

US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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The paper will be a humble attempt to explore the causes that were responsible for the withdrawal of the US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan as the withdrawal does not represent a mission completed in achieving all the three main goals that were set forth in 2001 by the US, ISAF and NATO: eliminate Osama-bin-Laden and the Al-Qaeda terrorist networks from Afghanistan; to remove the Taliban from power and the last to bring stability in Afghanistan and establish a democratic state. The paper will analyse the current security environment in Afghanistan as the conflict had grown in intensity and geographic scope, continued to result in significant casualties and displacement among Afghan civilians, as the Afghan National Security Forces sought to counter the efforts of insurgent groups to undermine the Government. The paper will also discuss how the emergence of various Pakistan backed insurgent groups is a concern for India as the biggest worry of India today is terrorism abetted by Pakistan and the possible spillover of the ISIS or the Taliban and Afghanistan/Syrian based jihadi and extremist groups into its territory.

Key Words: Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Taliban, ISIS, ANSF, Opium cultivation.

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Rationale of Withdrawal

By analyzing the Afghan crisis through multi-dimensional prism, it became crystal clear that several reasons were responsible for the withdrawal of the US-led ISAF troops from Afghanistan. The United States and its coalition partner's intervention in Afghanistan have ruled out the sovereign status of a nation and became an outbreaker of international law. The corollary of this caused nuisance both to affected and unaffected masses. The occupation by the USA has flared the flames of violence, destruction, and became responsible for mass genocide. As a natural tendency this attack has created anti-US sentiments in the region and the outside world.

The USA's annual expenditure on the Afghan war was US\$ 48 billion on the one hand whereas on the other the whole GDP of Afghanistan is US\$ 34 billion per year (Ibrahim, 2014). The USA and other European countries have been undergoing economic slump. So, under such economic crisis it was difficult for the ISAF to continue the war. Against this background, the US and other allied partners took decision regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

History reveals that war has never been a solution to any problem. Afghanistan remained a battlefield for power politics during the pre and post-Cold War era between the recognized superpowers. First, the erstwhile Soviet Union intervened in the region to install its own government and subsequently to alter the structural adjustments in its own favour through coercion remained unsuccessful. Similarly, the US arbitrate in the like manner for gaining its coveted objectives have also remained futile (Shelala, et al, 2012). Therefore, it becomes obvious that in both cases Afghan culture and tradition prevailed. So, the military power of any nation, cannot address the socio-economic and political problems.

Geo-graphically, Afghanistan is a mountainous region and is very familiar with the local population including the Taliban who are most originally its inhabitants. It is a common fact that the foreigners are not oblivious of another country's terrain and when it is mountainous then it is very difficult for the outsiders to carry out its operations there. The terrain of the Afghanistan has become parallel to that of the Vietnam terrain for the USA's troops (Ibrahim, 2014). It proved a second Vietnam for the USA and now they have been convinced that winning the war in the region is not only difficult but it also seems impossible.

The presence of the USA and other international forces will only escalate the conflict. By sending more troops to the Afghanistan was a mistake of Obama administration because up to now it did not show any positive result. Even the attacks by the insurgents have increased manifold particularly on sensitive areas.

The foreign forces presence in Afghanistan caused a sense of instability and fear among the common masses. Majority of Afghans wanted that USA forces should leave the Afghan soil. One of the major reasons is that US neither assisted the Afghan people nor fulfilled the desired task of its own, though they pulled out Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan to some extent but its affiliates still persists such as Taliban and other militant outfits (Rollins, 2011). The prolonged occupation of US forces has proved destructive to the innocent Afghans. Because at times they have been caught up between the crossfire of the combatants i.e., Taliban and the international security forces and are subject to a bombardment and suicide bombings.

Most of the times, the ANSF has been involved in the killings of the US and its allied partners. One such high-profile event took place at a Kabul training facility on August 5, 2014, when an ANA soldier killed U.S. Army Major General Harold Greene (Burns, et al, 2014). Such incidents have created a very ambiguous situation in the international security forces. Because they are no more in a position to feel safe and secure itself as their own partners are involving in their killings. Such kind of situation is compelling them to leave Afghanistan.

It is very similar to the Vietnam Syndrome, as the soldier returned back from Vietnam they showed unhealthy tendencies, such as depression, post-traumatic disorder, etc. Now, the same kind of situation exists again in the USA due to the protracted Afghanistan war. The international forces have been subjected to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Besides, there is also a scourge of Traumatic Brain injury (TBI) due to the fear of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) placed alongside roads (Ram, 2010).

Emerging Situation in Afghanistan: Possible Challenges

The democratic government of Afghanistan is facing serious security, political, economic and social challenges. Several efforts have been taken by the present government to tackle with those

challenges like to improve their working relationship, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, continued to engage in bilateral discussions. Preparation for the future elections had been started by the newly formed electoral management bodies. Although Gulbuddin Hekmatyar signed peace deal with the Afghanistan, but there was no such type of visible sign between the Government and the Taliban. The situation is deteriorating day-by-day, with heavy clashes between the ANSF and the Taliban, which were on record high in 2016 and continuing with same pace in 2017. The lower economic growth and less investment had resulted into fragile economic system. The present security situation had posed massive challenges before the world in general and democratic government of Afghanistan in particular. Some of the key challenges- security, economic, political and social are discussed in an elaborated way.

After the security responsibilities had been handed over to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) by the United States and NATO in 2014, there is no sign of Taliban's collapse, instead the war has become bloodier than ever. Persistence and even increase in insecurity had resulted into the higher number of ANSF and civilian deaths. As the foreign forces departed, the Taliban increased its pressure by a strong spring offensive. Although, the ANSF have performed reasonably well in face-to-face encounters against Taliban, however, it failed in defending some parts of the Afghan territory. The Taliban captured the Kunduz province in 2015, which the ANSF recaptured only after intense fighting (Goldstein & Mashal, 2015). Moving across the Kunduz, the Taliban increased their activities to other provinces of Afghanistan in the north like Faryab, Jawzjan, and Baghlan. Provinces. In March 2017, the Taliban captured Sangin district in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province (Shah & Nordland, 2017).

In order to show its current position, the Taliban issued a report that shows the areas under its control as well as contested areas and areas under the influence of the Afghan government. The Taliban also claims that there are large areas in Afghanistan where it has only a minimal presence. This report was released on the group's official website, Voice of Jihad, which was entitled as "Percent of Country under the control of Mujahideen", published on March 26, 2018 by the Commission for Cultural Affairs of the Islamic Emirate after a deep analysis. The Taliban's report was mapped by the FDD's Long War Journal.

The report had covered only 348 out of 400 districts of Afghanistan. The Taliban claims that 34 districts are under its full control, while 167 are partially controlled by it. The group also has a significant presence in other 52 districts and a minimal presence in six more districts. The Taliban had claimed that they are not presented in 89 districts, however, guerrilla activities are taking place in these districts.

Another worrying development that have emerged as a major threat in the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan and infact has the potential to endanger the ISAF's mission to train and prepare Afghan security forces to meet the challenges of stabilizing the country is attacks on Coalition forces by Afghan forces, also known as Green-on-Blue attacks. In 2012, attacks by Afghan forces on Coalition forces surged, accounted for **15%** of Coalition deaths. While in 2011, green-on-blue attacks accounted for 6%, 2% in 2010, 2% in 2009, and less than 1% in 2008. The Long War Journal's data covers green-on-blue attacks in Afghanistan from Jan. 1, 2008 up to 2016.

Table 1: Green-on-blue attacks in Afghanistan.

Year	Total Number of attacks per year	Coalition Deaths	Percentage of Coalition Deaths caused by such attacks	Coalition forces wounded during such attacks
2008	2	2	Less than 1%	3
2009	5	12	2	11
2010	5	16	2	1
2011	16	35	6	34
2012	44	61	15	81
2013	13	14	9.9	29
2014	4	4	6	26
2015	2	4	80	3
2016	2	4	78	4

Source: FDD's Long War Journal Data on Green-on-blue attacks in Afghanistan.

The NATO commanders stated that 90% of the attacks are due to cultural differences and personal enmity, however, disagreeing with NATO's analysis, the Afghan government has

blamed that the problem is due to infiltration by foreign spy agencies, including those of neighboring countries.

Following security, political and economic transitions in Afghanistan, the post-2014 era was always going to be a challenging time for the country. The economy of Afghanistan is closely associated with its security and political situation. The higher number of civilian casualties in 2016, falling of some key areas to the Taliban, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), and the re-emergence of Taliban each dominated news headlines and had affected the business mindset, which ultimately resulted in low investment and capital flight. The economic and social gains achieved in the past are eroding. Poverty, unemployment, underemployment, violence, migration, internal displacement, and the education-gender gap have all increased, while services and private investment have decreased (World Bank, 2016). The weak institutions along with high levels of crime and corruption undermine Afghanistan's delivery of public services, which deters private investment. The IMF had revealed that inadequate human capital and infrastructure, and a large illicit narcotics sector, are some of the notable elements which prevents robust and inclusive economic development.²

The financial sector of the Afghanistan is challenged by its security environment. It is also affected largely by lingering governance concerns, deteriorating asset quality, and weak profitability. The banking sector is dominated by 15 banks, comprises of three state-owned, nine Afghan private-sector, and three foreign-owned branches. However, the bank lending remained low after the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis as the Public confidence has not been fully restored. According to a State Department report, less than 10% of the Afghan population uses banks.

In Afghanistan, since 2001 the international community has made notable efforts in different areas such as service delivery, infrastructure investments, economic structure and social life. As a result of these efforts, life expectancy and schooling has shown a positive increase. However, the UNDP Human Development Report 2017 ranked Afghanistan on 169 out of 188 countries, which clearly indicates that investments in service delivery, social and economic structure has

²International Monetary Fund. (2016). *IMF Executive Board Approves A US\$44.9 million Extended Credit Facility Arrangement to Support the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C. USA. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2016/cr16252.pdf>

not reached expected levels. Still the socio-economic problems such as unemployment and poverty, education, opium production and drug trade, women's rights, and out-migration are the biggest problems in the social sector besides that of insecurity. Unemployment and poverty are the significant problems, especially in rural areas (Ozdemir, 2017).

Post-US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Implications for India's Security:

The most important goal of India in Afghanistan is to prevent the latter from being used as a base for Pakistani-supported terrorist groups to launch attacks in India or against Indian interests in Afghanistan, for example, against its diplomatic or infrastructure building missions. In order to prevent attacks on the India's establishments in Afghanistan, India desires to have a stable, democratic, and multi-ethnic Afghan government which could bring whole of Afghanistan under its control and maintain peace, prevent Taliban to come in power, and check anti-India extremism.

Afghanistan acts as a gate-way to resource rich Central Asia. The Central Asian republics have large amount of natural gas and oil reserves. So India has to depend on Afghanistan to get access of the oil and natural gas of CAR's. The proposed TAPI gas pipeline would carry 33 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) of Caspian Sea natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and then to India.³ It is expected to be completed in 2017 but in its completion the stability of Afghanistan is necessary. Afghanistan, itself also has abundance of oil and natural gas resources. The United States Geological Survey researchers have found that Afghanistan had a vast unexplored natural resources, crude oil ranging between 0.4 billion barrels to 3.6 billion barrels and natural gas from 3.6 trillion cubic feet to 36.5 trillion cubic feet.⁴ To use the natural resources of both the Afghanistan as well as Central Asian countries is in close interests of India. As a regional power, India likes to extend her influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia so as to encircle China. To counter China, Afghanistan acts as a litmus test for India (Kumar, 2014).

³Hanauer, L. & Peter, C. (2012). India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan. Center for Asia Pacific Policy. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf

⁴Afghanistan has oil. (May 15, 2006). *Geotimes*. Retrieved from <http://www.geotimes.org/may06/resources.ht>

India is following Afghanistan conundrum very deeply as the destabilization of the country would eventually threaten its security. On the one hand, the Indian government fears its arch rival Pakistan's increased influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's security doctrine views Afghanistan as a strategic area for retreat in case of a war with India, and Islamabad is clearly striving to exert more influence in Kabul. On the other hand, New Delhi sees the danger of a destabilized Afghanistan or the Taliban's return to power as being accompanied by the strengthening of terror networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai by members of the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba, the 2014 attacks on the Indian consulate in Herat and March 2016 attack on the Indian consulate in the city of Jalalabad in Afghanistan demonstrated India's vulnerability to Islamist terrorists.

India is well-known to the fact that after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, in 1989, militancy started in Kashmir. At that time thousands of youth from valley and foreign (especially from Pakistan and Afghanistan) joined different militant outfits and resulted into the arms struggle with the Indian forces. All this has triggered a lively debate among India's security policy elites about the possibilities and limits of India's commitment to Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban, India began to participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Its contribution of US\$ 2 billion made it the fifth-largest donor country.⁵ The successful completion of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam in the Herat Province, Construction of the Afghan Parliament building and the highway between Zaranj and Delaram are just three examples of India's prestigious projects in Afghanistan. New Delhi has also committed itself to many smaller development projects, for example, in the health sector, and annually offers 500 scholarships for Afghan students.⁶ In addition, India promised to provide US \$1 billion in development aid to Afghanistan during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's two-day trip to New Delhi in September 2016.

Putting the Pakistan -Taliban – ISI nexus in order it is worthy to mention that following 9/11, the United States and the Northern Alliance quickly defeated the Taliban and removed

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (August 12, 2012). *India - Afghanistan Relations*. Retrieved from <http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/afghanistan-aug-2012.pdf>

⁶ Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2012). *India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership*. Retrieved from <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?pdf0358?000>

them from power. The remaining leadership of the Taliban fled to Pakistan and after a few years regrouped and regained its strength. They have been fighting both Afghanistan and NATO forces since then, with the continued support of elements of the Pakistani intelligence and armed forces. The current goals of the Taliban is to remove the foreign forces in Afghanistan, overthrow the central Afghan government, and re-establish their control over the country. Their membership continues to be predominately Pashtuns. They receive significant assistance from portions of the Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). For Pakistan, the Taliban exists as a way to for them to exert influence and possibly control Afghanistan and provides Pakistan a level of strategic depth against their true enemy: India. The Taliban is closely aligned with many other insurgent and terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, such as the Haqqani Network. The leadership of the Taliban is based in Pakistan, but nearly all of its attacks are in Afghanistan. There is a separate organization called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that is based in Afghanistan and conducts attacks against Pakistan.

India cannot be a spectator as chaos ensues in Afghanistan, for it will not be safe from the spillover. Hence, it is imperative for Indian to assist Afghanistan in building sound political structures, a strong military and economy, along with human resources. It cannot afford to let Afghanistan slide back to the days of Taliban rule after 15 years of Western intervention.

Conclusion:

The decade of 2015 to 2024 has been declared by the Afghanistan's government as "Transformation Decade", which would envisage a certain level of stability, a self-sufficient economy, reduced unemployment, end to institutional corruption, coming into force of a new inclusive constitution, and a level of economic prosperity by the end of 2024. However, as the foreign forces departed, the Taliban increased its pressure by a strong spring offensive. Although, the ANSF have performed reasonably well in face-to-face encounters against Taliban, but it failed in defending some parts of the Afghan territory. The economic and social gains achieved in the past are eroding. Poverty, unemployment, underemployment, corruption, violence, internal displacement, and the education-gender gap have all increased, while services and private investment have decreased. Addressing all these challenges requires the determined resolve of the Government. Creation of a transparent and accountable administration, controlled

flow of foreign aid, economic reforms, and strengthening of local governance are required. However, all of these developments demand first and foremost the internal security of the country. The intensity of the conflict clearly underscores the urgency for a political solution to the conflict. Although, the implementation of the peace agreement between the Government and Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin is ongoing but there has been no tangible progress towards direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, for which the role of regional countries remains vital, particularly the constructive relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is of prime importance. Furthermore, there is an utmost urgency for the fully implementation of the National Civilian Casualty Prevention and Mitigation Policy as attacks on health-care facilities, educational facilities, health-care workers and educators have increased. India needs to cooperate with other regional neighbours to address pressing issues in Afghanistan and back Kabul government in its efforts towards rebuilding and reconstruction of the war weary country. India must see to it that Afghanistan does not once again become the breeding ground for religious fundamentalism and therefore must do everything in its capacity to help Afghanistan in its nation-building process. A stable and democratic Afghanistan will not only serve India's interests within Afghanistan but also limit to a large extent Pakistan's manoeuvring of religious extremism as a state policy. The security vacuum in post-2014 scenario may offer Pakistan-based anti-India extremist groups a strategic space to organise and plan their attacks without much scrutiny. In the absence of the security cover that the U.S. troops and ISAF were able to provide in Afghanistan for the last thirteen years, India's interests and installations inside Afghanistan might become vulnerable to attacks orchestrated and schemed by Pakistan's security establishment and carried out by their proxies. For that reason, India's post-2104 Afghan policy should focus on mitigating the possibility of Afghanistan again becoming sanctuary for extremist outfits which, as a rule, take diktats from Pakistan's ISI.

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