

## **Withdrawal of the US Troops from Afghanistan and its Implications for Pakistan-Challenges and a Way Forward**

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### **Introduction**

Pakistan and Afghanistan are generally labeled as inseparable states due to their historical, religious, cultural, linguistic, trade and ethnic linkages. These connections are so deep that even the Afghan President Mr. Karzai, during his visit to India, compellingly professed that Pakistan and Afghanistan were “identical twins”. However, the modern account of bilateral relations between Kabul and Islamabad reveals turbulence. The main reasons for this rocky relationship are the issues related to the Durand Line, the idea of a greater *Pakhtunistan*, the 1980’s Soviet War, the rise of the Taliban, post 9/11 war, and India’s rising influence in Afghanistan. The nature of Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan has predominantly been shaped by the Doctrine of Strategic Depth. Pakistan has always desired to have a friendly government in Kabul and this wish has been primarily driven by two reasons; firstly by Pakistan’s deep rooted rivalry with India and secondly Afghanistan’s refusal to accept the Durand line. This paper examines the Pak-Afghan relations through the history’s prism, and its connection to the withdrawal of US troops and its implication for Pakistan. This paper concludes by giving policy recommendations to the governments of United States of America, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **Historical Perspective**

The Durand Line is the 2,640 kilometers (1,640 miles) long, porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was

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established in 1893 after an agreement between Mortimer Durand of British India and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, for fixing the limit of their respective spheres of influence<sup>1</sup>. This region was turned as a buffer zone between the then USSR and the Great Britain. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan was given a special status by the British Empire. It was a status which was protectively guarded by tribesmen because it was charted out with their consensus. Similarly, the Empire also exploited the special status of FATA and used it as a front post against the Russians.

It was the time when Afghanistan was sandwiched between the two great powers that had expansionist designs. The Amir Abdur Rahman once equated his country to a poor goat on which both the Lion (Britain) and the Bear (Russia) had fixed their eyes<sup>2</sup>. However, when Pakistan was created and the British left the region, the Durand Line remained in place and so was the status of FATA. FATA elders and people were rewarded for siding with Pakistan and various pledges were made by the Government of Pakistan such as: FATA will enjoy an equal status, the privileges which were bestowed on the tribesmen by the British Empire will remain intact, and the tribesmen will protect the western borders where else Pakistan Army does not encroach upon tribal territory.

During 1947 to 1979, the issues regarding the Durand Line and *Pakhtunistan* remained the major concerns for Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan did not have a comprehensive Afghan policy and it simply reacted to Afghanistan's actions. Kabul had extended support to Baloch and Pakhtun nationalists inside Pakistan and even had called for the creation of a new state called "*Pakhtunistan*"<sup>3</sup>. It had also objected to Pakistan's admission into the United Nations, with justifications that Pakistan's Northwest Frontier should not be recognized as its part until the Pakhtuns of that area were given the opportunity to decide for independence.

Historically, foreign invasions in Afghanistan have always affected this region; Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1970's, Pakistan

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perceived a strategic threat. It also sought the opportunity of neutralizing Afghanistan's stance on the Durand line and *Pakhtunistan* by supporting the *Mujahidin* during the Afghan war<sup>4</sup>. Thus Islamabad affiliated with the western bloc with considerations that Washington would support it in installing a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul after defeating the Soviet Union.

Pakistan's support for the Afghan *Mujahidin* proved to be invaluable in helping the western bloc containing Soviet Communism. Moreover, Pakistan successfully used this opportunity in its favor to not only strengthen its ability to extinguish threats to its western borders, but also to strengthen its armed forces and advance its nuclear weapons program<sup>5</sup>. However, Pakistan was unable to achieve its long-term objectives, when it failed to establish a friendly government in Afghanistan<sup>6</sup>.

Pakistan's Afghan policy after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan seemed disordered, and it has been criticized for a failure to play a positive role in bringing about a lasting solution to the Afghan problem<sup>7</sup>. The regime installed by Moscow under Najibullah fought for three more years, finally collapsing in April 1992, after which a bloody power struggle ensued among *Mujahidin* commanders for the right to rule Afghanistan. Afghan leaders could not develop a consensus in the formation of a unified government in Kabul. Pakistan attempted to bring some unity among the warring factions through the Peshawar and the Islamabad Accords, but both failed to achieve the full compliance of Afghan leaders.

After the Soviet withdrawal, a number of factors came into play that made Afghanistan's situation highly complicated<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps the most salient factors were the failure of the international community to install an interim Afghan government due to an ill-conceived Geneva Accord, the U.S. policy of distancing itself from the region, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Each of these factors, when combined together, created a political vacuum in the region. Additionally, the

emergence of the new Central Asian Republics (CARs), each arising as a consequence of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, brought about political and economic changes in the region, thus further aggravating the situation<sup>9</sup>. The factional fighting among the *Mujahidin* groups created an opportunity for external elements- this time from Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, India as well as from Russia- each having its own interests in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, this created conflicts of interest among regional and global contenders, leading to a civil war in the region, and culminating in the emergence of the Taliban in 1994<sup>10</sup>.

Pakistan being abandoned by United States and its allies was left with no other option except for supporting the Taliban movement, as Pakistan hoped to accomplish several things by observing this policy. For example, it desired to redress its security issues related to India, curb Pakhtun nationalism, and create a corridor for trade with Central Asia<sup>11</sup>. For a short time, the Taliban regime did serve Pakistan's objective. However, due to its support for the Taliban regime, Pakistan gradually found itself isolated from the rest of the international community and ultimately took an embarrassing U-turn on its Afghan policy after 9/11.

Pakistan was forced to support the United States and even had to hand-over the Afghan Ambassador in Pakistan to Washington. Since 9/11 till now Pak-US relations are on a roller coaster. The relationship has seen a lot of ups and downs. However, the fact of the matter is that the US will always depend upon Pakistan until and unless she departs from this region and this holds strength on historical grounds as well.

#### **Analysis of US Withdrawal Policy and Actors Involved:**

The United States invaded Afghanistan under United Nation's mandate. At the time of invasion it seemed that the US would accomplish its mission by rooting out the Taliban and then establishing a fully functional democracy in Afghanistan. However, the current situation of law and order is worse than ever before. Insecurity, criminal market economy, unemployment,

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emergent insurgency, poverty, warlordism and corruption in Afghanistan are all matters of great concern for everyone<sup>12</sup>. Taliban are now more powerful than ever in Provinces of Parwan and Baghlan and it seems that they have now more support bases in Tajak and Uzbek populated areas of Afghanistan. Provinces under Taliban control are more peaceful than others. The Afghan public and even the Afghan Government have reached a conclusion that peace can only prevail if Western troops withdraw from Afghanistan and Taliban are given their due share in running affairs of the State.

There are four main actors namely the United States of America, the Afghan Government (dominated by the Northern Alliance), Tehrik-e-Taliban Afghanistan and Pakistan involved in Afghan predicament. All of these actors have no clear-cut policy with regard a peaceful settlement of the crisis. Though all of these actors want to settle the issue through peaceful means, everyone wants to perpetuate their own interests. Pakistan is pursuing a wait and see policy and considers itself indispensable to the prospects of any settlement in the future. Indeed, the recent visit of Salahuddin Rabbani to Pakistan validates Pakistan's claim.

The Afghan Government has also started efforts to reengage the Taliban in negotiations and the recent visit by delegates of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) to get Pakistan's support seems to be an encouraging step taken by the Afghan Government. However, this renewed vigor of Afghanistan in the peace process is out of compulsion, and fear of losing huge foreign investment. It is pertinent to mention here that the leaders and supporters of the Northern Alliance, who have a sufficient representation in the Afghan Government, have made huge investment in Kabul and they simply do not want to lose it in another war with the Taliban. Therefore they will make determined efforts to reach out to all actors for the peaceful settlement of the Afghan imbroglio.

Washington still has to chart out a clear plan of action regarding the Afghan crisis<sup>13</sup>; it is confused and still weighing different options. It has to come up with a transitional strategy for

Afghanistan that is acceptable to all. Pakistan and Afghanistan do not want an abrupt withdrawal of US troops as they believe it will exponentially multiply Afghanistan's problems. They believe that the abrupt withdrawal may further embolden the Taliban which can become a source of problem for all regional countries in the future.<sup>14</sup>

However, the Taliban has made the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan a precondition to the initiation of any dialogue process. The US is under domestic pressure and as a policy of appeasement announced the withdrawal of US troops by 2014. Vice President Joe Biden has also affirmed this decision. However the recent statement of William Burns, the US Deputy Secretary of State is contradictory. According to him US is not leaving in 2014 and its commitment to stability in Afghanistan doesn't end in 2014<sup>15</sup>. He posits that,

“It seems to me that there is no chance of rapprochement in the near future because the U.S has taken a very rigid stance on Taliban and Al Qaeda from ab-initio. At least ten years are needed for US to dilute that stance”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, until and unless the US first dilutes its stance it cannot sell the idea of a peaceful settlement of disputes with Taliban to its public or her allies. It thus seems that the US wants to cut a deal with the Afghan Government on the pattern of South Korea and Japan, which will allow the former to station 20,000 to 30,000 troops in Afghanistan. These troops can be involved in various counter terrorism operations and will also give stability to the Afghan Government. However, the Afghan government seems reluctant and drags its feet because complete withdrawal of foreign forces is one of the conditions set by Taliban for engagement in any peace dialogue with the United States or Afghan Government.

### **Policy Options for Islamabad: Challenges and Opportunities:**

In the wake of US withdrawal, a major challenge for Pakistan comes from the militant groups associated with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the centrifugal tendencies in

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Balochistan. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan has no single leadership like Tehrik-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA), and has been divided into several splinter groups, which occasionally coordinate terror attacks in Pakistan.

Most of these groups have rivalries amongst each other, for instance the Mahsud group (Hakimullah Mahsud and Wali-ur-Rehman) has rivalry with Mullah Nazir Group. On the other hand, Hafiz Gul Bahadar has great reservations against Hakimullah Mahsud and Wali-ur-Rehman who operate in North Waziristan but he does not have such strength to compel them accept his authority.

Similarly, three different groups in Khyber agency are fighting against each other. The situation in Orakzai and Parachinar Agencies are no different to the rest of areas where there is hold of TTP.

Abdul Wali, the TTP head of Mohmand Agency, has developed serious differences with Tehrik- Taliban Afghanistan. Fazalullah and Faqir Muhammad have both independent groups having bases in Afghanistan. In fact, absence of clear leadership of TTP is a great challenge for authorities in Pakistan, who has to interact with every group separately which makes things more complicated and complex. There are strong indicators that the spillover effects of US withdrawal will negatively impact law and order situation in Pakistan and especially in FATA.

Likewise, Pakistan possesses great threat from Fazalullah and Fakir Muhammad. Pakistan claims that they are supported by the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) - India's premier intelligence agency, and the National Directorate of Security (NDS)- Afghan intelligence agency, despite presence of US and NATO forces. These commanders are openly using Afghanistan soil against the interests of Pakistan. However, it might get hard for these commanders to operate freely from Afghanistan once the US and NATO troops would leave Kabul.

Though the US withdrawal from the region will confront Pakistan with a number of challenges, if handled properly they could be converted into opportunities. The US withdrawal might soothe Pakistan's problems vis-à-vis militancy and terrorism. The militants associated with the TTP can slowly and gradually be mainstreamed by the use of a clear cut reintegration policy. Two factors can play a pivotal role in mainstreaming these non-state actors (NSAs). Firstly, the pretext on which the Taliban are attracting recruits to its folds will diminish i.e., they claim that foreign forces are occupying Afghanistan and they have every right to wage *jihad* against US and its allies. Secondly, in Pakistan there are religious political parties which could be availed by these militants to promote the latter's agendas in a peaceful and democratic way. In this regard, the recent extension of political parties Act for FATA is a positive step taken by the government. Earlier, only Jamiat Ulema-e- Islam had an excess and monopoly over the politics in FATA. With the opening of offices of other political parties people of FATA will have more options available to them. This will also help in generating more political activities and de-radicalizing FATA.

Islamabad also has to deal with the Baloch separatist movement simultaneously. Pakistan blames India for the insurgency in its province of Balochistan and believes that India is using Afghan soil against Pakistan's interests. Similarly, it claims that finances to these separatist movements are provided by India and militants are given refuge in Afghanistan. With the US and West packing up from Afghanistan, it will get next to impossible for India to operate from Afghanistan the way they are currently operating. India might close down most of its consulates in Afghanistan. With the closure of its bases in Afghanistan the insurgency in Balochistan will die its natural death. The separatist elements will thus find it hard to get training and finances from India with the Afghan Government's support.

Mindful of the worst case scenario, Pakistan has already made the necessary readjustments to its foreign policy. Pakistan has tried to reach out to various regional powers which were previously



antagonists in the situation. It is in the process to build good relations with Russia and is making best to bridge the trust deficit between the two nations and to make up for the former misunderstandings. Pakistan is also reaching out to the Northern Alliance and has diluted her stance on giving proper share to the *Pakhtun* population, which had previously created doubts in the minds of common Afghanis. Earlier, Pakistan openly demanded share for *Pakhtuns* which is not the case now. Today, Tajak and Uzbek elders are more frequently visiting Pakistani embassy in Kabul<sup>17</sup>. A genuine effort has been in the offing on Pakistan's part to remove North's apprehension that Pakistan wants to impose *Pakhtuns* on them.

Pakistan needs to be cautious of an Indo-Afghan strategic partnership. India's growing involvement in Afghanistan is a threat and an increasingly destabilizing factor for Pakistan's security. Pakistan believes that India has no geographical, religious or ethnic linkages with Afghanistan. On this pretext Pakistan rejects India's inclusion to the final list of nations that shall deliberate on the future line of action regarding Afghan quagmire. Washington on the other hand, is persistent in her demand that India shall play her role in chalking out any future strategy regarding the Afghan crisis. Though this demand has been rejected by Pakistan, it dilutes Pakistan's position on the composition of a government in Afghanistan. Previously, Pakistan openly demanded a friendly government in Kabul. However, more recently it has changed that stance and now is in favor of a stable government only<sup>18</sup>. This shift is of great significance and is seen by many as the formal demise of the Doctrine of Strategic Depth.

## **Recommendations**

### **i. To the United States:**

- An abrupt US departure from the region is not desired by anyone as this will exponentially increase the complexities of the Afghan crisis. However, a clear-cut road map with regards a peaceful resolution of Afghan crisis is strongly needed.

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- The United States has also realized that it cannot settle the Afghan crisis on its own. Pakistan is in fact indispensable to a peaceful settlement of Afghan imbroglio. Therefore it shall be given its due role.
- Washington must think on the lines of formally giving share to Taliban in government or shall give government to them in provinces which are under their control.
- There has been no progress on the Reconciliation Commission and Delisting Commission therefore Washington must sincerely pursue the affairs of these two commissions in order to win Taliban's trust.
- The US should work on winning hearts and minds in the region by economic incentives. In this regard a look like of Marshal Plan arrangement can be made in Pak-Afghan region.
- United States shall be mindful of Pakistan's sensitivities vis-à-vis New Delhi.

**ii. To the Government of Afghanistan:**

- Afghans have never settled their issues themselves. Therefore, the more the international community involves itself in ironing out Afghan quagmire, the more the acceptability will be.
- The Afghan government shall marginalize and take action against those who work against the interest of Pakistan and in that regard shall discourage use of her land against Pakistan's interests.
- The Afghan government/High Peace Council shall take the lead in holding the International Ulema Conference in the nearest future which can help them reach out to Tehrik Taliban Afghanistan.
- The peace process shall be owned by the Afghan government and shall remain flexible.
- The Afghan Government shall try to convince Pakistan and the United States to release all those Taliban commanders who could help them in initiating dialogue process for peace-building.

**iii. To the Government of Pakistan:**

- Pakistan shall evolve a proactive Afghan foreign policy rather than reactionary one.
- Pakistan should continue convincing the US and Afghan regime into limiting India's role in Afghanistan and increasing its volume of investment and reconstruction/development works. This effort will also help Pakistan compete with other contenders and make a strong place for itself.
- Islamabad shall peruse two Ds policy in FATA: Development and dialogue. However, the government must involve the elders and *Maliks* in the development and dialogue process.
- Necessary administrative reforms shall be introduced in FATA which can make the system more transparent and responsive.
- Recently, Pakistan's foreign office is more assertive with regard Afghan foreign policy. Nonetheless, it needs to engage the military establishment in charting out future policies because eventually it is the military which practically implements policies.
- Pakistan must understand that Afghanistan is her growth engine. The savor of Pakistani goods has already been developed in Afghan population and the former shall take advantage of this association.
- It is pertinent to mention here that Pak-Afghan region is a trade specific region rather than a production hub. Therefore, Pakistan must liberalize its policy and shall tap the enormous potential of its trade route.
- Pakistan can serve as energy corridor and this will help the region in two ways. Firstly, it will promote interdependence, peace, and tranquility; and secondly it will help Pakistan exploit its industrial potential.

**Conclusion:**

A complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces by 2014 seems unrealistic but if this happens, the new set up will definitely be quite challenging for Pakistan. However, the challenges can be

converted into opportunities with prudent and sagacious policies. Though Islamabad has to pacify various NSA groups which would be quite challenging, it can tap the enormous potential of its geo-strategic location. Pakistan's communication network and its ports serve as lifeline for the land locked Afghanistan and Central Asian States. Restoration of peace in Afghanistan will open up the mineral rich Central Asian Republics to the rest of the world via Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to cooperate and develop a harmonized relation in order to get maximum economic dividends from the theatre of vast economic opportunities. The sooner both the countries realize each other's importance the better it would be for their future generations.

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