

THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX AND AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE US WITHDRAWAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Afghanistan's history has consistently made it a focal point in global politics, attracting the attention of key international players. Pakistan, as a frontline non-NATO ally in the extended War on Terror, has faced severe repercussions from this conflict. As such, it became crucial to anticipate the multifaceted implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. After several rounds of negotiations, the 'Afghan Quagmire' saw a glimmer of hope with the signing of the U.S.-Taliban Peace Agreement on February 29th, 2020. However, the world watched in shock on August 15, 2021, as Kabul fell to the Taliban, marking their dramatic return to power. The swift collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, along with the disintegration of the Afghan government, paved the way for the Taliban's rapid reconquest of Kabul. This turn of events has had significant implications for Pakistan, which can be categorized into four key areas: security, political, economic, and strategic concerns. Pakistan has consistently emphasized the need for a balanced, reciprocal approach in dealing with the Taliban government. It advocates for a comprehensive and justifiable regional strategy to address the challenges posed by the new Afghan administration. This paper examines the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, with a particular focus on its impact on regional security and the evolving U.S. policies toward the region in the aftermath.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, US, withdrawal, security, policy

Background of the Study

It is said that “when your neighboring house is on fire certainly you will also feel the heat”. This seems accurate in the situation of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the implications it posed to Pakistan. In fact, Afghanistan turned out to be a major foreign policy concern for US when in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 the US commanded a military campaign against Al-Qaeda and Taliban Government who harbored and supported it. This war was fought by NATO, US and Pakistan (Non-NATO Ally), and it started to manifest the indelible imprints on the entire country as Pakistan appeared at the receiving end; started to get affected by both- War on Terror and post-war impacts. The factual situation surfaced manifested that the civil-military scenario of Pakistan was shot and the FATA and KP areas were shoved in extremism.

The massive war expenditure of two trillion US \$ in two-decade long war proved to be disastrous especially for the Afghanistan, however the US also suffered. Apart from the warfare some areas in which US invested dollars included the reconstruction of Afghanistan such as replaced the

Taliban government by an elected Afghan government, raised and developed the Afghan security forces and different measures for human development though the future remained mixed about them. The fundamental objective of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan remained as preventing any further attacks on the United States and its allies by terrorists while enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan.

The Afghan quagmire came across a silver lining on 29th of February 2020 when the US-Taliban signed the “Agreement for bringing Peace in Afghanistan” on the issues of counter-terrorism and withdrawal of US and International forces (Bashir, 2023). In reciprocation Taliban committed to preventing Al-Qaeda and other terrorist outfits from using Afghan soil to recruit, train and fundraise for the activities that threaten US or its Allies.

Afghan government representatives were not participants in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some observers to conclude that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001. The U.S.-Taliban agreement envisioned intra-Afghan talks beginning on March 10, 2020, but talks were held up for months by a number of complications. The most significant obstacles were an extended political crisis among Afghan political leaders over the contested 2019 Afghan presidential election and a disputed prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Afghan government. President Ghani and his 2019 election opponent Abdullah Abdullah signed an agreement ending their dispute in May 2020, and as of June 2020, the number of prisoners released by both sides appeared to be reaching the level at which talks might begin, though the Afghan government might resist releasing high-profile prisoners that the Taliban demanded as a condition of beginning negotiations.

The US-led international forces’ withdrawal started on 13th of July 2011 when the first group of 650 troops left Afghanistan according to the President Barak Obama’s planned drawdown. The United States and its NATO partners agreed, on 18 April 2012, to slow down the war in Afghanistan in respect of three pledges: to move the Afghans steadily into a lead combat role; to keep some international troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014, and to pay billions of dollars (on yearly basis) to help support the Afghan security forces. On May the 2nd 2012, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the US President Barack Obama signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the two countries. The withdrawal of US led international forces raised serious implications for the entire region. In this context the two “Treacherous Triangles” cannot be ignored; one includes Pakistan, China and Afghanistan and the second comprises the US, India and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a land-locked state and it is the Pakistan that provides major transit routes to the former so assuredly it reflected serious security concerns in the post withdrawal arena however, the impacts of War on Terror also appeared to be lethal. It seems that the Durand Line never appears to be a rigid border line between Pakistan and Afghanistan due to the cultural and historical linkages. Huge refugee influx, along with drugs and weapons can seriously undermine the law and order and thus the security of entire state. Along with these implications the other dimension that needs to get the attention is the power vacuum created as a result of the US withdrawal (Humza & Khan , 2022). The ascendancy of Taliban to power definitely endangered the two decades long achievements in the field of education, health, women freedom and freedom of expression and other civil liberties. It seemed vivid that America wanted Indian presence in Afghanistan to contain China’s economic rise. Indian

investment in Afghanistan would rise Indian economy and a direct access to Central Asian States.

This research aims to explore and highlight the implications Pakistan confronted following the withdrawal of US and international forces from Afghanistan. It seeks to fill existing gaps in the literature by providing an in-depth analysis of this important issue, making it a valuable contribution for both general readers and students of International Relations in academia. Furthermore, this study offers a theoretical framework that will provide crucial insights for policymakers. The theoretical foundation of this paper is rooted in the *Regional Security Complex Theory* (RSCT) and the related concept of securitization. Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, RSCT presents a dynamic approach to security that contrasts with traditional, state-centric models. While traditional security theories were particularly relevant during the world wars and the Cold War, the post-Cold War era—and especially the turn of the new millennium—has seen a shift toward more multifaceted, complex, and dynamic understandings of security. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the implications of the US-led international forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan for Pakistan?

The Conundrum of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Afghanistan positioned at the cross-roads of Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East has been an enigmatic concern in global politics for centuries. The beginning of the new century got marked with the War on Terror in Afghanistan in 2001 with US and its NATO allies on one side and Taliban and AQ on the other. The ISAF founded in December 2001 was a transnational security operation in Afghanistan and NATO commenced heading it with UN mandate in August 2003. The responsibility ISAF assigned with was ensuring and maintaining security in Kabul and its vicinities. NATO took the lead of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan on August 11th, 2003. Mandated by the United Nations, ISAF's primary objective was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists. From 2011, responsibility for security was gradually transitioned to Afghan forces, which took the lead for security operations across the country by summer 2013 (Mughal & Hussain, 2017).

The War on Terror brought to the fore-front an entire new concept of security- being more inclusive and comprehensive. Under this new concept the states in the international political arena do not need to protect themselves from the external enemy only but from the internal enemy as well. Pakistan being the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan appeared to be at the receiving end in getting the severe impacts of War on Terror and in the post withdrawal scenario as well. As a result of divided and incoherent composition of state and society in Pakistan at that time the security situation appeared quite fragile and sometimes more deteriorated in the whole country in general and in its western belt in particular. The State of Pakistan seemed to be sandwiched between the mosaic of Taliban and al-Qaeda and their supporters on one side and US and its allies on the other. US continued to hammer the mantra of 'Do More' on Pakistan throughout that time period (Mockaitis, 2022). According to the US the western belt of Pakistan was 'safe havens' for the terrorists who conducted terrorist activities in Afghanistan and took refuge in Pakistani territory. Making this as a base US formulated a new strategy named as the "Af-Pak Strategy" in 2008 which prompted a wide array of resentment across the country. Following sharp criticism and condemnation from Pakistan the US stopped using the term in 2010. The security situation in Pakistan was rapidly deteriorating so in order to maintain law

and order and to counter terrorism and extremism Pakistan's security forces conducted major security operations in the country and paid worth cost for it.

Obama's Presidency: First Increase of the Number of Troops - then Gradual Withdrawal

With the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House, the strategic focus of the United States shifted back to Afghanistan. Less than three weeks after his inauguration, Obama ordered 17,000 extra US troops to be transferred to Afghanistan and thereby boosted troops already deployed by 50%. The assessment of the new administration was that the deteriorating situation requires new strategic attention, additional resources and swift action. This new strategy, publicly proclaimed on 27th, March 2009 after the intense consultation of White House with the Pentagon, State Department and foreign allies, included not only Taliban's pockets of resistance inside Afghanistan and along Afghan-Pakistani border, but also "safe havens" of Taliban and AQ guerillas inside Pakistan. Obama stated: "So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That is the goal that must be achieved. That is a cause that could not be more just. And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: we will defeat you" (Goldberg, 2017).

For this plan to work, Obama announced to further bolster US troops in Afghanistan, increase aid to Pakistan, put the stronger pressure on Pakistan to tackle AQ and Taliban "safe havens" inside their country and intensify bombing campaign against AQ and Taliban strongholds on both sides of Afghan-Pakistani border. Also, this new policy insisted on trying to engage Afghanistan regional neighbors (even Iran) to help pacify situation in Afghanistan. "The first sharpest break from his predecessor was the idea of including Pakistan in the overall strategic approach to Afghanistan. His position towards Pakistan has been tougher compared with the Bush years and intended to exert a strong diplomatic pressure on Islamabad. That break was based on the realistic acknowledgment that the north-western part of the country was of key strategic value for the Taliban's insurgency. The second change was strictly related to the third one (Dueck, 2015). The shift from a counter-terrorism to a counterinsurgency campaign indeed asked for more troops on the ground. That is to say that choosing for a counterinsurgency campaign meant also deploying fresh troops, since such type of operations requires huge military manpower, particularly at the infantry level. The Obama administration had also intensified programs for the Afghan Security Forces, intending to strengthen them by the time American troops begin their gradual withdrawal. Consequently, ANSF grew significantly during next four years, from 224,000 in 2010 to 345,000 in 2014.

The US exit strategy necessitates a 'political settlement' that entails reconciling with various Afghan streams including the Taliban. In this context, dialogue with Taliban stands out as the most critical factor on which withdrawal is anchored. The US is already engaged in reaching out with Afghan Taliban on a bilateral track that tends to marginalize Pakistani role to-date. The US engagement with the Taliban was varyingly described as scooping, contacts and perhaps talks but certainly not negotiations as yet. The credentials of the interlocutors, the body of resistance they represent and the scope of discussion remains in the grey area. However, the direction if not pace, is already vouched by the US facilitated preparatory steps: the UN Security Council adoption of measures to separate the lists of Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the context of sanctions regime and the acknowledgements of having reached Taliban for talks (Mashaw & Berke, 2018).

On December 1st, 2009 for the first time in the eight-year war history a time frame was put on US military presence as President Obama marked July 2011 as start of troops draw down but he did not detail for how long will it take. In November 2010, at a summit in Lisbon, Portugal, NATO member countries signed a declaration agreeing to hand over the complete responsibility for security in Afghanistan to the Afghan security forces by the end 2014. The transition process specified to begin in 2011 with local security forces taking over control in relatively stable provinces and cities. It raised the concerns of many in Afghanistan, west and members of Afghan parliament about the ability of national forces to take over from international troops. The internal pressure on the United States to terminate the everlasting war had grown as the US operation in Afghanistan had dragged on for years without producing any real results. To end the US military campaign in Afghanistan, the Obama administration created a two-pronged strategy. Counter-insurgency operations to be stepped up, while national security forces would take over responsibility for Afghanistan's security starting in 2011. The United States' Afghanistan policy was to clear, hold, build, and transfer power.

United States President Barack Obama has named General Stanley A. (Payne, 2019). McChrystal to lead US and foreign forces in Afghanistan as part of the implementation of his military plan. General David Petraeus took over as commander from General McChrystal after a year. With the deployment of 33,000 extra troops, the total number of troops in Afghanistan reached at almost 100,000. With this step, the goal was to weaken the Taliban, speed up the training of Afghan security forces, and transfer over the duty for protecting Afghanistan to them. NATO countries expressed in November 2010 that they would complete the handover of all Afghan security responsibilities and a large decrease of international troops by 2014. Because of major flaws in the US military plan for Afghanistan, the future course of US operations in that country has been jeopardized (Holland, 2016). Because it was time-bound, the strategy proved ineffectual because of the timeliness and deadlines for the troop surge, troop withdrawal, and handover of responsibility. As a result of this the Taliban gained the advantage to build both morale and insurgency resultantly succeeded psychologically as well as militarily.

On May 1st, 2011 the US forces assassinated the global terrorist icon, Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan. It fueled even further the long simmering debate about the Afghan war. On June 22nd, 2011 President Obama outlined a plan to withdraw 30,000 troops by summer 2012, the surge troops that were sent in 2009. He pointed that the drawdown would continue “at a steady pace” until the United States handed over security to the Afghan authorities in 2014. The American people were not supporting the war anymore, additionally President Obama had to fulfil the promises he had made during the presidential election campaign. After the surge troop’s withdrawal, approximately 70,000 troop were scheduled to stay till at least 2014. By then the Pentagon had also concluded that the war could not be won militarily rather a politically negotiated settlement could end the conflict.

As a part of realization of that process USA and Afghan government signed strategic partnership agreement officially named “Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America” on May 2nd, 2012 and entered into force on July 4th, 2012. According to Agreement and other American plans, on 21, May NATO leaders endorsed exit strategy during NATO summit in Chicago which foresaw that NATO led ISAF Forces will hand over command of all of its mission to Afghan force by the mid – 2013, while shifting its mission from combat to support role (McCracken, 2013).

As a result of Richard Holbrooke's diplomatic efforts, the U.S. Obama Administration engaged in direct, secret talks with senior Taliban leaders in Afghanistan. These discussions were of an exploratory nature and did not progress to formal peace negotiations. President Obama confirmed that the U.S. was holding preliminary talks with the Taliban leadership, with one of the primary objectives being to assess which Taliban figures might be open to participating in formal peace talks, and under what conditions. The Obama Administration's war advisors emphasized that any high-level peace or reconciliation process with the Taliban must be led by Afghanistan's then-president, Hamid Karzai, who had been engaged in sporadic talks with both current and former Taliban leaders since 2008, often with Saudi Arabia's mediation, though without significant results. For the United States, the ultimate aim of these talks was to convince key Taliban leaders to sever ties with al-Qaeda, abandon the battlefield, and participate in Afghanistan's electoral politics, thereby contributing to the transformation of both the country and its political landscape (Shams, 2016).

However, the Obama administration had understandably concluded that the status quo is untenable, the war had devolved into strategic stalemate. The facts being urban settlers enjoyed the perks of security, school girls were back in classes, furthermore Al-Qaeda could not operate and their supporters Taliban could not return to power but the problems of ethnic militias and criminal outfits had the chance to economize weapons, cadge international funds and exploit the weak. Both US and Taliban could not get their stated objectives by arms alone and the administration also lacked a definite way to preserve the gains achieved by reducing its military presence. USA started negotiations with the Taliban which led to unilateral suspension of the "Bilateral Security Agreement" by Afghan government in June, 2013, so new Security Agreement had to be reached and signed. In that period, US troops levels down from 77, 00 (September, 2013) to 46,000 (December, 2013) and 34, 000 in March, 2014. As ISAF forces were reduced in advance of the scheduled 2014 transition, NATO began gradually transferring security duties to Afghan forces which assumed full responsibility for security nationwide. In December 2014 the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ended and the noncombat "Resolute Support Mission" (RSM) started on January 1st, 2015 that continued training and advising Afghan military. At that time troop levels were cut down to 16,100, while in the March, 2015 only 9,800 of them remained in Afghanistan (Barikzai, Phaqwar, Rajesh, & Phgwara , 2021).

But, in October 2015, Obama promulgated that situation in Afghanistan is too fragile for US troops to complete their total withdrawal and announced that he plans to retain the current number of troops (9,800) in place during most of 2016 in order to continue counter-terrorism missions and advise Afghans battling a resurgent Taliban. Saying Highlighting the precarious security situation in Afghanistan President Obama announced that instead of dropping the U.S. troop level to 5,500 by December 2016, he would keep it at about 8,400 through the end of his term on Jan. 20, 2017. He expressed that his successor would determine the next move. If giving peace talks a chance could decrease the violence and shrink the Afghan battlefield by a few per cent, President Obama probably have had the credit to calculate correctly the ground reality in the battle field and the anticipated results: even a partly successful negotiation might help create political conditions that favor the reduction of American forces to a more sustainable level.

**Trump's Presidency- Doha Agreement and the Beginning of an End
Afghanistan Peace Talks: Anticipating a Political Settlement**

Throughout his campaign for presidency candidature Donald Trump has pointed out for a number of years that the American presence in Afghanistan is a terrible mistake that needs to be corrected. He based his campaign on the promise to withdraw the forces as soon as possible. For sure this showed the strong dichotomy of policy and the action. The Taliban movement continued to strengthen in parallel with the reduction of troops in the country. Moreover, IS-K a branch of IS surfaced as a new existential threat, which was supposed to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of US-led international forces posing further strong negative implications for all around. President Trump during his tenure asserted on the shift of policy from time bound ultimatums to actual conditions on ground. According to him the troop's withdrawal would be based on combat conditions, not predetermined timelines. There were two streams of opinion in Trump's circle, one of which was isolationist and thought that the plan to withdraw the troops should continue with its course, while the other thought that due to the ISKP, the situation on the ground should be strengthened, troop-wise. A compromise solution prevailed, sending an additional 3,900 troops, raising the number from the official 8,400 to about 12,300, although later reports showed that despite the fact that those were official figures, there actually were not 8,400 members on the ground, but 11,000 which would make the total situation, in mid-August, about 15,000 people (Owais, 2019).

In August 2017, President Trump unveiled in his speech the revised strategy for Afghanistan: a political settlement as an outcome of an effective military effort. Within a little time frame the trump administration decided to enter into direct negotiations with the Taliban without the participation of Afghan government representatives. It prioritized an Afghan led, Afghan owned reconciliation process and the first high level direct U.S.-Taliban talks occurred in Doha, Qatar in July 2018. Simultaneously in September of the same year the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan born former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, as special representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation added further momentum to this effort. For almost a year Khalilzad held a continuous series of meetings with Taliban officials in Doha along with consultations with Afghan, Pakistani and other regional governments. The Afghan quagmire finally came across a silver lining on 29th of February, 2020 when the US-Taliban signed the 'Agreement for bringing Peace in Afghanistan' "on the issues of counter-terrorism and withdrawal of US and International forces, to negotiate a political road map for a new government and constitution, reduce violence and ultimately forge a lasting cease-fire. The two and half years of a floundering peace process that started in July 2018 culminated into a three-day ceasefire and resulted in the Doha Agreement on 29th February 2020 for bringing peace to Afghanistan. At the same time, representatives of US and the Afghan government signed the similarly titled but less discussed Joint Declaration" (Bass, 2020).

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a member of the United Nations and recognized by the United States and the international community as a sovereign state under international law, and the United States of America are committed to working together to reach a comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement that ends the war in Afghanistan for the benefit of all Afghans and contributes to regional stability and global security. A comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement will include four parts: The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan 2020 outlines four essential components aimed at achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces. First, it guarantees the prevention of Afghan soil being used by any international terrorist groups or individuals to threaten the

security of the United States and its allies. Second, the agreement establishes a timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. and Coalition forces from Afghanistan. Third, it calls for a political settlement through intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations, involving the Taliban and an inclusive negotiating team from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Finally, the agreement seeks a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, aiming to end hostilities between the warring parties (Pilster, 2020). These four elements are deeply interconnected and interdependent, with each playing a critical role in establishing a peaceful, sovereign, and unified Afghanistan. Ultimately, the agreement reflects the shared goal of all parties involved to secure a peaceful Afghanistan, at peace with itself and its neighbors, after years of conflict. One of the main problems with this agreement lies in the fact that it does not contain a permanent ceasefire agreement, nor a way to resolve disagreements between the Afghan government, led by then-President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban, and the agreement itself does not contain any measures to implement and enforce promises such as violence reduction and severing ties with terrorist groups. It should also be noted that the number of troops was reduced to 8,600 American soldiers after the signing of the agreement and that on January 15th, 2021, the number of troops was further reduced to 2,500, which was the record lowest since 2001. Based on the order of Donald Trump from November 2020, which marked the end of Trump's mandate (Kaura, 2018).

President Biden & Withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan- Finally the Withdrawal Actually Happened

Long before he even became the candidate for the presidency of the USA, Joe Biden already thought about how to solve the problem called "Afghanistan". As Obama's deputy, he proposed to him a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, however, his proposal was rejected. Eventually, in early 2021, by becoming POTUS, he was finally given the opportunity to put an end to an event that, in his eyes, represented a war without a purpose. Biden and his administration reaffirmed the provisions of the agreement - to put an end to this "endless" war, but with the expectation to maintain a certain ability to resist a possible surge of terrorism and extremism. In addition, Biden's decision to remain true to the final withdrawal from Afghanistan has to do with extremely high accumulated costs (over 2 trillion, as well as over 2,000 soldiers killed), with frustrating successes on the ground, in terms of suppressing the Taliban and the process of state-building (Shively, 2024).

As per Doha Agreement, the Trump administration set May 1st, 2021, as the date for complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, on April 14th, 2021, US President Joe Biden announced that the United States would begin the final and complete withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan on May 1st, to be completed in full, symbolically, on September 11, 2021. The deference of the deadline for full withdrawal of the troops, as agreed by US and the Taliban in the agreement, resulted in negative reactions from Taliban leaders, who claimed it a violation of the Doha Agreement, which, in principle, gives the Taliban the green light to take all necessary countermeasures, and that the American side will be responsible for repercussions that could potentially follow. Resultantly, due to more frequent attacks by Taliban fighters, a decision was made to boost up the withdrawal deadline. The US handed Bagram Airfield, that used to be known as a symbol of US military might, to Afghan forces on 2nd July, 2021 (Brands & O'Hanlon, 2021). A few days later, on July 8th, in his addressing to the American people, Biden moved the deadline for withdrawal even further back, to August 31st. He pointed out further that the Taliban would otherwise start attacking American troops if they did not adhere to the

agreement reached during Trump's mandate. The month of August 2021, is marked by the various historic upheavals. The provinces across Afghanistan started to come under the Taliban at a greater pace than expected allowing Taliban the de facto control of the country. The historic Kabul Fall occurred on 15th of August, only the province of Panjshir resisted for some time and it fell on 6th of September, 2021. On the same day, the former president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country by helicopter and thus abdicated from his position. Country wide chaos broke out rapidly in Afghanistan. Thousands and thousands of people, both local and foreigners and diplomats, flocked to Hamid Karzai International Airport in hopes of being able to safely evacuate the country and escape life under the Taliban regime (Giustozzi, 2021).

President Biden sent 6,000 American troops to secure the airport in Kabul, as well as provide and ensure the safe evacuation of citizens and Afghan allies who helped during the war, as a result of the fear of possible retaliation by the Taliban. The evacuation deadline remained August 31st, as President Biden already announced, which included the 6,000 troops sent on the day the Taliban took over Kabul. And that was it. The last American plane to leave Afghanistan took off on August 31st at 7:29 pm, marking the 100% withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and starting a new-old era for Afghanistan, the one under the Taliban regime who have tried to project themselves as different from the past. It is yet to be seen the claims they have made. Immediately the Taliban announced their interim governmental set up on 7th of September, 2021 asserting that the state affairs need to run on priority basis. They projected an entirely different image by announcing general amnesty for all, inviting different countries for support, investment and reconstruction in Afghanistan. The world community seemed eager to see the claims made by the Taliban government are to be fulfilled or not (Jenkins, 2021). Eventually after two decades, America had finally, on August 31st, 2021, withdrew from Afghanistan. The policy and manner of participation had changed over time, from the original intention to search for Osama bin Laden, overthrow the Taliban and suppress Al Qaeda, through the process of building a state based on democratic principles while gradually reducing the number of US and Allied troops operating on the ground, and ultimately handing control over to the trained Afghan forces. The direction that America decided to take, after the frustrating results on the ground, was to gradually, in the foreseeable future, withdraw completely from Afghanistan.

Conclusively, the results of the military intervention such as huge war expense and loss of human lives are highly debatable. Certainly, for America the achievement was, at least declaratively, fulfilled its original goal for launching the military intervention, which was the elimination of Osama bin Laden and the suppression of AQ's actions, however, they had failed to build a functioning state, despite the enormous amount of money invested. In less than three months of the offensive, the Taliban, almost without breaking a sweat, took the complete control of the entire country, regained power and proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Furthermore, they formed interim cabinet to run the state affairs and appeared ready to engage with the world.

Implications of US-led Forces from Afghanistan and its Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan being the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan again appeared at the receiving end in getting the post withdrawal implications like the effects and consequences it faced during War on Terror. The world witnessed the unprecedented Taliban's ascendance to power and Kabul Fall on

15th of August. Though the Taliban's swift return to power in Kabul is not just because of the group's effective military strategy rather it was also a result of the psychological impact of a hasty US withdrawal, the incompetence of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and a beleaguered and incompetent Afghan government (Jaleel & Noor, H, 2023).

The aim is to highlight the Afghanistan complex situation and its implications for Pakistan. Across the ages, Afghanistan's complex situation and fragile government create severe security threat along with harsh political and strategic menaces for Pakistan. Considering the recent past and focusing on the late 1970s onwards Afghanistan had been a hunting ground for super powers, suffered brutal civil war in addition to foreign interventions such as the Soviet invasion of 1979 and U.S. invasion in 2001. Pakistan is significantly and directly affected by the foreign invasions in Afghanistan. The terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre on 11th September, 2001 jolted the entire world and introduced an entire new concept of security- the Comprehensive Security, according to which states not only need to defend themselves from the external enemy but from internal enemy as well. Pakistan being contiguous to Afghanistan faces a variety of similar security threats; an internal threat, threat on its eastern and western side in form of India and Afghanistan respectively (Anuka & Raymond, 2024). The collapse of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) exposed the erroneous claims of the US and other NATO countries regarding the strength of the country. Although, the reasons behind the failure of the US-backed Ghani regime are manifold and demand a deep introspection, the hottest concern at hand is how to deal with the consequence that has placed the Taliban in the center stage of power as a single and exclusive authority in Afghanistan. The Taliban's ascendance to power in Afghanistan has profound implications for the entire region in in general and for Pakistan ion particular. Pakistan asserts and establishes the fact that the regions stability depends upon peace and harmony in Afghanistan. Pakistan played the key role by investing huge political and diplomatic capital in bringing all the parties to the table for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Within the United States there was an enormous domestic criticism and pressure on the Biden administration regarding the situation in Afghanistan and its sudden announcement of a withdrawal without a political settlement appeared very alarming and concerning for Pakistan. Islamabad feared Washington's unilateral withdrawal would definitely jeopardize the initial gains of the Doha Agreement 2020 and may push Afghanistan towards further chaos and civil war. The Taliban's takeover has once again crafted a new set of challenges and opportunities for the region depending on how the situation evolves (Shahnan & Hussain, 2024).

During the transition phase, Pakistan has assisted in evacuating more than 7000 foreigners from Afghanistan including diplomatic personnel and staff of international organizations (Jamal, 2021). Pakistan's role and assistance in this critical juncture of time established its significance for any sustainable solution in Afghanistan. Pakistan having a very long contiguous border with Afghanistan makes it a preferred route for travel, trade and connectivity. At the same time, there is a growing concern in Islamabad that with mounting frustration over the US policy failures in Afghanistan, some of that anger is likely to be redirected at Pakistan (Khan, 2021). It was anticipated that a peaceful and smooth transition to an inclusive government would definitely help dissipate the negative focus on Pakistan. For that Islamabad needs to actively engage with regional and international actors and continue to play a constructive role in a transparent manner.

Implications for Security and Terrorism

The withdrawal of US-led international forces did leave security fissures in Afghanistan and suicide bombings became swift and lethal, among the most disastrous events is the suicide bombing in Barchi district of West Kabul, on 30th September, 2022 claimed lives of 53 young girls and women of Hazara community. The inherent weaknesses and loopholes in the security structure of Afghanistan have always profound impacts on Pakistan specially the threats from IS-K and TTP. Terrorism, militancy and religious extremism are the ultimate challenges Pakistan faced in the aftermath as Pakistan was the front-line ally to counter in War on Terror and struggling in post war scenario as well. An immediate risk as a result of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan is the revival of Pakistan's domestic terrorist groups such as the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the sleeper cells of other transnational terrorist organizations including the Islamic State (IS) and AQ (Nisar, Amin, & Asghar, 2023).

Pakistan is particularly concerned about insurgencies in its tribal areas along Afghan border in KPK and Baluchistan. In FATA, the security concern is TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan). This group has rivalries within and is without any single leadership. This threat surged up with US withdrawal and resultantly Pakistan poured in more force to counter terrorism and militancy effectively in this belt. Separatist movements of Baluchistan and their external support through Afghanistan is another security issue. Pakistan has been mentioning its reservations on Indian support for insurgencies in its border areas. Although, it is believed that with US withdrawal this support would decrease but the potential and connections of these terrorist outfits would keep on daunting security agencies. Afghanistan appeared as an active field for India to utilize it against Pakistan. In the past few years, terrorist attacks from Afghanistan-based Pakistani terrorist groups have been a major security challenge for Pakistan. Islamabad has consistently exposed to the world the Indian involvement in stirring up terrorism in the country from Afghan territory and have shared the evidence with the international community as well. An unstable Afghanistan very directly reflects the risk that the existing nexus would be strengthened to muster instability in Pakistan. The Taliban leadership has specifically guaranteed in "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between Taliban and US" not to allow the Afghan territory to be used against anyone. However, so far, they could not keep their claim to control terror outfits. Likewise, TTP's newly announced irredentist approach dismissing the Durand Line or the Pak-Afghan border may also find more sympathizers in Afghanistan as the Taliban also have not categorically supported Pakistan's position on the Durand Line (Nopens, 2022). Therefore, Terrorism becomes one of the hot concerns in defining Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban government. In August, 2021 Taliban released around 800 TTP militants including the former deputy emir Faqir Mohammad along with many AQ and IS leaders from Pul-e- Charkhi and Bagram prisons. Such gestures probably did provide strength to all the terrorist operatives active in and around Afghanistan, posing serious regional security threats. Pakistan has remained much concerned about its western border because the prominent threats such as TTP and BLA were gaining momentum before Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Around 170 terrorist attacks have been reported in border areas of KPK and Baluchistan provinces. Moreover, the unparalleled rise in attacks on Chinese nationals working on the CPEC projects is specially upsetting for Pakistan. It's a very complex phenomena and Pakistan so far has paid a very huge price in controlling and countering the extremism (Khan & Humza, 2022). Afghanistan appeared to be a very fertile soil for such ideas and ideologies as the last decade of the twentieth century is marked with the prominence of religious extremism or jihadism. The tables got turned at the beginning of twenty

first century with the advent of terrorist attacks on US and its response as War on Terror. As a result of the Peace Agreement between the US and Taliban on 29th February, 2020, US withdrew all its forces till 31st of August 2021. The withdrawal process happened relatively in a haphazard manner because Taliban got the control of Afghanistan with higher swiftness than expected. This jumbled extraction of international forces provided again the operative stage for different active, semi-active and dormant non-state actors. Since the Fall of Kabul, the Biden administration has received scathing criticism for its early withdrawal without reaching a political settlement and mishandling of the situation following Taliban control in Afghanistan.

The terrorist outfits (AQ and IS-K) appeared to be in a constant struggle to fill the available vacuum who would not pose any serious threat to the US homeland but it is very certain that they will pose serious concerns to the regional countries especially Pakistan which are already vulnerable to the existing terrorism. An internally weak and unstable Afghanistan would definitely be a breeding ground for the terror groups with transnational repercussions. Providing external help such as economic assistance and political legitimacy would work as a silver lining solution to the problem. If the needs are not met then the Taliban will neither have the incentive nor capacity to fight the terror groups as committed (Muzaffar, Nawab, & Yaseen, 2021). Therefore, the security concerns have gained prominence even further for Pakistan specifically after the draw-down process. A well-coordinated and collaborated relationship between US and Pakistan is the need of the hour otherwise strained and edgy rapport of the two states would jeopardize the situation and will be an ultimate challenge affecting the entire spectrum of the aspects of security.

Conclusion

Pakistan and Afghanistan share wide array of commonalities i-e, religion, culture, races. The politics of one affects the other widely and definitely. The political dynamics and security settings of both nations share so much complexities and intricacies that any event in Afghanistan distresses Pakistan's defense and foreign policy. The regional states see their interests in Afghanistan and try to secure and attain the specific interests. This scenario again poses Pakistan with a new challenge to be dealt with wisely. The internal condition of Pakistan is already vulnerable and any uncertainty in Afghanistan would add further to this. The economic deterioration and security deprecation in Pakistan is the ultimate outcome of War on Terror and post war events. Pakistan needs to consider its own interests and chalk out a pragmatic strategy to meet its interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been acknowledged as "Graveyard of Empires". The withdrawal of US-led international forces in 2021 marked the history as the third in three consecutive centuries. Afghan fighters defeated the British army in 19th century and Russian military in 20th century. The Afghan nation is actually composition of different ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Pashtuns. Afghans basically lack unanimity and coherence as a nation. For so long Afghanistan has been in continuous state of war. So, during the time of relative stability, no government had ever been able to fully control the entire Afghan territory. This time again it is a huge challenge.

The situation in Afghanistan changed so haphazardly after the clear stance of US to leave Afghanistan in 2021 that all regional players including Pakistan started to develop multiple strategies to counter the situation that could be result of the withdrawal of American troops. Pakistan is the immediate neighboring country; its significance can't be ignored. There were varying levels of concern in Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and India over the withdrawal of US-

led international forces and the possibility of Taliban return in Kabul met with a huge success. For Russia and Iran disturbance within the geography of Afghanistan had no special meaning but both are supporting peaceful Afghanistan for their own interests. Afghanistan has special meaning for Central Asian nations, and central Asia has special meaning for Russia and Iran. For Pakistan, the Taliban's return to control of Kabul perceived as a strategic victory over India, but a nightmare by giving a boost to the terrorist organization like " Tehreek Taliban Pakistan" TTP could not be ignored. TTP has been fighting with the Pakistani government and is not different from the Tehreek Taliban Afghanistan. Pakistan, which had been facilitating the Taliban's return to power, had to analyze different options on militancy on its soil and its policy toward TTP. For Pakistan TTP and other militant groups could become problems in sustaining its relations with the Taliban as the Taliban will never support the use of power against TTP and can even pressurize Pakistan to negotiate and facilitate them in Pakistan on their ideological bindings. As for India, the return of the Taliban in form of a coalition government or independent government in Kabul will increase its concerns about the situation in Kashmir, in the light of border tensions with Pakistan on the one hand, and China on the other. India can expect a repeat of the 1990s scenario when foreign fighters poured into Kashmir from Afghanistan and helped to fuel the insurgency (Chaudhuri, 2020). To control such a situation, India significantly reinforced its borders in the past few years. India can use the Deoband center in India to manage the affairs with the Taliban as a religious decree from Deoband (India) has meanings for the Taliban. As for China, the US withdrawal has raised fears of the expansion of extremist groups that threaten the ambitious infrastructure projects that Beijing is building westward across Eurasia. There will be tougher Chinese positions and pressure to ensure stability in the neighborhood that is impossible when groups like ETIM (East Turkistan Islamic Movement) and TTP have support from Afghanistan. China looks ready to contain any repercussions on the Afghan amphitheater by pursuing the Taliban to publicly distance itself from the "militant forces associated with Xinjiang", and to conduct joint military exercises with Russia and other countries in the region. Taliban will take over Afghanistan through deal or violence and it would make Islamic groups more powerful and violent from Kashmir to Xinjiang.

Even if provided with a conducive environment, controlling the multi-lingual and multi-factional Afghan society and a war-torn country will be highly intimidating and daunting. Establishing and asserting control over the entire country is one thing but consolidating that control and governing a nation is another strong factor for which the Taliban, as a resurgent group, definitely lacks the skills and resources. To fulfil this task, the group would require the support of the people across the board and among various factions to build a coherent nation. Therefore, only an inclusive government would guarantee stable and secure future for Afghanistan. Simultaneously, establishing complete control over the entire territory, can produce desirable results of ensuring peace in the country otherwise fulfilling the promise of internal stability and external guarantees would become a monstrous challenge. In Afghanistan, there is no such thing as victor's peace. The Taliban must realize this and avoid repeating the mistakes of the Bonn process that excluded them only to pave the way for their return as a stronger stakeholder twenty years later.

This time Taliban came up with a relatively new image, therefore it is very complex as well as tough time for them to prove what they claimed when they grabbed power in Afghanistan. In order to restrict the history to repeat its mantra, Taliban need to show resilience and pragmatism at the same time so that they would not allow any super or great power to make Afghanistan a

hunting ground or battlefield again. To take on board all the different ethnic compositions ensure flexibility on part of Taliban. This kind of practices would definitely guarantee the inclusiveness which is need of the time and restrict unilateralism by the mighty Taliban. Women's rights and media freedom are also restricted by them. Being an immediate neighbor of Afghanistan and sharing an elongated border and cultural affinities with its people, Pakistan stands at the receiving end as the most affected country to any negative effects and impacts from Afghanistan. Similarly, Pakistan's geo-strategic and geo-economic vision of regional connectivity is equally dependent on a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. In the evolving scenario, Pakistan has repeatedly asserted for a mutually agreeable and accepted solution and has called for a sustainable regional approach in dealing with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. While considering the history and to avoid immense harsh and extreme negative implications such as terrorism, militancy, drug and weapon culture, refugee influx, Pakistan needs to be vigilant enough to develop a pragmatically sustained, durable, dynamic and integrated strategy based on mutual gains and understandings in order to better deal with the evolving situation because the consequences of both, success and failure, are massive.

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