

## AFGHANISTAN: PEACE THROUGH RECONCILIATION

Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan\*

### Abstract

*Afghanistan, a crossroads of civilizations has been a victim of global conspiracies for centuries. In recent history, the Soviet invasion (1979 to 1989) and the subsequent covert U.S. campaign to disintegrate the former, has deeply influenced the social, political and economic sphere of Afghanistan, as well as neighboring Pakistan. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989, followed by the hasty U.S. departure, encouraged factional fighting and gave rise to a civil war-like situation in the country. The situation paved way for the extremist Taliban government that could attain neither domestic public acceptance nor the recognition of the international community. The country was further destabilized by undesired U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 attacks. Despite the military invasion, the U.S. found itself unable to subdue the opposition groups in Afghanistan. A decade into the invasion, the Taliban have grown stronger and more effective, and have emerged as a challenge for both the Afghan administration and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Contrary to its claims, the United States has failed to curb militants. Foreseeing a troubled future, it has finally decided to negotiate with the Taliban for either an honourable exit or peaceful co-existence. The idea of this political engagement of the Taliban began a few years ago and U.S. representatives commenced negotiations with the Taliban at their newly established contact point in Doha, Qatar, at the beginning of 2012. Subsequently, the Afghan President Hamid Karzai invited the Taliban for direct talks. The war-torn people of Afghanistan need stability and peace in whatever form they can attain. However, for a durable*

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\* Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan is Head of Department of International Relations, Faculty of Contemporary Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad.

*peace, and indigenous Afghan- led peace process, with all stakeholders in Afghanistan on board, and with the support of regional actors as well as the United States, would be extremely essential.*

## Introduction

Located on the Iranian Plateau in Southwest Asia, Afghanistan is a landlocked country enveloped by the Hindu Kush Mountains and Pamir. It covers a total area of 652,000 square km<sup>1</sup> and has common land borders of 5,529 km<sup>2</sup> with six neighbouring countries: Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. It shares a major portion of its border (2430 km) with Pakistan, while its geographical contiguity with China is only at 67 km of border.<sup>3</sup> Out of its arable land, only one-third is currently irrigated, which constitutes about 12% of the cultivable land. Its total population is 30 million.<sup>4</sup> The major ethnic groups are Pashtun comprising 42 %, (they constitute practically half of the total population), Tajik 27 %, Uzbek 9%, Hazara 9 %, Aimak 4 %, Turkmen 3 %, Baloch 2 % and others 4 %<sup>5</sup>. With a 28.1 % literacy rate, 68 % of the people of Afghanistan are of less than 25 years of age,<sup>6</sup> forming an exceptional human resource potential.

The country has undergone a prolonged period of internal instability, foreign invasions, civil wars, and factional fighting. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and is still continues to consolidate its foothold in the name of the so-called Global War on Terror. The present situation in Afghanistan is indistinct, highly tense, complex, and fluid, where uncertainty and chaos continues to prevail all around.

The on-ground security situation is extremely fragile and continues to further deteriorate day by day; the localized effects of Taliban, tribal leaders and warlords are much more pronounced than the central government in Kabul, which has desolately failed in establishing its writ in most of the country.

<sup>1</sup> Barry Turner,(ed) The Politics, Cultures and Economies of the World, *The Statesman's Yearbook-2011*, 147<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Palgrave Macmillan England-February 2011): 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Segal, China and Afghanistan, *Asian Survey*, (California: University of California Press, November 1981, Vol. 21, No. 11): 1158-1174, China Mulls Afghan border request, *BBC*, June 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book*, , can be accessed at; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> National Joint Youth Programme, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Annual Report -2008*. Can be accessed at; [http://www.undp.org.af/whoweare/undpinafghanistan/Projects/dcse/prj\\_youth.htm](http://www.undp.org.af/whoweare/undpinafghanistan/Projects/dcse/prj_youth.htm).

Poor governance, and absence of any worthwhile progress, mars the credibility of President Hamid Karzai's government.

Charges of corruption and the alleged sponsoring of the drug trade are factors that have further declined the local populace's acceptance for the incumbent government in Kabul.

The U.S. is the main player in Afghan affairs and has been deeply involved for the last one decade. The West and the only superpower have not been able to defeat the strength of the Taliban, despite a military campaign that has lasted for over a decade. Having failed to achieve any worthwhile success, America has decided to engage in a dialogue process with the Taliban. There has been covert engagement between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives for a positive breakthrough in negotiations since 2010. With the opening of Taliban office - indeed a Taliban's ambassadorial house - in Doha, Qatar, there has been a steep increase in interaction, in the first two months of 2012. Although, a complete victory by the U.S. and NATO forces seems impossible, political engagement and a redressing of the Afghans' grievances by integrating all groups and factions to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, would be an apt way forward.

On its part, the U.S. is wary that it may not enjoy the support of its European allies if it opts for a long-term engagement in Afghanistan. During the past one decade of joint military campaign, there have been disagreements among the troop-contributing countries on issues like; their employment, role, and level of contribution and participation. The Dutch government collapsed over the issue of sending more troops to Afghanistan in February 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was dragged into a court of law<sup>8</sup> for sending British troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. There is worry among the people of Germany and France against their governments for a prolonged engagement on a non-beneficial military campaign on account of personnel casualties and the financial drain that leaves no hope of reimbursement.

## **Afghan Predicaments: Regional and Global Interest Groups**

### **Regional Countries**

All of the six regional neighbours of Afghanistan have their own concerns, commitments and apprehensions about the present turmoil and

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<sup>7</sup> Dutch Government Collapses over Afghan Mission, *Dawn* (Islamabad, February 20, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> War Crime Case against Tony Blair Now Rock-solid, *The First Post* (Mumbai), December 14, 2009. Can be accessed at; <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/57361,news-comment,news-politics,war-crime-case-against-tony-blair-is-now-rock-solid>

the presence of extra-regional forces in the country. Each country would like to secure its own interests with regard to Afghanistan. India, geographically non-contiguous to Afghanistan, is massively involved in Afghan affairs. Under the garb of Afghan reconstruction, some of its activities are turning into security hazards for the state and society of Pakistan, as well as the future generation of Afghanistan. Militants along the Pak-Afghan border, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and sub-nationalists in Baluchistan, are said to have links with the spy agencies of the global actors involved in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

China fears that militancy and instability in Afghanistan is fuelling volatility in its semi-autonomous region; Xinjiang.<sup>10</sup> China desires a stable Afghanistan for three reasons. Firstly, it would lead towards the pulling out of ISAF from its neighbourhood; secondly, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan would facilitate stability in the Chinese areas bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan; thirdly, because of its geographical proximity, China will be able to make economic investments in Afghanistan, which would be beneficial for Afghan economic development and for China as well.<sup>11</sup> Besides the economic aspect, Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs), see NATO and the U.S. as a threat to their future. Russia feels that presence of extra-regional forces in its neighbourhood behaves as an obstacle to its resurgence and poses a serious threat to the former Soviet republics.<sup>12</sup> Russian Foreign Minister has directly accused U.S. for current political crisis in Moscow and its surrounding areas, to stop likely election of Vladimir Putin as the next President.<sup>13</sup> However, peace, stability and a united Afghanistan is the desire of both Russia and the CARs.

### **United States: The Central Player**

In 1991, Iraq was the first victim to fall prey to the American agenda of global domination. This military invasion gave the U.S. an excuse to secure its long term interests in the Middle East by stationing its forces on ground and tapping huge Arab wealth, either in the form of cash or through extraction of regional hydro-carbon resources,<sup>14</sup> as a cost of war for defeating Saddam's Baathist Iraq. This American act provided ample

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<sup>9</sup> How can Pakistan Stop Indian Terror Against It, *Dawn* (Islamabad), April 22, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Small, 'China's Cautions on Afghanistan-Pakistan', *Washington Quarterly* (Washington), July 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> M K Bhadrakumar, Russia Stops US on Road to Afghanistan, *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), January 27, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Dmitry Zaks, Russia Accuses US of Meddling ahead of Polls, *Dawn* (Islamabad), March 2, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Paul D'Amato, "U.S. Intervention in the Middle East: Blood for Oil," *International Socialist Review*, Issue:15 (Chicago: December 2000-January 2001), [http://www.isreview.org/issues/15/blood\\_for\\_oil.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/15/blood_for_oil.shtml)

sense of mental and physical freedom to the fearsome Arab monarchs. Thereafter, 9/11 provided the U.S. with an open warrant to invade anywhere in the world under the guise of the so-called War on Terror. To begin with, it invaded Afghanistan, seeking to crush its former jihadists allies-turned-terrorists, including Osama Bin Laden. The war in Afghanistan has killed thousands of people, mostly innocents, ever since October 7, 2001.<sup>15</sup> However, the U.S. Special Forces, Navy SEALs 'managed to' kill Osama Bin Laden only on May 2, 2011 his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. After this, the U.S. and NATO should not have had any excuse to stay in Afghanistan or even in the region. Many analysts and authors including Steve Coll, believe that despite announcing a draw-down plan of 2014, it seems unlikely that the U.S. will permanently leave Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

### Perceived U.S. Objective

A long-term stay in Afghanistan and the domination of Central Asia are all corollaries to the multipurpose U.S. strategies in the region.<sup>17</sup> It is widely believed that while anchored in Afghanistan, with a few bases in Central Asia, the United States has multiple objectives to put into practice.<sup>18</sup> In the views of various writers and analysts, its long-term agenda includes the containment of China through multi-prong approaches,<sup>19</sup> planned to be implemented through its allies in East Asia, Japan and South Korea, given that it already has a sizable number of its own military forces stationed there. The U.S. is moving closer to South East Asian countries (ASEAN), being part of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).<sup>20</sup> It has recently concluded a nuclear deal with Vietnam<sup>21</sup> and is about to secure military bases in the Philippines.<sup>22</sup> In South Asia, however, the natural ally of the U.S., India, is being prepared as a counter-weight to America's peer competitor.

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<sup>15</sup> Rahul Bedi, The Afghanistan War was Planned Months Before the 9/11 Attacks, *BBC* (London) July, 2001. American government told other governments about Afghan invasion in July 2001. <http://whatreallyhappened.com/WRHARTICLES/preplanned.html?q=preplanned.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars; the Secret History of CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); 45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Mark E. Manyin, Michael John Garcia, Wayne M. Morrison, U.S. Accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), *Congressional Research Service*, May 5, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Saurav Jha, Why a US-Vietnam Nuclear Deal?, *Diplomat* (Tokyo) September 15, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Mogato, 'U.S. Military Seeks more Access in Philippines, not Bases', *Reuter* (New York) February 9, 2012.

In global politics, the U.S. is highly conscious of a resurgent Russia and would take whatever measures it believes necessary to contest this power-balancing phobia. Certain Russian actions, such as the attack on Georgia in 2008, the test firing of long-range ICBMs and a consistent and strong opposition of the U.S. ballistic missile defence shield in the Eastern European countries, are tangible factors indicative of Russian resurgence, a fact that is of serious concern for the United States.<sup>23</sup> Russia considers that the pre-poll political crisis in Moscow, was on the instigation of U.S.<sup>24</sup> These protests aimed at blocking Putin's re-election as President, who secured 63 % votes to become President of Russian Federation.

Both Russia and China desire that the U.S. should leave the region as early as possible. They have even made use of the SCO's forum more than once to pressurize the U.S. into pulling out. Apart from these, domination, if not possession of the hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian and Caspian regions, has always been an American objective. The U.S. desires to explore and further sell these resources elsewhere in the world market while denying access to Russia, China or any third country in the region. Iran shares its borders with Afghanistan and Central Asia. The U.S. desires the neutralization of the Iranian role in regional politics as well as the bludgeoning of its nuclear programme.<sup>25</sup> After the UN economic sanctions of 2011, the U.S. and its allies, together with Israel, appear to be searching for an excuse to attack Iran or, at the very least to neutralize its nuclear programme.

### **The U.S. and Energy Politics**

Pipeline politics is yet another area of interest for the U.S., where it desires that neither Russian nor Iranian soil be relied upon for the future energy pipelines that will run from the CARs and the Caspian regions to Europe, and elsewhere in the world. The U.S. prefers using the route from Central Asia to Turkey and then on to Europe, as in the case of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline. This crude oil pipeline is 1768 km long and passes through Azerbaijan (Baku), Georgia (Tbilisi) and the Turkish coast (Ceyhan port) to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>26</sup> For the rest of the region, especially India, the U.S. desires a pipeline from Central Asia to India, via Afghanistan and Pakistan. This bypassing strategy clashes with Russian and Iranian interests in the region.

Regarding Afghanistan, "Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it. Failure to provide adequate resources also

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<sup>23</sup> William J. Lahneman, *Military Intervention: Cases in Context in Twenty-First Century*, (USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. 2004). 11.

<sup>24</sup> Russia PM Vladimir Putin accuses US over poll protests, *BBC News* (London) December 8, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Watkins, BTC Pipeline Throughput Increasing in 2011, *Oil and Gas Journal*, (Houston: June 4, 2010).

risks a longer conflict, greater casualties, higher overall costs and ultimately, a critical loss of political support. Any of these risks in turn, are likely to result in mission failure".<sup>27</sup> This was the crux of the assessment report of General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of ISAF in Afghanistan in 2009. At that time, McChrystal predicted the failure of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, provided political reconciliation and integration of the Taliban were not ensured.<sup>28</sup> He was perhaps, the only military commander who gave a realistic assessment, without prejudice, that there existed a total lack of understanding of the Afghan culture and society on part of ISAF. While accusing Pakistan of supporting the Taliban,<sup>29</sup> McChrystal declared the conventional modus operandi of dealing with the Afghan imbroglio through coalition forces under U.S. as part of the problem, rather than a way out.

## **Pak-Afghan Correlation**

### **Impact of Afghan Instability on Pakistan**

Pakistan has suffered the most from the instability in Afghanistan. It has a huge Pakhtun population in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which makes it the largest ethnic group, together with Southern and the Western parts of Afghanistan, all along the highly porous Pak-Afghan border. These Pakhtuns have occupied dominant positions in the country's political and military hierarchy for centuries and this is perhaps for the first time in Afghan history that the Pakhtuns have been forced out of power in their own homeland.

Moreover, factors such as the presence of about 2.5 million Afghan refugees<sup>30</sup> in Pakistan, the narcotics trade, a huge parallel economy, due to Afghan Transit Trade and rising Talibanization, have had telling effects on the security, economy and society of Pakistan. Pakistan wishes for a peaceful Afghanistan, where the lawful sway of decision lies in the hands of its own people. The people of Pakistan are aggrieved over the daily massacre of innocent Afghans at the hands of coalition forces. Repeated aerial raids and a number of ground operations have only been able to kill a few insurgent Taliban. The ultimate sufferer is the innocent Afghan population. The military action, "Operation Mushtarak"<sup>31</sup> in the Marjah area of Helmand Province in mid- February 2010, fell short of deterring Taliban; however, it killed hundreds of innocent civilians. The town's

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<sup>27</sup> General Stanley Mac Crystal, *COMISAF's Initial Assessment*, August 30, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> General Calls for More U.S. Troops to Avoid Afghan Failure, *New York Times* (New York), September 20, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Tens of thousands of Afghan refugees go back home with UN support, *UN News Centre*, June 21, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Riz Khan, Operation Mushtarak, *Aljazeera* (Online), February 18, 2010.

80,000 inhabitants<sup>32</sup> faced serious casualties and a disruption of their routine lives. Moreover, the recent desecration of the Holy Quran and urinating on the bodies of Afghan Taliban are acts of degeneracy, unprecedented in human history and Pakistan is concerned about them.

### **Afghan Future as Visualized by Pakistan**

“We cannot wish for Afghanistan anything that we don’t wish for Pakistan.”<sup>33</sup> This is the principle stance of Pakistan for Afghanistan. Since Pakistanis desire peace, stability, and economic prosperity for their own country, therefore, they wish similar comforts for their Afghan brethren. Furthermore, three decades of war, factional fighting, and internal instability in Afghanistan has brought us to the conclusion that, stability and peace in Pakistan is directly related to these factors in Afghanistan. The current state of instability in Pakistan is indeed an outcome of the Afghan situation that has its roots in 1979. Pakistani involvement in post-Soviet Afghanistan was reprehensively considered as an attempt of latching on to it permanently, but Pakistan neither had aspired to nor had planned to hegemonize a sovereign country.

The idea of Afghanistan providing strategic depth<sup>34</sup> to Pakistan has been wrongly projected. Rather than a physical occupation or control of Afghanistan, Pakistan has sought assurances for the maintenance of peace along the Pak-Afghan borders, in the event of any misadventure by our eastern neighbour. Successive Afghan governments had been providing just that, as evidenced by the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars. Even President Karzai has assured Pakistan of guaranteed Afghan support in the event of any such misadventure. In the current Pak-Afghan relationship, the Indian factor has greater significance. During the Taliban era in Afghanistan, India along with some other regional countries has been constantly supporting the ethnic minorities, collectively named them as the Northern Alliance. They were given economic and even military support by India, which virtually forced division among Afghan society. Despite an ethnic Pashtun President, the Northern Alliance is the true beneficiary of the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan. The current intake into the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP) and most of the bureaucracy is mostly from the minority group of the Northern Alliance, with an insignificant strength of the majority Pashtun population. The Indian Army has undertaken the training of the ANA, ANP and Afghan intelligence agency for last few years.

Pakistan feels that Indian trained ANA and ANP could prove hostile to its neighbours, particularly Muslim countries. Apart from its

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Imtiaz Gul, A New Understanding for the U.S. and Pakistan?, *Foreign Policy Magazine* (Washington DC), February 10, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

geographically contiguous neighbours, these Indian trained troops will be in conflict with the basic Muslim cultural and social values of Afghanistan itself. In addition to promoting internal clashes, these troops would conceivably be willing to maintain the current state of volatility, distrust, and enmity with Pakistan for the foreseeable future. Indeed, India and Afghanistan are two different countries, with different values, culture, and different future requirements. Therefore, the Indian trained ANA could further destabilize the region as a whole. This state of affairs would suit neither the U.S., nor Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been offering the Afghan Government assistance in the training of ANA and ANP. Indeed, this step would greatly reduce the current instability and hostilities along the Pak-Afghan border, by promoting harmony among the security forces of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, both countries share common terrain and borders to defend. Moreover, they have similar cultural and historical values and share ideological harmony. This can only be possible if they share trainers with corresponding training parameters.

### **Afghan Led Political Reconciliation**

It is still uncertain, as to what would be the formal response of Taliban to President Hamid Karzai's call for direct talk and political reconciliation. Nevertheless, at President Karzai's request, Pakistan has also formally appealed to all Afghan groups and factions, including the Taliban to be part of the intra-Afghan negotiation process. On February 24, 2012, the Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani, addressing Afghan factions said, "I would like to appeal to the Taliban leadership as well as to all other Afghan groups, including Hizb-i-Islami, to participate in an intra-Afghan process for national reconciliation and peace."<sup>35</sup>

He further elaborated by saying that, "It is our sincere hope that the Taliban leadership, Hizb-i-Islami and all other Afghan political leaders will respond positively to my appeal and agree to enter into direct negotiations in the framework of an intra-Afghan process for reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan."<sup>36</sup> Earlier, Karzai had repeatedly announced that his government is ready to accommodate the Taliban and other factions and invited the opposition group to a political reconciliation through dialogue process. He categorically said that, "In order to realise the objectives of the peace process, I invite the leadership of the Taliban to engage

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<sup>35</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, PM Urges Afghan Taliban, Other Groups to Join Peace Process, *Dawn* (Islamabad), February 25, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

in direct talks with the Afghan government.”<sup>37</sup> President Karzai made a comprehensive trip to Pakistan in mid- February 2012 and requested Pakistani authorities for dedicated support. He said, “I hereby request our brotherly government of Pakistan to support and facilitate our direct negotiation efforts as part of the peace process.”<sup>38</sup>

While Pakistan promised to provide all-out assistance to the Afghan Government, it is determined not to play a leading role in this reconciliation and desires that it should be, “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven.”<sup>39</sup>The Pakistani Foreign Minister firmly highlighted this aspect in her address to scholars at Chatham House on February 23, 2012. She emphasized, “But we will not lead. We cannot lead ... We will only follow what our Afghan brothers and sisters decide is the course of action they will adopt.”<sup>40</sup> This indeed is a great commitment by Pakistan, a neighbour, which suffered equally during these long years of foreign invasions and factional fighting in Afghanistan.

### **A Surge in the Reconciliation**

The immediate enthusiasm in the Afghan administration for the reconciliation process came only after it was learnt that U.S. authorities are covertly engaged in negotiations with Taliban representatives. This process became more overt in the beginning of January 2012, and U.S. officials including Marc Grossman, President Obama’s special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, met with Taliban representatives in Doha. President Karzai and his administration experienced a sense of having been isolated in the process of negotiations. Moreover, some Taliban publicly refused to talk to the Karzai administration and demonstrated a preference for talking directly to the United States instead.

In recalling the background of these U.S-Taliban talks, the fact is that the Obama administration had previously been of the opinion that the solution of the Afghan war did not lie in the military option. It had to be resolved outside the battleground. However, the Pentagon stopped Obama from taking such a step. Following the

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Karzai invites Taliban leaders for direct talks’, *News International* (Rawalpindi), February 22, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Estelle Shirbon and Alison Williams, ‘Pakistan vows to support not lead Afghan peace drive’, *Reuters* (New York), February 22, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

proclamation of the first indicator, given by President Obama on December 2, 2009, regarding a likely U.S. exit plan in July 2011, there has been much speculation within American circles and all over the world about a tussle between the White House and the Pentagon. In the following days, General Stanley McChrystal fell prey to this internal clash. Indeed, General McChrystal was strongly in favour of negotiations with Taliban for achieving durable peace in Afghanistan. In an interview with the Financial Times on January 25, 2010, the former commander of the ISAF stated, "The Taliban can contribute and help in the future to run the country."<sup>41</sup> He further said that, "a soldier he had seen enough fighting and there is a need to find a political solution."<sup>42</sup> As a military commander, he was familiar with the situation on the ground, to which the Pentagon is now finally conceding.

Nevertheless, Obama's outlined exit plan gave way to the 'London Conference on Afghanistan' held on January 28, 2010, and jointly hosted by the British Government, the UN and Afghanistan. It provided more political space to accommodate the Taliban in the future Afghan setup. The primary objective of the conference was to transfer the security responsibilities of Afghanistan to its own security forces from ISAF and to entice the warring factions, the Taliban, to end the violence. The agreed strategy was "Instead of demonizing the Taliban, we now contemplate the possibility that some of them could become part of the solution, an Afghanistan run by the Afghans themselves."<sup>43</sup> A reintegration fund was established to motivate the Taliban to give up militancy and join the peace process. As per the former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, the primary objective of the fund was to, "provide an economic alternative to those who have none other than participation in the insurgency."<sup>44</sup>

In a way, the London Conference gave President Karzai the formal approval of the international community to start a reconciliation process with the Taliban and other warring factions in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> The United States however, remained skeptical of the reconciliation and its outcome for them. The main consideration of U.S. policy makers was that if at all

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<sup>41</sup> *Financial Times* (Shinghai), January 25, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Paul Reynolds, Aims of London Conference on Afghanistan, *BBC News* (London), January 28, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Selig S. Harrison, A Smart Pashtun Play; Why Washington Should Back Karzai', *Newsweek* (Online), July 12, 2010.

Taliban are to be reintegrated into the main stream, including Afghan Government functionaries, then what did the U.S. get by ousting them in 2001 and waging a prolonged war thereafter, spending trillions of dollars?<sup>46</sup> Therefore, despite giving tacit approval to the Karzai Administration for the talks with Taliban, the U.S. itself continued its military offensives and night raids against the Taliban's strongholds including a major attack conducted jointly by NATO and the Afghan Army in Marjah<sup>47</sup> in February, 2010, which met with failure. Probably, all this was aimed putting the Taliban on the defensive, thus compelling them to negotiate from a position of weakness. It was the misfortune of the U.S. that this strategy did not work and it had to rethink its subsequent approach.

### Supportive Elements

Since testing the ISAF's military muscles against the Taliban repeatedly met with failure, therefore, at the concluding session of the G-20 Summit, held in Toronto, Canada, President Obama once again gave tacit approval to the reconciliation process. He laid emphasis on finding a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan by declaring Pakistan's Afghan settlement efforts as "useful".<sup>48</sup> President Obama said that, "conversations between the Afghan government and the Pakistani government, building trust between those two governments, are a useful step".<sup>49</sup> He even gave implicit approval to the inclusion of the Taliban in the reconciliation process. Indeed, Pakistan has long been emphasizing on the reconciliation of all Afghan groups, including Taliban for the establishment of a broad based government in its neighbourhood. Pakistan believes in political reconciliation as the only way forward for a durable peace.

Believing military success to be impracticable, former ISAF Commander, General David Petraeus, now Director of the CIA, also supported the reconciliation process. He even agreed to "Pakistani involvement in some form of reconciliation agreement, [deeming it] essential".<sup>50</sup> As he stated, Afghanistan and Pakistan "are always going to be

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Pillar, The Great Debate: Is Afghanistan the Right War, *National Interest* (Online), Mar/Apr 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Operation Marjah, *Foreign Policy* (Washington DC) February 17, 2010. Can be accessed at; [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/17/operation\\_marjah](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/17/operation_marjah)

<sup>48</sup> Pakistan's Afghan settlement efforts 'useful', *News International* (Rawalpindi), June 29, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> On General Petraeus' Confirmation, *Centre for Defense Information*, July 6, 2010.

[http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=4617&from\\_page=../index.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=4617&from_page=../index.cfm)

neighbours. And helping them develop a constructive relationship would be an important contribution".<sup>51</sup> Over time, the reconciliation process has gained more support from almost all stakeholders as well as the international community. The United Kingdom is one such advocate; the British Foreign Minister William Hague has visited Pakistan and expressed appreciation of the role played by Pakistan in curbing the scourge of terrorism. He too, emphasized on the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The British Army Chief also issued a statement to the effect that he fully backed the process. There is a growing realization among the coalition that, Afghan issue has to be resolved through political negotiations, as the decade long war could not resolve it.

### **Intricacies in the Reconciliation**

On their part, U.S. officials have been engaged in covert talks with the Taliban since 2010. However, the opening of a formal Taliban office in Doha and confirmation by Taliban representatives as being part of this negotiation was construed as an attempt at isolation by the Karzai administration. At the first instance, President Karzai recalled the Afghan Ambassador from Qatar. He then met with the head of Hizb-i-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and engaged in detailed talks with this powerful faction of Afghanistan, that operates in the North-East part of the country. President Karzai declared the meeting as productive and said, "We are hopeful that these negotiations continue and for the sake of peace, we reach productive results."<sup>52</sup> As a damage control strategy, Marc Grossman met with President Karzai in Kabul, and assured the Afghan government that "The United States stands ready to assist in any way we can an Afghan-led reconciliation process to find a peaceful end to this conflict."<sup>53</sup> Earlier the Afghan President warned that, "The Afghan nation is the owner of the peace process and any peace talks. No other country or organization has the right to deprive the Afghan nation to this right. Afghanistan is not a place for foreigners to do their political experiments or a laboratory that every few years they test a new political system."<sup>54</sup>

While the Karzai administration has its reservations about the direct Taliban-U.S negotiations, their greater concern lies in the venue of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Afghanistan President Karzai Meets with Insurgent Faction, Hopes it Will be Productive," January 21, 2012, [http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2012/01/afghanistan\\_president\\_karzai\\_m.html](http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2012/01/afghanistan_president_karzai_m.html)

<sup>53</sup> "U.S. Envoy in Kabul for talks with Karzai on Peace," *Express Tribune* (Islamabad), January 21, 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/325024/us-envoy-in-kabul-for-talks-with-karzai-on-peace/>

<sup>54</sup> 'US envoy in Afghanistan to discuss peace, Taliban', CNN U.S, January 21, 2012, accessed at [http://articles.cnn.com/2012-01-21/asia/world\\_asia\\_afghanistan-grossman-talks\\_1\\_afghan-led-president-karzai-peace-talks?\\_s=PM:ASIA](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-01-21/asia/world_asia_afghanistan-grossman-talks_1_afghan-led-president-karzai-peace-talks?_s=PM:ASIA)

these talks. Saudi Arabia, perhaps even Turkey, would have been more acceptable to the present government in Kabul, the U.S. chose Qatar. This act has been construed by Kabul as a deliberate attempt at its marginalization in the process which would permit the U.S. greater sway over the Taliban leadership. Karzai's meeting with Hekmatyar appears to be a strong signal aimed at the U.S. to remind them that Taliban –albeit the strongest contender opposing the American invasion- is only one of several Afghan factions, many of whom are in contact with the government. It would not be inconceivable for Karzai to subsequently approach even the Haqqanis.

The domestic power-sharing group, the Northern Alliance appears unlikely to be open to any negotiations with the Taliban either by the U.S. or by Karzai. Fazel Sacharaki, the spokesperson of the National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA), and a political opponent of Karzai Government, believes that "Karzai has been sidelined in peace talks with the Taliban because they don't trust the government."<sup>55</sup> Not only the Taliban, but also the U.S. and its NATO allies appear to distrust Karzai, who, over the years, has not quite proven himself to be a selfless leader whose primary concern is the betterment of the Afghan people. However, Karzai has stated that, "We talk to the Taliban every day. We were talking to them just a few days ago. The peace process, which envisions the return of all Afghans... including the Taliban, to peaceful lives in their country, is the surest way to peace and stability in Afghanistan."<sup>56</sup>

### **Sustainability of the Afghan Peace Process**

As neighbour to Afghanistan, Pakistan feels it is not unlikely that the U.S. itself is in direct talks with the Taliban and even the Haqqanis, but has incorrectly been accusing Pakistan of maintaining linkages with them. Statements to this effect are intended to keep sustained pressure on Pakistan for its gains in Afghanistan and coerce it, so that it does not contradict U.S. ordains. In a recent statement, the former Taliban Minister, Maulvi Arsala Rahmani, now a member of the High Peace Council of Afghanistan, said that the, "Taliban have decided to soften up their stance for peace in Afghanistan."<sup>57</sup> Today, they are ready to compromise on some of the aspects seemed inconceivable earlier. Indeed, the shift in the Taliban strategy has transformed them from "being a non-state to a state actor." The U.S. on its part, is also negotiating with the Taliban, granting them

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<sup>55</sup> *Ali Safi, Afghanistan's Karzai met with insurgents' peace delegation*, McClatchy Newspapers (Online), February 05, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> "Karzai Claims Contact with Mullah Omar," *Nation* (Islamabad), February 22, 2012, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/national/22-Feb-2012/karzai-claims-contact-with-mullah-omar>.

<sup>57</sup> Taliban ready for peace talks, to soften hard-line stance, *Oman Tribune-Asia* (Muscat) January 28, 2012.

recognition as a legal entity, in contrast to its previous stance of not reconciling with Taliban.

In looking for political reconciliation in Afghanistan, the U.S. will have to bring an end to its military operation and night raids that kill hundreds of innocents Afghans. The U.S. humiliation of the Afghan people has reached a level where its soldiers have been caught indulging in unfortunate acts of depravity, and this in the highly civilized world of 21st century. More recently, American soldiers have burnt the Holy Quran and other Islamic literature in Afghanistan. These are serious offences and appear to be vindictive in nature.

The Taliban consider the call for negotiations, whether led by President Karzai or the U.S., as their success, and they have rightly announced as much on January 16, 2012. Only after this declaration of success, did the Taliban officially express an interest in negotiations with Washington. The reality is that after a decade of military engagement, the White House and the Pentagon have reached the conclusion that they are losing in Afghanistan and the situation is beginning to emulate the Vietnam imbroglio. In point of fact, this realization is not entirely new; the late Richard Holbrooke has attempted to push for such negotiations, but his efforts were, unfortunately, resisted by the Pentagon.

Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski, Security Advisor in President Jimmy Carter's administration, has asserted in his book "Strategic Vision", that the U.S. is facing serious challenges to its very survival, if it does not take immediate remedial measures. He has pointed out many grey areas that the U.S. is faced with, owing primarily to the erroneous policies of the Pentagon and White House hawks. Brzezinski finds "alarming similarities between America today and the Soviet Union just before its fall, including a gridlocked governmental system incapable of enacting serious policy revisions, a backbreaking military budget and a failing decade-long attempt to conquer Afghanistan."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the U.S. needs to be a balancing factor in global politics instead of behaving as a colonial power.

Brzezinski also feels that the U.S. must become a "responsible partner to the rising and increasingly assertive East."<sup>59</sup> The U.S. role should be as a "balancer and conciliator" among Asian nations. Perhaps it was on having perceived the U.S. as demonstrating all the symptoms of a dying empire, that American policy makers took the decision to engage the Taliban as a way out from this never-ending and convoluted conflict.

For peace and stability in Afghanistan, the U.S-Taliban negotiations are a welcome step. However, the peace process would remain fragile

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<sup>58</sup> David Ignatius, Coming Debate Over American 'Strength' Abroad, *Nation* (Islamabad), January 27, 2012, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/international/27-Jan-2012/coming-debate-over-american-%E2%80%98strength-abroad/>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

unless it has the support of all groups and warring factions of Afghanistan, in addition to other stakeholders in the shape of the immediate neighbours, which have been associated with the conflict for over thirty years now.

### **Embedded Threats from Transition to Transformation**

The final Communiqué of the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan, held on December 5, 2011, supported the U.S. strategy to remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014. The Bonn Communiqué says that both sides “solemnly dedicated themselves to deepening and broadening their historic partnership from Transition to the Transformation Decade of 2015-2024.”<sup>60</sup> In November, 2010, the Lisbon Summit, which was attended by the forty-eight member coalition, agreed for a troop drawdown by December 2014. In the issued statement, it was asserted that, “The Alliance approved to end its combat mission in Afghanistan and hand over full sovereignty and security responsibility to Afghan forces.”<sup>61</sup>

The Pentagon had a reservation to this deadline, as was expressed by its representative immediately after the Lisbon Summit. Then Coalition Commander in Afghanistan, General David H. Petraeus (now CIA Director), opposed a faster troop drawdown. In support of Obama’s policy on the commencement of pulling out troops from July 2011, Petraeus said, “As the President has stated, July 2011 is the point at which we will begin a transition phase in which the Afghan government will take more and more responsibility for its own security. As the President has also indicated, July 2011 is not a date when we will be rapidly withdrawing our forces and switching off the lights and closing the door behind us.”<sup>62</sup> Later, however, the General towed the line of the Pentagon, highlighting differences with President Obama with certain aspects of the pullout plan.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Afghanistan and the International Community, Conference Conclusions of the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011. [http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011\\_11\\_conclusions\\_bonn\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011_11_conclusions_bonn_en.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan, US long-term plan in Afghanistan laid bare, December 20, 2011. [http://www.infowars.com/us-long-term-plan-in-afghanistan-laid-bare/Lisbon Summit Declaration](http://www.infowars.com/us-long-term-plan-in-afghanistan-laid-bare/Lisbon%20Summit%20Declaration), Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Lisbon, 20 Nov. 2010. [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_68828.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Josh Rogin, Petraeus: Withdrawal Timeline Does Not Mean switching off the lights, June 29, 2010, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/06/29/petraeus\\_withdrawal\\_timeline\\_does\\_not\\_mean\\_switching\\_off\\_the\\_lights](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/06/29/petraeus_withdrawal_timeline_does_not_mean_switching_off_the_lights).

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Not Completed Mission But Making Progress in Afghanistan: Defense Chief, December 15, 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2011-12/15/c\\_131306978.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2011-12/15/c_131306978.htm).

In mid-December-2011, during his visit of Afghanistan, the U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said in a press conference held with President Karzai that it is a reality that the U.S. has not completely won and there is need to complete its mission. He claimed, however, that ISAF and Afghan forces “have been able to seize the momentum from the Taliban militancy and establish security in critical areas, such as the Taliban's heartland in the South. We are moving towards a stronger Afghanistan that can govern and secure itself for the future.”<sup>64</sup> The ground realities are, in fact, contrary to Panetta's statement. The insurgency has actually increased. During 2011, even heavily secured areas like Kabul were not exempted from Taliban attacks. The areas that have been handed over to Afghan National Army (ANA) are now very vulnerable to militant attacks. Thus, as believed by most security analysts, Panetta's assessment is nothing more than a mere encouragement for ISAF and may be the regime in Kabul. Otherwise, being a former spy chief, Panetta knows the reality on the Afghan horizon. The Defence Secretary, however, accepted that “Ultimately, we can't win the war in Afghanistan without being able to win in our relationship with Pakistan as well.”<sup>65</sup>

The Bonn Conference also fixed an ambitious agenda for the future of Afghanistan, once it laid down a criterion that after transformation “In 2024 Afghanistan should not be a country in need of donors but also a donor country.”<sup>66</sup> It is felt that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan for an indefinite period would make it heavily dependent on others. It would require another two to three decades for restoring self-dependency among the Afghans. However, the question remains as to whether the U.S. really desires to leave Afghanistan.

The Defence Secretary has recently revealed that the U.S. may wind up affairs in Afghanistan, even a year before the schedule, which was laid down in the Lisbon Summit. Panetta, while in meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels said that, “Our goal is to complete all of that transition in 2013. Hopefully by mid- to the latter part of 2013 we'll be able to make a transition from a combat role.”<sup>67</sup> This new statement of Panetta has created yet more ambiguity about future U.S. plans in

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<sup>62</sup> Anwar Iqbal, Afghan War Cannot Be Won Without Pakistan, Says Panetta, *Dawn* (Islamabad), December 14, 2011, <http://www.dawn.com/2011/12/14/afghan-war-cannot-be-won-without-pakistan-says-panetta.html>

<sup>65</sup> Petraeus stresses Pak role in Afghan reconciliation, *News International* (Rawalpindi), June 30, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Afghanistan Pledges to Fight Corruption, *Pakistan Today* (Islamabad), December 6, 2011, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2011/12/afghanistan-pledges-to-fight-corruption/>

<sup>67</sup> Craig Whitlock and Karen DeYoung, U.S., NATO will seek to end Afghan combat mission next year, *The Washington Post* (Washington), February 2, 2012. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/panetta-us-nato-will-seek-to-end-afghan-combat-mission-next-year/2010/07/28/gIQArIZjiQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/panetta-us-nato-will-seek-to-end-afghan-combat-mission-next-year/2010/07/28/gIQArIZjiQ_story.html).

Afghanistan and the region. Furthermore, would it be possible for the Karzai-led Kabul Administration to sustain itself without the U.S.? The capacity of the Afghan government and the ANA to sustain itself against the militants' pressure is quite evident from some of the incidents that occurred during 2011. These events took place while there is a huge presence of ISAF troops. Then how could the ANA or ANP compete with the forces that still hold most of the Afghan territory.

It is felt that this interdependence has compelled Karzai to request the support of the participants of the Bonn Conference of 2011: "Together we have spent blood and treasure in fighting terrorism. Your continued solidarity, your commitment and support will be crucial so that we can consolidate our gains and continue to address the challenges that remain."<sup>68</sup> Had the U.S. been pursuing its basic objective of invading Afghanistan then it "should have used the death of Osama bin Laden in May as an excuse to immediately pull troops out of Afghanistan."<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps this was not the real objective.

For the U.S., the real objectives are more global and strategic in nature. Indeed, these are more important than Afghan peace and stability. In fact, an unstable Afghanistan is instrumental to all those. If there were stability in that country, then the U.S. would have no excuse to stay there, and would miss its real objectives to counter the challenges, facing it. These challenges do indeed pose a threat to its global status as the sole superpower in the coming decades. Therefore, the U.S. is here in the region to take timely counter measures against those strategic threats. In fact, these extensions, whether through the Lisbon Summit or the Bonn Conference, till 2024 are for the pursuit of those real objectives.

On one hand, it faces the economic might of a rising China, whereas on the other, there lays a resurgent Russia. The U.S. has practically been in a state of Cold War with either country since almost the entire previous decade. It is countering Chinese economic investments and expansions worldwide, by destabilizing those countries and regions where China has invested in the recent past. Its promised strategic and regional security architecture for East European countries and East Asian countries, is aimed against the threat it perceives from both these countries. Countering the Iranian nuclear programme, possession of regional hydrocarbons, and the denuclearization of Pakistan are other strategic objectives of United States in the region.

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<sup>68</sup> Alex Spillius, "World Leaders 'Will Not Desert Afghanistan'," *Telegraph* (London), December 5, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8936896/Bonn-Conference-World-leaders-will-not-desert-Afghanistan.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Aryn Baker, For the U.S. to Leave Afghanistan, It Has to Be Ready to Stay, *Time World-Global Spin* (Online), September 13, 2011. <http://globalspin.blogs.time.com/2011/09/13/for-the-u-s-to-leave-afghanistan-it-has-to-be-ready-to-stay/>

## Rational Evaluation and Way Forward

### Imprecision in U.S. Policies

There exists an element of ambiguity as to whether the United States wishes to pursue a protracted stay in Afghanistan or has finally decided to leave this troubled land. Since December 2009, this superpower has changed many standpoints about its future strategy in Afghanistan. Beginning in July 2011, some U.S. troops have already left Afghanistan, under direction from the White House. The Lisbon Summit of November 2010, stipulated 2014 as the year for the drawdown of NATO forces in Afghanistan. In the International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn, Germany on December 5, 2011, the NATO allies decided yet another phase of their engagement in Afghanistan from 2015 to 2024, a ten years period, named 'transition to transformation'.

This was a clear indication that this trans-Atlantic alliance would maintain its presence in Afghanistan in some form, even after 2014. This was the reinforcement of the U.S. stance, which had not fully agreed with the other NATO members for a complete drawdown by December 2014 during the Lisbon Summit. While debates on the Bonn Summit were continuing, Leon Panetta indicated that the U.S. could possibly wind up combat operations in Afghanistan by the end of the year 2013.<sup>70</sup> This statement from the head of the Pentagon appears to indicate a new orientation in the future U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan. Parallel developments include U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, which are the principal U.S. adversary and the main opposition group in Afghanistan that has been fighting against U.S. occupation since 2001. This obscurity leaves security and political analysts in conjecture about the true motives of United States and its future line of action in Afghanistan.

Panetta's statement can be viewed in two contexts. First, it can be seen as a pacifying effort to give more space to the political engagement of the Taliban through negotiations. The U.S. view holds that the strategy would bring for it the much needed stability in Afghanistan, substantially reduce its military losses (including personnel casualties) and ultimately pave way for its honourable exit from this marshy Afghan soil. The Taliban's willingness to talk to the U.S. and their decision to soften the fundamental stance, that they would only negotiate with the U.S. once foreign forces leave Afghan soil, might have prompted a change of hearts at the Pentagon.

This is, in fact, a fortification of Obama's long-awaited wishes as well, that had, earlier lacked the Pentagon's endorsement. It was one of the election promises, Obama had made during his Presidential election-2008.

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<sup>70</sup> Afghanistan: Moving Toward a Distant Endgame, *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, Retrieved on February 7, 2012. <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/afghanistan-moving-toward-distant-endgame>

He had pledged to the Americans that he would reduce the country's overseas military engagement and would cut military expenditures to reduce the strain on the budget, thereby paving way for an economic uplift. It is worth mentioning that, on more than one occasion, the Pentagon did not agree to Obama's policy of reduced military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unlike circumstances under the Bush Presidency, the White House and the Pentagon have, on many occasions, been at loggerheads and the former has often had to back track consequently.

Another group of analysts, who view it in the other context, believe that this is yet another move of the incumbent guards of the White House, to garner success for President Obama in the forthcoming elections, in his bid for a second term in office. The strategy is to signal to the American public that Obama's earlier promises either have been fulfilled or are in the process of completion. Classical Realists, however, feel that the U.S. would be unable to sustain itself economically in overseas wars, such as the one in Afghanistan for much longer.

Perhaps, President Obama and his colleagues have been able to sell this reality to the Pentagon and the CIA. The realist's school of thought also feels that it is high time the United States extricated itself from Afghanistan, before it turns into another Vietnam. Else, the economic meltdown, coupled with a military budget of around \$693 billion<sup>71</sup> - a figure that forms 43% of total global military expenditures - may force this superpower to meet the fate of the former Soviet Union. Incidentally, the battleground is the same, the Afghan soil, which has historically been known as the 'graveyard of empires'.

### **Safety of Afghan Masses and Respecting its Traditions**

Military offensives that have resulted in the killing of innocent Afghans, the humiliation of Afghan dead bodies and the desecration of the Holy Quran in an Islamic Republic, cannot go side by side with a reconciliation process. Some of the recent acts of ISAF are really a set back to the reconciliation process. Through these acts, the U.S. is creating difficulties for, and increasing animosity towards, itself. Through these acts, particularly after the desecration of the Holy Quran, there have been wide spread demonstrations throughout Afghanistan, resulting in the killing of dozens of Afghan protestors and US and NATO soldiers too. Before Afghan public sentiments transform into a national resistance movement, the U.S must bring about a change in the attitudes of the troops deployed in that country.

As tangible measures, night raids and military offensive must be stopped forthwith. There must be a restoration of respect for the Afghan masses and their traditions. A mere apology from President Obama and

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<sup>71</sup> **The World's Biggest Defence Budgets** Defence Budgets-Military Ranking, *The Economist* (St.Louis), March 9, 2011.

the ISAF Commander in Afghanistan over the desecration of Holy Quran may not be enough. Those responsible for this act must be publically punished and the conspiracy must be investigated for the satisfaction of Afghan people. Else, it might be concluded that the U.S. is not too desirous of stability in Afghanistan and then negotiations with Taliban are another ploy to create acceptability for its long-term stay there.

### **A Transparent Future Course of Action**

For a stable Afghanistan, the U.S. must bring clarity in its approach and attitude towards the Afghan future. In the first instance, it must have a precise position on whether or not it wishes to the reconciliation process among the various groups in Afghanistan. If the U.S. and its NATO partners want peace and stability in Afghanistan, they must encourage an Afghan-led political reconciliation process, rather than the U.S. itself engaging with a few Taliban, thousands of miles away from Afghan soil. An indigenous Afghan-led political reconciliation process, taking on-board all Afghan factions including Taliban, would ensure durable peace in Afghanistan. In the subsequent process, other stakeholders like the U.S., Pakistan and geographically contiguous regional countries, should be consulted as well. However, the entire process should be Afghan-owned with Afghan people playing the lead role, and with no discriminatory policy towards any group or faction.

### **Adherence to the Drawdown Plan**

Surely, an immediate switching-off the lights and moving out in haste from this war-torn and internally unstable country is not the solution to the Afghan imbroglio. However, the agreed drawdown schedule of December 2014, must be followed strictly by ISAF. Before moving out, as per this agreed timetable, the U.S. needs to ensure all actions necessary for the internal and external stability of Afghanistan. This includes, integration of all Afghan factions into a national government as per their share in power, in accordance with their population ratio. There should be no physical involvement of the U.S. and NATO forces during the decade of 'transition to transformation'. Afghans must be allowed to stand on their own feet, rather than remain dependent on foreign crutches.

### **Curtailing Foreign Involvement**

The post-U.S. era, would enable Afghans to be masters of their own destiny. No other country, thereafter, should be allowed to play politics in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. Until now, India has had a dominant role in Afghanistan, in the garb of reconstruction and other financial assistance schemes. It is quite likely that, in post-U.S. Afghanistan, India would play its old game of fuelling the infighting between the Pashtuns

and the Northern Alliance. All extra-regional countries, including India, should be asked to give way to indigenous Afghan stakeholders. The U.S. has realised that the Indian presence in Afghanistan is a source of tension for Pakistan and gives rise to apprehensions about its security. At the same, Afghan soil must not become a centre of proxy wars between India and Pakistan.

### **Recognition for Pakistani Suffering**

U.S. authorities and Afghans acknowledge that Pakistan has made significant contributions towards Afghanistan. General Petraeus, at times did acknowledge the Pakistani role during the entire campaign. He once said, "Pakistan is in a tough fight. One of its fights, by the way, is to keep our lines of communication open." Indeed, Afghanistan and Pakistan are part of the same society; hence, in the Afghan endgame, Pakistani contributions should not be relegated to accommodate the interests of others. Pakistan's solemn effort is to establish peace and stability followed by economic prosperity in Afghanistan. "Pakistan cannot wish anything for Afghanistan, which it does not wish for itself." Indeed, the roots of the current internal instability in Pakistan can be traced to the prolonged instability in Afghanistan. Once Afghanistan stabilizes, Pakistan would be stabilized automatically.

### **Supremacy of Afghan National Interests**

It is interesting to note that all the players involved in the affairs of Afghanistan claim that they are working to bring peace and stability in the country, nevertheless, they all keep their own interests well above the interests of the Afghan people. Foreign actors on a divergent axis further enhance the complexity of the situation, when the national interests of various countries collide with each other, and that is where Afghan people suffer the most, due to mistrust, broken promises, and ill-coordinated and disjointed efforts. However, what needs to be re-evaluated is whether an increase in the level of troops, followed by military operations, an imposition of democratic norms, alien to the Afghan people (being sharply at odds with the age-old tribal system), and western type economic reforms have brought any change in the lives of the Afghan masses.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, Afghanistan has been a region of great turbulence, where wars and infighting have been the order of the day. This country has faced a mix of foreign invasions and infighting for more than thirty years, in recent history. Why the war-wagers of the West cannot ensure sovereignty of Afghanistan, to let its people exercise their wish and will? Apart from their safety and security, Afghans wish for their traditional and religious values and their customs and culture to be respected.

In summary, conflicts and war are no more the solution. It is only through the reconciliation and reintegration of the Taliban and other Afghan factions into the mainstream, that a sustainable solution to the issue can be found. The ISAF was unable to win over Taliban and other militants, therefore a political solution and not military action is what is required for a durable peace in Afghanistan. On their part, NATO and the U.S. can no longer afford to bring their soldiers back home in coffins. The Taliban insurgency and the infighting suit, neither the Afghan government nor the ISAF. Pakistan, visualizes a peaceful, stable, friendly and economically affluent Afghanistan. It also wishes Afghanistan to be free from foreign interference and with an ethnically cohesive society. The desire for a stable Afghanistan is the collective voice of 180 million people of Pakistan. They can no more see their Afghan brethren in a state of suffering.

