

## US–TALIBAN PEACE DEAL: FUTURE SCENARIOS

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### Abstract

*U.S failure in Afghanistan may have many reasons but most striking is US inability to create a political Afghanistan in parallel with a military Afghanistan. The political strategy in Afghanistan was over-shadowed by military strategy. All the U.S force commanders in Afghanistan looked at Afghanistan not as a political but as a military problem. These generals remained very passionate about the military strategies geared to win the war in Afghanistan. This paper tries to determine why the achievement of the political aims of fighting the war in Afghanistan remained subservient to the achievement of the military aims; and secondly, now that the American focus is on pursuing a political settlement in Afghanistan, how likely is the U.S to achieve this aim? Which are the likely scenarios that can develop in the coming days and how will they affect interests of various actors involved in the Afghan war and its end game?*

**Keywords:** *Taliban, American forces, Afghanistan, Peace Process, Military Strategy*

### Introduction

America's desire for a political settlement that it now seeks in Afghanistan has come too late, and after paying a heavy cost. The whole Afghan conflict has brought us closer to understanding that the real-time war is no longer akin to the Clausewitzian notion of war as 'continuation of policy by other means'<sup>1</sup> but there are other factors too such as economics, culture, personal benefits, and electoral gains that drive and guide the course of war, and also get subsequently affected by war. If the United States had maintained any 'failed assumption chart' of its political and military failures met during 19 years' long war in

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Oxford University Press 1976, 252.

Afghanistan, 'incorrect political estimates' would certainly stand out as a major reason. United States realized the security of Afghan population as its top political and military priority only after General Petraeus took command of the American forces and tried to implement his counter-insurgency model of success there.<sup>2</sup> Prior to that, the US emphasized on counter-terrorism for winning the war in Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>. The US strategy in both Iraq and Afghanistan wars was re-evaluated in 2006 and 2010 respectively<sup>4</sup>. This was done after US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's and General William Casey's (US multi-national force commander in Iraq from 2004 to 2007) doctrine of 'achieving more with little' took the US nowhere in both these countries.

The over-emphasis by the US on the military component of war in Afghanistan may be attributed to the tyranny of 'yes man' and 'can do' culture in the military chain of command.<sup>5</sup> When things are not going your way, the military strategy that is not giving the desired results should not be insisted upon — a lesson that Americans learned in Vietnam. When military, not politics, drives the war, the generals tend to remain emotionally attached with their military strategies despite them going wrong. One of the lessons learnt in Vietnam was that strategic intelligence was quite different from operational excellence and operational intelligence. When Clausewitz called war 'an act of politics' he actually meant policy as not becoming subservient to military strategies — that would guide the war in a direction different from the ends determined by policy.

The military and operational strategies in Afghanistan were continued despite failing to meet the political ends, until re-evaluated late in 2010. For a long time the question at the heart of American war in Afghanistan has been whether the war is winnable and should the US continue to fight it? Stephen M. Walt recently wrote in the Foreign Policy magazine that "all we are debating – whether in talks with Taliban or in op-ed pages back home – is the size and shape of the fig leaf designed to conceal a major strategic failure, after 18 years of war, thousands of lives lost, and hundreds of billions of dollars squandered."<sup>6</sup> Now that the

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<sup>2</sup> Paula Broadwell, *ALL IN : The Education of General David Petraeus*, (Penguin Books, 2012), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obamas War*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Max Boot, "More Small Wars: Counterinsurgency is Here to Stay," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/more-small-wars>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen M Walt, "We lost the War in Afghanistan. Get over it," *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/11/we-lost-the-war-in-afghanistan-get-over-it/>.

Americans are finally answering this question, it seems appropriate to reflect upon the post-war developing scenarios.

### **Pre-dominance of Military Strategy in Afghanistan**

It is pertinent to mention that behind every US effort in Afghanistan a military mind-set was there, focused only on winning the war. Influenced and dominated for the initial five years by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's prejudiced 'light footprint' doctrine of fighting the war with speed, agility and precision;<sup>7</sup> the war effort sought to pursue with vigour only the military aims. Deployment of a heavy massed force – the US Secretary of State Collin Powell's doctrine – was rejected by Rumsfeld on the grounds that "it was an outdated Cold War imperative that was no longer necessary in the age of proxy forces, smart bombs and armed drones that could find and kill the enemy without any troops at all."<sup>8</sup> To the contrary, Gen Stanley McChrystal upon taking over the command of US forces in 2009, recognized that he lacked sufficient troops to root out the Taliban, secure the border with Pakistan, and hold the villages already cleared.<sup>9</sup> US Vice President Joe Biden (2009-2017), on the other hand, considered that the policy of 'Counter-terrorism Plus'<sup>10</sup> focused mainly on hunting down al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as opposed to far more long-term counter-insurgency operations.

General David Petraeus, upon taking the US forces' command in July 2010, changed the Tactical Directive (a document that provides detailed guidelines on the use of force in combat) and instructed the combat troops to "avoid the trap of winning tactical victories- but suffering strategic defeats – by causing civilian casualties or excessive damage and thus alienating the people."<sup>11</sup> The three big ideas that General Petraeus communicated to his under command, US Embassy, NATO Headquarters, and even the Joint Staff at Pentagon were: "one - the military couldn't fight and win this war alone, civilian counterparts, both local (Afghans) and international were critical; two – we are here to win; and three – we are not transferring but transitioning, and we are not pulling out but thinning out'.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, it was after nine years of war in Afghanistan that a General was highlighting not only the importance of winning the war but

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Broadwell, *ALL IN: The Education of General David Petraeus*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> C. Christine Fair, "False choices in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, 11 January, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/11/false-choices-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Paula Broadwell, *ALL IN: The Education of General David Petraeus*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

also of civilian counterparts' role in the success of the Afghan campaign. He actually called this overall approach "Anaconda Strategy".<sup>13</sup> This approach featured seven categories of activity: "kinetic operations, intelligence, detainee operations, information operations, international engagement and non-kinetics by which he meant programs for jobs, education, rule of law and development."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly only one of the seven operations involved predominant military action. General Petraeus tried to implement a strategy that was quite opposite to the advice given by former US Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, who once said, "the [American] military can do enormous things. It can win wars and stabilize conflicts. But the military can't create a political culture or build a society."<sup>15</sup>

The real question that comes to mind is why didn't the US military change course sooner? Why did the senior civil and military leadership continue to implement their failed strategies that gave primacy to winning the war instead of addressing the political component? Eighteen years later, the US is trying for a negotiated political settlement with the Taliban – a way forward that could have been chosen much earlier; instead, in the words of Stephen M Walt, "a long series of military commanders kept promising success instead of telling the commander-in-chief that they have been given an assignment that wasn't necessary and that they could not accomplish at a reasonable cost."<sup>16</sup>

## **The Afghan Quagmire: A Political Problem**

How politics in the US is now re-asserting more than the military component can be gauged through two statements of US President Donald Trump: "I know more about offense and defence than they will ever understand, believe me"<sup>17</sup> and, "I know more about ISIS than the general's do. Believe me".<sup>18</sup> Generals have always asked for leverage and flexibility for the management and fighting of wars. There have been US Presidents who have been accused of micromanaging the wars -- President Johnson

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,137.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew J Basevitch, "Leave it to the Generals, A Non-Strategy for Afghanistan," *The New Republic*, November 8, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/145418/leave-generals>.

<sup>16</sup> Walt, "We lost the War in Afghanistan. Get Over it."

<sup>17</sup> Aaron Blake, "19 Things Donald Trump Knows Better than Anyone Else, According to Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, 4 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/04/>

<sup>18</sup> White House, "Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," October 27, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-death-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi/>

and President Obama were accused of doing the same. In fact, according to one perspective, “Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates compared Obama to President Lyndon B. Johnson – an unrivalled military meddler. He believed that like Johnson, Obama had intruded into military matters that were beyond his purview, with results that were far from helpful.”<sup>19</sup> The balance between the US civil-military authorities, when it comes to Afghanistan, has remained tilted in favour of the generals for a very long time and as a result, the whole idea of a political solution guiding the conduct of war was shelved and remained on the back burner. The current US Presidential assertiveness is not new and one of the many other examples is of President Abraham Lincoln and his general George McClellan, who was entrusted with the task of fighting the civil war. According to one point of view, when General McClellan showed hesitance on committing his army to the battle, President Lincoln famously asked him if he could borrow it for a while, indicating the greater Presidential assertiveness that was to come.<sup>20</sup> The dismissal of John R. Bolton as his National Security Advisor, who was considered as a foreign policy hawk (also true in Afghanistan’s case), also vividly demonstrates President Trump’s preference for a political settlement over a military one.<sup>21</sup> In the past, the US was fortunate to be served by soldier-statesmen like George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower; however, the recent set of US generals (including some dismissed ones) such as General James N. Mattis (US Defense Secretary from 2017-18), General John Francis Kelly (White House Chief of Staff from 2017-2019), General Joseph Francis Dunford (Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff from 2015-2019) and General H. McMaster (National Security Advisor from 2017-2018) could best be termed as ‘intellectual soldiers’, but none of them can be compared to General Marshall or Eisenhower for their statesmanship. Some of these generals subscribed to President George W. Bush’s post -September 11 dream of “transforming the Islamic world by killing the terrorists in sufficient numbers ... so the jihadist threat will eventually subside”;<sup>22</sup> this was the very reason why the US strategy in Afghanistan was led predominantly by its military component while the political component lagged behind.

Before initiating the Doha Peace Process in Qatar with the Taliban, the Trump Administration came up with a new strategy- R4+S (regionalize, realign, reinforce, reconcile and sustain)- to end the war, which was presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee by U.S Secretary of

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<sup>19</sup> Basevinch, “Leave it to the Generals, A Non-Strategy for Afghanistan.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Baker, “Trump Ousts John Bolton as National Security Advisor,” *The New York Times*, 10 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/us/politics/john-bolton-national-security-adviser-trump.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Basevinch, “Leave it to the Generals, A Non-Strategy for Afghanistan.”

Defense Jim Mattis in 2017.<sup>23</sup> Two years down the line, the strategy failed to bring about any significant change in the Afghan conflict. Regionalizing meant taking a holistic and comprehensive view and taking the regional stake-holders of the conflict on board. Realigning meant adding more advisors who could provide the support in advising and training. Reinforcing meant boosting Afghan defence. The dispatch of 3000 additional US troops to Afghanistan in 2017 was in line with supporting this component of the strategy. Mattis explained the fourth R 'reconcile' as "convincing our foes that the coalition is committed to a conditions-based outcome, we intend to drive fence-sitters and those who will see that we're not quitting this fight to reconcile with the Afghan national government."<sup>24</sup> Lastly, sustaining meant that the US was likely to stay in Afghanistan for the near future. The US 'R4+S' Afghan strategy was a shade away from pure military strategy guiding the Afghan war, and the subsequent year it was put into practice as US talks with Taliban began via the Doha Peace Process.

### **The Peace Process and Prospects for a US-Taliban Deal**

The Taliban are brutal totalitarians and the Americans have now learnt that the kind of success they enjoyed in Iraq cannot be replicated in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the Americans "had more forces, a smaller population to secure and an easy terrain than [they] faced in Afghanistan.... Afghanistan [is] also a rural insurgency as compared to the urban insurgency in Iraq."<sup>25</sup> Americans were, to an extent, able to reshape the security environment in Iraq, but given that there are 40200 villages<sup>26</sup> in Afghanistan, with the majority under Taliban's control, the US has could not reshape the security environment to its advantage. General Petraeus, while describing the on-ground situation, stated that "conditions in the countryside had become so dangerous that aid workers could safely travel in only 30 per cent of Afghanistan's 368 Districts."<sup>27</sup>

Another important reason for unabated violence in Afghanistan has been the preference of the current American administration to keep the troops pull out 'condition based' instead of 'time based'. When the pull out conditions were time based "it was a signal to the Afghan leaders that

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<sup>23</sup> Michael R Gordon, "Trump gives Mattis the Authority to Send more Troops to Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 13 June, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/asia/mattis-afghanistan-military.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Mehta, "The Pentagon has a New Acronym for Afghanistan. Can it Win the War?" *Defense News*, 3 October, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/10/03/the-pentagon-has-a-new-acronym-for-afghanistan-can-it-win-the-war/>

<sup>25</sup> Broadwell, *ALL IN The Education of General David Petraeus*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Bob Woodward, *Obama's War*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010), 166.

<sup>27</sup> Broadwell, *ALL IN: The Education of General David Petraeus*, 19.

they could take more and more responsibility for their country's security which was important for success of the mission in Afghanistan."<sup>28</sup> Now that the pull out is condition based, many actors in the Afghan war can act as spoilers to ensure that the conditions on ground are not only unfavourable for the troop pull-out but also detrimental for successful peace talks. Now the US goal in Afghanistan is to reshape the security environment by cutting up a political deal with the Taliban to end violence. History shows dreadful scenarios regarding the withdrawal of occupational forces from Afghanistan in the past. The withdrawing Soviet army saw many casualties, but it is the British withdrawal and its consequences that are more referred to in history: "In 1842, Afghan resistance forced the British military to make an ill-fated retreat from Kabul to its garrison in the city of Jalalabad, a little more than hundred miles away. Some 16000 British soldiers and camp followers began the trek. Only one man made it to safety."<sup>29</sup>

It is in this historical context that smooth and agreed withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is essential, possible only through a peace agreement with the Taliban. US military occupation has so far been unsuccessful to meet its twin goals of democratizing Afghanistan, and bringing peace and stability there. What it has been able to achieve is preventing Afghanistan from being a country that could initiate attacks akin to 9/11. Interestingly, US Senator Lindsey Graham raised this point with President Donald Trump asking him, "Do you want on your resume that you allowed Afghanistan to go back into the darkness and the second 9/11 came from the very place the first 9/11 did?"<sup>30</sup> This concern has made Americans doubtful about their absolute withdrawal from Afghanistan. The possible developing political scenarios in Afghanistan are being highlighted in contemporary debates by considering both extremes, i.e. a favourable end to the negotiations between United States and Taliban, or failure of the peace talks.<sup>31</sup> Following is an analysis of the possible outcomes of the ongoing negotiation process and the repercussions that each different projection might follow.

## **Possible Future Scenarios and their Implications**

### ***Scenario 1: Formalization of Taliban's political role as a result of successful peace process***

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown – A Memoir*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 341.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ashley Jackson, "There will be no Peace for Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, 4 July, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/04/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-2/>

Given the current political, social and security environment in Afghanistan this is the least likely future political scenario to take shape. Both the US and Afghan National Security Advisors have been against the possibility of any political rapprochement with the Taliban. John Bolton, the National Security Advisor (NSA) of United States and a leading voice against such a deal, has been dismissed and Hamadullah Mohib, the NSA of Afghanistan, has also been lashing out against the peace process.<sup>32</sup> The Afghan government is also in a tight political spot; it opposes unconditional negotiations with the Taliban and requires that a ceasefire must last a whole month if the government is to engage in the peace process.<sup>33</sup> The Afghan government doubts that the Taliban have a total control over all their factions and wants the latter to demonstrate this by executing a month long ceasefire.

The Taliban on the other hand rarely respond to the Afghan government as they consider it a puppet government. In case of cessation of hostilities, the Taliban have a firm stand claiming that they will not indulge in an intra-Afghan dialogue unless the peace deal is finalized with the Americans. The American President and his security establishment also do not seem to be on the same page as far as formalizing and giving Taliban a political role in the peace agreement is concerned. The President has been lashing out at his generals, blaming their recommendations for putting the US in this situation.<sup>34</sup> He once stated: "These military guys, they don't get business. They know how to be soldiers and they know how to fight. They don't understand how much is it costing."<sup>35</sup> The views of advisors in President Trump's inner circle are also divergent regarding the peace talks and political future of Afghanistan. In a National Security Council meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2017, General Joseph Keith Kellogg (the current National Security Advisor) advocated pulling out of Afghanistan, the CIA Director Pompeo argued for expanding the CIA paramilitary role instead of sending additional troops, while McMaster argued for staying the course'.<sup>36</sup>

The results of the current Presidential elections in Afghanistan have also been withheld for the moment, and the likelihood of these

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal and Michael Crowley, "How Trump's Plan to Secretly Meet with the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-camp-david-taliban.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Government Links Peace Talks with Taliban to One-Month Cease-Fire," VOA, 29 October, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/afghan-government-links-peace-talks-taliban-one-month-cease-fire>.

<sup>34</sup> Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, 258.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

elections being termed as fraudulent and controversial by the losing candidate grows with every passing day. With political instability looming in Afghanistan, the likelihood of peace talks making any headway seems unlikely and thus the idea of giving Taliban a political role in exchange for a commitment to non-violence will have to wait. It is more likely that President Trump might contest next year's elections promising American people the bringing back of troops in his second term. The President may or may not decrease the current American troop level of 14000 on Afghan soil.

***Scenario 2: Peace Process fails and the United States decides to pull out its troops maintaining only a small military and civil presence in Afghanistan***

There are two important factors that stand out in favour of the development of this political scenario. One, President Trump's intense desire and political commitment to the American people that he would bring US troops back. Two, Americans already have the experience of maintaining a covert army in Afghanistan and they can take up a support role to the over 3,50000 Afghan security forces including the ANA (Afghan National Army). According to one perspective, "the announcement by Mr. Khalilzad that after nine rounds of talks with Taliban, the peace agreement document had been finalized in principle was only a signature accomplishment for President Trump to help him win re-election next year."<sup>37</sup> President Ghani's preference for covert CIA forces in Afghanistan can be assessed from US Senator Graham's remark to President Trump: "Ashraf Ghani, the President of Afghanistan would allow him to have as many counter-terrorism troops as he could want, plus CIA bases wherever he wanted. It was the best listening post and platform to attack international terrorism in the world."<sup>38</sup>

Bob Woodward explains this phenomenon by writing that "For years the CIA had run a 3000-men top secret covert army in Afghanistan. The CTPT, short for Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams, were Afghan paid, trained and controlled by the CIA. They killed or captured Afghan insurgents and often went to Tribal Areas to eliminate them. Could this CIA paramilitary force be expanded?"<sup>39</sup> This scenario would never materialize if the Taliban have a political role in Afghanistan because they wouldn't allow the presence of US covert military presence in their country.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal and Michael Crowley, "How Trump's Plan to Secretly Meet With the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart."

<sup>38</sup> Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, 126.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

***Scenario 3: Peace process fails and the United States decides to stay in Afghanistan by further reinforcing its military presence***

The unfolding of this scenario would at best mean the fulfilment of the current Afghan government's desire. But it is least likely to take shape because it will be very difficult for President Trump to sell this to his people. US Afghan policy has been efficient but not effective and the difference between the two is explained by General Stanley McChrystal who writes, "Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things."<sup>40</sup> After 18 years of war in Afghanistan and its inability to do the right things there, the United States and its public has no appetite for more body bags and hence reinforcement of its existing military presence doesn't seem to be a likely and 'popular with the American people' option.

***Scenario 4: Taliban acknowledge the US role in Afghan nation building and agree that Afghanistan become a quasi US client state to jump-start political, social and economic development through sustained US economic and military aid***

Without the shadow of a doubt, the likelihood of this scenario developing should be most popular with the people of Afghanistan, specially the liberal lot. The country, having been knocked out of the floor of self-sustaining economies in the world and devastated by decades of civil war, deserves all out assistance not only from the most powerful country in the world but also from the entire world community. The likelihood of this scenario unfolding is less, but not considering this option would be a great injustice to the people of Afghanistan and the sufferings they have endured at the hands of Americans for a long time. Also, it is supported by historical evidence as stated by Daniel Marston that, "It is critical to remember that today's so called enemy is likely to be part of tomorrow's solution. This has always been true, throughout the history of counterinsurgency."<sup>41</sup>

**The Way Forward: Sustaining Peace in Afghanistan**

To mitigate any threat emanating from Afghanistan and to create a stable, democratic, self-reliant and able Afghanistan, the world needs to learn from the mistakes it has committed in the past. It is necessary to view the mission and the objectives of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in Afghanistan and carry out an analysis on whether these objectives were achieved and if not why? ISAF mission, as stated on its website, aims to support the Afghan government, for which "it conducts operations in

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<sup>40</sup> General Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams, New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, (UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2015), 81.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Marston, *Counter Insurgency in Modern Warfare*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 1.

Afghanistan to reduce the capability and the will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of ANSF, and facilitate improvement in governance and socio-economic development in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population”<sup>42</sup>. Similarly, NATO’s mission in Afghanistan has centred on creating conditions which would assist the government of Afghanistan to exercise its influence and authority throughout the country and also help in development of ANSF.<sup>43</sup>

Henry Kissinger once stated that “America struggles to define the relationship between its power and its principles”<sup>44</sup> and this paper emphasized that military power remained in lead, focusing on the attainment of military goals, rather than the use of political power for attaining a political end – Peace in Afghanistan. The 18-year long war that the US fought in Afghanistan was absolutely unnecessary and the US military-political disconnect learnt no lessons from the past. In General H. McMaster’s 1997 book *Dereliction of Duty*, he called the Joint Chiefs who oversaw the Vietnam War “five silent men” who failed to establish the essential personal rapport with civilian leaders so they could speak their minds.”<sup>45</sup> In 18 years, the US generals could not deliver ‘suitable conditions on ground’ for determining a political end and the US Presidents also relied on their generals to execute a political strategy which in the words of Emile Simpson necessitated, “the use of armed forces that seek to establish military conditions for a political solution as against the use of armed forces that directly seeks military as opposed to political outcomes.”<sup>46</sup>

The US must do everything possible to break the deadlock in Afghan peace process. It has to find a way to ensure that the US congress continues to pay the multi-billion dollar annual bills for maintaining and sustaining peace in Afghanistan. It must adopt a predominantly political approach. According to a source, the “US has been spending \$100 billion annually to fight this war which will be nothing compared to \$4 to \$6 billion annual support that it may extend to Afghanistan.”<sup>47</sup> It must make the right political judgement in deciding when to hand over Afghanistan to

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<sup>42</sup> International Security and Assistance Force website (ISAF): <http://www.isaf.nato.int/mission.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Rick Brennan, “Withdrawal Symptoms,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 2014, 35. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/withdrawal-symptoms>.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (Penguin Books, 2014), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground up: Twenty First Century Combat as Politics*, (United Kingdom: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 2012), 1.

<sup>47</sup> “Afghanistan: Has the War Cost America \$500 Billion?” *BBC News*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821>.

the Afghan government. If the US won't support the Afghan government, the shrinking US troop levels and US funding may not enable the Afghan security forces to hold ground. How would post-withdrawal Afghanistan fight the war is aptly described in the words of Stephen Biddle: "The war will become a contest of stamina between Congress and the Taliban."<sup>48</sup> If the US spends \$50 billion annually on its intelligence<sup>49</sup> it can surely dedicate a sustained financial support to the Afghan government to manage the country until it attains sovereignty and self-reliance.

## **Conclusion**

Political stabilization and not the defeat of Taliban should have been the strategic priority of the US establishment. Critics would say that how could political stability be ensured if there was no military defeat of Taliban. In the 18 years of Afghan war, defeat of Taliban as a strategic priority became more important with every passing year relative to the stabilization of the Afghan State. Even the military strategies utilized to defeat Taliban remained highly questionable. It took years for the US establishment to realize what General Stanley McChrystal suggested that "It takes a network to defeat a network." Finding a political solution to the Afghan problem was not a priority and in the words of Michael Mullen, former US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "the Afghan War remained under-resourced for many years."<sup>50</sup> The US must plan its future strategy according to the audience and their interpretation. Its military actions for a very long time have been politically interpreted, thus not winning the approval of domestic or international audiences. The US must realize that it is more important to control the political space in Afghanistan rather than the physical space that it has been trying to do with troop surges in the past. Unfortunately for the US, to a very large extent, the social, political and economic dynamics in Afghanistan that preceded and caused the war continue to operate even after a drop in the intensity of the war. The only goal that the US has been able to achieve is the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; all other objectives have been partially achieved. The Taliban are brutal but the US has been no less brutal in finding a military solution to a political problem. It is appreciable that President Trump, contrary to his address at Fort Myer wherein he announced augmenting military component with more resources and giving more freedom of action to the commanders on ground for winning the Afghan War, realized the value of ending a stalemated war through negotiated settlement. For the sake of bringing stability in Afghanistan it is hoped that after the success of US-

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<sup>48</sup> Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown – A memoir*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Woodward, *Obamas War*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> Q&A: US Admiral Michael Mullen, *Aljazeera*, July 23, 2009, <https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2009/07/200972253325298956.html>.

Taliban peace dialogue, the US politics would take a lead and play a role more significant than the US military for sustaining peace in Afghanistan.

