



US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN – INTERESTS OF MAJOR PLAYERS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been the center of attention of different superpowers over the past few decades. It proved to be the last battleground of the erstwhile Soviet Union. From the Soviet Union to the US and the varying interests of other regional and global powers (including China, India, Iran, and Pakistan), Afghanistan has been a hard nut to crack for many foreign actors. However, the national and strategic interests of all these different nations make Afghanistan relevant from different perspectives. Selfish national interest has been the main driving force in the formulation of Afghan policy of different nations. Hardly anyone took interest in the greater good of Afghanistan itself. Hegemonic policies of the US notwithstanding, there is no one, not even the UN, in charge internationally who could act as a monitor in the international system. There is no police force, military system, or courts to check on non-compliance with international laws. There is no established hierarchy in the international system, thus states continue to live in a state of anarchy. In the case of Afghanistan, various states have been manipulating and seeking their national interests over the years, with no international organization being a monitor. This part highlights the relevance of Afghanistan to the interests of major players, especially China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the US in contemporary times. It is mainly descriptive and by using qualitative means of data collection and analysis



it tries to identify the challenges and opportunities that are emerging for the major player's given the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Different possible scenarios that may emerge from the evolving situation in Afghanistan are considered with appropriate policy recommendations for Pakistan to protect and promote her national interests in the emerging geostrategic environment. Pakistan should adopt a balanced approach in courting the major players regarding the evolving situation in Afghanistan and thereby ensure its national interests.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Post US withdrawal, Pakistan, South Asia, Taliban

1. Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the news of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan took the world by surprise. Many of the analysts argued that they did not expect the Taliban takeover to be this quick. Some on the other hand argued that they did not see this coming after the US spent twenty long years and invested \$5.8 trillion on the war in Afghanistan out of which about \$83 billion were spent to develop and sustain the Afghan Army. The evolving situation in Afghanistan since 15 August 2021 has implications not only for the people of Afghanistan but also for the region as well as for the global players. Pakistan once again has become the center of interest as the world is trying to assess the kind of role it can and will play in Afghanistan. The US and the western media have made Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures in the twenty years-long war in Afghanistan. Pakistan is once again at the crossroads of history where being the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan it has a significant role to play in stabilizing the region, besides ensuring its security. The evolving situation in Afghanistan will have many implications and opportunities for Pakistan soon. Keeping in view the past mistakes, Pakistan must choose its allies wisely to keep its borders peaceful and its house in order.

To understand the implications and opportunities that may emerge out of the evolving situation in Afghanistan, it is necessary to look at the major events of the past two decades which eventually gave way to the deal signed between the US and the Taliban in February 2020.

2. The perspective of the US - Taliban Peace Agreement

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, a power vacuum was created. That resulted in anarchy and chaos in Afghanistan and gave birth to different warlords who started governing their respective areas. Due to the lack of strong central



authority, those warlord institutions were extractive and common people were fed up with their reign in Afghanistan. Hence, as a resolving solution, Mullah Umar was asked to help against those injustices and tortures faced by the common people. He then gathered his Talibs and overpowered the warlords who had become infamous for their injustices, rapes, loots, and plunders. After being successful in the Qandahar area, a domino effect was created and people from different areas started to ask for the help of Mullah Umar and Talibs. These same Talibs later became famous and were known as the Taliban. They became so eminent that by 1995 they successfully conquered 90% of Afghanistan without any major resistance. Except for the three states, the rest of the world did not recognize the government of the Taliban, instead, they favored the Taliban's adversary's rule of the Northern Alliance which was governing the leftover 10 % of Afghanistan around Panjsher. Taliban ruled over Afghanistan for 9 years until the attack on World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001 happened.

After the so-called 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the US blamed Al Qaeda for the catastrophic attacks, who they also held responsible for the bombings on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998), and the US warship U.S.S. Cole (2000). US demanded from the Taliban to deliver them all of the Al Qaeda leaders hiding in Afghanistan, to close terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and hand over related persons, especially Osama bin Laden, and give the US full access to terrorist training camps. The US termed these demands non-negotiable and warned the Taliban that they would share the fate of the terrorists if they refused to hand them over (The New York Times, 2001a). Taliban, on the other hand, refused to hand over Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden without evidence of his involvement in the 9/11 attacks (The Guardian, 2001). Subsequently, the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 and toppled the Taliban regime. By May 2003, with 11,000 US and allied combat forces in the country, the US announced the transition from major combat to stability operations in Afghanistan. (The Washington Post, 2003)

In December 2001, the UN-mediated International Conference on Afghanistan was held in Bonn and chose the former CIA Agent Hamid Karzai as the Chairman of the Interim Administration for Afghanistan (The Washington Post, 2001). In June 2002, the Afghan Loya Jirga elected Hamid Karzai as Head of State (President), giving him the mandate to lead the transitional government until 2004 when general elections were to be held (DAWN, 2002). In January 2004, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution (NBC News, 2004), and in November, Karzai has declared the first elected President of Afghanistan. (Carlotta Gall, 2004) In response to these developments, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar vowed to regain control and sovereignty of Afghanistan (Carlotta Gall, 2004). While the Taliban insurgency against NATO and Afghan forces kept intensifying, Hamid Karzai was re-elected as the president in 2009, for a second term, amid allegations



of electoral fraud and the withdrawal of rival candidate Abdullah Abdullah from the runoff race on the pretext that a transparent election was not possible under election officials hired by Karzai(CNN, 2009).

By the same time, the Taliban resistance had escalated to a full-scale insurgency, and they had shadow governors in 33 out of 34 Afghan provinces. Meanwhile, the US announced to temporarily send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan as part of a new strategy, called 'surge', bringing the US force presence to about 100,000(Eric Schmitt, 2009). In June 2010, President Karzai convened a "Peace Jirga" which endorsed his proposal to negotiate with insurgents. The Taliban, however, laid the condition for the removal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, before any peace discussions(Caroline Wadhams, 2010). The same year, there appeared a reported change of strategy in the U.S. administration – encouraging negotiations with the Taliban(The Guardian, 2010). Later, in 2011, Karzai confirmed that the US was itself going ahead with the negotiations with the Taliban (Hamid Karzai, 2011).

In 2011, al Qaeda leader and the alleged mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, was killed by the US military forces in Pakistan. Following this, President Obama declared that the US had largely achieved its goals in Afghanistan and announced the withdrawal of additional troops by 2012 and a steady drawdown of forces until the planned handover of security to Afghan authorities in 2014(Mark Landler & Helence Cooper, 2011). In August 2013, the US-led NATO forces handed over security responsibilities to Afghan National Army and assumed a supportive role(The Guardian, 2013). In December 2014, NATO formally ended its combat operations in Afghanistan(The Guardian, 2014).

In 2013 Taliban were facilitated to open an office in Qatar from where negotiations were to take place(BBC News, 2013). The formal and informal talks continued between the parties to the conflict. In 2016, Hezb-i-Islami signed a peace agreement with the Afghan government(Al Jazeera, 2021). In 2018, the US agreed to hold direct talks with the Taliban(Ismail Sameem & Hamid Shalizi, 2018) and also appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative of the US for Afghanistan Reconciliation(Faridullah Hussainkhail, 2018). The subsequent direct talks between the US and the Taliban led to the Afghan peace deal (United states 2020) under which the US was to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan against the guarantee that the Taliban would prevent the use of Afghan soil against the US and its allies. Given the agreement the US and its allied forces started withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and eventually the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 marked the end of twenty years-long US occupation of Afghanistan. Since then, the world has apprehensions regarding whether the Taliban has amended its ways since the 1990s;



whether Afghanistan will slide into chaos following a civil war between different groups; whether the human rights of vulnerable groups will be protected or not; whether the power vacuum created by US withdrawal will have its impact on the neighboring countries in the form of a new wave of terrorism. People in Pakistan also have conflicting opinions on the aforementioned areas.

The rapid assumption of power by the Taliban has taken most of the Think Tanks and policymakers by surprise. People all over the world are skeptical about the outcomes and survivability of this new administration. Where on the one hand, it is hoped that the new Taliban-led administration in Afghanistan will not be oppressive as the previous one was, as the group is expected to have become more enlightened. On the other hand, states are also worried lest Afghanistan re-emerges as a haven for different terrorist groups which become security threats for them. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the interest of major powers, the US, Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, possible emerging scenarios in the geostrategic environment, and arrive at policy recommendations for Pakistan.

3. Interests of Major Players in Afghanistan

Under this section, the paper attempts to lay out the key interests of the major players given the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Based on these interests, this paper maps out the possible scenarios and then suggests policy recommendations for Pakistan.

3.1. China's Interests in Afghanistan

A narrow strip of land to the northeast of Chitral, Pakistan, known as the Wakhan Corridor links China with Afghanistan. Apart from that, both countries have no shared border (Bill Bostock, 2019). China, over the years, has established its position as a dominant global power. As a result of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China is seen as a potential gainer, who will try to fill the vacuum created in Afghanistan. China has already started taking the lead role in Afghanistan as it has announced initial aid of 200 million Yuan to the Taliban regime, including food and vaccines (Yang Sheng, 2021).

China's Afghan policy is driven by two major factors, the first being its economic interests where it eyes the untapped natural resources of Afghanistan as well as the market which is looking for investors and traders (Bonnie Girard, 2021). On the other hand, China feels threatened by East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it fears might reappear from Afghanistan under the Taliban to create instability in Xinjiang (Dawn, 2021). Moreover, China and Pakistan's Afghan policy seem to be coherent as both the states have



taken joint steps post US withdrawal, for instance, ambassadors of China and Pakistan met in Kabul, which followed the aid to Afghan people by both China and Pakistan(Charlotte Greenfield, 2021).

China would try to capitalize on the US defeat in Afghanistan as much as it can, this adds up to the Chinese advantage in many ways. US withdrawal from Afghanistan makes China the sole major power in the region. The US had containment plans for China but its withdrawal from Afghanistan is an abdication of those containment plans. China and Pakistan, today appear to be the major gainers from the US withdrawal, for the very apparent reasons. It is perceived that both the US and India have become losers which gives China and Pakistan an added advantage, which both states would be able to cash on.

3.2. India's Interests in Afghanistan

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has cleared the ground for the formation of the “Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan.” New Delhi is now in a difficult strategic position as a result of this power transition. It will put India under considerable pressure since its rivals, both Pakistan and China could gain from this opportunity. Besides, the victory of political Islam in Afghanistan rings dangerous bells for India as it has a sizeable restive Muslim minority being persecuted by the BJP rule in India (Davydov, Kugelman, Kupriyanov, & Sood, 2021).

The prospect of worldwide and regional “Islamic-terrorism” is the first implication of the Taliban's control, which is one of the several concerns for India. Militant organizations such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) can recruit radicalized Muslims in India (Saxena, Bashar, Basit, Sinan, & Gunasingham, 2020). One such example happened when IS-K attacked a gurudwara (house of worship) in Kabul, with one of the four attackers being from Kerala, India. Similarly, the presence of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan may threaten Indian military forces' counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir to some extent. This adds to Indian security concerns that the development of new terrorist safe havens may empower terrorist organizations in the disputed region (Doxsee, Thompson, & Hwang, 2021).

India's interest in Afghanistan is not limited to countering terrorism; it also focuses on trade between the two nations and would certainly try to dilute Pakistan's influence, if not try to restart its terror attacks through Afghanistan against Pakistan. Trade between India and Afghanistan has grown in the previous two decades, paving the possibility for the reconstruction of new routes. New Delhi, which was actively interested in the creation of the Chabahar Port in Iran, considers a stable Afghanistan to be a critical element for trade



since an unstable Afghanistan poses a danger to regional connectivity initiatives. Afghanistan is an important link between India and the Central Asian region. As a result, a regime change in Kabul is likely to have an immediate impact on India's grand ambitions, if not in the long run (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012).

New Delhi is also concerned about China's apparent willingness to collaborate with the Taliban. With the Taliban in authority, China is systematically building and maintaining diplomatic footprints in Afghanistan. This concern of India is justified in part because China appears to be antagonistic towards India due to serious territorial disputes while maintaining excellent relations with its traditional adversary, Pakistan. China's vast financial resources allow it to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan and keep her at distance (Helf, Donald, Nada, Salikuddin, & Scobell, 2021).

3.3. Iran's Interests in Afghanistan

Iran, one of Afghanistan's immediate neighbors to the west, has high stakes in Afghanistan. Geopolitics has become one of the prominent factors in Iran's relations with Afghanistan, while religion and nationalism were also used in support of their foreign policy as a source of building local networks of influence (Jalali Ahmed Ali, 2021). Iran's Afghan policy is driven by its main interests which are religious, sectarian, ethnocultural as well as economic in nature.

Keeping in mind the re-emergence of the Taliban and the eventual withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, Iran established limited relations with the Taliban, despite its previous enmity. Iran's relations with the Taliban were also driven by their mutual interest in the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and their concerns regarding the Khorasan Province affiliate of the Islamic State (ISKP), an ideological enemy of both Iran and the Taliban (Jalali Ahmed Ali, 2021). Furthermore, the Iranian IRGC in their bid to win over the Taliban had also been involved in providing weapons to them. In 2009, Iran-made small arms and explosives were discovered by the Taliban, while a large cache of Iranian-made explosives was also discovered in Farah Province, bordering Iran (Gohel M. Sajjan, 2010).

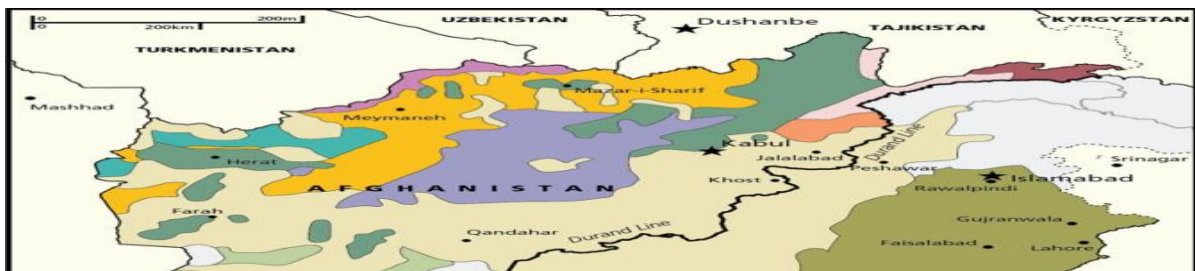
Things looked quite favorable for both Iran and the Taliban in building up a new relationship until recently when the valley of Panjshir fell to the Taliban. Iran reacted with displeasure to the Taliban's control of the last left province of Afghanistan. Iran also showed concerns about alleged foreign intervention in the Panjshir battle, pointing toward Pakistan (Iran International, 2021). This shows both frustration and hesitancy on part of Iran in choosing sides in Afghanistan. Even after the fall of Kabul, Iran kept its embassy



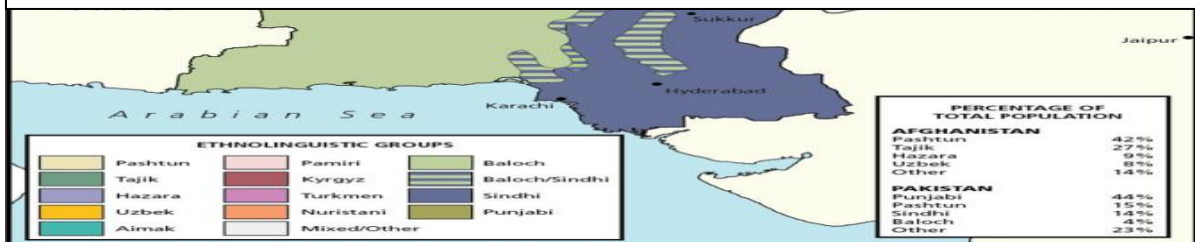
and consulate open in Kabul and Herat, but it closed its consulates in Mazar-I-Sharif, Kandahar, and Jalalabad (Borzou Daragahi, 2021). This clearly shows Iranian confusion and reluctance in completely supporting the new Afghan government. Iran is finding ways to enhance its relationship with the Taliban which would help both theocratic regimes at least on the economic front. However, both might still see each other as a threat to their versions of Islam and greater geostrategic goals.

Pakistan - a Responsible Stakeholder

The US introduced and adopted the concept of preemptive war, whereby it holds the right to destroy any challenge before it becomes a threat to its security (Chomsky & Barsamian,



Map – 01: Ethnic divide in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Source: National Geographic www.nationalgeographic.org)



2005). This approach was manifested when the US attacked Afghanistan in 2001 perceiving it as a threat to its security. No moral questions were asked, and no moral obligations were taken into consideration. The infamous approach of, “You are with us or against us” (Tankel, 2018) was drawn by the rest of the world especially regional stakeholders such as Pakistan, which were left with little choice.

Resultantly, Pakistan became one of the major non-NATO allies of the United States for which it paid heavily. More than 80,000 precious human lives were lost and about US \$100 billion in monetary losses were suffered by Pakistan for the US war, imposed on it (Sana Jamal, 2021). However, the US never appeared to be satisfied with Pakistan, it fell



into the propaganda by the Indian authorities and their disinformation campaign which was busted recently by Europe-based NGO - Dis Info Lab (Bilal Kuchay, 2020).

The US ultimately started to scapegoat Pakistan for the losses it faced in Afghanistan (Rogin Josh, 2021). Instead of honoring the sacrifices and losses which Pakistan suffered in the US “war on terror” as an ally of the US, the US decided to leave Afghanistan haphazardly while giving a cold shoulder to one of the biggest victims of this war. In fact, as one of the immediate neighbors of Afghanistan, Pakistan was left to deal with many unforeseen repercussions for the region. The war may have ended for the US, as claimed by them, but the crisis persists for Pakistan.

Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan are multifaceted. A stable Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan, through which it can access the markets in Central Asia and can provide them access to “warm waters” via Gwadar seaport, which can be a win-win situation for Pakistan, Afghanistan as well as the landlocked Central Asian Republics. However, if peace and stability can be achieved under the new Taliban regime is a question that needs to be answered. Afghanistan also has close socio-cultural links with Pakistan. Afghanistan’s majority population comprises of Pashtun ethnic group and Pakistan also has a larger chunk of the Pashtun population living in its territory which creates a socio-cultural bond between the people of both the states (Amna Puri Mirza, 2021). Apart from the Pashtuns, Hazaras and Baloch also have a sizeable population in both the countries, which increases the socio-cultural bond of both the states (National Geographic, 2021). Map - 01 shows the ethnic spread both in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan’s strategic interests are also linked to Afghanistan’s stability. During the 20 years long war, Afghanistan was used as a hotbed of proxies against Pakistan (Naveed Siddiqui, 2020). From TTP to ISIS(K), and the separatists, ethno-nationalist Baloch groups, all were breeding and flourishing in Afghanistan under the nose of the US, NATO, and the then Afghan government. India was accused to be the one who was funding and handling all those proxies to destabilize Pakistan (Naveed Siddiqui, 2020). However, the recent takeover of Kabul by the Taliban has forced many of Pakistan’s enemies to withdraw from Afghanistan. India, the chief conspirator, has vacated its embassy and consulates from Afghanistan, which certainly is a sigh of relief for Pakistan (Suhasini Haidar, 2021).

Pakistan today, seems to be quite clear about its approach in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan in a statement reacted to the Taliban takeover by saying that “The Afghans have broken the chains of slavery (Maroosha Muzaffar, 2021)” Pakistan sees the Taliban-takeover as a welcome change, which can prove favorable for Pakistan, in comparison to the previous pro-Indian governments. Pakistan, however, wants to keep the balance and



has urged for an inclusive government in Afghanistan that involves all ethnicities and stakeholders (The Express Tribune, 2021). The US might have ditched Pakistan while on its way out of Afghanistan, and that too after making it pay heavily for the so-called “war on terror”, but Pakistan still stands tall by leading the evacuation efforts in Afghanistan. Many western troops and diplomats were transited and facilitated by Pakistan on their way out of Afghanistan (Khalid Mahmood & Waqas Ahmed, 2021). Not only this, but Pakistan is also leading, along with China, in providing aid to the people of Afghanistan, who have almost been abandoned by the rest of the world, after dragging them centuries back (Charlotte Greenfield, 2021).

Prime Minister Imran Khan in his interview with CNN mentioned that ‘Pakistan does not want to make the mistakes of past by choosing sides. Therefore, Pakistan invited the leaders from the Northern Alliance including the brothers of late Ahmed Shah Masood, and ensured them that irrespective of the history of their relationship, now Pakistan stands for the inclusiveness of all the ethnic groups in Afghanistan without picking up sides (Becky Anderson, 2021).’ This, however, did not materialize when the Afghan Taliban announced an interim government exclusively based on Taliban leadership and mostly the Pashtun ethnic group, except for only two members (BBC News, 2021). In addition, there was no women’s participation in the Afghan cabinet. This, the leadership of the Northern Alliance considers a breach of the promise the Prime Minister Imran Khan had made to them, as one of the Northern Alliance leaders, Dr. Latif Pedram tweeted in anger which he deleted later on.

Pakistan-US relationship on the other hand continues to remain cold. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently made a statement, that the US would assess the relationship with Pakistan over Afghanistan’s future. This statement was not welcomed by Pakistan, which the Prime Minister termed as “completely ignorant” of the facts and ground realities (NDTV, 2021). He also commented on the Pakistan-US relationship during the Afghan War by calling it “terrible (CNN, 2021)”. Prime Minister Imran Khan stressed that the US should adopt a Pakistan-centric relationship with Pakistan instead of using it as a hired gun to achieve its goals in Afghanistan or anywhere else for that matter.

3.4. Russia's Interests in Afghanistan

Russia has been wary of the US/NATO presence in Afghanistan, which is too close to her sphere of influence. Moscow has no desire to get involved on the ground in Afghanistan again, that much is evident, given the tragic experiences of previous participation in Afghanistan. Moscow has stepped up diplomatic efforts to reach an amicable political arrangement in Afghanistan that promotes balance (Hill, 2021). The Afghan government



and the Taliban have met in Russia for talks. It also expanded its relations with Pashtuns in Afghanistan, rather than the Uzbeks and Tajiks with whom it had previously dealt which is considered as part of its efforts to assure the group's continued existence. Russia has also engaged in intensive negotiations with other significant players, including China, Pakistan, and the US. Such talks for the formation of an inclusive Afghan government are still going on between Russia and the interim Taliban government to which Russia claims that it is in sync with the US, China, and Pakistan on such imperative (DAWN, 2021). Pakistan is particularly important and has long played a role in Afghan politics, which is why Moscow has increased its contacts with Islamabad, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit in April this year for the first time in nearly a decade (Greenfield, 2021). Regardless of Russia's closer links with the Taliban, Moscow is being pragmatic for the time being, studying trends and not yet removing the Taliban from its terror list. Although Russia has no goal to recognize the Taliban, its goal is to engage with them to reach specific agreements and accords in Afghanistan along international frontiers (Mehra & Wentworth, 2021).

Russia will have limited direct participation in both arming and financing the Taliban regime, but it will remain a big neighboring influence in the ongoing challenges in Afghanistan, with no desire for a concrete direct presence. Moscow tends to view the Taliban as less concerning, deeming the group's goals to be primarily focused on regaining their lost power and control within Afghanistan (Sakhi, 2021).

While the US withdrawal from Afghanistan provides opportunities for Russia, it also exposes Russia to uncertainty and risks. The most crucial advantage for Russia is that it can now easily demonstrate its military capabilities in Central Asia, bolstering her claims to be a defender of neighboring nations against the Afghan menace and positioning herself as a prominent player on the Eurasian chessboard. With several nations, Russia has alliance obligations under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a result, her top priorities in Afghanistan include regional security and preventing any spillover of insecurity and extremism from Afghanistan to protect the borders of her important Central Asian allies Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as preventing terrorists and political Islam from crossing into her own country (Mankoff, 2021).

Afghanistan's ongoing instability also threatens Russia with large-scale refugee inflows into the Central Asian countries, adding to tensions and pressures in neighboring nations. Moscow's top goal is to prevent drugs from leaving Afghanistan and entering Russian markets. Moscow is also concerned about Islamist extremist forces operating in eastern and northern Afghanistan, as well as ISIS. Russia's expanding relations with the Taliban



thrive, reducing the threat presented by other Islamist extremist forces, which is in Russia's best interests. Russia has secured the Taliban's guarantees that Afghanistan would not pose a threat to her regional friends and that they will be able to continue working together (Stepanova, 2013).

3.5. US interests in Afghanistan

American president George W. Bush announced the war against terror as a campaign that will not end “until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated”. Also telling Americans not to expect a single battle, but “a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen”. He vowed to pursue terrorists as well as the nations that provided aid or safe havens to terrorists (The New York Times, 2001). He went on to declare that a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan was in America's strategic and moral interest and set the ambitious goal of helping the people of Afghanistan succeed in it, no matter how long it took (White House, 2008).

The Obama administration, however, unveiled a new strategy for the conflict. Their vital national security interest was to address the current and future security threats from extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For this purpose, the core goal of the US was “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan”. The supporting objectives towards the main goal included: “removing al-Qaeda's sanctuaries, effective democratic government control in Pakistan, and a self-reliant Afghanistan that would enable the withdrawal of combat forces while sustaining the commitment of political and economic development” (Reuters Staff, 2009).

The new strategy, surprisingly, termed the possible threat of extremists obtaining fissile material – “too real”. Bruce Riedel, head of the Obama's said policy review team, described the Taliban militants in Pakistan as being ‘intoxicated by the idea of a jihadist takeover in Pakistan (Mark Mazzetti & Eric Schmitt, 2009). However, the idea of a jihadist takeover was seen as delusional given the size, equipment, command, and fighting capabilities of the Pakistan Army and the unlikelihood that Pakistan's intelligence agencies would transfer nuclear weapons to the Taliban (Steven Simon, 2009). Expanding the above canvas, the main interests of the US could be prioritized as; preventing terrorist attacks on the US and the use of Afghan soil for the purpose; a stable government in Afghanistan that is not hostile towards the US; and that Afghanistan is not dominated by an outside hegemonic power, in such a way, that jeopardizes America's ability to pursue the full range of its geostrategic and geo-economics interests in Afghanistan and the region” (Vanda Felbab-Brown, 2021). There is always a gap between a state's declared and



actual interests. However, if it is seen in that context, it could be said that the US succeeded in degrading the organization and influence of al-Qaeda. As put by President Biden, in his announcement of troops withdrawal by September 11, 2021, “We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Afghanistan. And it is time to end the forever war.(Maegan Vazquez & Kevin Liptak, 2021)”

Another US interest was its reputation as a country that could be relied upon(VANDA FELBAB BROWN, 2017). In this regard, US pledges and reputation saw an exemplary blow in the shape of the dramatic collapse of the Afghan government and abandonment of former allies amid Taliban advances without a peaceful settlement, despite earlier US pledges to support a democratic Afghanistan “as long as it takes”. This, however, makes it difficult for the US to overtly cooperate with the Taliban if they did not honor their commitments to women and human rights, freedom of speech, and an inclusive government. Since, if not emphasized, it may further tarnish the already compromised reputation of the US. However, the US would not abdicate its efforts to contain China with no presence of military within Afghanistan and keep its presence through other means in Afghanistan.

4. Possible Scenarios

In the post-US withdrawal developing and evolving situation in Afghanistan, the following possible scenarios can be foresighted given the past patterns and interests of key players in the emerging geopolitical environment.

4.1. Filling the Power Vacuum in Afghanistan

Internationally, one of the major outcomes of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is the power vacuum that it has created in Afghanistan. Who will fill the vacuum, is yet to be seen. China and Russia are supposedly the powers that would try to replace the US, along with regional powers like Pakistan and Iran, who would try to capitalize as much as they can. However, among all these scenarios, one major threat that looms around is the re-emergence of terror outfits from the Afghan soil, which can prove to be deadlier for the region and the world overall.

Seeing through the realpolitik lens, this can be a new US game to put this region into chaos through sanctions and other tacit hybrid war tactics which it could not do being present in Afghanistan. An unstable Afghanistan means an unstable region. The instability in Afghanistan would have an impact on three of its direct neighbors Pakistan, Iran, and



China who are supposedly in the anti-US bloc. India is a major US ally in its China containment policy, which has forced distances between Pakistan and the west. Therefore, Pakistan while facing the brunt of instability in Afghanistan goes in the favor of the US and its allies. Iran's hostility towards the west is no hidden secret and China is considered a direct rival. So, the region with these three major stakeholders will have to face the consequences of US folly or cunningness whatever one may call it.

The question of an external power dominating Afghanistan in a manner that jeopardizes US interests will be determined by future developments. Besides the US, only a big power that can dominate Afghanistan in such a way is either Russia or China. However, if the Taliban opt to group with one power against the interests of the other, they will jeopardize any prospects of stability in the region. Resultantly, Afghanistan will become a hotbed of regional and global power competition. Even the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a shift of US focus towards China. If such a situation develops between US and China in Afghanistan, Pakistan might be blamed not only for the US failures but also as a threat to the US interests. Pakistan has also expressed concern about being used as a scapegoat in the scenario. In the past, too, some hostile quarters recommended the inclusion of Pakistan in the US State Department's list of state-sponsors of terrorism, on such pretexts (Zalmay Khalilzad, 2017). Very recently, again, such demands were raised to sanction Pakistan in this regard (Mike Waltz, 2021). Certain actors have already started campaigning against Pakistan.

4.2. Civil War in Afghanistan

A civil war might erupt in Afghanistan because the minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan do not see the Afghan Taliban favorably. The Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and other minor ethnic groups are mostly hostile toward the Taliban and if the worsening economic conditions in Afghanistan make it difficult for the Taliban regime to govern, a civil war is likely to erupt in Afghanistan, which can have impacts on the overall region. This seems to be very likely because at the moment, the Afghan Taliban's biggest challenge is the frozen financial reserves which the US is not ready to release and this has led to a governance crisis for them.

4.3. Terrorism and Religious Extremism

In opposition to the Taliban, the transnational terrorist group, the Islamic State or Daesh, which emerged in Iraq and Syria and gained space amid a weakening of al Qaeda, seems more focused on destabilizing the Muslim countries it is operating in. The group has been so controversial that the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai blamed the US for aiding



ISIS, calling it a “US tool (Hollie McKay, 2017)”. IS not only pose threat to the government of the Taliban but also its neighboring countries including Pakistan.

The question of stability in future Afghanistan depends upon the direction in which the Taliban head. If the Taliban maintain their future government set up in line with the recently introduced, non-inclusive, and ethnically non-representative, interim government, the prospects of instability and conflict will increase, particularly in the north of Afghanistan. While ISIS already remains a challenge for the Taliban, it might not be able to counter a multi-front, widespread insurgency.

4.4. CPEC and BRI

US withdrawal, if handled smartly, can have certain positive consequences as well. One of them can be the active trade by the Central Asian States which can reach out to CPEC and BRI through Afghanistan, making it a hub of trade through different regions.

4.5. Amnesty for TTP

The release of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) militants from Afghanistan’s jails after the fall of Kabul poses a serious threat to Pakistan. There is a strong probability that they may cross into Pakistani territory and cause disruption and carnage. Thousands of Pakistanis have died because of bombing assaults by Islamist fanatics in the previous two decades in Pakistan. Islamabad should be cautious of the situation and deal with it aggressively.

There is a talk of giving total amnesty to the entire TTP outfit by the government of Pakistan. This idea came in as the TTP personnel was released from Afghanistan’s prisons, in the wake of the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul on the 15th of August 2021. However, TTP does not sound repenting at all and immediately mocked the offer of amnesty rejecting it. If TTP returns to Pakistan and is not handled by an iron hand, it is likely to restart its bloodbath in the name of Islam, encouraged by the victory of the Taliban. Resuming terror activities by TTP is the worst scenario staring Pakistan squarely.

4.6. Implications for Pakistan

Being an immediate neighbor of Afghanistan, all the possible aforementioned scenarios would have implications for Pakistan. This paper highlights some of those implications, which are expected after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul and US withdrawal from Afghanistan:



4.7. Refugee Influx

A major refugee crisis is looming over Pakistan, already hosting about 1.5 million registered refugees and possibly a similar number of unregistered. Three generations of Afghan refugees have grown up in Pakistan. That makes Pakistan the biggest host of Afghan refugees. However, the current Afghan crisis is expected to draw more refugees out of Afghanistan because both the security and economic condition in Afghanistan do not appear promising at the moment. The people of Afghanistan have socio-cultural links with the people of Pakistan. The Pashtuns and Hazaras have their ethnic community in Pakistan and find Pakistan a lot closer to their way of life therefore, they would prefer coming to Pakistan instead of any other neighboring country.

The refugee influx can bring about another crisis of identity in Balochistan. Baloch is enjoying a minor edge on ethnic count over the Pashtun population. The new influx of Pashtun refugees will surely outnumber the Baloch by the Pashtuns, making them a minority. This is likely to create socio-political problems within the province.

4.8. The Economic Factor

The US, while leaving Afghanistan has frozen the assets of the Afghan Central Bank. This is a step toward creating an economic crisis that would have an impact on the region. No capital means no civic facilities, no imports, and a food crisis to say the least, which can ultimately result in chaos for the public. Shortage of food and other daily needs can result in over-reliance on the neighbors and Pakistan can be directly affected. The vacuum created in Afghanistan by the US withdrawal is likely to be filled by China. Chinese presence and economic activities in Afghanistan would directly help Pakistan because they cooperate in BRI and CPEC projects. Pakistan can ultimately become a transit trade hub for the Central Asian states and Russia, which have been longing for access to “warm waters” for trade and Pakistan can be their safest bet under the evolving circumstances. This can be a real economic booster for the dwindling economy of Pakistan.

4.9. Proxy Wars

The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has also forced the withdrawal of the over-ambitious and toxic Indian presence in Afghanistan. This is certainly a breather for Pakistan, which faced Indian-sponsored terrorism from the northwestern border for so long now. Indian removal from Afghanistan would lessen the extent of proxy wars that it was waging through Afghanistan. That is one of the positive impacts that the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan would bring.



4.10. TTP and the Indian Factor

The question is, are we celebrating it all too early? Since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan has faced numerous attacks on the bordering check posts from the TTP. Will Afghan Taliban go hard against the TTP is a moot question. However, the recent attacks from Afghanistan's soil have not been condemned by the Taliban regime nor has any action been taken to prevent such aggression. Ashraf Ghani's pro-Indian regime was openly supporting Indian adventurism and now the Afghan Taliban's sympathy for the TTP can prove deadly as well. This needs to be cautiously managed.

The outgoing Indians from Afghanistan would try to create anarchy within Pakistan, including a series of terror attacks, especially on the high-value targets. This can have serious implications for the hard-earned peace in the country. Since its failure in Afghanistan, India would try to reinforce its energies through the proxies against Pakistan. It would pollute the minds of the masses through the fifth-generation warfare, which has become an effective tool in the contemporary scenario. One such example could be seen in the recent cancellation of New Zealand and England's Cricket team's tour to Pakistan. Hours before the toss for the first match, a false threat was conveyed to New Zealand, which they considered credible enough and pulled out of the series, scheduled in Pakistan after 18 years. Such hybrid-war tactics have adverse effects on Pakistan.

4.11. The Iranian Factor

Very volatile neighbors surround Pakistan and Iran is one of them. US withdrawal from Afghanistan can have direct implications for Pakistan's relationship with Iran. Iran is ideologically against the Taliban and had supported Northern Alliance against them in the past. Pakistan however, enjoys good relations with the Afghan Taliban. This becomes a direct conflict of interest for both the states. Iran recently blamed Pakistan for the Panjshir offensive by the Taliban against Northern Alliance, which Pakistan has denied. However, both Iran and Pakistan have tried to soften up differences by showing friendly gestures toward the Taliban and Northern Alliance respectively.

4.12. Sub-nationalist Movements

Baloch and Pashtun militant sub-nationalists who were engaged by India via Afghanistan are also left stranded after the US withdrawal. They would either return to settle in Pakistan or would come back to strike Pakistan in whatever capacity they can. There are rumors that most of the Baloch militants have already trickled back into Pakistan through Balochistan and are spread in the southern areas, staying with their families. If they stay



peaceful, even their presence will not be felt. However, those ideologically motivated are expected to continue violence/terror within Balochistan and ought to be handled without being complacent. They are a threat to Pakistan owing to their ideologies and mindsets. Pakistan must keep that insight as well.

4.13. Religious Extremism

With the extremists Taliban in power in Afghanistan, Afghanistan can once again turn into a hotbed for the terror outfits. TTP, ISIS (K), and ethno-nationalists can become a threat to hard-earned peace in Pakistan. Not just that, but the local religious extremists in Pakistan can draw inspiration and reemerge to create chaos and anarchy. One such incident has been witnessed, the Imam of Lal Masjid, Islamabad, in recent footage on social media was seen giving threats to the police directly. Such incidents can have serious implications for Pakistan.

4.14. The Kashmir Cause

The nearly inactive Kashmiri mujahedeen's struggle in Kashmir can resurge in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Afghan Taliban are the ancestors of Jihad in Kashmir, and their strengthening can revive that Jihad in Kashmir which would have direct implications for Pakistan. On the positive side, Pakistan can punish India through unconventional warfare by Kashmiri freedom fighters. On the other hand, there are chances that India will try to get Pakistan rebranded as a terror-sponsoring state, being a defense-ally of the US now and diplomatically strengthened.

5. Policy Recommendations

Given the evolving situation in Afghanistan, relevant policy recommendations are as follows:

Afghanistan, being a landlocked country, has historically been dependent on two of its neighbors, Iran and Pakistan for most of its trade and economic activities. Both Iran and Pakistan provide it access to the sea. Iran in the recent past capitalized mostly on the Northern Alliance-centric government of Afghanistan to boost its trade with Afghanistan. However, Iran's recent verbal clashes with the Taliban after the Panjshir battle have reduced its diplomatic influence compared to Pakistan. Pakistan enjoys friendlier relations with the Taliban. Besides, Pakistan is allied with China's BRI through CPEC and can put Afghanistan on board too. Therefore, it is recommended that Pakistan must cash on the changing dynamics in Afghanistan and grab the space before anyone else latches on to it.



Pakistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs) can increase their trade via Afghanistan and CARs can ultimately become a part of BRI via CPEC. The region overall can gain stability from this increased economic activity and prosperity can be the future, which should be the ultimate goal.

Legitimacy and recognition are a few major steps that the Taliban are waiting for the international community to the accord. Pakistan should tread this path carefully as it can bring about adverse consequences. Pakistan must continue to engage with them on different issues but de jure, recognition must only come when any of the major powers recognize the Taliban regime. On the other hand, if the Taliban take some meaningful measures in the interest of Pakistan on some of the longstanding issues. For instance, Pakistan can bargain with Afghanistan for a no-tolerance policy against the enemies of Pakistan.

Pakistan has recently lent out a helping hand to the west in evacuations from Afghanistan while the west continues to see Pakistan with the same suspicion and degrading eyes. Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey-listing, tougher IMF conditions, and the recent abrupt departure of the New Zealand Cricket team from Pakistan are some of the examples of the west's high-handedness with Pakistan. Pakistan becomes good and workable when the west, especially the US need it in crisis, otherwise, it continues to remain in their bad books. Pakistan must bargain any future help to the west/US protecting its national interest. Pakistan must stand for a balanced government in Kabul. It should be inclusive of women and all ethnicities. Pakistan in the recent past made considerable gains among the notables of the Northern Alliance, this recent takeover by the Taliban must not reverse those gains. Pakistan has so far pushed for and supported an inclusive government in Kabul, which takes in all the ethnic groups. However, so far, the interim government is far from that reality. Pakistan must take all the stakeholders in Afghanistan together to avoid any conflict and civil war in Afghanistan, which ultimately is in Pakistan's own greater interest.

Pakistan must stand prepared to face the fallout of Indian withdrawal from Afghanistan. The segments that India supported in Afghanistan are left stranded and can vent out their frustration in a series of terror attacks in Pakistan. Indian pullout from Afghanistan will be good in the end but can have immediate adverse effects for which Pakistan must be prepared. Pakistan has two options, either to give general amnesty to all of them who worked against the state of Pakistan or to take them on. In the light of the evolving environment, it is suggested that Pakistan should avoid both and instead initiate legal trials against all such individuals and let the law take its course.



Pakistan must avoid overreliance on China in the context of the evolving Afghan situation and it must avoid going all out against the western states / the US. Keeping a balance is the need of the hour. China might be the emerging global power but the US still controls most of the world affairs overtly and covertly and Pakistan needs legitimacy from the west, especially under the current economic situation which would take years for Pakistan to be back on its feet. Until then Pakistan cannot afford and must not go for any confrontation with any third state. It must pursue its national interests carefully and diplomatically.

War tactics have changed largely in recent times. Narratives play an important role in the contemporary world. However, Pakistan lacks narrative building. Pakistan was at the forefront in the evacuation of western diplomats and forces, but it received meager recognition for such heroic efforts. On the other hand, India continues to build false narratives via its fake news network, which was busted recently by the European Union. Pakistan is still a villain in the eyes of many westerners especially the nonprofessionals despite it suffering the loss of countless precious lives and suffering heavy economic losses. Pakistan must increase its counter-propaganda machinery and act smartly in presenting its narrative through modern means, especially electronic and social media. Fake news should not only be countered but the source is also penalized, especially if it is coming from someone within Pakistan. There should be proper checks on every collaborator of anti-state activity in this environment of the fifth-generation warfare.

One of the looming crises that Pakistan should be prepared to manage is the possibility of an influx of a large number of Afghan refugees. Pakistan should still lobby for peace within Afghanistan so that the Afghans do not feel the need of ending up as refugees. Those Afghans who are involved in anti-Pakistan activities should be carefully filtered out of the refugees that Pakistan may have to host, if and when. All the Afghan refugees should be kept under close watch and Pakistan must ask UNHCR to help to host the Afghan refugees.

One may argue that closing Pakistan's western border, which extends 2,670 kilometers, is the greatest solution for preventing the TTP infiltration, but this would certainly result in Pakistan missing its strategic place in Afghanistan since it would enrage the Taliban government. Pakistan and Afghanistan have a cultural and religious link, sealing the border would certainly inflame nationalist and religious feelings across the border. The tribes living astride the border need to be accommodated by keeping gates and access through the fence. Islamabad's one-sided closure of the western border contradicts its stated support for Afghanistan. The best option for Islamabad would be to reach an agreement with the Afghan Taliban to deliver militants preparing strikes against Pakistan, or at the very least



to expel them from their shared border, where Pakistani troops have been highly vigilant for the past few months.

Several factors should be kept in view if the administration is truly considering an amnesty. To begin with, an amnesty should be limited to a few individuals rather than the entire organization, as a general amnesty is a risky idea. Low-ranking cadres, for example, who have been misled and agree to lay down their weapons and live according to the rule of the land, may be eligible for amnesty. They need to be de-radicalized and trained in skills to play a gainful part in society. However, even these people would have to be monitored by the government, as evidence from the de-radicalization program of other nations shows that even rehabilitated extremists frequently revert to violence.

Conclusion

In the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan once again is standing at the crossroads of history where the choices it may make will be game-changing for the people of Pakistan in particular and of the region in general. From the analysis in this part of the paper, and given the unfolding situation in Afghanistan post US withdrawal, the global power dynamics and Indian hostility do not give Pakistan much space to get directly involved in Afghanistan's internal matters. As Pakistan itself is a developing nation with many challenges and hostilities hence it needs a stable and friendly Afghanistan for securing and promoting its interests. Therefore, for a win-win solution, Pakistan should firstly keep its international diplomatic efforts alive for the sake of foreign acceptance and support for the new government in Afghanistan by the global community. Secondly, Pakistan should also make efforts toward the Taliban to make an inclusive government. Thirdly, Pakistan should adopt a very balanced approach in courting the great powers such as the US, Russia, and China and should give prime importance to its national interests while making alliances with these states. It will help Pakistan as well as the region to prosper in peace. Pathways to Peace and stability would be possible through a balanced approach in Afghanistan by all the stakeholders.



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