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Article:	Afghanistan Post US Withdrawal: Security Challenges and Future Prospects
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Abstract

After 9/11, the mission “Operation Enduring Freedom” was to root out terrorists from Afghanistan and to establish good governance in shape of democracy. However, the current internal law and order situation is worse even after years of US forces staying in Afghanistan. While President Trump has directed Pentagon to decrease nearly half of the more than 14,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan. All the regional and global powers have their interest in Afghanistan, have no clear policies for peace and development, but everyone is in struggle to solve the Afghan problem according to their own interest. To establish democracy, improve governance, rule of law and security situation in Afghanistan, the US withdrawal without proper homework will create more problems and lead to chaos. It is believed that the abrupt withdrawal may further strengthen the Taliban and increase violence in Afghanistan. This paper aims to investigate those internal and external factors which may become the cause of insecurity for Afghanistan. Furthermore, the research work enlightens over the solution of security problems in Afghanistan and suggests possible option.

Keywords: US withdrawal, Afghanistan, Regional Actors, Security issues, Challenges

Introduction

In October 2001, US with NATO troops launched a war against terrorism in Afghanistan. The invasion of US and its allies over Afghanistan changed the whole dimension of the region specially created the issue of security. After spending a decade and half, the US has decided to withdraw her troops from Afghanistan. President Trump has directed the Pentagon to pull out almost partial of the more than 14,000 troops deployed to Afghanistan (Kaura, 2019). The US and its NATO allies neither took control over Taliban and other insurgent groups nor did they snatch out the evil of insurgency from Afghanistan. Although, Taliban still engaged in an insurrection by using suicide bombers, blasting, explosion and target killing, which seriously undermined the political, social and economic situation of Afghanistan (Kanji, 2003: 2). The insurgents have paralyzed the Afghan's security forces restricting their activities to the cities, only.

The US decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan without resolving the political and security issues have great effect over the region. The US withdrawal will create a vacuum of power in Afghanistan, which will be ultimately filled by Taliban and other non-state actors. Facing internal and external security challenges, Afghanistan will once again fall into terrorism, civil war and insurgency. Internally, Taliban have strong control over wide territory, created their own Islamic Emirate and facilitated more than half of the population and have further increased their influence over the masses. Externally on the other hand, different regional states have their vested interests in Afghanistan. India is trying to expand her influence in Afghanistan to compete Pakistan or minimize the later role, Pakistan is trying to restrict the Indian role and propaganda there because to her security challenges. Their competition to support one group against the other has created problems of peace and stability in Afghanistan (Larry, et. all. 2012: 2). Not only India and Pakistan but China also has interests in Afghanistan related to security and economy. Furthermore, Iran and Russia are accused for supporting Taliban and government of Afghanistan for the fulfilment of their strategic interest. Consequently, this may lead Afghanistan to a civil war and further undermine the stability of Afghanistan.

The contemporary political, security and economic situation in Afghanistan is preliminarily undermined, while there is plan for US exit. The government in Afghanistan is weak and is not in a position to defend the country nor can she bear the huge expenditure of army and government without the support of US or other agencies. Additionally, the insurgents are expanding their influence over the areas day by day. So, without settlement of all problems at this stage, the withdrawal may lead this country into another chaos. Main focus of this research is based on the internal and external security situation in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. This work also focuses on the future prospects for Afghanistan.

Internal Security Issues

Since 2001, the insurgent groups have continuously fought against the US troops, and keep the victory in stalemate. These insurgent groups are many in number, according to Afghan Security and Defence Department that there are twenty domestic and international insurgent groups working in Afghanistan. They are fighting against Afghan's government to have influence over it and with an instinct desire for the establishment of strong military bases in Afghanistan (Arian, 2017).

The Taliban policy against Afghan government and US Forces persists to be same as in the beginning; i.e., 'vacate Afghanistan'. Taliban still considers herself as the genuine ruler of Afghanistan but in exile. Taliban continuously demand for the withdrawal of the US troops and establishment of *Shariah* rule in the country (Mcnally, et.all. 2015). Taliban's strategy is to increase their influence and support in masses, trying to topple down the Afghan's government. Taliban are also encountering ISAF expansion in Afghanistan, because Taliban's control over Afghanistan is impossible without the loss of ISAF. Generally, Taliban

are involved in a strategy to create a poor situation for the government, for this purpose, Taliban are exploiting the political and social issues to enhance their power in a state (Dorronosoro, 2009), and constantly seeking to build “emirate state”. As Taliban leader Mullah Omar asserted to his supporters that rules and laws of the emirate must be stronger (McNally, et. all. 2015).

Over analysis on the US war against terrorism, Taliban are dominant in this war, and might possibly regain control over Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. As USFOR-A reported on 15th May, 2017, that there is no clear winning in this war between Taliban and Afghan forces, both parties remain in stalemate. Afghan army have control over the 59.7% part of the country till 2017, but in last quarter of 2017, they have lost over 6%. In mid-2017, Taliban had possessed 45 districts in 15 provinces in which 11 districts were under direct control while the remaining under influence of the Taliban. Furthermore the contested districts, which are 119 in number, are still in the same fate, it was not clear, whether this part of the country is in the control of government or with insurgents. Afghanistan has 32.6 million population, still 3 million of them are living under the influence of the Taliban. So in such type of situation, there is no clear victory of the US troops and Afghan Army, there is a balanced situation, which may create problems of security for Afghanistan (Cordesman, 2017). Furthermore, Taliban have enlisted the areas, where they have complete possession over it and have promulgated policy for education, economy, justice etc. (Joscelyn, 2014).

After 17 years of war against Taliban, the US felt a loss and made a policy for withdrawal, after peace talk with Taliban in Qatar, it may be possible that the foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan within 18 months (Mehmood, 2019) (Mehmood, n.d.). The chief of United States negotiator said that US and Taliban officials have concluded the future framework, as the Taliban would not use the Afghan land for the purposes of terrorism (Mashal, 2019). But the question is what will be the security situation in Afghanistan after US withdrawal. Whether Taliban will cooperate with Afghan government or either they will bypass it?

Answers of these questions depend upon the nature of US policy, if they install a good negotiation between Afghan government and the insurgents, and find a balanced way it may lead to peace. But in case of US withdraw from Afghanistan as Soviet Union did in 1989, it may raise insurgency and civil war once again. Taliban are not ready to negotiate with Afghan government, even they consider it as dummy of the US administration. During interview in Moscow Conference, the head of the Taliban’s political office and former Deputy Minister Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai clearly rejected the government of Kabul and did not recognize it because it is not a legal government neither elected by the people of Afghanistan; it is made under the shadow of US interest (Stanikzai n.d.). Furthermore Taliban demanded from the US in Qatar negotiations that they will frame the future plan and negotiate after complete withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan. So, in case US withdrawal occurs and does not create cooperation between Taliban and Afghan government, it will create a lethal situation in Afghanistan. During discussion in Cross Talk, Brigadier (R) Mehmood Shah mentioned that up till now US does not give an exit date for the withdrawal. Furthermore Taliban did not give the guarantee of complete cease fire, although they said that there will be no attack over US troops and at the same time they also take the responsibility of the ISIS and Al-Qaida to not operate in Afghanistan. Taliban also refused to cooperate with Afghan’s government if there is any negotiation taking place, it would be after US withdrawal. But if US exit takes place without solving the problems between Taliban and Afghan government, it would bring civil war as had occurred after USSR withdrawal (Mehmood, 2019).

If we compare the Soviet withdrawal with that of the US, the consequences will be the same as happened in the past. Soviet Union installed the government under Najibullah, the

successor of Hafizullah Amin, which did not run for a long time because it was not acceptable to Afghan Mujahideen. As Taliban the victorious of the Soviet-Afghan war, they made a government in 1996, which was recognized by the governments of Pakistan, UAE and Saudi Arabia (Imraz, 2017). During interview, Shahid Latif said that although we cannot compare the existing situation of Afghanistan with USSR withdrawal, but still there are some similarities i.e. Taliban were victorious at that time and considered themselves as the ruler of Afghanistan. There was a deadlock among Taliban, the then government and war lords, which led to civil war. So, today situation is the same, US did not defeat Taliban after 17 years, and if there is no clear cooperation and consultation between Taliban and Afghan government before US withdrawal it may lead to war (Latif, 2019).

Although Taliban were successful at this stage yet they should strike out the idea of complete control over Afghanistan from their mind, because there is international interference in Afghanistan in the shape of Russia and Iran which support them and influenced the Taliban. There is also the role of India, her investment in Afghanistan may restrict them over some activities which may harm their interest. If Taliban take over the government without the support and consent of the regional powers, the consequences will be in the shape of insurgency and belligerency (Ahmad, 2019). Furthermore, the Taliban government of 1996 was recognized by some of the countries, but this time no one is ready to accept it including Pakistan if such situation takes place in future.

Whether the Taliban would cooperate with Afghan government in the negotiation or not? Zalamy Khalilzad (US Envoy and the Special Representative for the Afghan Reconciliation at the Department of State) mentioned in his tweet that the Afghan government should negotiate with Taliban, they should make an interim government with balance. If the Afghan administration shares powers with Taliban, this will be a disastrous situation for a government. What are the issues after the possible US withdrawal from Afghanistan?

The policy of competition and confrontation among the regional states Indo-Pak Interest in Afghanistan

In the Post-Taliban regime, India had constructed an influential roadmap inside Afghanistan, and created a monumental core in the fields of political, social and economic. The Indian policy of anti-terrorism, building of safe and peaceful Afghanistan, unconditional support in economic field and blessing of strong government in Afghanistan, has not only been accepted by the Afghan community and government but also well come by the international community. India has long range objectives inside Afghanistan, which are maintained on trade and commerce, and especially security issues which are possible only to provide a powerful government to Afghanistan. So a soft hand policy by India inside Afghanistan, not only provides a good omen in Afghanistan but also receives a space to contain Pakistan role inside Afghanistan. Now the question is why India wants to contain Pakistan influence inside Afghanistan? India faces security issues from the terrorist groups. These challenges come from the terrorist groups of Al Qaeda, Taliban, Haqqani etc. India claims that all these terrorist groups are supported by Pakistan (Fair, 2014). These groups according to Indi, which are nurturing inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan's Tribal Areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This is why, India is encountering Pakistan's policy inside Afghanistan (Nair, 2015:6).

India blamed Pakistan for the 26/11 Mumbai attacks and the attacks on the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistan repeatedly dismantled the Indian interest inside Afghanistan (Nair, 2015:7). The think tanks in India have their opinion that all these terrorist activities have been committed by Taliban with the support of Pakistan. So, the only way to counter Pakistan role inside Afghanistan, it is necessary to increase the Indian role inside Afghanistan. For this purpose, India started investment in very huge scale i.e. construction of roads, hospitals, military support, etc. and especially the strengthening of

military and Afghan government (Nair, 2015:7). Such allegations against Pakistan are baseless. Pakistan is also the victim of terrorist attacks from the last eighteen years and the Indian propaganda is only to malign Pakistan role against terrorism. The Indian policy to damage Pakistan security on the Western border is reflected in the presence of the Indian military advisors and institutions in the Afghanistan government. Such policies are reflected in the Afghan government statements and policies towards Pakistan. Pakistan has not objected to the Indian presence in Afghanistan but if the former is involved in activities directed towards destabilizing Pakistan, the government will not allow those elements there to operate.

The economic exploration of India inside Afghanistan worried the strategic interest of Pakistan. The traditional rivalry between Pakistan and India, compelled the later to have a strategic partnership with neighbours to counter the Pakistan role in the region economically. So, the NATO invasion in Afghanistan gave an opportunity to construct peaceful relations, consequently, the Indian aid and agreements without condition increased the level of Pakistani inflation because of the stopping and changing of the black market economy in the shape of puppies, opium, food crops etc. (Budihas, 2011: 21). Because of the low production of wheat and increase in the production of puppies in Afghanistan, skyrocketed the prices of wheat in Pakistan. Furthermore, the smuggling of ten billion US dollar opium on border also benefited Afghanistan (Budihas, 2011: 21). So, the peaceful enhancement policy of India in Afghanistan not only affected the economic sphere between states but also created security challenges for Pakistan. Strategically encircling Pakistan, decreasing the value of CPEC and the role of China in Afghanistan, India has strengthened deep economic relations with Afghanistan. India is supporting construction a seaport in Iran (Chabahar), which connects India, Afghanistan and Iran (Milani, 2006: 251). This trade alliance of Afghanistan, India and Iran would harm the economy of Pakistan and may possibly create the hegemony of India over the entire region. This is not in favour of the national interests of Pakistan. The effective role of the Chabahar seaport reaches India to the Central Asian, which is rich in natural resources. This may rapidly increase the economic level of India (Budihas, 2011: 21).

Both Pakistan and India are in struggle to contain each other in Afghanistan, the final goal of the India is to eradicate Pakistan influence in Afghanistan and curtail the project of CPEC. While in response, Pakistan is also increasing its influence in Afghanistan. This may minimize Indian's interest in Afghanistan, the huge amount of Indian investment in Afghanistan possibly have little fruits for her, because Taliban are stronger than Afghan government. As result, the containment policy of India and Pakistan will bring security challenges in Afghanistan.

China Interest in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a significant role in the foreign policy of China because of the political, economic, strategic and geographical peculiarities. The rapidly changing circumstances in the world politics and global security issues have increased the demands of close relations and cooperation among states. In the contemporary situation, China seems to have a peaceful role in Afghanistan to secure her interest of economy and security. The former President of China Xi Jinping implicitly claimed in a meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, "a new era of cooperation in China-Afghanistan relations that will take development to a new depth and breadth" (Pandda, 2014). So, it was the economic interest of China, which made her to expand investment for the improvement of mineral resources of Afghanistan. Along with professional training for 3,000 Afghans, China has guaranteed for \$330 million endowment (Khan, 2015: 2). In the last decade Sino-Afghan trade reached to \$700 million, more than that mostly China's companies contracted for the construction activities. Besides this, China remained the first state to contract the deal on oil exploration (Khan, 2015: 2). As security concern, both countries have made a schedule for strategic

cooperation to safeguard the national interest, to develop political and financial aspects and clear the region from the insurgent groups. Both the countries have decided neither to use nor let their territories to be used against each other (Khan, 2015: 2).

China enhancement policy in Afghanistan has two aspects, first one is related to security issues and the second one is economic benefit. The existence of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Khan, 2015: 3), might possibly raise the issue of security, this is the reason that China has concern with foreign troops in Afghanistan. The existence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan benefited China, because the Taliban were engaged with foreign army and had no concern with ETIM in China. Although, China has indirect benefits from the NATO troops, yet there is also a view that US envisioned over Afghanistan is to contain the China influence in the region, this may cause the problems of security. China also blamed the foreign troops for fuelling ETIM (Khan, 2015: 3). Regarding, the second aspect of the China interests in Afghanistan related to economic, the huge investment in Afghanistan, compelled to have peaceful relations with Afghan government and the Taliban as well. Any loggerheads policy in Afghanistan may sink the interest of China.

China has a safe hand policy in Afghanistan, China wants a stable Afghanistan because of various reasons, such as to eliminate the internal and external issues of security, furthermore China focussing on securing of economic interest in Afghanistan. According to Davood Moradiyan of Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Kabul, “the returning of Taliban into power is not in the interest of China nor is the presence of US troops in Afghanistan a good omen for China” (Khan, 2015: 31). China will neither directly jump in Afghanistan after US withdrawal nor will support Taliban government clearly, but the possibility of a new approach through that will save her political and strategic interests in Afghanistan.

Russia interest in Afghanistan

Historically Russia has the interest to have influence over Central Asia, so, Afghanistan has a focal point in the foreign policy of Russia. But, 9/11 changed the scenario of influence over the Central Asian's states, many powers like China and US came to the front to have political and economic control over the region. Relatively, Russia has a greater influence in the historical, geographic, cultural ties, economic and a military presence sphere in the region (Ziegler, 2014: 589-617). Afghanistan is a main subject in the foreign policy of Russia. From the US assault against terrorism till now, Russian changed her policy toward Afghanistan. Its main determinants are the internal situation of Afghanistan, changing relations between Russian and US and also other regional actors, this is why Russia has differed her policies towards Afghanistan with changing situation. After the US attack, Russia was in struggle to strengthen her influence and presence in Afghanistan and completely support the government of Karzai militarily and economically. During 2003-2006, Russia focussed on close relations with Western allies because Russia realised that her role is weak without the support of Western troops. While in 2007, Russia gave full support to the Afghan government because of the differences between Karzai and Western allies (Menkiszek: 2011: 21-22). Furthermore, in the period of 2009-2016 Russia was seriously engaged in Afghanistan in backing the political and security problems, additionally, it officially supported the ‘process of national reconciliation’ in Afghanistan and also demanded the withdrawal of Western troops (Garhwal, 2017: 8).

Iran Interest in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has great core in the foreign policy of Iran from the very beginning because of various reasons (Dehghani, 2009: 485-491) (Dehghani 2009). Afghanistan is geographically and politically linked with Iran, in other words, it is stated that Afghanistan is the neighbour of Iran and apart from this the political situation of this country has great effect on Iran. This is the reason that Iran is always involved in the internal politics of Afghanistan. In the period of Taliban government, it was the policy framework of Iran to have hand-in

policy with Taliban (Yousefi, 2012: 64-65). In term of culture, ideology and civilization, Afghanistan is also important to Iran because of religion, language and culture similarity, bring Afghanistan to the door step of Iran. That is the reason, Iran supports her influential groups inside Afghanistan in the shape of Hazara shias to secure their interest in Afghanistan (Yousefi, 2012: 64-65). Furthermore Iran also has geostrategic interest in Afghanistan, so the presence of great powers or the intervening policy of regional states in Afghanistan, brings severe security issue to Iran. Iran is always in struggle to stop the penetrations of others in Afghanistan.

Future prospects for Afghanistan and US withdrawal

The government of Afghanistan and the international community especially US has failed to establish peace and stability in Afghanistan. There is no clear policy with Afghan's government what to do after US withdrawal to protect the country from the imminent civil war. Different actors are involved in Afghanistan, they have their own agenda and draw the state to their respective strategic interests.

Presently Afghan National Army (ANA) has around 352,000 personnel which portray peace and stability in the country and tackle down any threats. Despite all this, the ANA is the combinations of many ethnic groups and having confrontation with each other on some issues (Hussain, 2015: 8). So, wide pitches in the ANA are sign of weakness which will lead to weaken the ANA. Furthermore, there is lack of good governance which level the way for the military presidency in Afghanistan and consequently, there will be the possibility of civil war after US withdrawal. The situation will further deteriorate because institutions in Afghanistan are not stable to take the burden from civilian government.

After the withdrawal of US, the Afghan government will face confrontation with the Taliban, because Taliban have never accepted the government of Afghanistan and considered it as a puppet (Ibrahim, 2014: 16), which according to the Taliban, has no support of the people. Furthermore, Taliban are not in a position to sit on the table talk with the Afghan government because they have created their own setup of government in the shape of Islamic Emirate and have control over more than half of the Afghanistan. Furthermore Afghanistan is divided into so many ethnic groups (Hazaras, Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks etc.), each ethnic faction has its own interests and wants to run the administration according to their own interests (Lawley, 2012). This has created problems in negotiations because there is no strong power in Afghanistan at this stage.

The security threats to Afghanistan not only belong to internal actors but there is also the involvement of external actors in the internal matters of Afghanistan. The current destabilization in Afghanistan is because of the regional rivalries (Hussain, 2015: 10). All of them have their own strategic interests in Afghanistan, pulling each other in the opposite direction has weakened the writ of the state. As a result of this competition Afghanistan has been drawn into anarchy. Another possibility of the civil war in Afghanistan will emerge abruptly after the exit of the US, it will create vacuum of power. The space which is filled by the US forces will be open for every one (internal and external actors). Everyone will try to fill the space so the chaos and turmoil would begin (Ibrahim, 2014: 16).¹ These vacuums will not only accelerate conflicts in Afghanistan among the internal groups but also of the external actors.

Joe Biden Administration

The Trump administration has announced the US forces withdrawal from May, 2021 from Afghanistan in Doha Peace agreement but the new administration in Washington has extended the period till September, 2021. This has created a trust deficit between Taliban and the US while other states like Pakistan, Russia and Turkey are trying to reach on an agreement acceptable to all stakeholders. The most important issue is the post withdrawal situation in Afghanistan on which there is a debate among the states like Pakistan, Russia,

and Iran. According to a BBC report, the most important country which is affected from this decision will be Pakistan (BBC Urdu, 2021). In 2015, it was the first time that a direct link developed between Taliban and United States by the support of the Pakistani government. In 2018, the US and Taliban started negotiation after the direct contact between the two, led to the famous Doha Peace agreement. At the moment, Pakistan is trying to continue the peace process and led to more success in future on the Afghanistan issue. Pakistan is trying to convince the Taliban to participate in the Turkey Peace conference (April, 2021) which is boycotted by the later because of the US policy on withdrawal (BBC Urdu, 2021).

Conclusion

Afghanistan has suffered badly from the policies of regional and international actors from the last forty years. They are state and non-state actors, both have used the soil of Afghanistan for their national interests. The result is now in shape of uninterrupted violence, terrorism and instability not only in Afghanistan but in the entire world has suffered from such policies. Possibility of the long term peace in Afghanistan depends upon all, the domestic, regional and international community. They should play their role in the construction of modern Afghanistan. Afghanistan society is more traditional and all powers are needed to transform it into an educated and modern one.

Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, which could improve the social and economic life of the nation, if they are explored. If United States supports Afghanistan in the flourishing of mineral resources in the shape of skills, techniques and modern equipment, Afghanistan dependence will decrease on donor agencies and will be able to stand on their feet. Before the US withdrawal, US should bring Taliban and Afghan government to table talk and a long lasting peace settlement and give them an opportunity to stabilize the war torn country.

America should not only engage Taliban, but also include China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran on board for a long lasting solution of Afghanistan. The multidimensional policy of withdrawal along with the economic reform packages to Afghanistan is the need of the time. Regional actor's involvement in the policy of withdrawal will bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. It is, therefore the responsibility of international community to put weight in favour of Afghanistan for its long lasting peace and stability and economic development. It is the time for all regional powers to put their share in the peace process at this stage and also for the future setup which is the most important part of the peace deal after the US withdrawal.

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