

# IMPLICATIONS OF THE WITHDRAWAL OF NATO FORCES ON PAKISTAN IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THREE EMERGING SCENARIOS IN AFGHANISTAN

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**ABSTRACT:** NATO led International Security Assistance Force completed its drawdown by end 2014 and a new era in the history of Afghanistan has now begun. The drawdown not only affects Afghanistan, but is also a cause of concern for Pakistan as different scenarios can result in different repercussions for Pakistan. Of the three possible scenarios the most favourable one is a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, which would enable Pakistan to focus upon its own domestic issues and forge trade links with Central Asia via Afghanistan. A possible second scenario is a protracted civil war while in the worst case scenario Taliban may seize Kabul thus resulting in further aggravation in terrorist activities in Pakistan. Some recent developments, like significant improvement in Pak-Afghan relations and resumption of Pakistan and China mediated peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban give some cause for optimism for durable peace in the region.

**Key words:** Afghanistan, NATO, Taliban, Central Asia, Al-Qaeda, ISAF.

## INTRODUCTION

A decade after authorisation of military action in Afghanistan by the Bonn Agreement under the auspices of the United Nations, the United States announced drawdown of its troops in 2011 with completion by end 2014 [1] "Operation Enduring Freedom" in military terms and "Obama's war" in journalistic circles, the Afghan war has now officially been concluded by the U.S strategists. Despite being the longest war the endgame has been downplayed by the US administration and media as other domestic issues and new foreign affairs challenges like Ukraine and ISIS grabbed the headlines. The development however cannot be downplayed by Pakistan as it is a watershed in the history of the region. Though about 9,800 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan to support a non-combat "train, advise, and assist mission," the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) will be mainly responsible for defending the country against any insurgency. In this paper a critical analysis of the post drawdown situation has been made with a focus upon the likely impact upon Pakistan.

### Military intervention in Afghanistan

After 9/11 terrorist incident in 2001 the U.S led NATO forces entered Afghanistan to flush out Al-Qaeda friendly Taliban government and hence dismantle the headquarters of a deadly international terrorist movement which allegedly had masterminded the attack. The officially stated key priorities of NATO led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan were:

- To protect the Afghan people;
- To build the capacity of the Afghan security forces so they can take lead responsibility for security in their own country;
- To counter the insurgency; and
- To enable the delivery of stronger governance and development [2].

Since NATO took command of ISAF in August 2003, the Alliance gradually expanded the reach of its mission, originally limited to Kabul, to cover all of the Afghanistan's territory. Accordingly, the number of ISAF troops grew from

the initial 5,000 to more than 130,000 troops from 48 countries, including all 28 NATO member nations. The strategic aims of the U.S were later spelled out in different policy statements. Unveiled on June 29, President Barack Obama's counterterrorism strategy is as significant for what it says or is silent on [3]. Presenting a 19-page strategy document, Obama's top anti-terrorism adviser, John Brennan declared that America's "best offense won't always be deploying large armies abroad but delivering targeted, surgical pressure" against groups that threaten" the US. This affirmed a shift in the US policy from large-scale military interventions to clandestine campaigns [4].

A reluctant Pakistan that had hitherto invested heavily in a friendly Taliban government also joined the international coalition by offering physical and intelligence assistance to the U.S. The Taliban who were written off after their defeat by the Northern Alliance forces staged a surprise comeback in the Afghan spring offensive 2006 [5]. A fact finding 66 page reports by the then Commander of U.S forces in Afghanistan General McChrystal painted a very grim picture and concluded "While the situation is serious, success is still achievable" [6]. Despite the morale boosting killing of Osama Bin Ladan in a covert operation in May this year situation on ground is less optimistic from the U.S perspective. The recent surge in activity of Afghan anti-government insurgents as evidenced by shooting down of a U.S chopper killing 30 SEAL commandoes and daredevil attack on British Council building, demonstrates that Taliban fighters are on the offensive. This raises many questions about future of Afghanistan when all foreign troops leave by December 2014 in accordance with Lisbon meeting announcement. This analysis reviews the situation in Afghanistan and focuses on post withdrawal implications on Pakistan.

A summit of NATO leaders in Lisbon was held in November 2010 which was also attended by Hamid Karzai, the then Afghan president, and Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general. The summit agreed on a "transition strategy" for Afghanistan which envisaged phase wise handover of the

country's provinces to AFNS from 2011 to 2014. Some of the NATO leaders were however guarded in declaring 2014 as a clear deadline [7]. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO secretary general expressed NATO's resolve to stay till completion of the job and declared that the process must be conditions-based, not calendar-based. Similarly the U.N Secretary General also added that reality and not schedules should guide the Afghan policy. In the summit the NATO leaders emphasised that Afghan army and police forces were to grow to more than 300,000 by October 2011 and that the international forces would be able to gradually pull out, leaving behind training missions which would not engage in combat.

The commitment of the members of the NATO alliance not to abandon Afghanistan to chaos was however widely questioned because of plummeting support domestically and internal demands to justify massive defence spending on an overseas venture with few clear gains. Dutch and the Canadian forces pulled out in 2010 and 2011 respectively. The British Foreign Secretary William Hague was categorical in declaring that 2015 would be an absolute deadline for withdrawal, no matter what the country looks like at that point [8]. The British forces have now already vacated Afghanistan. France pulled its 4,000 troops out of Afghanistan on the same staggered timetable as the US's paving the way for drawdown by other allies [9].

President Barack Obama, who approved more than 40,000 additional forces for Afghanistan in the first year of his presidency, pledged to begin withdrawing U.S. troops in July 2011. As the plans for that withdrawal moved ahead, Hillary Clinton stressed the need for caution by telling the NATO foreign ministers in Berlin that the alliance had "to underscore that we are transitioning, not leaving." She reaffirmed support for the Afghan government's desire to lure Taliban fighters back into society as long as they met certain condition. But she said it was equally important to make clear that those who reject such overtures would pay the price. "Those who choose violence must face relentless pressure," she said. "The Taliban need to know that they cannot wait us out." [10].

#### **A Critical Analysis of Post Withdrawal Scenarios**

Many analysts have discussed the situation in Afghanistan after NATO's drawdown of troops from Afghanistan by end 2014. Most of them are aware of the dangers posed to security situation in future. Even the U.S does not fool itself by painting a rosy picture. For instance Hillary Clinton in a clear message said "We have to steel ourselves and our publics for the possibility that the Taliban will resort to the most destructive and sensational attacks we have seen and that we have to send a clear message that we remain united, and we have to offer the Taliban a clear choice." [11]. The BBC editor in Kabul contrasts two likely scenarios ; a hopeful one in which Taliban join the negotiations and become part of the political process and second a pessimistic one in which Taliban take over Kabul after a civil war. Unfortunately less attention has been paid by our analysts in

the popular media to carry out a detailed analysis of likely impact of various scenarios in Afghanistan upon social, political and economic life in Pakistan. It is only after a detailed and impassionate analysis that we can judge what would be best from Pakistani perspective.

There is a difference of opinion within Pakistan over what a post-drawdown Afghanistan will look like. Some envisage it as a threat for Pakistan's security, while others perceive it as a chance for the country to solve its own domestic security problem and regain influence in Afghanistan. Most of our analysts focus upon Afghanistan to comment upon geostrategic dynamics in the post withdrawal situation. Very few extend this analysis to socio-economic impact on Pakistan, as already observed. Some exceptions are however there. For instance, a Khaled Ahmed, anoted analyst contends that: "The Americans and the NATO allies are going to start withdrawing from Afghanistan but Pakistan is tempted to repeat the blunders of 1989-90 banking on conquest by the Taliban and the Punjabi Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line." [12]. The writer raises his concerns about Pakistan's ability to cope with surging terrorism if it does not change its Afghan policy in future. Similarly, another Hasan Askari views the situation and identifies the joint cooperation of the U.S, Afghanistan and Pakistan as a key to stability in the region [13]. In his two piece analysis, Dr. Haider Shah, a public policy expert, identifies three likely scenarios which might affect Pakistan after NATO's drawdown of troops is completed. He extends the analysis to socio-economic level and identifies economic dividends that would accrue to Pakistan if a stable and peaceful Afghanistan survives [14].

There are various dynamics of the Afghan puzzle which makes it difficult to predict one likely outcome. Taking cue from Dr. Haider Shah's analysis the post drawdown situation can best be analysed in terms of various possible scenarios. There are three such scenarios which are discussed next.

#### **Scenario 1: Stable Afghanistan under ANSF and Afghan Police**

In January 2010, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, the formal decision-making body for Afghan and international coordination, endorsed an increase of the Afghan National Army (ANA) growth target to 134,000 by October 2010 and 171,600 by October 2011; and for the Afghan National Police (ANP) to 109,000 by October 2010 and 134,000 by October 2011. The Afghan army has now about 195,000 troops mostly financed by the U.S [15] But the Afghan defence experts argue that Afghanistan needed much greater strength between 600,000 to 700,000 troops as per the U.S. military's own counterinsurgency manual. Including police and other security units, Afghanistan currently has about 350,000 Western-funded security forces. A U.S. report says funding the Afghan Army costs \$4.1 billion a year, with only \$500 million coming from the Afghan government [16].

In Regional Command-Capital, since 28 August 2008, the ANSF gradually took over the lead responsibility for security in Kabul province. The Afghan Ministry of Interior (MoI)

and Ministry of Defence (MoD) lead this effort with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The best case scenario primarily rests on the ability of ANSF to withstand any onslaught of anti-government insurgents, the Taliban. Additional determinant which would work towards a stable Afghanistan is the absence factor of foreign troops in Afghanistan, a primary motive for garnering popular support among Afghan villagers. The moderate Taliban will be persuaded by this enabling environment to join mainstream politics and hence contribute to long term peace and stability. Pakistan can benefit enormously from this situation. It can boost regional trade by becoming a hub for trade between India, Afghanistan and Central Asian states. Presently there exists a negative perception about Pakistan due to its long association with Taliban. The fact that Osama Bin Laden was found in a posh cantonment of Pakistan also did not help our international image. If we help in establishing a stable Afghanistan Pakistan will be seen as a responsible member of the international community. We would then also be able to focus our anti-terrorism effort more on domestic issues such as sectarianism, trouble in Baluchistan and law and order in Karachi.

### **Scenario 2: Protracted civil war in Afghanistan**

The second possibility is a continuation of a civil war between Taliban and Afghan government. As commented by Hilary Clinton and feared by all analysts, the departure of foreign troops may result in a steady surge in the activities of Taliban forces. But it is also a fact that the Afghan government will also not be left hung out to dry. Not only the NATO has maintained its presence in the region by 10,000 US and 5000 other NATO member troops, many regional players will also be keen on keeping Taliban at bay. Iran, Turkey and neighbouring Central Asian states support the present Afghan power structure due to shared ethnic or religious affinity. India also has invested a lot in the ongoing economic development of Afghanistan and would not like to see an abrupt change [17]. Fearing that the instability in Afghanistan could spill over into some of the Central Asian republics along its borders, Russia reached out to the NATO coalition by signing an agreement to expand the use of supply routes through Russia to Afghanistan. Russia also offered provision of helicopters and trainers to boost the Afghan military and delivered several shipments of small arms to the Interior Ministry. China is also apprehensive of any radicalized regime in Afghanistan as this will have a potentially disturbing influence in the troubled Sinkiang region.

Local insurgents like Taliban and international terrorist networks like Al Qaeda and ISIS are also aware of the situation and are determined to take full advantage of the situation and would sabotage any effort towards a peaceful settlement. The consequence of this all will be a protracted war between Taliban and the Afghan government. Pakistan is still saddled with two million Afghan refugees who are reluctant to move back to Afghanistan due to security reasons. The anarchy in Afghanistan would force other

refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan that would further complicate repatriation of existing refugees. Costs of maintaining the refugees include environmental degradation, depletion of renewable energy sources, and a rise in crime [18].

The organized crime and lawlessness in Afghanistan have encouraged criminal activities in adjoining Pakistani territories. One major activity is kidnapping for ransom which rises as militants become active. Actions of Afghan warlords encouraged local clerics of these areas who also followed suit even in adjoining areas of Peshawar, which had to be dealt through force by Pakistani law enforcement agencies. In Swat which was known as a tourist paradise, Maulvi Fazal-Ullah, now Taliban's head, carved out a fiefdom after terrorizing local population. The modus operandi, motivation and stratagems of such criminal activities were learnt from the Afghan criminal gangs [19].

### **Scenario 3: Fall of Kabul to Taliban**

The third possibility is that of a replay of 1992 situation when Dr.Najib's government melted in the face of Mujahideen's speedy advancement. This possibility arises due to the troubled economic situation of the U.S and other NATO powers. With the U.S presidential election drawing closer, the attention will focus on fixing the gaping U.S budget deficit. Afghan war is a major contributor to the budget deficit and as the U.S voters support is dwindling it is possible that Afghanistan is left on its own. Many NATO analysts have shown their distrust over the quality of ANSF. As has been seen in the past, if the tide turns, mass desertions cannot be ruled out. The donors accuse the Afghan government of wide spread corruption and nepotism. If massive funding dries up and Afghan forces do not show right mettle a takeover by militants can become a grim reality. State failure in Afghanistan, characterized by weak governance, lawlessness, ineffective counter insurgency efforts, organized crime/drug trafficking poses a clear danger to Pakistan's security and stability as well. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan and FATA are already beset with serious security challenges like insurgency, socioeconomic instability, drug proliferation, influx of refugees, and a most virulent strain of religiously inspired terrorism. They will only become worse if Taliban claim victory in Afghanistan.

The instalment of a radical militant Islamist government will be a great source of personal satisfaction for those strategists in Pakistan who are imbued with a spirit of international jihad. They will find great consolation in the fact that they have out manoeuvred big international players like NATO and India in Afghanistan by installing a regime which would be against them. But apart from this jingoistic satisfaction what would be our national gains is hard to imagine. If we extend support to such a regime, the international community would further sever the already strained relations with us. In the late 1980s 'access to the newly liberated Central Asian states' became a bee in the bonnet for our strategists and Taliban were thought to be a means towards that end. It never materialized then and is even harder now to become a reality.

With regular blood baths in Karachi we do not offer ourselves as an ideal trade link to any investor. Moreover the ethnic political ties between Central Asian states and non-Taliban forces will always work against any trade aspirations at our end.

The backlash of a Taliban government upon socio-political life of Pakistan will however be severe. A new discourse of invincibility of jihad inspired movement will spread like a jungle fire. Radical elements in media will cite defeat of two superpowers to further radicalize our youth. The Taliban government will support the Pakistani Taliban movement with a new vigour. Law and order situation will be the obvious casualty. A sectarian warfare would erupt as sectarian groups associated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS would feel emboldened by their faith brothers' victory in Afghanistan. It is not difficult to see that Pakistan would end up becoming a pariah state and would climb up the ladder of failed states very quickly to share the top slot with Afghanistan. Given this reality, one can see some truth in the comment of the U.S Vice President Joe Biden which he made after he visited Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2008 that "If Afghanistan fails, Pakistan could follow, because extremists will set their sights on the bigger prize to the east."

The US-Pakistan relations have seen many ups and down over Afghan problem and are marred by mutual mistrust. Tension reached unprecedented level after US forces conducted a unilateral operation to kill al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011. In the event of Taliban takeover Pakistan's relations with the international community will hit the rock bottom. Already Pakistanis are considered as high risk visitors and in the event of a disturbed South Asian region all developed countries will raise the visa barrier even higher for Pakistanis travelling to these countries. The most adversely affected will be thousands of students who wish to go to developed countries to undertake higher level studies. Similarly, investment in Pakistan will completely dry up and tourism will also be hard hit.

In this scenario, the Afghan Taliban will try to extend their control across the border through one Caliph (Ameerul Momineen) as in the Taliban's ideology there is one rule under a single Caliph. The sympathisers of Khilafat movement in Pakistan, like Hizbul Tehreer will be emboldened to engage in greater preaching. Sovereignty of Pakistan will be threatened by the activities of these anti state elements. There is a likelihood of merger of Afghan Taliban & TTP into a unified force. Whether the Afghan Taliban government will acknowledge ISIS caliph or will compete for global leadership is hard to guess in that scenario. But whatever the relationship between Middle East based ISIS insurgency and Taliban the tribal belt of Pakistan will further be infested with the pro-insurgency elements. In case these elements merge into a larger group, they would collectively implement their agenda in Pakistan for

establishing a bigger Orthodox state in the region by all violent methods.

### **The Emerging Situation and Pakistan**

There are two important developments which might prove instrumental in determining the course of history. The first one is Pakistan's paradigm shift in dealing with jihadi elements by waging an all-out war against terrorists, code named Zarab e Azb, and announcement of a national anti-terrorism plan (NAP) to root out extremists as a national policy. Election of Ashraf Ghani, a cool headed administrator and negotiator, as the President of Afghanistan also encouraged this shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy. In regional disputes, while the inertia of the past is the most potent determinant, the significance of personalities and their temperament can also not be underemphasised. Perhaps Ashraf Ghani is the right person for the right job at the right time. Fortunately, both Pakistan and Afghanistan have finally realised that their economic development is dependent upon regional peace and mutual cooperation [20]. A very high level exchange of visits has made a break with past hostilities and mutual mistrust. Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz, Army chief Raheel Sharif and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Lieutenant General Rizwan Akhtar met their counterparts in Afghanistan in the recent past. Afghanistan reciprocated these peace overtures with the goodwill visit of President Ashraf Ghani. A clear indicator of significant progress is the joining of six Afghan army cadets for military training in Pakistan [21].

The second important development is the resumption of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban. This latest peace initiative is considered more promising than the past doomed efforts because of Pakistani and Chinese mediation [22]. Greater hopes of success are also on account of Pakistani threat to arrest or expel Taliban leaders if they do not negotiate with Kabul. The TTP's massacre of 132 students in December at Army Public School in Peshawar gave impetus to Pakistan's interest in an early resolution of the Afghan conflict so it can deal with the terrorists without any cross border support. Despite this new glimmer of hope difficulties still plague the peace process. The Afghan Taliban have both pro and anti-peace initiative factions, led by Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and Abdul Qayum Zakir respectively. Efforts to resolve their differences have not been successful so far. The demands for complete departure of NATO troops and sharia implementation may also kill the peace negotiations in the bud. There are opponents of peace negotiations in the Afghan political mainstream as well. For instance Chairman of the Meshrano Jirga, senate, Fazl Hadi Muslimyar criticized the secretive hasty decision of peace talks with the Taliban, stressing that the Taliban would never renounce violence and would continue their insurgency under the name of Daesh. In view of such polarised views finding a middle ground acceptable to both sides, though highly desirable, may prove actually difficult to achieve.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Pakistan must be watching the post drawdown period with both a mixed sense of optimism and anxiety. The unpredictable future holds both promise and problems for Pakistan depending on how the situation in Afghanistan takes its course. Using scenario analysis it can be concluded that one possible emerging scenario may see Afghanistan finally making progress and living in harmony with its neighbours and the world. A second scenario may see Afghanistan plunging again into a long civil war between the government and Taliban while in the third scenario Taliban may again seize Kabul and establish its rule in a significant part of Afghanistan. Due to important developments like paradigmatic changes in Afghan policy of Pakistan and a Pakistan friendly administration in Kabul and resumption of Pakistan-China mediated peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban there is however now a greater room for optimism.

Pakistan is faced with many domestic problems that require an urgent and sustained attention. While it is grappling with the worsening energy crisis many proposed megaprojects with the association of Central Asian states, e.g a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan, would not be possible if the security situation in Afghanistan remains poor. Pakistan could also not realise its imagined geographical pivot of Eurasia in South Asia, linking it with West Asia [23]. The economic effects of drug proliferation in Afghanistan would also weigh heavily in difficult economic circumstances. The number of drug addicts is increasing by 7% annually, leading to a rise in crime. 60% drug supply passes through Pakistan, a fact that portends an insidious symbiosis between crime syndicates and drug smugglers [24]. The drug money has financed criminals and smugglers besides acting as a lifeline for ethnic and sectarian miscreants [25]. The impact of this activity near Pakistan's border would aggravate Pakistan's problems, a fact evidenced by the UNODC's report regarding cultivation of 70% of Afghanistan's opium in five Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan [26]. The continued worsening law and order situation in Pakistan due to our involvement in Afghan affairs has resulted in low investor confidence and stagnant foreign investment [27]. The losses to business, tourism, and industrial activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are staggering. The foreign exchange earnings due to tourism have been showing a continued downward trend [28]. The economic cost to Pakistan due to backlash of terrorism is therefore also quite considerable.

The following recommendations are made in the wake of drawdown of troops from Afghanistan.

1. Pakistan needs to play its facilitator role more effectively so that it can focus on its own domestic problem with various deadly variants of extremism.
2. Pakistan must respect sovereignty of Afghanistan and build its relations on the basis of mutual goodwill and respect
3. Adopt a policy with emphasis on trade and economic development and establishing trade links with Central Asia

4. Pakistan and Afghanistan must also explore the possibility of forging friendly relations with all countries of the region to complete the paradigm shift
5. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan should avoid Great Games of the past and avoid being part of proxy wars.

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