



Vivekananda International Foundation

The Afghanistan Conundrum



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About the Author



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The Afghanistan Conundrum

Introduction

The location of Afghanistan is geostrategically critical. It is a land bridge that links China, Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Geo-politically, Afghanistan is located conveniently close to “the soft underbelly” of Russia and China and its neighbor Iran. Will the Americans leave this geo-strategically important location? However the country is constantly at war for several decades. For the country to prosper Afghanistan must have some semblance of peace. For ending the 17 year old war the United States is pushing the Taliban to join peace talks with present Afghan Government. The problem is how to balance the Taliban's demand for a complete withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces with Kabul's desire for U.S. troops to stay.

On December 21, 2018, that U.S. President Mr. Donald Trump ordered to pull troops out of Syria and the withdrawal from Afghanistan of 7,000 American troops, about half of the total in the country. This was a radical reversal of his August 2017 commitment to increase troops and to “never let up until the terrorists are dealt a lasting defeat.” Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who had urged the President to keep troops in both Syria and Afghanistan resigned.

There is a feeling in the U.S. that it is doing the heavy lifting in Afghanistan which serves the geopolitical interests of key stake holders in the region like Russia, Iran, China and Pakistan etc. To safeguard their political interests and secure their territories from the threat of terrorism these countries will have to get involved in Afghanistan post U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. There is a believe that an unstable and violent Afghanistan will serve U.S. security interests because it will threaten the security of Iran, Russia and China.¹

As a leading world power the U.S. has many strategic commitments. The U.S. is weighing its choices carefully. Afghanistan today does not pose major terrorist threat to the United States. To impose the burden on Iran, Russia, China and Central Asian States the U.S. would leave the Afghan and Pakistan problems for these countries to solve. Islamic radicalism in Central Asia is a problem for both Russia and China. Robert Kaplan recently argued in the New York Times that the U.S. war in Afghanistan amounted to support for both Chinese and Russian initiatives in Central Asia. U.S. taxpayers should not be subsidizing the security of rivals.²

Background

As the playground for outside powers betrayal, violence and surrender have defined Afghanistan's history for long. The present Afghan Government is a corrupt, divided and ineffective. It is seen as more the government of 'Kabulistan' than the nation of Afghanistan. Out of the 180 countries Transparency International ranks Afghanistan is ranked as the 4th most corrupt country in the world. Afghanistan faces critical civil problems. Corruption at every level, massive unemployment, Flight to the cities, growing dependence on a narco economy, rising poverty, divisions between power brokers and *de facto* warlords and a brain drain to other countries are some of the issues the present Afghan Government is grappling with.

35 percent of the Afghan population lives in areas controlled by insurgents. The Asia Foundation's Survey of the Afghan People in 2018, found that 82 percent of the population does not sympathize with the Taliban and over 90 percent would fear encountering the Taliban. When the Taliban tries to capture towns, the overwhelming firepower of the U.S. Air Force and Afghan artillery manage to beat back the Taliban with heavy casualties. Despite poor training, low morale, corruption and high desertion rates in the Afghan army, if the danger to Kabul were restricted to the Taliban threat on the battlefield, the present situation could persist for a long time.

President Trump has a valid point on the cost and casualties in America's war in Afghanistan. The U.S cannot support Afghanistan indefinitely. If the Afghans again fail to elect an effective government and develop their forces over a reasonable period, do not reduce corruption and do not make the necessary reforms, the U.S. has no responsibility to bear the cost of war.

The latest publically available Cost of War report issued by the Department of Defense indicates the total direct cost of America's wars since 2010 will be \$1.77 trillion by the end of Financial Year 2018 – with \$730 billion for Afghanistan. The State Department probably adds another \$127-\$132 billion. U.S. and other outside donors provide 100 percent of the Afghan security budget and around 60 percent of the civilian budget. Afghan state cannot stand on its own feet without such budgetary support.³

Presently U.S. military actions are reduced to air support for the Afghan national forces and limited interventions by U.S. special forces. U.S. casualties have been reduced considerably. Only seventeen U.S. soldiers were killed in 2017, compared to 496 at the height of U.S. operations in 2010. Financially and militarily, the existing U.S. commitment is sustainable. Afghan soldiers are not better than U.S. troops in skill level or equipment, but they are better for Afghanistan since they generate less resentment than foreign occupiers and deprive the insurgents of their "eject the foreigners" recruiting narrative.⁴

Michael E. O'Hanlon, a national-security expert claimed recently that "a presence in Afghanistan . . . completes the web of U.S. surveillance over the whole of the greater Middle East. Afghanistan is still home to the greatest concentration of terrorists anywhere in the world."⁵

The casualties of Afghan forces were not declassified as it was felt that this high figures would demoralised the forces. However the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, recently stated that since 2014 when Afghan forces took over the responsibility for securing the country from American and NATO forces, forty five thousand of his solders have died. During the same period, seventy two foreign soldiers have died. On average, five hundred Afghan security forces have died for every American. Ghani said, "It shows you who is doing the fighting".⁶

The President's decision to withdraw half of the present U.S. troops in Afghanistan will adversely affect raining and assist program for Afghan forces and checking the Taliban. It may lead to an uncertain war of attrition into the same kind of defeat the U.S. suffered in Vietnam.

Peace Settlement Process

Zalmay Khalilzad was named Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation in September 2018 for finding a peace settlement in the war in Afghanistan. A hands on Afghan born diplomat and a former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq, Khalilzad was involved in building the post Taliban government from its earlier days. He is an old school friend of President Ashraf Ghani. Lisa Curtis, deputy assistant to President Trump and senior director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council is assisting Mr Zalmay Khalilzad. Khalilzad has been travelling around the Middle East and South Asia. In the last few months, Khalilzad led a delegation to India, the United Arab Emirates, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan before heading to Qatar and then Afghanistan again. For more than a week, Khalilzad has negotiated in Qatar exclusively with the Taliban. Khalilzad is now under pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump to arrive at a deal.

Taliban is refusing to deal with the Afghan Government. Its main demand is that the U.S. and NATO should leave Afghanistan. Taliban is confident of victory. This confidence is not without cause. The Afghan forces are suffering from unacceptable levels of killed and wounded casualty. U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan would lead to the resurgence of terrorism and the deterioration of human rights including women's rights — that come with a Taliban victory.

The underlying political causes of the conflict remain to be addressed. This includes:-

- ◆ The complex issue of how power is shared among the Taliban and the different ethnic and political factions that have participated in Afghanistan's constitutional government.

- ◆ Inclusive political system or a cease fire that would spare the lives of innocent civilians while such talks are going on.
- ◆ How to address a range of tricky issues on cease fires, prisoner releases and human and women's rights protections as well as how to enforce the terms of an agreement.

An entire generation of Afghans has grown up since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. They have experienced great advances in personal freedoms and human rights. Significant socioeconomic and political gains have been made Afghans want peace and more economic development and they highly value their democracy, with polling showing that they have little sympathy for the Taliban. This should not be ignored or sacrificed. The proliferation of cell phones, television and the internet has changed society. Women are worried that the rights and freedoms they have been guaranteed in the 2004 constitution can be rolled back. Any peace negotiations must be inclusive of women, youth and representatives of different ethnic groups and not just powerful warlords who have perpetuated conflict in the past.⁷

There is a real danger in the collapse of the existing Afghan state and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. This would almost certainly lead to a civil war. This has grave repercussions on the impact of Muslim migration on Europe. Afghans already make up the second largest group of refugees to Europe after the Syrians. An intensified civil war and collapse of the Afghan state, would greatly increase migration. Can EU members refuse to grant asylum to refugees given the Western role of the past seventeen years in Afghanistan?⁸

The U.S. President's sudden cut of U.S. forces in Afghanistan has made the position of negotiators awkward. It leaves the Taliban with no incentive to negotiate and a near assurance of winning a war of attrition over time. There must be a real peace, that leaves a legitimate government in charge and not the Taliban.

Progress on Peace Process

Fourth round of talks started on January 21, 2019. Taliban and U.S. officials met in Doha, Qatar. The meeting lasted for a week. Both the sides reported significant progress on a draft accord which included a proposal for a U.S. troop withdrawal and a Taliban cease fire. Things are moving very fast on peace talks. On 28 January 2019, following six days of talks in Qatar with Taliban representatives, Zalmay Khalilzad, announced that, he had achieved a "framework" for a peace deal with the Taliban. The Taliban has pledged that in exchange for a full withdrawal of foreign troops from the country they would not allow any organization to carry out an international terrorist attack from the territory of Afghanistan.

Zalmay Khalilzad in a statement said, "Progress on vital issues had been made and the two sides had agreed to agreements in principle on a couple of very important issues. More work needs to be done." In an interview with the New York Times, Khalilzad said, "We have a draft of the framework that has to be fleshed out before it becomes an agreement. We have a number of issues left to work out. Nothing is agreed until everything

is agreed and ‘everything’ must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire. We will build on the momentum and resume talks shortly” On Twitter, Khalilzad said meetings in Qatar were “more productive than they have been in the past. We made significant progress on vital issues.” Reuters quoted a Qatari Foreign Ministry official in reporting that the two sides have “agreed tentatively to reconvene on February 25.”

A lot remains to be done. No major issues has been agreed to, not even the principles. Each side have different priorities for what ought to come first. For the Taliban, a U.S. troop withdrawal is most important. For the U.S., a ceasefire would be a top priority. The Trump administration has hinted for a draw-down of the troop levels too. For the Afghan Government, both a ceasefire and direct talks are of the highest priority. The troop withdrawal is much further down and depends on security improvements that at this stage are far from realized.⁹

Reactions of Important Actors on the Peace Process

The U.S., Afghan state, Taliban, the Pakistani army and regional powers like Iran, India, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, UAE have been players in the geopolitical chessboard of Afghanistan. Post 9/11 despite several rounds of Afghan general elections, the roots of robust democracy did not take place. In spite of funding and training Afghan national army and Afghan national police have not succeeded in taking back Taliban controlled areas.

Understandably there are conflicting reactions on the peace process. As on 31 January some of the positions on this issue by various stakeholder countries are given below.

USA

Willingness to discuss a withdrawal from Afghanistan indicates its shifting strategic priorities of the United States. The United States went into Afghanistan in October 2001 to dismantle the Taliban regime and destroy Al Qaeda. This was the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism. U.S. has tried different approaches, including troop surge/drawdown, increased air efforts and pushes for political reform in Afghan government. More than 17 years later a tired U.S. is now seeking an end to its involvement. Its 2018 National Defense Strategy says: "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security", as it looks beyond Afghanistan to China and Russia.

The contours of the peace process are slowly coming together, though a final settlement to the war is still far off. The critical issue is: the United States withdraws troops over an eighteen month timeline and the Taliban provides assurances to U.S. that Afghanistan will not be used by foreign terrorist organizations as a base to attack the United States. A ceasefire and prisoner exchange would be on the table as a way to improve the environment for comprehensive political talks between Taliban and Afghan government officials.¹⁰

Ryan Crocker a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom is one of America's most respected and honored diplomats. In a foreign service career that spanned four decades, Crocker served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon. As a political attaché, he survived the 1983 embassy bombing in Beirut. Ryan Crocker slammed the deal with the Taliban as a "surrender." He feels the following:

- ◆ 'The framework deal with the Taliban is a betrayal of the democratically elected Afghan government that Washington has spent nearly two decades propping up. It will leave the Taliban in control of Afghanistan. In 18-month timeline, the Taliban will simply move in and retake the country.
- ◆ Taliban will certainly take over the Afghan government sooner or later. U.S. should not negotiate from a position of weakness. That Taliban will respect the constitution and seek legal changes, isn't going to happen. The Taliban will offer any number of commitments, knowing that when U.S. leaves and the Taliban is back, U.S. will have no means of enforcing any of them.
- ◆ Afghan Army is a work in progress. They were not a modern armed force. In spite of the horrendous losses they've endured, they keep on fighting. In the period between the Soviet withdrawal in '89 and the collapse of the army in '92. They fought on without Soviet enablers or advisors for three years. They only came apart when the pay stopped. After nearly 18 years in the wilderness, they are not kinder, gentler or less dedicated.
- ◆ Taliban may give an assurance about not providing safe haven for groups like Al Qaeda or ISIS. The Taliban made the choice in 2001 that they would face defeat on the battlefield rather than give up Al Qaeda. Does anybody really think the Taliban will be different this time?
- ◆ When the President talks about halving the force, you just can't do those things arbitrarily. Which half? What does the half that remains do? What about the NATO allies who have really stayed the course with U.S. in Afghanistan?
- ◆ The framework was reached without the involvement of the Afghan government. The Taliban has said all along that it refuses to negotiate with the government, considering it the illegitimate puppet of the U.S. occupation. By acceding to this Taliban demand, U.S. delegitimized the government they claim to support.
- ◆ President Trump has two choices. He can leave the country to the Taliban, or he can make clear that the United States has interests, values and allies and will stand behind them.'¹¹

It is not clear how the U.S. could verify Taliban pledges that terrorist groups won't use Afghanistan as a staging area for attacks. CIA Director Gina Haspel told a Senate panel on 12 December 2018, "If there were an eventual peace agreement, a very robust monitoring

regime would be critical and we would still need to retain the capability to act in our national interest if we needed to."¹²

Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director of the Center for Stability and Development and the Special Operations Program, at the CNA Corporation raised the following questions:-

- ♦ Intra-Afghan talks – what to address and how to proceed.
- ♦ Structure and power-sharing arrangements with a reconciled Afghan government and the Taliban.
- ♦ The pace of a U.S. military withdrawal and when it begins.
- ♦ Meaning of a “full withdrawal”. Is it all U.S. troops or those forces engaged in combat missions.
- ♦ Taliban has an estimated strength of 30,000 to 60,000 fighters. If even five percent of the fighters don’t accept the peace settlement, 1500 to 2000 die hard fanatics can conduct serious numbers of attacks and inflict large numbers of casualties. There are grave repercussions of what might happen should unreconciled Taliban fighters choose to directly merge ranks with the self proclaimed Islamic State.
- ♦ Peace agreements aren’t based on trust. They are based on mutual interest, verification and enforcement. How will the United States monitor and verify a Taliban pledge to not allow Afghanistan to serve as a base for international terrorism?
- ♦ Whether the Taliban would agree to a sustained U.S. counter terrorism mission in Afghanistan. What will be the role of the Haqqani Network?
- ♦ What will be security assistance funding for Afghanistan by U.S. and international community in the wake of a settlement?
- ♦ With major reduction of funding from U.S. and EU a major restructuring of Afghanistan’s security forces would be required. The details of restructuring of Afghanistan’s security forces and bases would need to be worked out.
- ♦ What happens to Taliban fighters and those personnel cut from Afghanistan’s security forces after the peace settlement?
- ♦ Will the United States and the international community fund a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program for Afghanistan? Can the Taliban fighters be integrated into Afghanistan’s security forces. How would this work in practice?¹³

How will the U.S. maintain any pressure on the Taliban after withdrawal? To restrain Taliban behaviour will not be the task of the United States but of Afghanistan’s neighbours—Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and India—and they should therefore be centrally included in the peace process. But U.S. relations with Russia, China and Iran are

well known. China can influence Pakistan not to use Afghanistan as a base for terrorism directed against India.

Surely concerned people in the U.S. government are currently engaged in working through for possible answers to above issues. This would require detailed planning and challenging of commonly held assumptions, lot of effort and patience, the continued investment of funding and personnel. These questions will have to be addressed if the Taliban continue to work with the United States and eventually the Afghan government in order to secure a lasting peace.

In another development, the U.S. Senate on 31 January 2019 passed a nonbinding amendment that contradicts President Donald Trump's foreign policy on Syria and Afghanistan. It was drafted by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. It says that too fast a withdrawal from either country "would put at risk hard won gains and United States national security." The 68-to-23 vote to cut off debate ensures that the amendment backed by virtually every Senate Republican, will be added to a broader bipartisan Middle East policy bill which is expected to be passed by the Senate. The amendment is well within the Senate's power: It's basically a message to the President, not a law that would require anyone to do anything.¹⁴

The bills say that the executive branch may not use any of its funds to bring the number of U.S. troops unless the President meets certain conditions. Among them one is that the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence must all certify to Congress that withdrawing the troops won't undermine national security.

Afghanistan

President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani wanted a peace process where important issues about Afghanistan's future could be discussed and settled. He has extended the following offers to Talibans for bringing peace in his country:-

- ◆ Grant of formal legitimacy to Taliban as a political party.
- ◆ Release of prisoners.
- ◆ Review of the Afghan constitution.

This was subject to the condition that the Taliban:

- ◆ Enters into peace negotiations with the government.
- ◆ Recognises the legitimacy of the government.
- ◆ Respects the rule of law and the rights of women.

President Ghani wants to be remembered as the man who delivered peace and tranquility to his country. He has insisted all along that any talks between Washington and the Taliban in whatever format should be routed through Kabul. This request is entirely sensible, Afghanistan's political future for Afghans should not be decided by the Americans.¹⁵

President Ghani is reiterating the U.S. policy that the present Afghan government should lead the talks with Taliban. In case Taliban officials back down and agree to meet the Afghan government will the Ghani government be able to accommodate the Taliban demands? The Afghan President has already stated that watered down version of the Afghan constitution will be unacceptable. There lies the dilemma.

Several days after details of a possible agreement were leaked President Ghani spoke to the nation on January 28, 2019 and said, "Any peace accord with the Taliban would have to preserve the fundamental civil and human rights the Afghan people have been granted since the insurgent group was dethroned. There are values that are not disputable, such as national unity, national sovereignty and territorial integrity".¹⁶

It is clear that President Ashraf Ghani is unnerved by a hurried American deal with Taliban insurgents. Fearing that the deal could unbalance the fragile Afghan state and lead to a renaissance in power by the Taliban he sent a letter to President Trump offering him reduced costs for keeping United States troops in the country. In a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Mr. Ghani alluded to such savings in which he argued for caution in any American withdrawal. He said "The United States as a sovereign power, as a global power, is entitled to leave but we need to get the departure right. Are the fundamental reasons that brought the United States to Afghanistan — are those objectives accomplished? The first issue is cost. We completely agree that the cost must come down, must become more efficient."

Mr. Ghani has requested for a discussion as to how costs could be reduced and the troop levels could be brought down from the current 14,000 to a "more efficient level." There is a possibility that \$2 billion a year can be saved, from maintenance contracts and reduction of American troops to as low as 3,000.

As on writing of this paper the Taliban has not yet showed any willingness to talk to the Afghan government. However, in case the Taliban shows willingness, the Afghan side is divided in ways that seems difficult to reconcile.

Some of the Afghan officials are understandably aggrieved and feel that the Trump administration, despite having signaled a long term commitment, cares little for what an American withdrawal could mean for Afghanistan's 35 million people. President Ghani has appointed a negotiating team led by his chief of staff, with several government ministers as members. Some political parties, including many with Taliban contacts, have denounced that negotiating team is unrepresentative.

Immediately after the American talks with the Taliban at Doha Mr. Khalilzad went back to Kabul and met Mr. Ghani on 28 January 2019. The meeting was cold and lasted for three hours with no progress made on how to move forward the negotiations between the Afghans and the Taliban. The Afghan government felt that the U.S. was ceding too much to the Taliban too quickly. President Ghani in a televised address on January 29, 2019 highlighted previous rushed deals that ended in bloodshed. He said, “We should not forget that the victims of war are Afghans, so the initiative of peace should be in the hand of Afghans,” Mr. Ghani highlighted how Afghans are “killed in airstrikes” a criticism of the United States military he rarely makes publicly.¹⁷

President Ashraf Ghani in a recent interview with Fareed Zakaria of CNN showed his concern over the secret peace deal and said, “There is discussion, but the discussion needs to be shared back. A discussion that does not involve the region will not last. Afghanistan has national dimensions, neighborhood dimensions, the regional dimensions from India to Russia, the Gulf, Islamic and international. If we don’t get all the pieces right, one piece alone doesn’t suffice.”

Interior Minister of the Government until recently and a Vice President candidate in the July elections, Amrullah Saleh in an interview to the BBC said, “Why should Afghans be under this enormous psychological pressure that ‘you are a dependent nation’? Of course, economically we are dependent. But security wise, also remember the West is dependent on us. We are giving the ultimate sacrifice for global security. It’s been our blood and our bones. From the West, recently, it’s only been money and metal — money and weapons. So please, make sure this is not considered a charity case. We are a partner.” An official in the Ghani government told The Daily Beast. “We are totally excluded from the Khalilzad decision-making. He only passes on his reports, but he is not listening much to Ghani at all. Perhaps he knows that Ghani is in deep water.”¹⁸

Afghanistan’s opposition leaders are increasingly at odds with the Afghan President. They are now rallying around the American effort to negotiate with the Taliban. The opposition leaders feel that, Mr. Ghani is worried that the negotiation could hurt his bid for a second five-year term. Hanif Atmar, a former national security adviser challenging Mr. Ghani in the elections said, “Instead of creating hope and leading this critical process, the government is trying to damage the process and create fear among the people. The government should embrace the prospect of negotiations with the Taliban and can only play that role if it comes out of its corner of isolation and narrow-mindedness to unite the country and be prepared to sacrifice power for peace.”

On the other hand Mr. Ghani’s supporters feel that the opposition leaders are blindly embracing the American and Taliban talks because they expect a share of power in the interim government putting the gains of the past 17 years in jeopardy. Mr. Ghani’s aides warn that a rushed deal can lead to anarchy and bloodshed like the one that was created after

the Soviet occupation ended in 1989. Davood Moradian, the director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, said on Mr. Ghani's concerns, "He has history on his side. There are many cases that the United States has abandoned its allies, from the Shah of Iran to Mubarak of Egypt. He is right to be worried about U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan."¹⁹

It is not clear whether all factions of the current government would accept a peace settlement with the Taliban. In a country deeply divided on ethnic, tribal and political lines some groups might also decide to take up arms against a post settlement government. President Ashraf Ghani would likely face intense opposition from some Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara and even Pashtun leaders who do not trust the Taliban and have searing historical memories of tit-for-tat brutality in cities like Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz and Taloqan. The 'Panjshiris' who formed the backbone of the anti Taliban resistance in the late 1990s within the Northern Alliance are themselves split into factions led by individuals with self-serving ambitions.

Afghans need to talk to one another about their political future if Afghan peace talks have to succeed. The issues are:-

- ◆ Will Taliban officials be accepted into government ministries?
- ◆ Will a national unity government be formed or will Ghani remain President until the next elections this summer?
- ◆ Will the Taliban be able to participate in those elections?
- ◆ Will the Afghan constitution need to be amended to decentralize power away from Kabul and towards the provincial authorities?
- ◆ What about the civil and political rights women have been given since the Taliban were evicted from Kabul in 2001?

There are valid reasons for Afghan President to be nervous about a shoddy peace deal. He is aware that the former President Najibullah was murdered. The body of the country's former President was dragged through the streets in a gruesome public execution by the Taliban when it overtook Kabul in 1996, seven years after Soviet forces withdrew. The Afghan President feels that Khalilzad's goal is to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue, meaning direct talks between the Taliban and Kabul. He has no authority to discuss issues such as a future Afghan administration.²⁰

Taliban

The Taliban understand well that the present situation gives them the best opportunity to clinch their objective of achieving a U.S. initiated withdrawal of all foreign forces. Withdrawal of U.S. forces would enable the Taliban to claim a moral victory and portray the outcome as a vindication of their insurgency to drive out foreign forces. They

have taken action to attain their objectives by opening a political office in Doha, participating in a conference in Moscow and cultivating relationships with regional powers including Iran, Uzbekistan, Russia, China and the U.S. Negotiating from a position of strength on the battlefield Taliban will drive a hard bargain. It can be safely assumed that ultimately they are likely to commit to a tentative peace agreement.

A senior official of Taliban Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was appointed on January 24, 2019 to lead Taliban's subsequent negotiations from its political office in Doha. That effectively makes him the chief negotiator on behalf of the Taliban. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is a co-founder of the Taliban. He is from southern Afghanistan and is part of a tight knit group of Kandaharis who started the whole movement in the early 1990s. He is a Popalzai tribesman. A decade ago, Baradar sought a peace deal with the Afghan government before being arrested by authorities in Pakistan, whose security establishment opposed negotiations. Pakistan had imprisoned Baradar in 2010. Pakistan quietly released Baradar in October last year, following a secret meeting between Khalilzad and Taliban representatives. Pakistan's decision to free Baradar as part of a confidence building measure and prelude to these talks signals that Pakistan has decided to take a more active role in this round of negotiations. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar brings a significant amount of political clout and a strong military mind to the negotiating team. It is unclear if Baradar had joined the talks.²¹

'The chief Taliban negotiator, Mullah Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, after nearly a week of marathon discussions in Qatar with the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, revealed the following to a pro Taliban media outlet:-

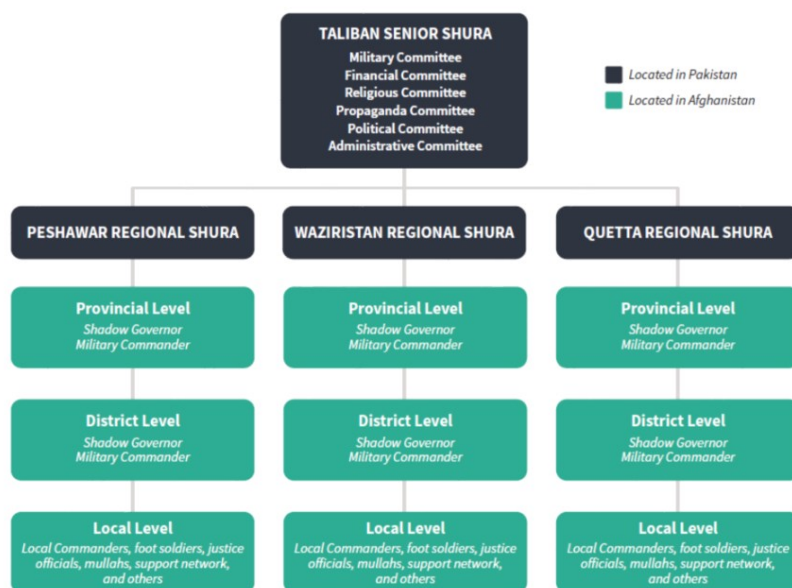
- ◆ The U.S. and the Taliban have agreed to establish two technical teams to determine details for the eventual withdrawal of all American and NATO troops from Afghanistan and for preventing terrorists from using Afghan soil against America and its allies.
- ◆ The two technical teams will prepare proposals and take decisions and bring them to the table in the next meeting in Doha set for February 25. A larger meeting would then be arranged, with major powers, the United Nations and representatives of Islamic countries in attendance as "guarantors" where assurances will be given that all foreign troops will leave Afghanistan.
- ◆ The Taliban will give their own assurances at the meeting that no one will be allowed to use Afghan soil for international terrorism. The U.S. side will also announce a timeline for the troop withdrawal because "these troops cannot leave at once, in a day or in a week. It will require time."
- ◆ The U.S. has agreed to help in reconstruction efforts after its troop withdrawal, which the Taliban would welcome. "We have told them that after ending your military

intervention, we will welcome U.S. engineers, doctors and others if they want to come back for reconstruction of Afghanistan and they have promised to do so."

- ♦ The Trump administration would agree to a withdrawal of all foreign troops and the lifting of an international travel ban on top Taliban leaders. In exchange, the Taliban would pledge that Afghanistan not be used as a base for attacks against foreign countries.
- ♦ Also on the table, though not agreed to, are a proposed cease fire and an exchange of prisoners that is likely to include American Kevin King, an university professor kidnapped by the Taliban in 2016.
- ♦ The deal has "delegitimised President Ashraf Ghani's national unity government." Taliban negotiators rejected American demands for the Taliban to observe a complete cease-fire during withdrawal of foreign troops and engage in direct talks with the Afghan government.²²

Stanikzai said "It is impossible for us to engage in direct talks with the Kabul administration until all U.S. and NATO troops pull out from Afghanistan. We told them that the Kabul government is not legitimate and is the product of American military pressure. It is not an elected government so it cannot represent Afghans and engaging with them would be a waste of time".

It has been confirmed by the Taliban sources that provisions in the draft that have broader implications for Afghanistan's ties with its neighbors, particularly Pakistan, India and China. The deal included provisions that separatist militants from resource rich southwestern Pakistani province of Balochistan will not be allowed to use Afghan soil to target Pakistan.²³



Example of Taliban Organizational Structure.²⁴

Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman based in the Gulf Arab country of Qatar where the Taliban have a political office, said in an exclusive audio message to The Associated Press the following:-

- ◆ Once U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the Taliban want to live with other Afghans, “tolerate one another and start life like brothers. “We are not seeking a monopoly on power. We believe in an inclusive Afghan world, where all Afghans can see themselves in it”.
- ◆ The Taliban envision is a reformed police and local police forces, without offering specifics. Afghanistan's local police forces have been widely criticized as deeply corrupt and intimidating to the local population.
- ◆ The U.S. and the Taliban will establish joint technical teams to work out details of a future U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as ways of preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida.²⁵

Infighting in Taliban?

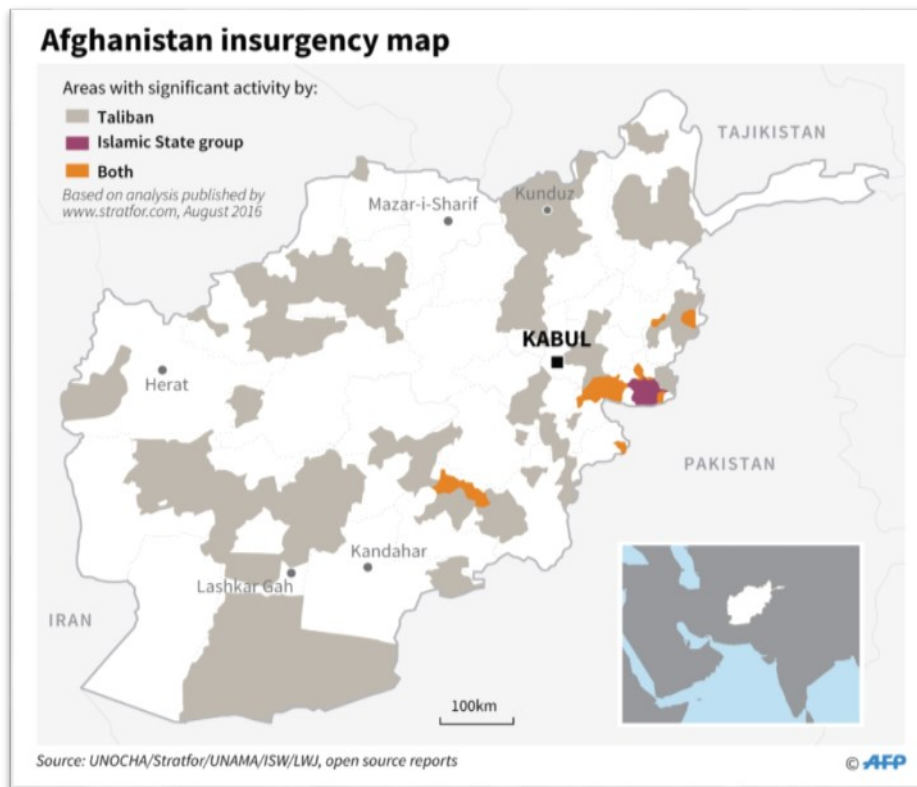
There are chances of bickering and debate among the movement's leaders over the details of the accord that could lead to a slow and cumbersome process. Taliban is not a homogeneous body. It has different groups and clans with different loyalties. However, they showed remarkable command and control when all the factions all over Afghanistan enforced cease fire during the Eid al-Fitr holiday for three days in Jun 2019 at short notice in spite of communication, distance and terrain problems.

Different Views within Taliban

A senior Taliban official on the ground in Afghanistan told, “The Taliban are in a win-win position. We can talk or we can walk. Our jihad was not started against the presence of U.S. forces, it was started in 1994 to found an Islamic state. A U.S. withdrawal will not end our struggle. An Islamic regime will end our jihad.” Umar Al-Mahajar, a Taliban fighter from Khost says, “It’s up to the United States whether they want to stay or leave. The Americans are calculating their costs, I am drinking water from the countryside and eating dry bread; \$100 is enough for a year of my expenses. We are not in any hurry.”

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's Second-in-Command under supreme leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, is in favour of a military solution to the conflict. This suggests that the Taliban's most influential faction, the Quetta Shura (of which Haqqani is a member), may categorically oppose a political settlement. They may continue to fight against the Afghan military in parallel to any negotiations. Views of some other Taliban leaders are different. They want the war to end. A former Taliban minister told The Daily Beast “The Taliban could fight forever, but the goal of the Taliban should not be just to fight. Afghans need to breathe the air of peace and the Taliban should change from a

military combat force to an Islamic political party that can achieve the same goals through political struggle.”



Taliban and the Haqqani Network retains freedom of movement in Pakistan. Pakistan’s sponsorship of the Haqqani network had been an open secret for quite some time as was the fact that the Haqqanis have been responsible for some of the most murderous assaults on the Indian and Western presence in Afghanistan. Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the Haqqani network as a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s ISI.²⁶

The question of what happens with the Haqqani Network is also critical to an effective and lasting settlement. The Haqqani Network is a U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The Haqqanis have been a very influential and highly lethal element of the Taliban led insurgency for many years. The big question is:-

- ♦ Will the Haqqanis reconcile along with the Taliban?
- ♦ If so, will the United States de-list them as a foreign terrorist organization?
- ♦ Will they continue to conduct spoiler attacks in Kabul and South East Afghanistan?²⁷

The Islamic State

The Islamic State is a very small fraction of the militant presence in Afghanistan. Only two to five percent of the violent incidents in Afghanistan are attributable to Islamic

State. In other words, violence in Afghanistan is not that concerned with the Islamic State. Islamic State is present primarily in Nangarhar and Kunar Province in the east. Other militant groups have minor presence.

Peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government would be extremely bad news for other militant groups. Taliban and the Islamic State fight extensively between them. The Islamic State would be afraid of a Taliban that is not fighting Americans or Afghan government forces. Taliban then could focus its attention on slaughtering the Islamic State.²⁸

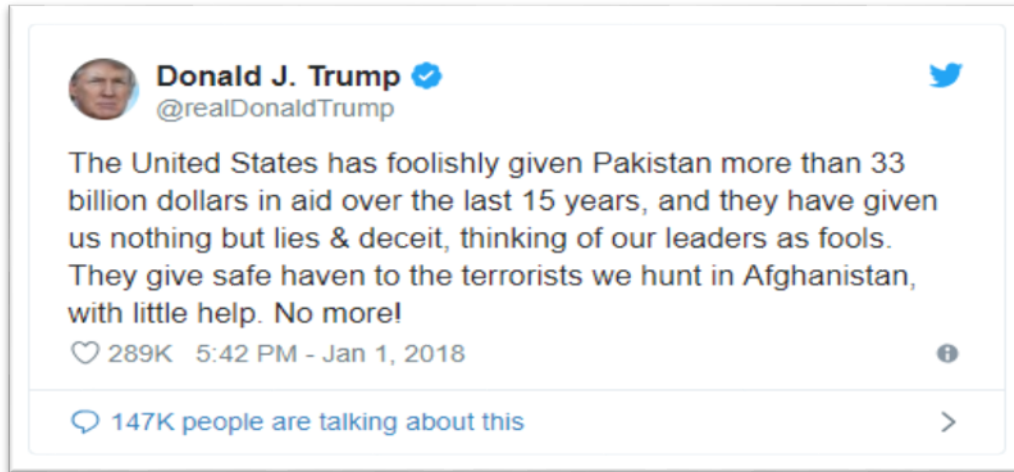
Pakistan

The root cause of problems in Afghanistan lies in Pakistan. U.S. knows it very well. Almost all U.S. Think Tank reports on Afghanistan are of the same view. For all the rhetoric of alliance, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other elements of its military have consistently dealt with and have offered sanctuary to elements of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Haqqani Network and other insurgents. Since 1993, Pakistan government, especially the ISI, has provided several types of assistance. It has given money, intelligence and strategic guidance to the Taliban and Haqqani Network and has helped provide medical care for Taliban fighters. The Pakistan government has also provided housing and logistics to some Taliban and Haqqani leaders. This includes allowing the Taliban to establish a sanctuary on its soil with freedom to operate in Pakistan. Pakistan provides safe havens to Taliban. It uses the Taliban as a proxy to exert influence in Afghanistan. It is not possible to defeat the Taliban without eliminating its safe havens.

The leadership of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network are situated on the Pakistan side of the border. Examples include the Taliban's leader, Haibatullah Akhunzada; his deputies, Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mohammad Yaqub and a range of senior leaders like Abdul Qayyum Zakir, Ahmadullah Nanai, Abdul Latif Mansur and Noor Mohammad Saqib. All reside in Pakistan, though the bulk of Taliban and Haqqani foot soldiers live in Afghanistan and fight a government they consider corrupt and incompetent. The U.S. failure to undermine this safe haven may be Washington's most significant mistake of the 17 year old war. However, Pakistan has a great leverage. The logistics chains of U.S. and NATO forces have to go through Pakistan. Pakistan uses this to the hilt.

Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attribute much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistan. President Ghani said in February 2018 that Pakistan was "the center of the Taliban." Pakistan is attempting to exert control in Afghanistan through ties to insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that has become an official, semi autonomous component of the Taliban.²⁹

President Donald Trump tweeted on January 1, 2018:



Exactly one year later, on January 2, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump said that, "We want to have a great relationship with Pakistan, but they house the enemy. They take care of the enemy. We just can't do that. So, I look forward to meeting with the new leadership in Pakistan. We will be doing that in the not too distant future. But I ended USD 1.3 billion that we paid. I think it was water, we were just paying to Pakistan. So, I ended that."

Last month, Donald Trump had written a letter to Pakistan PM Mr. Imran Khan, seeking Pakistan's help with stuttering Afghan peace talks and support in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table to end the 17-year brutal war in the neighbouring country. The Trump administration's tone toward Pakistan has softened since mediation efforts with the Taliban by Prime Minister Imran Khan's government have accelerated. Khalilzad has been travelling to Pakistan for talks with the Pakistani government about peace in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been playing an excellent balancing act between USA and China. If USA leaves Afghanistan, USA has to lean heavily on Pakistan. Pakistan is past master in extracting maximum out of it. Lindsey Graham, a Republican member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, considered President Trump's closest ally in Congress and the U.S. media says that the President often uses him to float ideas that he wants debated publicly. The U.S. may offer Pakistan a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in return for its assistance in ending the Afghan war, a media report said. Graham first proposed offering an Free Trade Agreement to Pakistan, after a recent visit to Afghanistan. He said "If we can go to Pakistan and put a free trade agreement on the table to get the Pakistanis to push the Taliban to the peace table and you can end the Afghan war."³⁰

The root of Pakistani macro economic problems is Pakistani Army's obsession with strategic and military adventurism under which terrorism is an instrument to exploit the so

called strategic depth in the Afghan theatre. The Bangladesh economy has proved this. Under the diktat of Pakistan army successive elected governments have harboured and sponsored terrorist groups as a policy. Regional powers have a common concern with regards to Taliban, Al-Qaeda, IS/Daesh, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Growing activities of any one of these terrorist groups in the Afghanistan would bring a whole new level of action and reactions from the stake holders. In the absence of foreign forces, how effective the Pakistani army would be in Afghan state affairs?³¹

Pakistan is likely to encourage an orderly and measured U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. It would prevent a security vacuum from emerging on its western flank. Simultaneously, Pakistan will push for strong Taliban representation in any post conflict government in Kabul. Pakistan still has a dream of supporting Taliban or Mujahideen to establish a weak, under controlled and pro Islamabad regime in Afghanistan.

China

China has invested heavily in Afghanistan which includes railway projects and the \$3 billion Mes Aynak open pit copper mine. As per Ahmad Bilal Khalil, a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies in Kabul, in the past three years China has extended more than \$70 million in military aid to Afghanistan. China is concerned that instability in the neighbouring country could threaten its growing economic interests in the region. China can offer Afghanistan financial support and build more infrastructure projects that involve both the Taliban and the Afghan government. This may help reduce hostilities between the two sides. China is probably the only country capable of building a highly needed railway in Afghanistan. Afghanistan can link up with the existing railheads in Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Beijing is concerned that fighters from the Muslim Uighurs minority community trained by the Taliban or ISIL could return across the common border and enter the unstable Xinjiang region. Withdrawal of U.S. will provide room for extremist groups to launch attacks on Chinese interests. It has already happened, and it may intensify.

China would like to accelerate its involvement in North East Afghanistan in Badakhshan Province and Wakhan corridor. The South China Morning Post reported on this:

- ◆ China was helping Afghanistan to set up a mountain brigade in the country's north to boost counterterrorism efforts.
- ◆ China would provide \$85 million to support a mountainous Afghan army brigade to secure the border province of Badakhshan, the former anti Taliban bastion where the militant group has made significant inroads since 2013.

- ◆ Chinese security forces have reportedly been conducting patrols inside Badakhshan since at least 2016.
- ◆ China had funded and begun building a training camp for Afghan troops in the isolated Wakhan Corridor.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a Muslim separatist militant group branded as a terrorist organization by China, in the past operated in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. If post the U.S. withdrawal the situation in Afghanistan is worsened it could jeopardise the China-Pakistan Economic corridor that is a key part of Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiative".

In October, 2018 Pakistani Islamic cleric Maulana Samiul Haq, who is known as the "Father of the Taliban", called on China to play a bigger role in the peace process. Beijing now has the kind of influence over Pakistan that can bring the Taliban's backers in the Pakistani army fully on board. Any Afghan settlement can only be established and maintained if China plays the leading role. Considering the nature of the alliance between China and Pakistan and the utility of Pakistan as a strategic check against India in the region, it is unlikely that China would attempt any policy change vis-à-vis Pakistan specially in view of China's interest in the success of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan will remain indispensable for China. This makes it difficult for the U.S. to exercise a decisive pressure on Pakistan due to Pakistan being firmly supported by China.

China has joined peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government held in Moscow in November, 2018.³²

If the Taliban takes power in Afghanistan, only China and not USA can prevent them from destabilising the region. Such a Taliban regime will have to depend heavily on Pakistan who in turn depends critically on Chinese backing. China, has a vital interest in the survival of Pakistan and in regional stability. This interest is due to China's ethno religious makeup and geographical location.³³

China has not traditionally been a major player of the Afghan "Great Game". China is viewing Afghanistan through the geopolitical lens of China's own South Asian "Great Game," China has no strong ties with any of the Afghan factions. China's primary objectives are to advance its commercial interests, including access to Afghanistan's natural resources and to limit the spread of Muslim militancy throughout Central Asia and China. China's desire to counter balance India and support Pakistan would shape its Afghanistan policy. The Chinese are unlikely to exert themselves in support of a peace process. The Chinese are unlikely to obstruct the peace process, as long as Pakistan's interests are adequately looked after.

To protect itself China is interested in building up a security buffer in Afghanistan. However, Beijing is unlikely to take too much interest for Afghanistan's internal security issues.³⁴

Russia

Russia will not be happy about U.S. withdrawal. There is a real threat of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic state spilling over to Central Asian Republics (CAR). Russia would be increasing pressure on Tajikistan to insulate CAR from Taliban spill over. It will try to strike ties with Northern Afghan groups like Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum Group.

One should not forget that Russia covertly supported the anti Taliban alliance to ward off the menace at the borders with Central Asia. The emergence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan has forced Russian leaders to embrace the Taliban as the lesser of two evils.

Russia is taking a leading role in the future of Afghanistan as part of a broader effort to counter the United States and NATO in the region. Russia is trying to bring the Taliban and the Afghan government to the negotiating table, as it fears that continued Afghan instability will threaten its Central Asian allies that share a border with Afghanistan. In case of a U.S. withdrawal, Russia will desire and aspire to take the lead role in Afghanistan affairs. In Moscow, on November 9, 2018, the Russian Foreign Ministry hosted a multinational conference on the conflict that included officials from Afghanistan, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States and Uzbekistan. Taliban refused to engage in direct conversations with Afghan representatives present at the table

Immediately after Zalmay Khalilzad, reported “significant progress” in his latest round of negotiations with the Taliban in Qatar the Russians organized a meeting on February 5 between a Taliban delegation and Afghan politicians. The Russian Embassy in Kabul said members of the Afghan diaspora in Russia organized the dialogue, though delegates privately acknowledged the host government played a major role in arranging it.

The roster of attendees included representatives of Afghanistan's Taliban and several members of the Afghan government's High Peace Council. Former President Hamid Karzai led the group of about 40 politicians from Afghanistan, including presidential hopefuls, former officials, warlords, tribal elders and female rights activists. Taliban which previously had spurned attendance at any multinational conferences dealing with the conflict, sent a delegation to the Moscow meeting from the insurgent group's Qatar office under the leadership of their chief negotiator, Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai. A representative from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow also attended as an observer. India had sent two former diplomats, Amar Sinha and TCA Raghavan, to attend as unofficial observers. U.S. backed government in Kabul was not invited to the conference because the Taliban have persistently refused to engage in any talks with Kabul until all foreign forces

leave Afghanistan. This conference in Moscow was a significant event where Russia was able to assert its relevance as a major stakeholder/broker in the Afghan conflict.

President Ashraf Ghani has criticized and dismissed the Moscow conference as an attempt by his political opponents to undermine his constitutionally elected administration. The Ghani administration has lodged a complaint with the United Nations against the Russian government for allowing Taliban leaders, some of whom are on a United Nations Security Council sanctions list, to travel

Russia and the United States have backed separate negotiations with different stakeholders, complicating the already complex process. To add to the confusion, the Taliban sat down for talks with American negotiators in Qatar followed by meeting a delegation of powerful Afghan power brokers in Moscow for "intra-Afghan" talks.

Russia is cultivating closer relationships with the Taliban and Pakistan to reclaim its influence. Russia is spreading disinformation that USA is providing support to the Islamic State. Western Experts are of the view that Russian involvement in the Afghan conflict is another way to undermine the United States and NATO on the world stage.³⁵ The visit by the Russian presidential envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov to Pakistan on January 29 showed that Moscow's priority will be to coordinate with Islamabad in future so that as stakeholders in the security and stability of Afghanistan, Russia and Pakistan can work together to ensure that any political settlement will be enduring.

Iran

The Taliban, heavily influenced by Wahhabi religious doctrine emanating from Saudi Arabia, viewed Shia dominated Iran as a heresy. The Taliban's August 1998 massacre of the Hazara and murder of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif made Iran to amass tens of thousands of troops along its border with Afghanistan. Iran's relations with Taliban ruled Afghanistan were often tense, if not outright hostile.

Iran also has a special relationship with the Hazara, the Heratis and other smaller Shia groups inside Afghanistan. Hazara, Tajik, or Uzbeks will likely to turn to Iran for support if they find their interests are threatened by the peace agreement. Iran has traditionally allied itself with and supported most Northern Alliance groups.

Iran Afghan relations will experience strain over water disputes and the issue of refugees. There will be increased water usage upstream to boost Afghanistan's agricultural sector affecting Iran's supplies. Both countries suffer from a shortage of water, with Iran's eastern provinces bordering Afghanistan being particularly water challenged. Iran has more Afghan refugees than any other country after Pakistan. As economic conditions in Iran have deteriorated, Afghan refugees have come to be seen by many as a burden.

Iran has developed connections with Taliban. Iran would like to expand its influence in West Afghanistan and try to improve ties with Pakistan. It has issues with Pakistan border and terrorist activities. There is media report about Iran offering assistance to India for dialogue with Taliban. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif visited India recently and told NDTV that it's impossible to have a future Afghan government without a role for the Taliban, though it should not have a dominant role. Iran has realized that the Taliban is likely to be a major factor in Afghanistan after the U.S. drawdown. Iran is not entirely relying on its traditional Shia and Tajik partners.

Iran cannot be ignored as an influential regional player. The country has broad investments in Afghanistan. It has a common and volatile border. Drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan could spill over into Iran. Teheran is now openly in talks with the Taliban and says the aim is to bring the Taliban and the government of Ashraf Ghani together.³⁶

Iran, like Russia, shares concerns of growing IS presence in Afghanistan and would want to keep that influence in check. The convergence of strategic interests and avenues to expand their influence has led to increased presence of both Iran and Russia in Afghanistan, to the extent that analysts view a possible 'cooperation' of Moscow and Tehran in Afghanistan.

That a Shia country like Iran will co operate with the virulent rabid Sunni extremist organization like Taliban is something like an oxymoron. By any stretch of imagination this tie is not likely to last long. But stranger things happen in international relations.

India

India will always have a legitimate interest in Afghanistan's stability and security. Whatever happens there will have huge geopolitical implications in the region. India will certainly be a major player in this area. India's Afghanistan policy is oriented towards Afghan led, Afghan controlled, Afghan owned peace process, which in reality will be a true representative of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Since 2002, India has given over \$3 billion aid to Afghanistan. India has built roads, schools, Dams (Salma dam and proposed Shahtoot dam), Afghan parliament, power projects, hospitals and helped in education and training. Indian developmental assistance can be summarised in five categories - infrastructure development, economic development, humanitarian assistance, connectivity and capacity building projects.³⁷ India is already Afghanistan's largest regional donor. Indian developmental record in Afghanistan has been better than anyone else's.

India enjoys a huge goodwill among the people of Afghanistan. The hatred for Pakistan is equally palpable. The Indian initiatives have been received very well by common Afghani citizens. More areas of soft power like education, technology, expertise in

institution building, digital governance, agriculture and medical science may be explored further.

So far India has been exercising soft power in Afghanistan. She took a considered decision not to use hard power. Though very important, soft power has no meaning without hard power to back it up. There was a time when Afghan National Army was looking towards India for defence equipments aircrafts, tanks, artillery and choppers. Somehow we did not accede to that request. Could we give good, serviceable military hardware with maintenance support to the Afghan Army? Did we lose credibility with some of our friends and allies?³⁸

It is obvious now as US prepares to leave Afghanistan, Indian foreign policy must grapple with the reality that India does not have much of a leverage in matters Afghanistan except goodwill. It was clear, today or tomorrow USA would leave Afghanistan. President Barack Obama tried that. In the election speeches President Donald Trump was categorical in getting back American troops from Afghanistan. India has a range of interests to protect in Afghanistan. India decided that we should not have a stronger military role in Afghanistan and continue to depend on USA as security provider. How can we be net security provider in Indian Ocean Region when we cannot look after our own legitimate strategic security concerns in Afghanistan?

If Afghanistan was marginal for Indian security interests, then India should not have made investments worth \$3 billion in that country. New Delhi should have been better prepared by now to protect its significant investments in Afghanistan, if the assessment was that Afghanistan is going to be critical for Indian interests in the region It is time now to review our foreign policy on Afghanistan. Could we have done better?³⁹

India must maintain her old connections. India's linkages with Northern Alliance and Tajiks have served India's interest in past. India needs to maintain its goodwill with Tajiks and get Iran's and Russian support to make Tajiks relevant again. A stronger presence of Tajiks in interim government in Afghanistan is not only in India's long term interests but also good for Afghanistan. India's participation in the peace talks should be part of its diplomatic efforts, but it will have to trade a balance between the old friendship with Tajiks and emerging reality of Taliban being in government. Any meaningful initiative with Taliban can only progress if Taliban agrees for cease fire and is willing for talks under the purview of the constitution.

Durand Line issue is sensitive to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. India standing by Afghanistan on this issue and its ability to get the international attention on the terrorist camps on the East of Durand line will serve India's strategic interest. Post US withdrawal if the Afghan state collapses and the Taliban takes over, there is every chance that the war that is currently being fought in Afghanistan by Afghans will be fought by countries like India in India.

Asserting that India should adopt a 'clear-cut roadmap' to tackle the Kashmir issue, former DGP of Jammu and Kashmir K. Rajendra Kumar while delivering the Lalitaditya Memorial Lecture in Pune has said that the U.S. withdrawing troops from Afghanistan could affect the Valley as terrorist outfits may feel empowered. He said, "Now USA is exiting Afghanistan. It has its implications in Kashmir. It is a matter of time that we will be feeling its implications in the Valley. After the U.S. withdrawal, the terrorist organizations would feel pumped up, emboldened."

India should continue to do what she is doing for people of Afghanistan. Extension of health and education facilities and training of armed forces persons must go on. People to people contact should be maintained and strengthened. India should be more active diplomatically and assertive in her dealings. India's voice and concerns must be heard. The nefarious designs of Pakistan must be exposed to the world. Indian media has a big role to play in this and should do its bit for national cause.

It will be a good idea if India appoints a Special Representative for Afghanistan who will be India's points man on all issues concerning Afghanistan.

Post U.S. Withdrawal What Can Happen in Afghanistan

It is very difficult to predict what will happen to Afghanistan once U.S. withdraws from the country. With so many countries as stake holders with contradictory interests, the fraction ridden and clan driven society of Afghanistan and poor economic conditions it is not easy to visualize the scenarios unfolding after U.S. withdraws its forces from Afghanistan. Rand Corporation in January 2019 has made a bold attempt to study astutely details and analyses the effects of the precipitous withdrawal. The report came to the conclusion that an early U.S. military departure without a properly negotiated peace settlement would likely lead to the following developments:-

- ◆ Other NATO forces will also leave.
- ◆ External economic and security assistance will diminish.
- ◆ U.S. and other international civilian presence will be sharply reduced.
- ◆ Power will move from the center to the periphery.
- ◆ The Government in Kabul will begin to lose influence and legitimacy.
- ◆ Regional states will back rival claimants to national power.
- ◆ Responsibility for security increasingly will devolve to regional militias and local warlords.
- ◆ The Taliban will extend its control over territory and population but encounter resistance.

- ♦ The Taliban will lose interest in negotiating peace with the U.S.
- ♦ Civilian deaths will rise sharply, and refugee flows will increase.
- ♦ Afghanistan will descend into a wider civil war.
- ♦ Extremist groups, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, will gain additional scope to organise, recruit and initiate terrorist attacks against U.S. regional and homeland targets.

Based on the above assumptions the options available to U.S. is limited. Some of the options are:-

- ♦ Post-withdrawal of all forces, continue to provide military and non-military assistance to the government and local actors. This can slow down but not prevent the government to collapse.
- ♦ Keep a small counter-terrorism force of several hundred or a thousand soldiers. U.S. special operations forces to work with the CIA, other intelligence agencies, NATO special operations forces, and high-end Afghan units to capture or kill Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorists.
- ♦ Utilise enablers like UAV and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets.
- ♦ Keep a force of roughly 7,000 to 14,000 U.S. soldiers, with European and other international partners. This may be sufficient to prevent a Taliban takeover of the government and control of urban areas.

Out of the above options, the last one is the least bad one for United States.

Conclusion

Surely there will be intense activities by all stake holders before the next round of talks are held. There are some basic fundamental issues that have to be addressed. Some of these are:-

- ♦ In any negotiation there is a give and take situation and solutions are in between. How does one negotiate with an organization which wants to run the country like medieval times of 8th century? Leave Afghanistan in 12th century?
- ♦ What is the future of the considerable progress made during the last 18 years in civil society in terms of women's emancipation, education, health, democratic norms (may be flawed but at least far better than Sharia laws). Playgrounds where people including girls play cricket and football will return for stoning to death and playing football with human heads.

- ◆ Will there be some peace keeping force to enforce the deal. What will be there mandate for use of force? What will be the role of United Nations?
- ◆ U.S. has created some huge sophisticated assets for their surveillance activities in this extremely important geostrategic location. Even if they leave some armed forces personnel to look after these assets, what is the guarantee of their security?
- ◆ Will there be a residual U.S. military force, of say 1,000 soldiers, to protect the U.S. embassy, which, with the Taliban's permission, will have the capacity to conduct limited counterterrorism strikes?
- ◆ Will the U.S. pay around some \$4 billion annually for an Afghan military that includes Taliban soldiers? Will the European Union fearing Afghan refugees, pick up the bill?
- ◆ How will it be ensured that ISIS and AQ will not be allowed to function from Afghanistan? These are networks. They can easily change names and continue their activities in different names.
- ◆ How fast will the United States withdraw its military forces—in as few months as the Taliban wants or between 16 to 24 months as the United States seeks? Time of few months is militarily infeasible and strategically unsound for the United States and Afghanistan.
- ◆ Will the Taliban agree to a ceasefire while it negotiates with the Afghan government? Will the U.S. military remain in Afghanistan until the agreement is concluded and at what strength?
- ◆ How the peace negotiations will interact with Afghanistan's Presidential elections in July 2019. Will the Taliban be allowed to run its own candidates although the registration deadline has passed?
- ◆ Will the elections be postponed until an Afghan peace deal is struck, with an interim government created in the meantime, including strong Taliban representation? President Ghani remains fiercely opposed to it who would lose power.
- ◆ Will the Taliban agree to have its fighters simply go through a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process and head home or there will be some token surrenders.

After 18 years of war lot has changed in Afghanistan. Afghanistan today is by no mean comparable to Afghanistan under the Taliban reign Afghanistan has made major social, economic and political gains over the past 17 years. Afghanistan is one of the youngest nations in the world and these youth have grown up under the roof of progressive democracy. Roughly 4 million girls in in Afghanistan are going to school and women are proudly working everywhere including public, private and non-profit sector. GDP per

capita has increased by over three-fold and the government's capacity to collect tax revenue for its own security and development has improved significantly from almost nothing in 2002.

Though a lot has gone wrong in Afghanistan and much more could have been achieved, but the present Ghani Government has done certain things remarkably well knowing the intricacies of essentially a tribal society. President Ghani brought the kind of reforms in Afghanistan that are needed to build a modern state in Afghanistan. His contributions are:-

- ◆ Unique international policies which have been beneficial.
- ◆ Creative economic reforms which revived the economy.
- ◆ Economic policies and projects are creating stable, efficient and self-sufficient economy in the long run.
- ◆ Policies to isolate tribal leaders and warlords welcomed by entire nation. Putting an end to warlordism, feudalism and traditional political structure are much needed thing to fix Afghanistan.
- ◆ Reforms in bringing youth in power and giving them high public positions.
- ◆ Policies of boosting appointment of educated women in key governmental positions.

It can be concluded that Afghans will not accept a conventional Taliban government where even basic human rights were not granted. Therefore, thinking of surrendering to Taliban to establish their 1400s old ideological government in Afghanistan of 2019 is, not only a monstrous strategic mistake, but if even such a government is formed, it will not survive for six months. The U.S. government should understand that a conventional Taliban government can't be an option or solution. It may have to rethink its strategy on Afghanistan.

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