THE DRAWDOWN OF US AND NATO FORCES FROM AFGHANISTAN IN 2014 – IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The speedily sprouting security scene in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the region has fashioned a set of challenges vis-a-vis opportunities for regional and extra-regional countries, to fine-tune their strategic priorities in accordance with the altering security architecture. For Pakistan, to survive peacefully in the present imbroglio of evolving security and political landscape, it has become incumbent to make an impact of its genuine importance in the region to secure its short and long-term interests in Afghanistan. Being one of the key players in the post drawdown of NATO forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan is facing multi-faceted internal as well external challenges on one hand. It demands Pakistan’s urgency to deal with the internal worsening law and order situation on the other; it has to respond to the evolving complex Afghan end game. Furthermore, Pakistan has to re-visit its security, political and economic priorities in the regional and international context, to convert and reduce the challenges into fruitful opportunities.

Introduction

The impending drawdown of the US and NATO forces is likely to complete by the end of 2014. It has sparked discussions about the impact of this drawdown on the security situation in Afghanistan and the region. US and NATO forces will switch over their role from combat to “train, advice and assist.” It will shift the onus on the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take the leading role in maintaining law and order of the country and to undertake, effective counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency operations and standalone against the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The Afghan National Army (ANA) can play a constructive role in the
country’s transition after 2014. The foreign forces drawdown has shifted the international attention towards reconciliation, negotiations and finding a viable political solution of Afghan stalemate.

The strategic milieu of Afghanistan is intricate, and has many dimensions. The future of Afghanistan does have the equation of four key players: the Afghan government, Taliban and other insurgent groups, US and Pakistan. It does not necessarily mean that the other regional and extra-regional actors are less important or they do not have stakes in the Afghan end game.

**Importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan**

Pakistan and Afghanistan are together entertaining approximately 43 million ethnic Pashtuns and being the immediate neighbour; Pakistan has seriously become a victim of these the developments in Afghanistan. It is not the first time that Pakistan is facing volatile security situation for supporting Afghanistan. In this backdrop, Pakistan has faced the consequences of the Afghan-Soviet War, which started in 1979 and ended in 1990. Since 1979, Pakistan has paid the price of being the immediate neighbour of Afghanistan. This cost is not limited to sacrifices of Pakistani people and security personnel; rather it also encompasses the political, economic and social costs with worst psychological impacts.

After 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a frontline state in the war against terrorism and paid a huge price for that role. According to a recent report, Pakistan has lost 51000 lives, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, including 4000 military casualties. On economic front, Pakistan has suffered $90 billion losses. The cost of Pakistan’s participation in ‘war on terror’, both human as well as material terms, has been heavier than any member of the foreign coalition fighting inside Afghanistan. In return, Pakistan has received $15 billion from United States, which included the provision and maintenance of essential military equipment and initially a meager amount as compensation. Additionally, Pakistan has
faced huge burden of ‘Afghan Refugees’ since the Afghan-Soviet War. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), Pakistan hosts over 1.6 million registered Afghans, the largest refugee population in the world, staying for the most protracted period in a single country.\textsuperscript{12} In addition to this, approximately one million undocumented Afghans are also living in Pakistan. The continuous stay of the Afghan refugees, combined with the growing security challenge posed by the illegal immigrants in Pakistan, has affected the strategic and socio-economic equilibrium of Pakistani society. It has injected an element of extremism and militancy in otherwise pluralistic society of Pakistan.

The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 has given birth to tsunami of violence across the region; consequently, Pakistan is facing the aftershocks of eruption of the worst kind of terrorism in the modern history. It is generally believed that Pakistan’s strategy of “cooperation” with the United States is one of the primary causes of contemporary terrorism directed at Islamabad.\textsuperscript{13} The terrorists and insurgent groups killed innocent civilians and security personnel by exploding bombs, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings.

After the establishment of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007, the terrorists used sophisticated techniques against the law enforcements agencies to demoralize and inflict unaffordable damage to them. They have attacked the Mehran Base, key strategic installation at Kamra Airbase, and the General Headquarters (GHQ).\textsuperscript{14}

In short, Pakistan being the neighbour of Afghanistan and located at an important geo-strategic position has legitimate security, political and economic interests in Afghanistan’s end-game. As it is evident from history the Pakistan can play a key role in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, Pakistan has been working closely with the international community and Afghanistan at all levels to support Afghan reconciliation process. Pakistan strongly looks forward for the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has come to the conclusion
that peace and stability of Pakistan lies in the peace and stability of Afghanistan and vice versa.

The role of regional countries, importantly Pakistan is critical in reaching a sustainable peaceful settlement of Afghanistan conflict. Recently, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif said, “Pakistan would support Afghan led, Afghan owned”, reconciliation process initiated by the Afghan High Peace Council, established in 2011. In recent months, Pakistan has played an essential role in bringing the reluctant Taliban leadership to negotiation table. According to Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesperson, Mr. Aizaz Ahmed, “we (Pakistan) are convinced that an intra-Afghan dialogue and Afghan-owned peace process is the way forward to achieve peace in Afghanistan.”

**Internal and External Challenges**

There are a number of internal and external factors that influenced and impeded the ability of Pakistan to play a constructive role in shaping the Afghanistan end-game for the regional stability. Pakistan is faced with internal challenges in the shape of violent extremism, growing sectarianism, militant separatism, foreign fighters, extra-state actors, failing economy and natural disasters. Furthermore, the country is facing the worst kind of onslaught of terrorism and violence in the contemporary history. It has created a rift in the society, resultantly; it has been divided into two blocs: the right wing or the conservatives and the liberals or moderates. The two different and opposing views created confusion among the Pakistani society and generated an unending debate regarding the future course of action of Pakistani state vis-à-vis tackling the growing terrorism in the country. The conservatives are of the view that it is ‘US led war’ and they should get out of it as soon as possible. Also, they support the idea of reconciliation with the Taliban. On the other hand, the liberals are of the view that although, this was not their war, but they have been suffering the onslaught of terrorism since 2001, terrorists are killing the innocent civilians and the security personnel,
therefore, the government is not obliged to talk to them, rather crush the militant with a full-scale military force.

The grave internal security challenges remain unaddressed, as being portrayed by the prevailing security situation of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan mainly, and the rest of the country as a whole. Poor coordination among the security agencies and lesser attention to the capacity building measures of law enforcement agencies are adding to the problems. Pakistan, as a state, is facing tremendous and diverse challenges and the country has yet to formulate a comprehensive and wide-ranging counter-terrorism and national security policy.

The assault of TTP against Pakistan’s law enforcement agencies and civilians has increased at a dangerous level. Currently, TTP is based at Kunar, Afghanistan. Maulana Fazlullah, the leader of TTP is residing inside Afghanistan along with approximately 700 militants. On many occasions, Pakistan has raised this issue with the Afghan officials to crackdown on TTP and its affiliates, but Afghan officials particularly province government did not show any interest in this regard. Moreover, Pakistan demanded the custody of the Taliban leader, as he has blood of many innocent Pakistanis on his hands. However, the provincial Afghan government refused to hand over senior TTP leader Maulvi Faqir Mohammad to Pakistan.

In short, the ongoing ‘War on Terror’ in Afghanistan has grave geo-strategic consequences for Pakistan. Pakistan has paid huge cost in form of militant insurgency in FATA, uprising in Swat, religious extremism, rampant rise of domestic terrorism, the backlash of US drone strikes and deep rift in the society regarding the ‘War on Terror’ and its aims and objectives.

In the wake of US and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdown from Afghanistan, the uncertainty among the Pakistan’s political and military leadership is increasing due to evolving Afghan complex end-game, intense
rivalry between the regional players and competing strategic interests in the region. Pakistan has to re-position its security, political and economic priorities in the regional context. Pakistan, being the neighbour of Afghanistan, has certain legitimate security interests and stakes in the ‘deep game’, which has been played on its western borders. Pakistan and US faced the lowest point in their relations in 2011, as Washington and Islamabad’s principles and strategies differed. Since 2001, there had been several issues i.e. killing of Osama bin Laden (OBL), Salala attack, Raymond Davis issue, replacement of Military Liaison Officers, use of NGOs for malicious reconnaissance, highlighted the differences between both the countries. As a result, Pakistan’s relations with US have gone mired in deep mistrust that left Pakistan on the margins, even after making massive sacrifices in the ‘War on Terror’.20

Pakistan-Afghan Troubled Ties

Despite Pakistan’s numerous sacrifices, it has failed to win the support and sympathy of the Afghan political elite. Islamabad and Kabul never had good relations at the top level. Afghanistan’s Ex President Hamid Karzai and his affiliates used to blame Pakistan for creating trouble inside Afghanistan and throw all responsibility on Pakistan. They saw Pakistan as a part of problem rather than solution.

In addition to this, there are other issues, which are major irritants and serve as a cause of disagreement between the two neighbouring states, such as; unresolved issue of Durand line; influx of Afghan refugees and their continued presence in Pakistan for last three and half decades; border management issues; drug trafficking; and cross border movement of the terrorists and saboteurs.

The issue of Durand Line has been a source of conflict between the two neighbours since 1947. Afghanistan is of the view that the treaty of Durand Line was signed in 1893 between the British India and Afghanistan, and it is no more valid after the termination of British rule.21 Afghanistan also
claimed with little validity that the border treaty was inked by a state that no longer existed. On the other, Pakistan considers the Durand line, as an established international border and a settled issue.\textsuperscript{22}

All the other issues, such as influx of refugees, drug trafficking and cross border infiltration are the byproducts of unresolved border issue, as it does not allow better border management. The difference between the two sides has deepened due to ongoing wave of instability in Afghanistan, weak state structure and continued mistrust between the two parties. However, both the neighbouring countries have great prospects to co-operate not only in the fields of security, trade and economy but also health and education.

**Indian Footprints in Afghanistan: A Cause of Worry for Pakistan**

The growing Indian influence in Afghanistan was supported by US and Karzai governments. It is evident from the Indian pledged amount of $2 billion in Afghanistan against Pakistan's contribution of less than $350 million.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, India has become Afghanistan's leading regional development partner and its fifth largest donor. This has added to Pakistan's mistrust for the Indian policy objectives in Afghanistan. The primary objective of India’s Afghan policy is to counter Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan, to weaken Pakistan’s influence over Taliban groups, uninterrupted access to Central Asian Republics’, natural resources and lastly, to encircle Pakistan.\textsuperscript{24} Pakistan’s uneasy relationship with Afghanistan and US created space for India to expand its footprints inside Afghan territory and to have a greater say in the evolving end game. An un-abating US and Afghanistan blame game, that Pakistan is responsible for deteriorating security situation inside Afghanistan, forces Pakistan to re-visit its policy vis-a-vis Afghanistan, US and India.

This has led to a more cautious approach by Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan. On the other hand, India is busy in expanding its range of diplomatic activities i.e. opening up of two
consulates. Furthermore, India is investing in large scale development projects such as Zaranj-Dileram Highway, Hydro-Electric Dam in Herat and huge investment in developing 1.8 Hjigak Iron ore mines in Bamiyan Province. Additionally, Indian Agency for Partnership in Development (IAPD) will take the lead from Ministry of External Affairs to expand development activities in Pashtun areas, bordering Pakistan.

The expansion of Indian footprints along the Pakistani border is a serious cause of worry for Pakistan. It has serious consequences for the domestic peace and stability in the country. Islamabad is of the view that there is a clandestine link between the increasing Indian presence in Afghanistan and the rampant rise of TTP terrorism activities inside Pakistan. India is also aiding and fueling insurgency in Balochistan by giving financial and logistic support to Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants.

**Short and Long Term Objectives of Pakistan in Afghanistan**

The fate of Pakistan and Afghanistan is intertwined due to geographic proximity, strong religious bonds, shared culture and historic connections. In the post 2014 Afghanistan, Pakistan has a significant role to play for peace process and the political settlement. Pakistan has opted to play a part of facilitator for negotiations among Taliban, US and Afghanistan, in order to move towards durable peace in the region.

The short-term interests can be; peaceful and smooth drawdown of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan; sustainable peace in Afghanistan; effective border management; politically stable government in Kabul; destruction and dismantlement of remaining Al-Qaida members from Afghanistan; and ensuring that TTP, BLA and other insurgent groups do not use Afghan territory, as a launching pad of terrorism and anti-state activities against Pakistan.
Long-term interests can be; peace and stability in Afghanistan; friendly government in Kabul; immediate departure of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan; bolstering security, economic and trade relations with Afghanistan and Central Asia; and making sure that India does not use its presence in Afghanistan, to pursue an anti-Pakistan policy.

In recent months, there is a significant realization in Islamabad that Pakistan’s domestic peace and stability is vital for the national security. Therefore, it is in Pakistan's interests to eliminate terrorist networks and carry out operations against them. This realization had a major impact on Pakistan’s Afghan policy. Fundamentally, four drivers have shaped Pakistani decision-makers’ strategic vision of Afghanistan which include; the rampant rise of violence, terrorism and worsening security situation in the country; increasing Indian presence inside Afghan territory and Pakistan being pushed to margins; emerging political consensus in Islamabad that war through proxies has hurt Pakistan badly; and public pressure on the policy-makers to disassociate from GWOT.

The recent calculated shift in Pakistan’s policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, manifests that Pakistan neither wants chaos, civil war in Afghanistan nor the complete Taliban’s rule, both of which, it believes, would create domestic instability and militancy, in FATA and other parts of the country, having negative impacts on the state of Pakistan. Therefore, stable, united and progressive Afghanistan is in the best interest of Pakistan.

**Afghanistan a Puzzle: Opportunities for Pakistan**

In the backdrop of US and NATO forces drawdown from Afghanistan, key regional players are competing to secure their interests in Afghanistan. Countries such as Pakistan, India and Iran are attempting to align supporters to enhance their bargaining positions inside Afghanistan, allowing them to gain political and economic advantages after US and ISAF drawdown, in 2014. The Afghan end-game is offering a golden
opportunity to Pakistani decision makers to rethink and head towards a fresh beginning with Afghanistan by forgetting the bitter memories of the past. The fresh start should be based upon the notion of mutual respect, non-interference and mutual prosperity.

Pakistan must facilitate US and NATO drawdown from Afghanistan. The steady reduction of foreign troops will undermine the narrative that fuels insurgency in Afghanistan. Consequently, it will end the perpetual agony of the Afghan people, after thirty years of continuous war. This is the best thing which Pakistan could do for Afghanistan and it should seize this historic opportunity, which is knocking at its door. It is also an appropriate time for Pakistan to mend its ties with the Northern Alliance and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. This will give an extra edge to Pakistan in the post 2014 scenario. In this backdrop, Pakistan’s political and military leadership need to cautiously evaluate the changing notions of security in the region and craft a policy which could serve Pakistan’s national interests as well as respond to the aspirations of the Afghan people and international community.

Chaos, instability or civil war in Afghanistan would have serious consequences upon the domestic stability of Pakistan. The spillover effect will be disastrous for neighbouring and regional countries, as it has the potential to travel and affect the international peace and stability. Wars always end with reconciliation and dialogue between the warring parties. Therefore, the initiative taken by the Afghan High Peace Council and reconciliation process led by the Afghan government, not the Americans, can find a lasting solution to the country’s violence, lawlessness and corruption. Pakistan must support this initiative and play its due role in this regard.

Following the departure of US troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan is likely to re-visit its policies towards Afghanistan to deal with the challenges posed by US drawdown. There is no doubt that the troops drawdown from Afghanistan would cause serious consequences and threats for Islamabad, as
Pakistan is already facing grave issues regarding Afghanistan’s situation after NATO forces pull out. If the Afghan conflict is resolved through negotiations, this could be in the favour of long-term interest of Pakistan, as it strongly believes that stability and peace in Afghanistan is guarantee to Pakistan’s peace and stability. Being an immediate neighbour, Pakistan cannot have peace until Afghanistan is stable and powerful. The policy makers in Pakistan strongly believe that increased ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan can lead to deal with the menace of terrorism more effectively. Pakistan’s efforts to facilitate peace process would help to represent itself a responsible state in the eyes of international community, and also it would help to re-construct its repute regarding the peaceful settlement of Afghanistan.

**Security Vacuum created by the US Drawdown**

After US drawdown from Afghanistan, there are mixed reactions of Afghan government and Afghan people about the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of NATO. There are legitimate questions: what will be the nature of security vacuum? Who will fill this gap? And what will be the terms of engagement in Afghanistan? Afghan people have concerns that the Taliban would come back, take over and lead Afghanistan. Haji Rokai, a tribal elder said, “as soon as these forces leave this province not only Wardak, but even some parts of Kabul, will be occupied by Taliban and Kabul security will be in danger.”

There are concerns that the US troops’ drawdown would strengthen the insurgents after the arrival of spring, which traditionally considers the start of Afghanistan’s fighting season. Post 2014 scenario is likely to see increase in violence and insurgent’ attacks, launched by various groups such as Taliban, the Al-Qaeda linked Haqqani Network and Hizb-i-Islami etc. Some people are doubtful that US Special Forces are expected to play a vital role after NATO combat troops drawdown by the end of 2014 and Afghan government decision could intricate negotiations between the United States and Afghanistan over the scope of US operations after the pull-out. According to local communities and media sources, militants have already started ambushes, shooting
attacks and suicide bombings on American and Afghan forces there in Wardak. The doubts are also expressed about the training and capacity of Afghan National Army (ANA) both by the Afghan people and regional countries, as they are already at a deplorable condition, because they lack training and equipment and could become less effective, when the Americans are set to leave.

Is Afghan National Security Forces Ready to Take Lead?

The government of Afghanistan has appreciated the decision of US troops’ withdrawal and stated that the Afghan forces are ready to take responsibility for the country’s security. On the other hand, Afghan government has signed a legal framework with the US for next 10 years regarding limited presence of US troops, and its nine military bases, post 2014. According to this agreement, US would cooperate and facilitate socio-economic development and would support to reconstruct its security and institutions.

Afghan people are not happy on the decision of US troops’ drawdown and have concerns that this would destabilize the country, which is suffering from war for the last 35 years. They also fear that the nearly 3, 52,000 Afghan army and police forces are not ready to take the lead for security.

Peaceful Settlement of Afghanistan’s Conflict: Possible Endgame

As United States and NATO forces plan for limited withdrawal, the security situation in Afghanistan is still a major concern for regional and international actors. Till now many efforts have been made to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan, but all have failed due to lack of proper planning, changing policies and reliance on military power. If US and other players have emphasized upon negotiations the circumstances would be much different, as compared to the current situation. Various rounds of talks by US and Afghanistan as well as Pakistan conducted with Taliban, but
none of these efforts could result into concrete outcomes. The issue of how to initiate a long-lasting peace process is a troublesome for Washington, Islamabad and Kabul, and for other regional and international actors, especially, Afghan people for whom the process should be clear in direction and transparent.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Pakistan is facing grave internal and external challenges to its national security. Consequently, factors, such as domestic instability caused by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), downturn in Pak-US ties and uneasy relations curtailed Pakistan’s ability to play a constructive role in Afghanistan’s peace process and Afghan end game. However, Pakistan has certain legitimate geo-strategic interests in Afghanistan and in the region. Pakistan’s willingness to endorse “Afghan led—Afghan owned” reconciliation process approved by Afghan High Peace Council, is a strong indication that Pakistan wants peaceful, stable and united Afghanistan. Pakistan aims to broaden its sphere of activities to entire Afghanistan and desires to create goodwill among the common people rather than focusing only on Pashtun territories. Pakistan desires to work with the regional stakeholders, including China, to increase its range of activities from development to education, health and social welfare for the Afghan people. Pakistan needs to come up with a comprehensive socio-economic development plan for Afghanistan. This could be in the shape of small-scale development projects for Afghan rural areas and building strong connections with the Afghan companies through Public Private Partnership initiatives. These projects may be based on the local partnership and local ownership to form the basis of mutual cooperation. This would, resultantly, reduce the space for its strategic rivals in Afghanistan. The peace process must be in the best interest of Afghans. The regional and international actors should facilitate the peace process and the outcome should reflect the aspirations of the Afghan people. It should be arranged in such a way that they may not destabilize the regional peace and stability. This is a world, beaming with
economic options, so whosoever first turns these opportunities into own advantage, would be the winner, to stay with pride, on the globe.

Notes


6 The exact size of the total Pashtun population is unclear as recent census data is unavailable in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The estimate provided is based on population figures and ethnic breakdown estimates given in the CIA World Factbook. US Central Intelligence Agency’s World Fact book.


15Rais, ‘Pakistan’s Perspective on the Afghan Transition,’ pp.145-160
20Rais, ‘Pakistan’s Perspective on the Afghan Transition,’ pp.145-160
27Indrani Bagchi, “Trilateral helps India air opinion about Afghanistan’s future,” The Times of India, 4 March 2013.
28Larry Hanauer, Peter Chalk “India’s and Pakistan’s strategies in Afghanistan: implications for the United States and the region” RAND
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