political reconciliation either in the form of nationbuilding process or statebuilding process, is not going too well, due to massive corruption and irregularities in spending. Some analysts speculate that if political reconciliation did not lead to positive results, the future may result in the culmination of the "Blackwell formula."⁽⁴⁶⁾ This formula predicts that if political reconciliation would not support the reintegration process of local militia into the local police and security forces, and the reconciliation within different ethnic groups, the resultant war and ethnic faultlines would yield to the separation of Afghanistan into "Non-Pashtun North and Pashtun South."⁽⁴⁷⁾

Afghans are not so sure whether this process of reconciliation is going to yield positive results for them or not, considering the uncertain outcome of negotiations with the Taliban and the proxy involvement of regional stakeholders within the Afghan quagmire. Afghans have suspicions over the US-Taliban talks as they have not been taken into confidence over it. Fighting with the Taliban on the one hand and negotiations with them on the other hand demonstrates the dichotomy in this whole process. The majority within the Afghan public does not support the Taliban given their past record of marginalizing minority ethnicities, poor human rights record, particularly against women, and the recent surge of bloody suicide attacks, killing innocent people indiscriminately. Recent attacks on Kabul, in the form of Taliban spring offensive, demonstrate the fact that Taliban ended their negotiations with the US

as they demanded release of their top leaders in US custody, and the process has been marred by legal complications. Under such circumstances, it would be difficult to assimilate the Taliban in the Afghan political mainstream, considering the future US plans for Afghanistan.

- Afghan frame of reintegration

The process of reintegration revolves around two variables: Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Local Police (ALP). General Patreaus former ISAF Commander and now CIA chief, like his predecessor General McCrystal (former ISAF commander) is against a speedy withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, as both military generals are of the view that withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan should be 'circumstantial' in nature as ANA and ALP are still not ready to take responsibility of security of the whole of Afghanistan. The critics of the reintegration process suggest that the ethnic faultlines of local militia in Afghanistan are a lot more complex as compared to that of Iraq. In Iraq, the local militias were more inclined towards their conversion into the local security forces as compared to the case here.

There have been charges of embezzlement and corruption on the Afghan government regarding the expenditures on the training and equipping the ANA and ALP. Although recent performance of Afghan security agencies against the Taliban attacks on Kabul have been taken as a mark of success by the NATO leaders, Afghan locals, independent experts and opinion makers do not accept the credibility of ANA and ALP, considering the assassination of Burhanudin Rabbani, Wali Karzai and recent Taliban attacks in the heart of Kabul. More severe attacks are to be expected from the Taliban in the near future. The credibility of ANA and ALP can only be established if they are able to counter the Taliban spring offensive with minimal help from foreign forces. For that, they need to have a strong base of intelligence network, capable of locating and targeting terrorist hideouts.

There is an uncertainty within the Afghan circles over whether they would be able to cope with the post-withdrawal situation or not, considering the increase in Taliban momentum towards Kabul. The credibility of Afghan national forces also puts a question mark on the peaceful future of Afghanistan's law and order situation. The writ of the Afghan state can only be established if the local forces are ready and capable enough to take on the responsibility of law and security from the foreign troops.

The first phase of transition, in which seven areas are going to be controlled by Afghan national security forces, will determine the issue of credibility of Afghan security forces.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Loyalty is the main concern with reference to defining the credibility of Afghan forces in the near future.⁽⁴⁹⁾

- Afghan frame of economy

Robert B. Zoellick has done some interesting statistical research on the economic and financial woes of Afghanistan. According to him, in 2010, foreign aid accounted for 91 per cent of the total Afghan economy.⁽⁵⁰⁾ This makes the economy a 'rent-based economy'. High levels of corruption in government sectors are worsening the overall shape of the economy. Without a strong economy, security forces, state institutions and democracy would crumble

against the recent surge of terrorists. For these very reasons Afghans want foreign fiscal assistance beyond the time frame given by Obama's end game. They have to build an effective tax collecting mechanism to create a balance between revenues generated and expenditures incurred. As Afghan Colonel M. Amin Wahidi said, "the international community still has responsibilities in Afghanistan. Their responsibilities have not finished yet because there is still a war going on. We are asking not to be forgotten. We are still not standing on our feet, even after the transition, and we need financial help."⁽⁵¹⁾ If Afghanistan has to move towards a brighter future, it has to take responsibility of solving its own economic problems.

- Afghan frame of Afghan-US relations

In the second tenure of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, tensions have increased between the US and Afghan regime. There has been a lot more criticism from Karzai on the US and NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan. In May 2011, President Karzai strongly condemned the ongoing NATO operations in Afghanistan and termed NATO as "occupiers" in Afghanistan.⁽⁵²⁾ Karzai also has apprehensions on limiting Afghan role in negotiations with Taliban. The US, on the other hand has blamed Afghans for worsening the situation with high levels of corruption in the Afghan government sectors and embezzlements in foreign aid.

Afghans are showing their apprehensions that if Americans leave them in the same manner as they did after the end of Soviet Afghan war, there would be no hurdle for the Taliban to return and capture Kabul. Afghans want proper functioning state institutions, strong security forces, strong economy and effective reconstruction mechanism in the post-withdrawal scenario. Afghans alone cannot deal with all of the existing problems. Americans have realized this fact. This realization has resulted into US-Afghan strategic partnership agreement for 10 years beyond the 2014 time limit given by Obama's end game, which involves training of Afghan security forces by the US trainers and investment for reconstructing Afghanistan for a strong future.

Therefore, the future of US exit strategy depends upon the nature of trilateral relations between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan's frames

Pakistan has been an important frontline non-NATO ally of the US in the war on terror in the Afghan proximity. Pakistan has great strategic significance for both the US and Afghanistan. The NATO supplies are routed through Pakistan's territory into Afghanistan. Emergence of Af-Pak policy is indicative of the significance of Pakistan and its terrain, in the resolution of the Afghan war on terror. The cooperation of Pakistan is essential for the peaceful resolution of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The study of Pakistan's frames is necessary in analyzing the outcome of US exit strategy and its impact on Afghan war on terror.

- Starting from the AfPak frame, Pakistan officially has never been a great supporter of this strategy.

The annexation of Pakistan with Afghanistan, in this umbrella term, has been negatively viewed in the strategic circles of Islamabad. Islamabad feels embarrassed being defined as being part of the singular theatre of war in Afghanistan. Adding to this embarrassment is the continuation of drone attacks in Pakistan, which instead of making life easier for the political establishment in Islamabad, has further complicated its problems, considering the variables of public opinion against such attacks, number of civilian casualties in such attacks and the ascending phenomenon of anti-Americanism within Pakistan. The US demand to 'do more' has been met with severe criticism within the foreign office circles of Islamabad. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir advocated for "an end to the blame game" on the part of US demand to 'do more.'⁽⁵³⁾ The US AfPak policy, drone attacks, demand to 'do more' and the 'blame game' has led the official circles of Islamabad and Rawalpindi to suspiciously view the US exit from this region.

The end of Osama bin Laden episode (2 May 2011) and attack on the Salala checkpoint (26 November 2011) have transformed these suspicions into confrontation. Pak-US relations, in view of the aforementioned events, are currently at a very low point. Normalization in these relations is essential for any progress in negotiations with the Taliban. Pakistan can play a critical role in facilitating negotiations, according to both the US and Afghanistan.

- Indian role in Afghanistan and the US support for this role, this considering the resolution of Afghan quagmire, has not been appreciated by Pakistan.

India has always been considered a security threat in Pakistan's foreign policy formulation. Although there has been a "muted response", a deviance from traditional response, from Islamabad on the "strategic partnership agreement between India and Afghanistan" should not be interpreted as Pakistan's silent acceptance of growing Indian presence and influence in Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Rise in proxy conflict between India and Pakistan would further destabilize Afghanistan in particular and the region in general.

Pakistan's former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani said that the resolution of the Afghan problem must be done from within Afghanistan. Both the US and Afghanistan should keenly focus on Pakistan's existential frames related to the Afghan quagmire. Without Pakistan's active involvement in providing support for the resolution of the Afghan problem, it would be difficult for the US to carry out its exit strategy.

Costs of war

The cost of war frame is quite important in order to understand the need for US exit strategy from Afghanistan. The following statistics are worth noting.

- Overall inference of human lives lost is between 224,475 to 257,655, considering the surveys carried out in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁽⁵⁵⁾
- "For every person killed on 11 September 2001, another 73 have been killed since."⁽⁵⁶⁾
- "US deficit projected at 1.4 trillion dollars this year."⁽⁵⁷⁾

- “Costs on the caring for US veterans 32.6 billion dollars.”⁽⁵⁸⁾

All these figures highlight how costly this war has been for all the major stakeholders.

Regional dynamics of Afghan quagmire and US exit strategy

Afghanistan’s geostrategic location makes it an integral part of the foreign policies of major nation-states located in its proximity. Afghanistan is a continental transit trade route linking different nation-states. Four nuclear states exist in its proximity. A stable Afghanistan is in the interest of China, India, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the Central Asian states. China has its 800 million dollars investment in Aynak copper deposits in Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁹⁾ For Russia, it is important as it can reach the Middle Eastern markets and stop the extremist Islamist groups gaining ground in Central Asian states. For Iran, China, Pakistan and India, safe access to Central Asian markets is only possible if there is peace and security in Afghanistan. All these major states, for strategic as well as for economic reasons, have a major stake in the solution of the Afghan quagmire.

India and Pakistan have to rise above their mentality of proxy warfare to reach the eastern shores. Iran and the Middle Eastern states have to show flexibility towards each other, in order to achieve maximum gains, as a result of safe access to Central Asian states. Trade can become a source of cooperation as well as a source of conflict between these major states. In consideration of Iran’s investment in Chahbahar Port rivalling Pakistan’s Gawadar Port, which has its support from India, the conflicting economic interests of regional powers may result in proxy warfare in Afghanistan.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Iran, in the meanwhile, has serious apprehensions against ever increasing US expansionist designs in this region. There are prospects of cooperation as well in Afghanistan for the regional powers, for example Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project.⁽⁶¹⁾ All the more reason that the United States has expressed its desire for a regional solution to Afghan quagmire as it is in the interest of all the regional powers. A strong transport network would be required to boost trade across this region via Afghanistan. The realist politics, on the other hand, suggests that regional powers would try their best to maximize their interests in the exit scenario, leading to the start of a new great game in this region. Interaction of Afghan ‘end plans’ of major regional powers with Obama’s end game will be consequential in determining the future of Afghanistan.

Impact on Afghan war on terror

Frames relating to the US withdrawal also provide the data base for framing its impact on the Afghan war on terror. The fate of US exit strategy and Afghan war on terror is interlinked. The US withdrawal strategy and its objectives have to remain compatible with the objectives of the war on terror in Afghanistan. If the objectives of both strategies are not mutually compatible, it would yield negative results. In order to carry out the frame analysis of strategic

interaction between the US-Afghan exit plan and the course of Afghan war against terrorism, determination of some frames is going to play an important role, in this regard. These are:

- Disengagement or transition?
- Political transition in 2014?
- Post-withdrawal situation and the Taliban factor
- Role of Afghan democratic institutions and security forces
- Alternative approaches

Disengagement or transition?

Is Obama's end game a disengagement strategy or a transition strategy?

The framing in response to this question would have a huge impact on the course of the war against terror, in the Afghan milieu. 'Even if' analysis would be of great help to offer logical rational understanding of the very nature of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan terrain. Let's consider, for the sake of argument, if America goes for a disengagement policy, is it going to yield more benefits than losses and sacrifices. Given the long-term US vested interests in Central Asia and South Asia, going for a comprehensive withdrawal from Afghanistan would cease the strategic leverage of the US in these regions. In the context of anarchical nature of world system affairs, the space or vacuum, if left over by the US, would definitely be exploited and manipulated by other major global powers such as China, Russia and Iran. This, in result, would hamper the vested interests of the US in this region. The US would not be able to maintain its firm role in the formulation of future strategic oil routes passing through the straits of Central Asia.

The rise of China is another factor which the US believes requires its presence in this region. Considering the critical and complex nature of negotiations with the Taliban, the US cannot afford to engage with them sitting on a weaker seat. This would allow the Taliban to press with more demands. The US has to remain firm in order to negotiate with the Taliban and the presence of 'hard power' is imperative in that case.

On the other hand, for the sake of the argument, if we say that Obama's end plan for Afghanistan is a transition strategy, it would provide a more flexible approach for the US. The US, with a limited presence, going for targeted objectives via targeted means, would be better able to get good results and protect its vested interests in the region. Some of the official frames, regarding the answer to the aforementioned question, are given below:

- Richard Holbrooke Frame (10 November, 2010)
- Gen. John Allen Frame
- Ambassador Ryan Crocker Frame
- Hamid Karzai Frame
- Joe Biden Frame
- The US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement Frame (2014-2024)

US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke was of the view that Obama's Afghan end game was not an exit strategy; rather it would represent a transitory character.⁽⁶²⁾ ISAF Commander General John Allen, and US ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker support the US stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Adding to these already existing frames, president Hamid Karzai has confirmed that there have been negotiations between the two countries for the establishment of US bases on the Afghan territory.⁽⁶³⁾ The five bases, for which negotiations were being held are going to lie in areas of Jalalabad, Kandahar, Shindand, Mazar-e-Sharif and Bagram. Vice President, Joe Biden has also suggested partnership with Afghanistan beyond 2014, where if circumstances require, the US would stay beyond the 2014 deadline.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Recent "US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement" highlights the fact that the US is not willing to disengage from this region and will stay here beyond 2014.⁽⁶⁵⁾

All these official frames discussed above are clearly indicative of the fact that Obama's end game for Afghanistan is a transition strategy.

Afghan political transition in 2014?

According to the Constitution of Afghanistan, Afghan President Hamid Karzai could not be re-elected for the third successive term. The next Afghan election is to be held in 2014. The US-NATO leaders, regional powers and foremost, the Afghans, are uncertain and unaware of who would be their next leader. The absence of this notion in the US Afghan exit strategy may lead to a serious predicament beyond 2014 as it would create a snag in the smooth withdrawal of US forces from this region and the protection of US strategic interests in this region.

Post-withdrawal scenario and the Taliban factor

The success of Obama's exit plan depends a lot on the framing of post-withdrawal Afghan scenario. Since 2001, there have been nine international conferences on the issue of resolving the Afghan imbroglio. The Bonn Conference, 2011, did not prove fruitful, due to Pakistan's boycott, over the Salala incident. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has also emphasized regional solution for the Afghan problem, where regional powers are going to play an important role in determining a peaceful future for the troubled state.

One of the key factors in this regard is the US engagement with the Taliban. From 2001 to 2009, the Taliban were not seen as part of the US solution to the Afghan quagmire. Increase in Taliban attacks in the vicinity of Kabul has led the Americans to the realization that they cannot completely eliminate the Taliban from Afghanistan. The only way forward is to convince them into becoming a part of the political process and renounce violence. The Taliban, on the other hand, are opposed to a partial withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan as Al-Qaeda members, part of Taliban factions, are against this policy. They believe that the only way to end this war is complete

withdrawal of foreign troops from the country. Recently, the launching of the Taliban spring offensive in the form of fresh attacks on Kabul confirms the belief that the Taliban are not serious in negotiating a partial withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and their assimilation in the national political mainstream.

The re-emergence of the Taliban has been accepted as a ground reality by all the stakeholders. It is up to the stakeholders to minimize the differences among themselves and reach a consensus for the greater good of Afghanistan in particular and the region in general. In this regard, cooperation and understanding between the state stakeholders would be helpful in conducting negotiations as well as counter-terrorism strategies against the Taliban, from a position of strength.

Role of Afghan democratic institutions and security forces

An important aspect of the US exit plan for Afghanistan is the transfer of responsibility to Afghan national security forces. The US exit plan also calls for reintegration and reconciliation between different ethnic groups, with the aim of strengthening nation-building process. The Congressional Research Service Report, 2011, suggests that the training of Afghan national forces and the Afghan nation-building process is not up to the mark. Corruption charges, irregularities in spending and bad governance are factors hampering a bright future for Afghanistan. Although the role of ANA and ALP in combating the recent surge of Taliban attacks at the heart of Kabul has been commended by the US/NATO leaders, yet they have to prove a lot more, since the Taliban are not going to sit idle and will retaliate with more vicious attacks. The role of Afghan democratic institutions is also important for making the transition smoother.

Alternative approaches

In the formulation of a fool-proof strategy, the existence of a backup or alternative plan is always an essential element. The US exit strategy or its framing seems to lack that. It is primarily a strategy with more focus on military means as compared to political and economic ones. It does not take into account the Afghan political transition in 2014. The assimilation of the Taliban in the political mainstream has been badly hurt by their recent attacks on Kabul. Pakistan and India are trying to dominate each other in the Afghan imbroglio, leading to a conflict of interests, and consequently there is no progress on a regional consensus for the future of Afghanistan.

This strategy is flawed considering its dependence on circumstantial developments, as was being suggested by Gen Patreaus. Some of the alternative approaches being discussed in the academic and policy-making circles are:

- **Economic or Silk Route strategy:** This could be presently conjoined with the US Afghan military strategy, making the transition a lot more feasible, while providing the essential

strength to the Afghan democratic and security institutions through regional trade and foreign fiscal assistance.

- **Neutrality and non-interference model:** This might be the most ideal alternative solution to the existing US exit strategy, based upon the neutrality model of Switzerland (1815). It would require a pledge of non-interference from the regional powers as they will vow not to support any non-state terrorist networks or resort to in proxy war. According to the realist prism, the solution seems impractical in its nature, considering the conflicting nature of interests of regional powers in Afghanistan.
- **Sphere of influence model:** If neutrality is not the best available scenario for Afghanistan, the sphere of influence model seems to be the most plausible alternative solution to the Afghan quagmire, in which regional powers will sit together and define their strategic sphere of influence in Afghanistan, whereby they will try to avoid any conflict in Afghanistan.

However, the most critical question here is, would the Taliban or Afghan government buy these approaches?

Conclusion

Lenin once stated that “there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.” Today we are facing some interesting times. Every coming new day is bringing some new developments into our existing status quo frames. Obama’s exit plan, announced for Afghanistan, is also unfolding, with probable and unexpected new developments. The nature of the exit plan demonstrates the flexible character of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Would this circumstantial character of Obama’s end game prove to be a matter of strength or weakness? Chances are that it will prove to be a mechanism of strength as it would help the US strategists to adapt their policies according to the demands of changing environment. The recent US-Afghanistan strategic Partnership Agreement (2014-2024) highlights the review of US Afghan exit strategy taken by Obama administration, as they have realized that in the post-withdrawal scenario, it would be difficult for the Afghan security forces to combat the Taliban alone. Time is the utmost crucial factor in determining the fate of the US exit plan and its impact on the war on terror in Afghanistan.

The existential frames of US officials such as Vice President Joe Biden, General John Allen and Ambassador Ryan Crocker demonstrate the fact that the US is not contemplating a complete withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan; rather it is going for a transition strategy, which looks for the broader US role in this region, beyond 2014.

Initially declared objectives of the Afghan war on terror, according to the UNSCRs focused on the point of eliminating the safe havens of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and stopping the Taliban from re-emerging on the political scene of Afghanistan. It has been almost 10 years since 9/11 happened. The ground realities have changed a lot since then. The US and other

stakeholders in the Afghan quagmire have accepted the fact that they cannot stop the Taliban from re-emerging. All they need to do is to focus on regional dimensions of the solution for the Afghan problem as without the support of regional powers, the very spirit of the Afghan war on terror would be severely jeopardized as the Taliban will seize any opportunity to gain firm ground in Kabul.

Bad governance, corruption charges and irregularities in spending have tarnished the image of the present Afghan government. In view of the US exit from this region, Afghans have to take responsibility of their own affairs. The future and fate of Afghanistan lies in the hands of the Afghan government and the Afghan people.

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