

THE 2014 US WITHDRAWAL – AN UNSETTLED QUAGMIRE FOR PAKISTAN

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Introduction

The deployment of international troops in Afghanistan led by the US in 2001 brought new challenges for Pakistan to deal with. With American troops based in Afghanistan's side of the border, the question of where the border was and Pakistan's responsibilities for maintaining peace, law and order in its own territories acquired international attention. Militants were allegedly hiding on both sides of the borders and were entering Pakistan through this porous border.⁽¹⁾ After a decade of war in Afghanistan, the US remains spiteful to regional sensitivities and the Global War on Terrorism (GWOt) has been a struggling venture for the US and the coalition forces. It was believed that the death of Bin Laden would make it easier to create a narrative of victory for the US-led coalition against al-Qaeda and perhaps gave way to negotiate directly with the Afghan Taliban; but the death of al-Qaeda's leader ended up further exacerbating violence and instability in Afghanistan and the Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

Now, however, the US has embarked on a quite different and considerably more difficult task in Afghanistan that has not only affected Afghanistan but also directly impacted Pakistan in general and its tribal areas in particular. The US-led NATO-ISAF troops have been involved in the reconstruction and restructuring of Afghanistan's institutions particularly its security forces, but it is not yet clear whether such efforts will yield any prolific results in a long run, particularly after withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) by the end of 2014. The withdrawal of a significant bulk of (ISAF) forces from Afghanistan has dramatically enhanced Pakistan's importance not only as a neighbouring country of Afghanistan, but also as a

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country which is directly affected by the War on Terrorism launched by the US and its key allies back in 2001.

The US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under United Nation's mandate. At the time of the invasion, it was expected that the US would accomplish its mission by rooting out the Taliban and then establishing a fully functional democracy in Afghanistan. However, the current state of affairs pertaining to law and order is worse than ever before. Insecurity, criminal market economy, unemployment, home-grown insurgency, poverty, war between warring factions, and corruption in Afghanistan are all matters of great concern for everyone.⁽²⁾

Despite using extensive military force to eliminate the Taliban and al-Qaeda supporters and networks, the US and coalition forces have faced severe resistance in the form of insurgency and backlash. These forces are defeated to some extent but the US could not eliminate them. They are more organized than ever before and their movement has shown greater resilience over the years, gathered strength from the Afghan populace. Particularly, their resistance has increased in the Pashtun-dominated northern and southern provinces along the Pakistan border, which have become a safe sanctuary for the terrorist groups.⁽³⁾

The article is divided into three parts. The first section examines the failure of US-led coalition forces to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan even after fourteen years since the War on Terrorism started; it also discusses the likely repercussions of the US-led ISAF-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. The second section focuses on major challenges that lie ahead for newly elected Afghan government and identifies potential scenarios. The third section analyzes the consequences of the fourteen-year War on Terrorism on Pakistan.

Explaining the US withdrawal from Afghanistan

NATO took permanent command of the ISAF force in October 2003 and its mandate was expanded territorially to reach across most of Afghanistan. ISAF's goals were further expanded to cover the maintenance of security, to provide assistance in reconstruction and development, and to facilitate good governance.⁽⁴⁾ However, fourteen years after the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), NATO-ISAF has had limited success in achieving its wide-range agenda. Its primary success so far has been the aim of eliminating Bin Laden and eradicating much of the al-Qaeda stronghold in Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁾

The decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan is taken mainly due to many viable reasons on the ground including: operational exhaustion, low morale, strategic confusion and a sense that the prospects for realizing NATO-ISAF's wider goals in the near future are remote and not easily achieved.⁽⁶⁾ Though NATO-ISAF forces have successfully dismantled many terrorists training camps and hideouts, there is confusion, inconsistency and disagreement about its aims and strategic approach.⁽⁷⁾ In terms of objectives, there is confusion and divergence between the coalition partners' pertaining to viable political solutions over the elimination of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and over the security and good governance paradigm in the contemporary Afghan context.⁽⁸⁾

On 28 December 2013, an article in *The Washington Post* reported on National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the Afghan war, revelled and predicted that the US and its allies' investment in Afghanistan in the form of troop surge would not be adequate in the long run to yield fruitful results.⁽⁹⁾ So this would not be an advantageous strategy if Washington leaves behind a few thousand troops and continues bankrolling from Afghanistan.⁽¹⁰⁾ The NIE Report also shows apprehension regarding uncertain political environment of Afghanistan in the post 2014 withdrawal and further added that 'in the absence of a continuing presence of US troops and continuing financial support ... the situation would deteriorate very rapidly.'⁽¹¹⁾

The Washington Post also reported the debate generated through NIE and its strong impact within administration. This Report exposed the inner weaknesses of the Obama administration pertaining to smooth transaction of power and other security related matters.⁽¹²⁾ This is because it showed a clear divergence from the prevailing official narrative of a complicated but yet positive transition process, in which the Afghan side's growing capabilities enable it to take greater responsibility. The NIE has not only given a clear but pessimist picture about uncertain realities after 2014, but also raised a question mark over Afghan armed forces' readiness levels and capacity,⁽¹³⁾ stating clearly that in such a fragile situation, it would be difficult, in fact impossible, for Afghan security forces to prevent a reemergence of al-Qaeda.⁽¹⁴⁾

The challenge is both qualitative and quantitative. Even after fourteen years of investment by the US and the coalition forces, training and funding of the Afghan military remain poor and heavily dependent on ISAF forces when it comes to operational procedure.⁽¹⁵⁾ In order to strengthen the security forces, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should increase the number of troops up to maximum 352,000 in 2014,⁽¹⁶⁾ which is quite improbable in the present situation when they are set to leave.

The Obama administration inherited a miserable and failing situation in Afghanistan, which is a direct outcome of his predecessor's seven years of mismanagement and mishandling. The administration eventually came up with the formula of intensifying US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan by increasing US troops to more than 100,000 and civilian personnel to 1,000⁽¹⁷⁾ in order to undo the deteriorating security situation. NATO-ISAF forces have also increased to 40,400 from 28,250 during this time.⁽¹⁸⁾ The administration has also given approval for military funding of Afghanistan's security forces and it has also increased non-military assistance. All this assistance, which is being provided to Afghanistan on military and non-military basis, comes out to a monthly bill exceeding many billion dollars, out of which much is believed to be lost in corruption.⁽¹⁹⁾

The most important objective for the Obama administration was to correct the strategic miscalculation characterized by the Bush administration towards Afghanistan. In its two policy reviews in March 2009 and December 2009,⁽²⁰⁾ it was decided that the ultimate aim of the US in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan and Afghanistan."⁽²¹⁾

US withdrawal strategy raises many questions. Will the US exit-strategy from Afghanistan be a successful or failed venture? Would Afghanistan be a stable state after the withdrawal of NATO-ISAF forces? What would be the serious repercussions for Afghanistan and Pakistan and would Afghanistan be in a position to secure itself in the long run against terrorism? The US exit strategy, without completely eradicating terrorism for which it launched a global campaign in the region, is no more different from US pack-up gamble in the aftermath of the Cold War in 1990. Pakistan was being used as a proxy tool by the US against the Soviet Union to defeat Communism in the region. Once the war was over, the US left Pakistan on its own to deal with the repercussions, and the after effects of the Afghan crisis lasted for 10 years.⁽²²⁾ The non-state actors, i.e. *mujahideen*, turned into Taliban later in the 1990s and due to the quick exit strategy of the US, Pakistan suffered a lot and it is widely believed that Pakistan would become a scapegoat and would have to deal with the mess created by the US and the coalition forces in the post 2014.

So far NATO-ISAF mission has been a combination of fatigue and strategic confusion on the ground. It would not be wrong to say that western contributors in Afghanistan share a similar view based on uncertainty and future deployment of the NATO-ISAF forces.⁽²³⁾ In the second half of the 2000s, though high-profile terrorist bombings on the mainland of the US and Europe faded, the death toll of soldiers stationed in Afghanistan increased dramatically. Domestic outcry against deployment of NATO-ISAF foreign forces in Afghanistan gained momentum with the passage of time. In this pretext, the political elites in Europe and the US have been unable to successfully handle the ongoing crisis and they do not have any coherent long-term sustainable strategy for Afghanistan. They do not feel the need to stay in Afghanistan for any longer duration especially in political and economic contexts where the continued maintenance of national troops in Afghanistan has become almost politically unviable for many NATO-ISAF governments, posing a serious threat to their economies as well.⁽²⁴⁾ Additionally, in the case of the US, defence analysts are of the view that advancements in defence technology, primarily drone technology, enables the targeting of enemy combatants in difficult terrains, such as Pakistani and Afghan mountainous region, without the need to send troops on the ground, thereby saving time, expenditure and the lives of American national soldiers.⁽²⁵⁾

When it comes to NATO-ISAF's operational procedure, the coordination of all of the partners is highly problematic and vague, particularly with regard to their deployment and participation in combat operations.⁽²⁶⁾ This can be stated by the fact that troops contributing in peace efforts in Afghanistan have different mandate from their governments. From here onwards, differences arise, as it is not clear if troops are authorized by their respective governments to engage in direct fighting with enemy combatants or are required to refrain from combat and only play supporting roles.⁽²⁷⁾ NATO-ISAF has no coherent strategy or future road map, and the lack of unanimous consensus over the future rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghan society is presently a nightmare for the Obama administration. 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' have received \$57 billion in foreign aid since 2001,⁽²⁸⁾ but they failed to come up with

satisfactory results and have had relatively little impact in improving health, human security and education on the ground due to continuous backlash and insurgency.⁽²⁹⁾

Converging and conflict interests

The hasty announcement of withdrawal is quite well-understood by the fact that the US is facing a deep but challenging financial crisis at home and immense public pressure to roll back from Afghanistan without creating any additional burden on US exchequers. It is not wrong to say that this ongoing conflict in the name of War on Terrorism has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and many American lives.⁽³⁰⁾ Afghanistan, being a neighbouring country of Pakistan, has been a constant source of trouble in multiple forms, such as the Durand Line issue, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s, the rise of the Taliban in 1990s and now finally the issue of terrorism that has become a bone of contention in improving good neighbourly relations. The ensuing Taliban insurgency has a huge impact on Pakistan's politics, economy, security profile and relations with the world community.

Above all, withdrawal of the US forces will hardly achieve any desired result in the long run as the US and international coalition forces have miserably failed to understand the intensity of home-grown insurgency in Afghanistan. The United States' continuous support to its traditional ally India in South Asia, which is steadily emerging as a regional power, and the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan are troublesome factors from Pakistan's perspective which has been acting as a front line state in Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).⁽³¹⁾ Traditional rivalry between Pakistan and India and the maintenance of balance of power in the region always play a vital role in determining peace effort in Afghanistan. Some analysts are of the view that India has invested approximately US\$2.5 billion in Afghanistan.⁽³²⁾ The basic purpose seems to escalate tension and to facilitate cross border terrorism in Pakistan; this time not from the eastern front but on western borders along with Afghanistan. That is one of the reasons that, for the first time in history of Pakistan, it has deployed over 150,000 of its troops on its borders along with Afghanistan.⁽³³⁾

A Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan has not only created a safe haven for terrorists but it has also posed a potentially dangerous scenario for the entire region. The ongoing political turmoil, which could be escalated into a bloody civil war and in turn produce a refugee crisis, draws in regional competitors, but comparatively strong states such as India, could destabilize the region in general and Pakistan in particular.⁽³⁴⁾ Increased militancy in Afghanistan is already spreading to Pakistan's adjacent tribal areas of Fata and Balochistan bordering Afghanistan.⁽³⁵⁾ Pakistan is already facing a dangerous insurgency as well as political and economic challenges as a coalition partner. The western world, in general, and the US, in particular, strongly believe that Pakistan has drawn distinction between different terrorist groups. It acts in a prompt manner and aggressively against those that have taken up arms against the state, such as the Pakistani Taliban, while elements of its security services provide passive and active support to groups that target Afghanistan, India, and others.⁽³⁶⁾ So

Pakistan, according to international media, is not a reliable client as it is playing a dual and unsatisfactory role as a US coalition partner. Afghan Taliban leaders have operated from inside Pakistan and many of their top leaders go back and forth to the war in Afghanistan and receive war supplies from Pakistani sanctuaries.⁽³⁷⁾

India also sees Afghanistan through the lens of its decades old hostility and conflict with Pakistan. In comparison to Pakistan, which has somewhat difficult history of relations with Afghanistan, India historically has had excellent relations with Afghanistan, apart from the rule of the Taliban, who were deeply hostile to India.⁽³⁸⁾ India has rebuilt its influence in the country since 2001 by heavily investing in the country, and to date they have only delivered 40% of the total pledged amount of US\$2.5 billion. Pakistan is also contributing its part by investing in development sector in Afghanistan and has also given US\$360 million for different ongoing projects.⁽³⁹⁾

Sectarian violence and terrorist incidents have gained impetus after the death of Akbar Bugti in Balochistan. Quetta is known as the headquarters of the exiled Afghan Taliban leadership. The former ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, declared “Quetta Shura” as the greatest threat to ISAF forces in Afghanistan.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Whether or not the *shura* exists in Quetta today, the fragile security condition of the province can be easily exploited by militant groups and there is enough evidence to support that this is happening.⁽⁴¹⁾ Despite tackling the Taliban threat, on one hand, Islamabad also has to deal with the Baloch separatist movement. Pakistan believes India is the main player behind the scene and the major source of provoking insurgency in the province of Balochistan.⁽⁴²⁾ In addition to that, Islamabad Foreign Office has evidence against India that it is using Afghan soil to destabilize Pakistan and providing regular funding and equipment to militants and separatist elements to continue work against the interest of Pakistan.⁽⁴³⁾

As US and coalition forces are all set to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014, it will be quite easy for India to use Kabul against Islamabad. It is also assumed that India is operating against Pakistan through its intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) and by building consulates along western border with Pakistan.⁽⁴⁴⁾ To make the situation worst, the emergence of groups like Jundullah⁽⁴⁵⁾ on both sides of the border between Pakistan and Iran has added a new dimension to the ongoing conflict in Balochistan, and is playing an active role in promotion of nationalism, extremism and sectarian violence.

There is evidence that New Delhi and Kabul are also collaborating to support Baloch insurgents within Pakistan.⁽⁴⁶⁾ India's main interests in Afghanistan are to offset Pakistani influence and to prevent the return of a Taliban-style regime friendly to Pakistan that would provide a haven for *Jihadi* militants.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Since 2001, trade links between India and Afghanistan have increased dramatically and a stable Afghanistan could provide access to India for trade and energy as well as a gateway to Central Asia.⁽⁴⁸⁾

India's growing involvement in Afghanistan is a direct threat and an increasingly destabilizing factor for Pakistan's security. Pakistan believes that India has no geographical, religious or ethnic linkages with Afghanistan.⁽⁴⁹⁾ India

is the only country that has no share in Afghan war in the form of blood, commitment and resolve. The US wants India to play a major role after the US withdrawal from the region and help Washington in chalking out any future strategy regarding the Afghan crisis. Pakistan is not happy with this, as this weakens Pakistan's position as far as the new Afghan government set-up is concerned.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Pakistan also wants to see a stable and prosperous Afghanistan in its North-west border after the drawdown of US and coalition forces in 2014.⁽⁵¹⁾

Both India and Pakistan are traditional rivals with nuclear power in the region, and these rivalries are essentially political and geostrategic in nature. In Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are not competing over the country's resources, but to prevent each other from using Afghanistan as a tool against their respective interests and strategies.⁽⁵²⁾ There is, however, a significant divergence in the way India and Pakistan have projected these strategies in the last few years, particularly in post-9/11 scenario towards Afghanistan.⁽⁵³⁾ Likewise Iran, which never established diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime in 1990s, now has developed an economic sphere of influence in Afghanistan's west, but its primary aims remain preventing Afghan soil from becoming a launch pad against Iran.⁽⁵⁴⁾ China, an emerging global economy, has also invested in Afghanistan in Aynak copper deposit, but is reluctant for any further investment due to uncertain political climate. Another major reason of investment is to protect its Xinjiang province from militancy from Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Richard Holbrooke, special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, regularly convened an International Contact Group of Regional and International diplomatic representatives on Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁶⁾ These meetings, however, in one way or the other have often been concealed and the findings of meetings are highly confidential among NATO-contributing countries.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This creates an environment of suspicion and distrust among regional countries that are apprehensive of long-term US strategic intentions in Afghanistan and toward its neighbours.⁽⁵⁸⁾ But the most troublesome factor for all of them is a new power vacuum following a US withdrawal.

If there is no regional consensus over how to settle the Taliban issue before US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a great danger of a proxy war in Afghanistan where regional powers would try to attain maximum gain by promoting different ethnic or sectarian factions in pursuit of their own national interests.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Such a conflict would drag both India and Pakistan into the struggle for control of Afghanistan. If such like situation erupts between regional states post 2014, it is possible that Iran and Russia would join India to support anti-Taliban actors, while Saudi Arabia may support Pashtun groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Such a conflict would not only be destructive for Afghanistan, but this would bring serious repercussions for regional security and prosperity. It would also lead to ethnic and sectarian violence across the region with proxy groups being used to attain self-vested interests along ethnic and sectarian identities.⁽⁶¹⁾ Moreover, such a regionally sponsored conflict in Afghanistan created by a power vacuum in the aftermath of the drawdown would block any progress towards prosperity, economic integration, nuclear proliferation, water sharing, energy and trade.⁽⁶²⁾

As the military drawdown enters its final stage, regional actors are re-evaluating their strategic environment according to recent happenings and have begun planning for the future as they are once again inheriting an unsettled country with numerous challenges to tackle.⁽⁶³⁾ It is quite true that no regional country is in a position to assert itself in Afghanistan, but they all are capable enough to play their cards against any development contrary to their national interests.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Afghanistan's neighbours are likely to try to manipulate Afghan unstable political situation in their favour to ensure their own security.⁽⁶⁵⁾ The situation in Afghanistan is far from stabilized. In the north and the west, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would face difficulty in controlling the insurgency after the withdrawal.⁽⁶⁶⁾ By contrast, in the south and the east, the situation is even more precarious, where the Kabul government apparently seems helpless to gain the upper hand against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda forces.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Post-2014 scenarios

Most of the discussion about the role of the US in Afghanistan after 2014 is focused on the United States' future noncombat but military character. The future agenda is ambiguous and may raise questions which merit discussion. For instance, what would be the likely mandate for 9,600 US troops in Afghanistan, and what would be the nature of their mission? What would be the rules of engagement and under what terms and conditions? These above mentioned queries and the major decisions pertaining post-2014 Afghanistan will be made in the coming months.

On 11 September 2001, Afghanistan was a sanctuary for al-Qaeda, which had close association with the Taliban regime.⁽⁶⁸⁾ This was evident from the fact that Osama bin Laden decided to move from Tora Bora to Kandahar in the late 1990s and his new place was only a few miles away from Mullah Omer's residence.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The Taliban's refusal to handover Osama bin Laden to the US in the wake of 9/11 showed a close bonding between themselves and al-Qaeda.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Today, the US cannot accept a situation in which al-Qaeda and its allies pose a serious threatening situation against it, and the western world in general.⁽⁷¹⁾ Similarly, the US would never accept any leadership friendly to the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. In the post-9/11 scenario, al-Qaeda's continuing relationship with other Taliban groups such as the Haqqani network, and its growing friendship with other like-minded militant leaders including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, is a clear indication that a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan would be a risky gamble and a serious threat for US national security.⁽⁷²⁾

Failure to reach any political settlement in Kabul is, therefore, likely to have a spill-over effect that would further wane Islamabad's ability to control different extremist groups operating inside Pakistan's tribal area.⁽⁷³⁾ Despite the complexity of the US-Pakistan relations, and being a frontline state in US led Global War on Terrorism, a complete US withdrawal by the end of 2014 would

not only give rise to a security vacuum in the region but also not be in Islamabad's interest.

One of the greatest post-2014 nightmares for the US and the Western world is the potential of a civil war or the return of a Taliban rule, both of which would again make it a safe haven for *jihadi* terrorism. In the pre-9/11 scenario, the Taliban government supported terrorist activities against India particularly in Indian-held Kashmir. Thus, it would also be a source of great concern for China and Russia alike because both countries do not wish to see the expansion of international terrorist networks.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Afghanistan's security problem is not only limited to the military dominion. Even a strong ANSF will be functional only if it provides services to the qualified, functional, and legitimate Afghan government. The legitimacy of the post-Karzai government will not only be the first preliminary test of the ANSF but will be central to the evolution of a new Afghanistan after the US drawdown.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The question is open to debate, however, whether the current electoral process can or will lead to such an outcome? The 2009 Afghan presidential election was extremely rigged, despite under a strong international presence of security apparatus.⁽⁷⁶⁾ There are also reservations that Karzai used his influence regarding selection procedures to support his preferred candidates in both legislative chambers.⁽⁷⁷⁾ Afghanistan's GDP grew since the fall of the Taliban from 2003-04 to 2010 at an annual average of 9.1 per cent.⁽⁷⁸⁾ After the foreign forces withdrawal from the region, conflict-afflicted provinces, which have received more foreign assistance and have benefited more in employment, will obviously be more affected in terms of funding. This is because the US and other European countries have no concrete plan to continue with heavy foreign assistance packages for Afghanistan in future.⁽⁷⁹⁾ To grow the economy and to rely on its own resources rather on foreign assistance will be the major up-hill task for the new Afghan government. It also means that the transition will be much harder for the next government, whatever its economic incentives, it will be unable to come up with any effective strategy.

On 2 May 2012, Afghanistan and the US signed the Enduring Strategic Partnership Security Agreement. The agreement is significant because it gives a framework for the future US role in Afghanistan, including social and economic development, institution building, regional cooperation and security.⁽⁸⁰⁾ It is worth mentioning that the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which defines the status of US troops and the details of military operations in Afghanistan, has been approved by Afghanistan's parliament as well as an ad-hoc *Loya Jirga*, but ex-president Karzai refused to sign it.⁽⁸¹⁾ This agreement would strengthen US-Afghan relations post 2014. In addition to this, the agreement would help in handing over powers to newly elected Afghan president in a smooth manner and would boost the morale of Afghan security forces who in turn would not feel abandoned after 2014.⁽⁸²⁾

Afghanistan is not yet capable of standing on its own. The process of rebuilding the country by the US and the coalition forces in the aftermath of 9/11 started from an extremely low base. Decades of war and protracted conflicts between the warring factions had destroyed its civilian and military

institutions, deprived young Afghans of education within their country, with many preferring to remain in self-exile. Today, the government of Afghanistan is investing in the development of infrastructure and security programmes and this budget exceeds domestic revenues. More than 70% of Afghanistan's government-administered budget is financed by international donors who manage and run its external budget.⁽⁸³⁾

Afghanistan is heavily dependent on donors to run its internal expenditures. This dependence on external support will be continued even after the 2014 withdrawal but to a lesser extent than expected.⁽⁸⁴⁾

One of the questions that could be a focal point of main discussion between international actors is the country's status on the international level. As external actors play a significant role and act as an important component of Afghanistan's problems, it makes sense to examine the possibility of neutralizing Afghanistan in the post-2014 scenario.⁽⁸⁵⁾ A neutral Afghanistan away from the politics of great powers and regional states has been proposed on a number of past occasions. After the 1979 Soviet invasion, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, called for a neutral Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, a proposal that had gained the appreciation of the European Union. It was also authorized by US President Jimmy Carter but finally rejected by Moscow. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev again floated this idea, but the US rejected it.⁽⁸⁶⁾

The US is of the view that it would not abandon Afghanistan as it did after the Soviet Union withdrawal from the region at the end of Cold War. In fact, the US administration has already stated publicly that the US will still be committed to Afghanistan's stability and integrity even after 2014.⁽⁸⁷⁾ As far as the process of transition is concerned, the US seeks Afghanistan's willingness through a strategic accord that will allow and give the US exclusive rights to access multiple Afghan military facilities.⁽⁸⁸⁾ It is worth mentioning that Bagram Airfield is included on the list from where the US-led NATO carries out drone attacks throughout the region. Apart from Bagram Airfield, through this strategic agreement, the US can continue to launch unmanned drone strikes on high value suspected targets inside Pakistan in future, or even retain the option to use manned helicopter for raids, like the one that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden.⁽⁸⁹⁾

In actuality, the troop surge of 2010-2012 sought to assuage Afghanistan by delivering a devastating blow to the Taliban elements and driving them out of key areas. At the same time, the primary objective of the US has been to train and equip the ANSF.⁽⁹⁰⁾ The ANSF would be the main actor in the aftermath of 2014 withdrawal to ensure Afghanistan's stability and to destroy the Taliban network. However, the surge did not accomplish its goals. The task of training a large security force of a country that has been a bleeding ground for more than a decade, and preparing it for the future in a short span of time has yet to yield results.⁽⁹¹⁾ The ANSF will have to carry out major operations in the future instead of just coping with the Taliban remnants and the ensuing insurgency. At the time of writing, this task is unlikely unrealistic, impossible and very difficult to achieve.⁽⁹²⁾ The ongoing War on Terrorism

heavily relies upon the continuance of funding from the donor countries to the ANSF. Without their interest, it would not be easy to bring stability and peace to Afghanistan.⁽⁹³⁾ It is hard to predict any political consensus among conflicting parties, and this could lead to further instability.

In January 2013, the commander of ISAF, General Alan, presented three options for the remaining US troops in Afghanistan.⁽⁹⁴⁾ In the first place, 6,000 troops would focus on counter-terrorism missions; a second option of about 10,000 soldiers would be utilized for training, mentoring, and logistical support; and lastly, 20,000 US troops would patrol some areas.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The US administration termed this proposal unrealistic due to mounting tensions with President Karzai. However, this plan would be implemented if no security agreement were reached between conflicting parties before the withdrawal.⁽⁹⁶⁾

The most likely scenario of post-2014 Afghanistan is that there will be a small force comprised of 10,000 troops to fulfil security requirements. For example, counterterrorism (CT) operations will be led by US forces, whereas the counterinsurgency will be carried out by the ANSF.⁽⁹⁷⁾ This small force would act to protect American military installations, provide some limited support to the ANSF, and strengthen the Afghan security institutions by providing training and mentoring.⁽⁹⁸⁾ A power vacuum will be the final outcome in any situation, once the US-led coalition drawdown, and this somehow has to be filled.⁽⁹⁹⁾

In his speech to the State of the Union in 2013, President Barack Obama announced that the withdrawal will extend until the end of next year when the US mission in Afghanistan will finally come to an end. He declared that the US would continue its support for Afghanistan beyond 2014 but the nature of this commitment will change.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ From a military perspective, the US will focus on two missions, i.e. training and equipping Afghan forces to an extent so that the country would not become a victim of political anarchy and disorder because this situation would only give safe passage to al-Qaeda and the Taliban forces.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

Paradoxically, if the Afghan Taliban get even a limited victory in Afghanistan, it will strengthen and empower the Taliban forces in Pakistan too, and this victory would give them a chance to get closer and work together in joint collaboration.⁽¹⁰²⁾ In either scenario, the US withdrawal does not portend any advantage for the civilian government and the military establishment of Pakistan.⁽¹⁰³⁾ The US and the Western world are of the view that the US should remain in Afghanistan after 2014 with limited presence. It is quite essential and necessary for Washington to keep a watchful eye in the region in order to combat the Taliban and the al-Qaeda forces, by using more drone attacks to tame the Taliban.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ This situation will bring serious challenges to the Nawaz government; the opposition parties will also try to manipulate the situation by criticizing Pakistan's role in the War on Terrorism as well as the severe security and economic crisis it faces as a price of its alliance with the US.

The US forces withdrawal will likely bring drastic and negative implications on Pakistan. The Afghan National Army is not yet in a position to take control of the country especially in provinces where the Taliban forces are exerting influence. They are inexperienced, not trained enough and naïve.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

Their competence and eminence to combat terrorism can be easily evaluated from the fact that the Taliban and the al-Qaeda elements consider foreign forces position of deployment as a 'soft belly'⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ to attack and execute suicide bombs in Kabul. It is widely assumed that after the pulling out of the US-led coalition forces, a weak and incompetent entity in shape of the Afghan National Army will replace them. This would definitely lead to more incursions across the border in Pakistan's tribal belt. In fact, the weaknesses in Afghanistan's political structure will have a direct impact on Pakistan's national and domestic security.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

There is also a great possibility that a protracted civil war in Afghanistan will force Pakistan to take sides and deploy its limited and rapidly diminishing resources in that struggle.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ The domestic implications are even worse if a civil war erupts in the country. Pakistan will have to bear the burden of more refugees, which will pose threat to its already fragile economy in addition to social problems. A recent Gelvum poll conducted in the country over Afghan presidential elections found that 61% of voters would vote for a candidate desiring open talks with the Taliban and 51% believed their candidates should build good relations with Pakistan. Other key findings were that 71% of voters supported positive relations with the US and 40% believed it was important for candidates to maintain the presence of international forces beyond 2014.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Afghanistan, which has been a war-torn country since its independence, has witnessed four electoral cycles since the US overthrew the Taliban leadership, but the elections failed to prevent armed conflict or alleviate suffering of the people at an unprecedented level.

If the newly elected Afghan government is unable to establish its authority over Afghan institutions, the institutions will be more likely to weaken and collapse, thus giving rise to political chaos.

Pakistan in 'the muddle through' scenario-spillover?

As the 2014 deadline for the Afghanistan transition approaches, Pakistan's role as a main actor is likely to become even more important. Pakistan is already struggling with numerous external and internal challenges in form of corruption, lack of good governance, poor economy, and most important of all, terrorism which has badly damaged its security dynamics and its image as a sovereign democratic state.

Soon after the start of the War on Terrorism in October 2001, Pakistan faced immense international pressure to intervene in the sensitive border region of Fata and flush out elements of the Taliban that were linked with Afghan insurgency and that had been a constant source of disturbance for peace in the region.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Initially, President Musharraf regime not only banned several militant terrorist organizations⁽¹¹¹⁾ but it acted in a prompt manner in detaining thousands of extremists from its territory. It captured many high value al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists, thus extending full length support to the US military and law enforcement agencies in rooting out terrorists' network.⁽¹¹²⁾ Many peace accords were signed with the militants in order to restore peace but all efforts failed due to the non-seriousness of Taliban forces. Islamabad urged the tribal leaders to

play an effective role and take serious measures in rooting out foreign elements mainly comprised of Afghan, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Chechens, etc.⁽¹¹³⁾ The basic provisions of these peace deals were that Pakistani territory would not be allowed as a base camp to execute terrorist attacks anywhere in the world. In return for such guarantees, Pakistan Army also provided support to help the local population pertaining to the reconstruction and development of infrastructure destroyed during military operations in the tribal areas of Pakistan.⁽¹¹⁴⁾

Immediately after 9/11, Pakistan was a crucial factor in determining US victory in Afghanistan. Pakistan immediately took a U-turn and sided itself with the US-led coalition in its fight against terrorism and unconditionally offered ground and logistical assistance in order to destroy and eliminate the Taliban and al-Qaeda networks.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

US military and intelligence forces have conducted extensive blows to al-Qaeda's Command and Control system in Afghanistan and Pakistan; many of these operations have been carried out successfully in co-operation with Pakistani officials.⁽¹¹⁶⁾

Al-Qaeda and other militant groups prefer to hide in remote terrain, primarily the mountainous region along the border of Afghanistan. They also flee to other swarming cities like Karachi, which is a home to approximately 18 million⁽¹¹⁷⁾ Pakistanis. Pashtun community in Karachi is approximately three million, and it⁽¹¹⁸⁾ is the largest urban Pashtun community in the world. Such big metropolitan cities provide terrorists not only safe havens but also other facilities including telecommunications, financial, and transportation networks to enable a more international reach.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

Over the past several years, Pakistan Army has successfully launched numerous operations to defeat terrorists and to eliminate their strong footholds. But the success of these military ventures mainly rest upon effective and strong civilian institutions and efficient law and order situation.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Weak or nonexistent police forces and limited judicial facilities in remote areas are some of the factors that are posing additional problems for Pakistani security forces heavily involved in counterinsurgency operations.⁽¹²¹⁾

Basically, Afghanistan is a diverse country with regard to its ethnic composition. Due to severe fighting ever since the Soviet intervention in 1979, peace has never restored in the land-locked country. Moreover, a continuous civil war like situation has badly damaged ethnic composition of Afghans. Major communities, such as Tajik, Uzbek, Hazaras, have all fought the war, but Pashtuns (45% to 60%) acted as the most powerful block of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.⁽¹²²⁾ They have been the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan since the mid-eighteenth century and also inhabit vast territory on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.⁽¹²³⁾ Consequently, they suffered the most. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, factional fighting of various *mujahideen* groups ensued, and *mujahideen* commanders turned into mighty warlords.⁽¹²⁴⁾

The geographical dependency of Afghanistan on Pakistan, ethnic links and shared culture make latter indispensable for the former. On top of that, tribal

affinities on both sides of the border are deep rooted and cannot be challenged.⁽¹²⁵⁾ This factor has made it a natural route for all Afghans to come and avail health and business facilities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Fata.⁽¹²⁶⁾ That is one of the major reasons that Pakistan army has faced severe resistance from the local population who have joined hands with militants and strongly resisted its presence in the tribal areas.

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a strong history of ethnic, cultural, and social bonding.⁽¹²⁷⁾ Today, Pakistan is hosting 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees and an estimated one million non-registered Afghan refugees, mostly residing in the border provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) and Balochistan⁽¹²⁸⁾ and this could be termed as the largest protracted refugee situation worldwide. Since the fall of the Taliban leadership, some 3.8 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan but the number of those returning could drop off depending upon the worsening security situation in their home country.⁽¹²⁹⁾ Hosting millions of registered and unregistered refugees brought many social and economic problems for Pakistan and the crime rate in society has increased with the passage of time.⁽¹³⁰⁾ These refugees are a real source of trouble for already ailing economy and resources of Pakistan, so Pakistan is quite reluctant to act as a host to additional refugees.⁽¹³¹⁾

In economic terms, Pakistan is the largest trading partner of Afghanistan and provides access to foreign markets. Pak-Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) was signed in June 2012.⁽¹³²⁾ This agreement enables Afghanistan to export agricultural products to rest of the world via Pakistan. According to recent trade figures, Pakistan exports \$1.5 billion worth of goods to Afghanistan and imports \$111.5 million worth of goods in return.⁽¹³³⁾ Due to worsening security situation, social and economic links have been badly disrupted between the two countries.

The Obama administration's strategy in Pakistan due to its geo-strategic location and its frontline status in War on Terrorism can be termed more detrimental rather than beneficial.⁽¹³⁴⁾ On one hand, US administration tries to build stronger relationships with civilian and military authorities, but on the other, targeted aid, and an inexorable assault by unmanned aerial drones on the militant networks operating in Fata are the main stumbling blocks between the two coalition partners who are fighting the same war but with divergent interests. The US wants to build a long-term strategic partnership with its non-major NATO ally, Pakistan, in order to secure its own interests in the region. For this end, it is seeking Pakistani intelligence and military support to eliminate terrorist networks within its borders.⁽¹³⁵⁾

Apparently, Pakistan lies nowhere in the US exit strategy. It is quite evident that the Bush and the Obama administrations have both miserably failed in Afghanistan. They have not achieved the desired objectives and goals. President Obama stated: "We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place; we will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government."⁽¹³⁶⁾

The US and its coalition forces have time and again raised concern that militants from Afghanistan fled to Pakistan where they find safe asylum with the

help of local population and continue to plan attacks against the US and its allies.⁽¹³⁷⁾ But undoubtedly, militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan pose a direct threat not only to the US and its allies but to Pakistan's security forces as well.

Despite Pakistan's deployment of more than 150,000 troops alongside the border of Afghanistan, and losing over more than eight thousand soldiers to contain the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas, terrorists have continued to execute brazen suicide attacks in Pakistan's largest cities.⁽¹³⁸⁾ Terrorism and extremism are one of the many challenges which Pakistan faces today including rapid population growth, exploitation of natural resources, deteriorating condition of law and order within country, and poor economic prospects, giving way to internal violence and militancy in the society.⁽¹³⁹⁾ Pakistan is going through the toughest period and is not prepared to fight these challenges without getting foreign assistance. The prevailing volatile situation has further strengthened militant tendencies, and militants are taking advantage of this power vacuum to expand their networks and exert their influence. Pakistani government apparently seems helpless to contain these non-state actors who challenge the writ of government.

The Waziristan Accords signed with militants brought some early successes, most notably against militants of Central Asian Republics. These peace efforts broke down in July 2007, however, after the Pakistan Army took action against extremists operating in Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ These elements directly challenged the writ of the government in the capital. The cordon off the mosque, which according to official sources resulted in just over 100 deaths, can be seen as an intense outcome stemming from resentment of military presence in Waziristan.⁽¹⁴¹⁾ The trend of targeting security forces, government offices and installations, and a range of soft targets (shrines, markets, churches, and other public spaces) gained momentum as time goes by. More significantly, the siege of Red Mosque led to the formation of a coalition of Pakistani militants under the umbrella of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).⁽¹⁴²⁾

The militants who led the Red Mosque confrontation with the government were Pakistani nationals who demanded radical changes in Pakistan's systems of law and governance. These militants were known to have had strong links with the Afghan *mujahideen* in the 1980s.⁽¹⁴³⁾ They took a hard stance against Pakistan's role as a frontline state to the US and against the provision of logistical assistance to the US in the post-2001 Afghan war.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ The formation of TTP brought together different groups of the Afghan Taliban who acted as sympathizers and demanded for the enforcement of Sharia Law in Pakistan, to bring to an end to ongoing military operations in Fata, withdrawal of Pakistan security forces from the tribal areas, and an end to any form of assistance to ISAF forces in Afghanistan.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ At the time of the formation of the TTP, its founding leader Baitullah Mehsud assured the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, of his alliance support.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

In early 2012, Pakistan's Foreign Office publicly declared a 'strategic shift'⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ in its policy towards Afghanistan which would be based on wide-

ranging reconciliation process and actively reaching out to elements of the Northern Alliance which are believed to be anti-Pakistani.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

As a result, Pakistan's conception of a friendly Afghan government, which is vital to Pakistan's strategic interests, has evolved overtime.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ At the moment, Pakistani security establishment, following pragmatic approach, is of the view, at least for the time being, that the Taliban may not be capable enough of seizing power alone.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ As a result, officially Pakistan does not float the idea that the Taliban should form the Afghan government alone. This strategic shift reflects that in the post-9/11 scenario, Pakistan's perception has changed vis-a-vis the Taliban and the latter is no longer a reliable proxy.⁽¹⁵¹⁾

A continued US presence in region, however, also gives way to numerous additional predicaments. Pakistan's alignment with the West proved to be a blissful factor as a recipient of significant bilateral aid.⁽¹⁵²⁾ But Pak-US relations have not been on easy terms and have seen many highs and lows as coalition partners. Anti-American backlash in Pakistan has been accompanied by an unending process of radicalization of the Taliban forces within the country, and the population at large remains indignant of the Western military presence in the region, particularly with regard to the projection of force in the form of drones by the US to eliminate militants and their networks.⁽¹⁵³⁾

Many of the problems affecting Afghanistan and Pakistan are entangled and should be addressed simultaneously. This includes economic cooperation, cross-border issues such as refugees, drugs smuggling, and safe havens for militants groups operating in both countries and thus posing a high security risk. On another level, being a neighbouring country, Pakistan will be in limelight and will have a primary role in the post-2014 period to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan do not want an abrupt withdrawal of US troops from the region as they believe it will exponentially multiply Afghanistan's problems. They believe that the rapid withdrawal may further embolden the Taliban forces, which can become a source of problem for all regional countries in the future.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ Today Pakistan needs to formulate concrete and effective strategies to address internal extremism, which can spread its tentacles all across the country.

Conclusions & recommendations

The death of Osama bin Laden itself does not signify that terrorism has completely vanished from this region. In fact the Taliban forces have become more organized and come back with full force and vigour. It is widely believed that the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan can only be ended through a peaceful settlement with the help of negotiation including with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Both the US and the Karzai government tried many times to reach such a settlement but these efforts could not come up with any breakthrough and no progress is ever made.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ The negotiation process between Afghan-US and Taliban eventually died a natural death with the killing of ex-president Rabbani in September 2011, who was acting as prime negotiator.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾ Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia now try to facilitate Pakistan to create an amicable atmosphere suitable for a dialogue between the Pakistani government and Taliban. At the

time of writing this piece, it seems that the dialogue has lost momentum and Pakistan security forces have finally decided to use force against militants in North Waziristan. It is very much clear that the Taliban forces in Pakistan are not interested and serious to reach out any settlement and this development is quite important with regard to NATO-ISAF withdrawal so closely in sight.⁽¹⁵⁷⁾

US-led NATO-ISAF coalition forces miserably failed in Afghanistan to bring peace and stability. The announcement of hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan clearly reflects that the Obama administration is trying to get a safe exit by the end of 2014 without fulfilling its commitment towards a war-torn country. American foreign policy makers consider Pakistan as a vital state that can play an important role for political reconciliation due to its ethnic and cultural links with Afghanistan.

Apparently it looks like, the basic objective of the US in South Asia for both Afghanistan and Pakistan are long-term aspirations based on stability, prosperity, and good governance. The central question is not what the US might wish to achieve but what it should aim to accomplish.⁽¹⁵⁸⁾ Since 9/11, US long-term objectives and strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan have been ambiguous with very little clarity. Throughout this period, the US has been failed to formulate any clear vision for both countries of the region. It is important to be realistic with accuracy as to what Washington should seek to accomplish in the region, with what resources, and for how long.

This is a good omen, that all the regional countries express the desire for the creation of a stable, peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. However, each regional state has respective security and economic concerns and interests in Afghanistan that will have to be understood, addressed, and safeguarded accordingly in the face of any negotiated settlement among Afghanistan's warring sides.

Since the landing of the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, Afghanistan has been a trouble-maker for the region in general and for Pakistan in particular. However, events in Afghanistan have had perceptible and profound effects on Pakistan's domestic security, politics and economy, particularly in the last decade. Furthermore, regional political dynamics, where every regional country is trying to influence and work for its own interests, are making it extremely difficult to come up with any 'regional solution' regarding the prevailing situation in Afghanistan.

International assistance for Afghanistan has played a vital and constructive role in the lives of millions of Afghans. Working closely with other donors, USAID successfully launched mega projects pertaining to health care and led an effort to increase the number of Afghans from 9% in 2002 to more than 85% in 2010. Likewise for the development of infrastructure, USAID has invested immensely for the construction of over 1,677 km of roads and has worked to establish four mobile companies that serve 6.5 million subscribers.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ There is more that can be done to generate economic growth that is essential for creating more jobs and other incentives for the many Afghans who are locked into the war economy or narcotics trade since decades. This assistance should be based on welfare and humanitarian projects. In this way, the US and the major

donor western countries can help build more stable and more secure societies that are less likely to export violence and extremism.

Pakistan's government will have to take action against foreign terrorists on its soil and should expel them within no time. To control the cross border movement of terrorists and to keep a check on illegal movement, Pakistan proposed to fence the border in 2006, a proposition that was vehemently opposed by President Karzai. Pakistan should fence the border with Afghanistan to restrict the movement of militants⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ into its territory and could use landmines only where it is impossible to lay wires.⁽¹⁶¹⁾ Pakistan should use every means to stop local and foreign militants using its soil for terrorist acts.

Afghanistan's unrelenting political instability could drag the region into a proxy war that would again place still greater pressure on Pakistan, weaken fragile energy-rich Central Asian states, and aggravate tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad. All stake-holders are mindful of the fact that a rapid US withdrawal from an unstable Afghanistan could recreate safe havens for international terrorism. A final US victory in the region is not that the forces of Taliban and al-Qaeda surrender on the negotiation table, but it lies in the commitment from the regional states, particularly from Pakistan and Afghanistan, to secure their own territories against the threat of extremism and militancy so that US forces can withdraw completely.

All past attempts to solve Afghanistan's problems and to bring peace and stability have failed. Any future policy without any deep strategic coherence based on a regional approach is likely to meet the same fate unless the Afghan state itself is strong enough to assert a minimal degree of influence and respect for its sovereignty.

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