

PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN: ROLE OF REGIONAL COUNTRIES AND UNITED STATES

Muhammad Khan* and Shabir Ahmad Khan**

Abstract

The year-2019, marked the 40 years of instability and chaos in Afghanistan, ever since it was invaded by former Soviet Union in December 1979. In the last forty years, the Afghan instability and conflict has been so transmissible that any peace plan, initiated even with sincerity got entombed into viscid domestic ambiguities, undesired regional rivalries and geopolitical interests of great powers. Owing to internal instability and frequent foreign invasions, there could not develop a cohesive national character within Afghanistan. Besides, there has been no institutional build-up and development which could have provided a strong base for the establishment of good governance system. In the absence of domestic peace and a unanimously acceptable leadership, the invaders and regional players have been exploiting Afghan geopolitics and its diverse societal makeup. Above all, the poor economic system, lack of needed resource base and massive unemployment constrained the flexibility, the Kabul regimes could have utilized for the minimum economic management at the domestic level. Furthermore, the post 2014 drawdown of US and NATO forces did not provide conducive environment where Afghans could have taken independent decisions to determine their future course of action for the larger national interest of the state and masses. The paper takes a critical analysis of the above-mentioned factors, which impeded peace process from taking firm roots in Afghanistan. The paper also puts into debate the US strategic interests in and around Afghanistan and diverging interests of regional countries which further impede peace process in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, peace process, CBMs, United States, Russia, China, stakeholders, Taliban and negotiations.

* Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: drmkedu@gmail.com

** Professor & Director, Area Study Centre (Russia, China & Central Asia), University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: shabirasc15@uop.edu.pk

Introduction

In the historical context, Afghan geopolitics has been exploited by major powers and regional countries alike. In its modern history, the Afghan masses have not known peace in their motherland ever since the former Soviet Union stepped into Afghan soil in 1979. Thereafter, neither there has been an effective central government in Kabul nor could the fragile administrations harmonize the masses into a national cohesive power. Despite deployment of 150,000 troops at one time, United States could not establish peace in Afghanistan since October 2001.¹ Despite its heavy military deployment in last 18 years US could not shrink the influence of Taliban in Afghanistan. Failure to achieve this goal, US had to accept reality of Taliban in Afghanistan and undertook rounds of talks with them from a position of equality.

Domestically, there existed an absence of any serious efforts for peace between Kabul regime and Taliban. Indeed, there existed an unending cycle of internal conflicts among various Afghan groups, based on; tribal rivalries, ethnic differences, political divide and above all the Taliban domination over major parts of the country. Practically it has been beyond the competence of the Afghan Government to establish the writ of state all over the Afghan territory. Taliban is a reality in Afghanistan, a fact denied by US for quite some time. Underestimating the power of Taliban had led US to face a perpetual setback in its longest deployment in Afghanistan. "Between 60% and 70% of Afghanistan is now contested or under the control of the Taliban."²

Indeed, peace in Afghanistan would remain a distant dream without engaging the Taliban. From 2014 onwards, Taliban leadership has been talking to officials from neighbouring states as well as great powers including United States. Besides several rounds of formal talks with US in Qatar and UAE, Taliban delegation has been to Moscow on a number of occasions.³ During February 2019 talks in Moscow, Taliban had the

¹ Violence mars Afghanistan peace meeting in Kabul, BBC South Asia, (June 2, 2010). Accessed at; <https://www.bbc.com/news/10211026>.

² By Clarissa Ward, Chief International Correspondent, Najibullah Quraishi and Salma Abdelaziz, 36 Hours with Taliban; CNN goes exclusively behind Taliban lines as the US prepares to pull its troops after 17 years of war in Afghanistan, *CNN*, (February 2019). Accessed at; <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/36-hours-with-the-taliban-intl/>

³ Extended US-Taliban peace talks in Qatar raise Afghan hopes; Talks in Qatar have now gone on for four days with analysts hoping they 'open a way for an intra-Afghan

opportunity to engage with Russia and other neighbouring states like; China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is worth mentioning that, Russia, China and Pakistan have made serious efforts for bringing peace in Afghanistan through their tri-partite talks in last few years. These talks were sabotaged by rival powers at a critical stage by provoking Ashraf Ghani Government.⁴ Taliban also believe that, “Most countries have acknowledged our status”⁵ This is true, since many countries have invited Taliban for negotiations which gave them a sort of legitimacy for their existence as a political entity.

The neo-realist theoretical perspective gives the most pertinent description of the contemporary situation in Afghanistan. In the realm of power politics, each state is vying to protect its interest at regional and global level in an anarchic international system. Though US is still a super power but practically there emerged multiple power centres at the global level, influencing various regions and countries surround them. Afghanistan is a case study where rising China and resurgent Russia challenge the very authority of US and its long-term presence. On its part, U.S is seeking a unilateral negotiation with Taliban as a bargaining chip for its long-term stay in the region for attainment of its strategic objectives. In September 2019, the last minute arrangement for signing of an agreement between US and Taliban failed, since US establishment (US Deep State) never wanted complete pull out of its troops from Afghanistan for the obvious reasons of its long term strategic objectives.

In fact, Taliban were adamant for a phased pull-out of US troops, since it was the basic theme of their struggle against US presence in Afghanistan, after losing power in 2001. As a pretext, President Trump had to take a cover-up of one of US soldiers, killed in Taliban attack in Afghanistan. President Trump said, “Unfortunately, in order to build false leverage, [the Taliban] admitted to an attack in Kabul that killed one of our great soldiers. I

dialogue', *Al-Jazeera*, (January 24, 2019). Accessed at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/extended-taliban-peace-talks-qatar-raise-afghan-hopes-190124144710617.html>.

⁴ Afghan government frozen out of Moscow peace talks with the Taliban, *The Washington Post*, (February 4, 2019), Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-government-frozen-out-of-moscow-peace-talks-with-the-taliban/2019/02/04/b9670c46-286a-11e9-8ee7-0d74f4bf0295_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5d8320c23752

⁵ Russia reaches out to Afghan Leaders for Taliban Talks, Angering Kabul, *The Moscow Times* (*Reuters*), (November 2nd 2018). Accessed at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/11/02/russia-reaches-out-to-afghan-leaders-for-taliban-talks-angering-kabul-a63395>.

immediately cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations.”⁶ Apart from the neorealist framing the international structure, the states engaged in and around Afghanistan have made the region, a security complex, fits into the ‘Regional Security Complex Theory’ (RSCT), theorized by scholars like Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The theory establishes a linkage between regional security and international security where apart from states; non-state actors also play a dominant role in this security complex. Afghanistan is located in region where it makes a junction between South and Central Asia, logically attracting the attention of major powers like China and Russia, both having convergence of security interests against presence of external power in this regional security complex.

The struggle for the attainment of power is a perpetual and unique feature of international politics. This power politics give way to security competitions among states and major powers. In order to understand the dynamics of peace and war, the alliance system and the balance, it is important to understand the relative distribution of power in the international system. Kenneth Waltz, a structural realist argues that all state, particularly the major powers are always concerned about the potentials of other states. The US-Taliban talks have resumed once again, nevertheless in case of a future deal, there may be a possibility of accommodating US forces by Taliban, which would irk its peer competitors; Russia and China.

Afghanistan is a pivotal state in the Eurasian region having proximity with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which U.S views critically. In such a case, the ultimate concern of these states will be their security vulnerabilities, which enhances while US military remain at their door step. U.S presence in this region with security maximization may ultimate leads towards power maximization; an offensive form of realism as explained by Mearsheimer. Indeed, the international structure compels states to maximize their security which ultimately contributes towards power maximization, giving way to conflicts like Afghanistan. At global level, there neither exist supra-state concept nor the satisfied or status quo state(s). In the contemporary system, states are constantly searching for prospects to gain power at the expense of other states. At the global level, U.S finds it extremely difficult to continue with its hegemonic stature which Mearsheimer consider as, “the world is destined to perpetual great power

⁶ Trump cancels secret US meeting with Afghan Taliban, *BBC*, (September 8, 2019). Accessed at; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49624132>

competition,⁷ and Afghanistan has become the ground of this great power competition.

The Geopolitical Interests of China in Afghanistan

In the Chinese strategic calculus, Afghanistan has a unique significance from the perspective of geopolitics and geo-economics. China desires a deeper and a closer cooperation with Afghanistan. All regional countries, surrounding Afghanistan would like peace and stability in the region and Afghanistan is the linchpin for this peace. China would always like to have a constructive engagement with Afghanistan. A constructive Chinese engagement in Afghanistan will serve its economic, strategic and security interests. In case China decides to remain indifferent to what is happening in Afghanistan, there will be no stability and extra regional powers will continue exploiting it for their vested interests. Indeed, an unstable and anarchic Afghanistan with active militancy stands contrary to Chinese interest. Its interests and interests of regional countries would only be served by maintaining stability and defying the on-going chaotic socioeconomic and socio-political situation in Afghanistan which will also contribute towards peace in its autonomous region, Xinjiang.

China unveiled its policy towards Afghanistan in 2012, once former Chinese President Mr Hu Jintao clearly hinted from the SCO forum that, “We will continue to manage regional affairs by ourselves”.⁸ He indeed referred towards protecting against the extra regional involvement in Afghanistan causing; ‘shocks and turmoil’ under the cover of reconstruction. President Xi Jinping later reiterated Chinese commitment for the peace, stability and economic prosperity of Afghanistan. He emphatically said, “A new era of cooperation in China-Afghanistan relations to take development to a new depth and breadth”.⁹ Afghanistan also reciprocated positively, backing Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while realizing the geopolitical

⁷ Derek Drinkwater, Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations: the Practitioner as Theorist, Oxford University Press, New York-2005, P52.

⁸ Shuja Nawaz, Exiting Afghanistan: A Regional Approach, Atlantic Council, June 19, 2012. Accessed at; <http://shujanawaz.com/2012/06/exiting-afghanistan-a-regional-approach/>

⁹ Ankit Panda, Afghanistan and China Open a New Chapter; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is in China for his first trip abroad as president, The Diplomat, October 29, 2014. Accessed at; <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/afghanistan-and-china-open-a-new-chapter/>

realities which makes Afghanistan as a hub for the regional and global “trade, transit, and peace.”¹⁰

Envisaging a constructive Chinese role in Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani, visited China in his first overseas visit in October 2014. His first official trip to China explicitly explains the desire for bilateral relations on both sides. There is reciprocity since then, Afghans look towards China for its active engagement towards Afghan economic development and stabilization, the Chinese side is eager to be forthcoming to play the desired role and benefit its own Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on long-term basis. China has already invested in the mineral sector of Afghanistan with local adequacy. Dozens of Chinese companies are working in various parts of the country, after signing the oil, gas and minerals exploration deals of over \$7 billion for next 25 years.¹¹ China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner, Watan Oil and Gas, secured the rights to three oil blocks in the provinces of Sari-i-Pul and Faryab in north-western Afghanistan in 2011.¹²

Apart from exploration of oil and gas, China has invested \$4.1 billion, to develop 5 million-ton copper deposits in next 2-3 decades.¹³ Two Chinese state-owned companies, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited won the projects and since then has made a lot of progress in the development of the projects. The consortium later called itself MCC-JCL Aynak Minerals (MJAM) formally runs the project. As per estimates, Mes Aynak mine is world’s second largest copper deposits with 5.5 million metric tons of high-grade copper ore. Metrological survey reveals that, Afghanistan has huge deposits of Lithium, like Saudi Arabia has oil reserves. Lithium is rare metal, being used in cell phones apart from its usage in electric car batteries. Chinese investment is expected to ensure local socioeconomic development.

In last few years, China is approaching its neighbours, seeking to consolidate good neighbourly and friendly relations for the promotion of regionalism through a partnership and cooperation on security matters. The visionary Chinese leader Mr Xi Jinping is an advocate of good neighbourly relationship, which would subsequently contribute towards Chinese ascendancy. In fact, China is pursuing the long term objectives of achieving the status of dominant global power by 2049, the year of Diamond Jubilee of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Raja Muhammad Khan, China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan, FWU Journal of Social Sciences, Special Issue no. 1(1), (Summer 2015)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

the People's Republic of China. The Chinese expert, Andrew Small, view China as the only country in the region to play a part in the economic development of Afghanistan and the region surrounding it. "If you look across Central Asia that is what has already happened. ... China is the only actor which can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out".¹⁴ Taking into account the economic potentials of Afghanistan and level of investment, China can made in this war-ridden country, there will be mutuality of economic development, prosperity and up gradation of their bilateral relations in the days to come.

Russian Perspective of Peace in Afghanistan

In February 2019, a group of Afghan notables and officials was invited by Russian Federation for having negotiations with Taliban in Moscow. This group included the people like former Afghan President Hamid Karazai and some others, those who formed part of Mujahidin against Soviet invasion. Nevertheless, incumbent President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah was not called to participate in the talks. Later, President Ghani had shown his concern over the invitation to selected few politicians and former war lords. Moscow talks were held immediately after there was a meeting between Taliban and US representative in Doha, capital of Qatar. Upon failure of an agreement between Taliban and US in September 2019, Taliban visited Moscow once again.

Though, US is talking to Taliban at its own, without taking President Ghani on board, yet the incumbent President seems happy with the negotiations between US and Taliban. President Ashraf Ghani however seems unhappy over the Russian invitation to a selected group of politicians and war lord for talks at Moscow. President Ghani feels that, talks at multiple level would 'muddle the US-backed peace process'. This would mean that President Ghani is exultant with US talks with Taliban and not interested in Russian sponsored talks with Taliban.

It is pertinent to mention that, Russia has invited the representatives of almost all neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, United States and President Ghani for a debate on Afghan peace in August 2018 at Moscow. U.S and President Ghani refused this offer which obliged the Moscow to invite other politicians for this revised schedule of talks. President Ghani has shown displeasure over the talks in Moscow. As per a statement of an

¹⁴ Wajih Ullah, China's Maneuvering In Afghanistan: Political And Economic Interest – OpEd, *Eurasia Review*, (December 2018). Accessed at; Accessed at; <https://www.eurasiareview.com/01122018-chinas-maneuvering-in-afghanistan-political-and-economic-interest-oped/>

Afghan official “We requested Russia to cancel the summit”.¹⁵ President Ghani perceived that, such high level multiple meetings would raise the status of Taliban and make the peace process a complex phenomenon.

In reality, a repeated engagement between US and Taliban and Russia and Taliban really elevated the stature of Taliban. This is a direct recognition of Taliban as a reality in Afghanistan. Moreover, this is also an acknowledgment that, without reconciliation with Taliban, there would remain uncertainty in Afghanistan and volatility in the region. Pakistan has long been emphasizing the US and other power centres to accept Taliban as a reality and talk to them for the durable peace. Whereas the U.S led talks with Taliban are in isolation without involving even the Afghan Government. However, the Russian led talks include all neighbours of Afghanistan and the Taliban, thus attaining a broad-based consensus, essentially needed for regional peace and stability.

In fact, U.S has been secretly engaged with Taliban since 2010/11, once it had over 150,000 troops present on Afghan soil. Moreover, US engagement with Taliban may aims at its national interests; getting the Taliban’s consent for long-term stay of its forces in Afghanistan or else for the strategic usage of Taliban in a future scenario. The Russian engagement with Taliban is conversely encompasses all neighbouring countries and Afghanistan. In the process, Russia and China will be the major beneficiary by relegating US in the regional politics. In a way, it’s a global power politics, where all power centres would like to have their linkages with Taliban.

Russia and Pakistan have transformed their bilateral relationship in last two decades. According to dominant view, this development is part of new strategic alignment, shaping internationally where China and Russia are trying to undo the status quo (unipolar global system) in which Pakistan is being viewed as a linchpin. Another class of international relations scholars feels that, cordiality in Pakistan-Russia relationship is primarily because of unstable situation in Afghanistan, where US presence is being seen by Russia as a challenge for the regional security. According to Petr Topychkanov, a South Asian expert of Russian Federation, “Russia is

¹⁵ Russian bid for Taliban talks angers Kabul, *The News International (Reuter)*, (November 3, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/388977-russian-bid-for-taliban-talks-angers-kabul>.

concerned about the long-term presence of the US and its allies in Afghanistan.”¹⁶

A senior Professor of John’s Hopkins University, Mr Daniel Markey, view progress in Pak-Russia relationship for attainment of two key concerns; first; ‘to minimize the hazards of militancy from Afghanistan and second; to curtail the US influence in Afghanistan’. He said, “The point is that Russia and Pakistan perhaps have more in common with respect to the war in Afghanistan than U.S has with either of these.”¹⁷ This fact has been deduced from the previous history of the region and these countries. Prospect of Pakistan becoming the future energy corridor from Central Asia to South Asia is yet another aspect of this growing relationship between Pakistan-Russia. Russian oil and gas companies will explore the opportunities of pipelines for oil and gas from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan and rest of South Asian region. Indeed, at regional and global level, Pakistan and Russia have many commonalities and convergence of interests which can best be attained through a regional solution of Afghan problem.

US Strategic Objectives and Peace in Afghanistan

In order to negotiate with Taliban, US has sought Pakistani assistance in 2018. This is despite US neglected Pakistan and stopped its military and economic assistance after President Trump took over the power at Whitehouse. Many analysts viewed this selective re-engagement policy of US with Pakistan as very significant development from the perspective of its political and strategic interests in this region. Daniel Markey, a long-time observer of Pak-US relations, wrote in his book, ‘No exit from Pakistan: America’s tortured relationship with Islamabad’ that despite all the problems and trust deficit that the US had with Pakistan and its military, ‘the answer lay in managing the problems rather than finding a solution’. Why managing problems and why not a permanent solution? It’s because the US civilian leadership thinks differently from Pentagon. The damage control by Pentagon of Trump’s anti-Pakistan tweet of January 1, 2018 is illustration of the same complexity. US establishment understands that for gaining headway in South Asia and Afghanistan, Pakistani support is essentially required.

¹⁶ Shifting alliances as Pakistan manages relationship with US, *Daily Times*, (February 28, 2018). Accessed at; <https://dailytimes.com.pk/208331/shifting-alliances-pakistan-manages-relationship-us/>

¹⁷ Dr Abdul Ruff, Will A Reset Be Possible In Russia-Pakistan Relationship? – OpEd, *Eurasia Review*, (March 18, 2018). Accessed at; <https://www.eurasiareview.com/18032018-will-a-reset-be-possible-in-russia-pakistan-relationship-oped/>

Pentagon has been advising the President Trump that, such discriminatory acts would harm the US interests in Asia, particularly in Afghanistan. It was in the same context that, President Trump wrote a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan for assistance in brokering a deal with Taliban. Besides, there has been a desire at the level of State Department as well as at Pentagon for a re-engagement with Pakistan. Restoring training courses for the military officers of Pakistan in US military institutions is step towards re-engaging Pakistan. Re-engagement with Pakistan is indeed, aims at attainment of U.S strategic objectives, while being in Afghanistan. Apart from what US claim for rebuilding Afghanistan, it has five major objectives in the region.¹⁸

These strategic objectives are: One, to have a check on the rising power of China, which US consider as its peer competitor in the international politics. While being in Afghanistan, US can conveniently engage China on multiple grounds; strategic, economic and political. Two; countering resurgent Russia, where President Putin is openly challenging the United States and its eastwards military expansion. Russian efforts for the stabilization of Afghanistan, while involving Taliban and other regional actors is indeed aims at countering US presence in Afghanistan. Three: to have a close watch on Iran, its expanding power in the Middle East and particularly its nuclear programme. Iran has hinted to restart Uranium enrichment after US pull-out from Nuclear Deal-2015. Killing of top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 by US was a clear message for Islamic Republic that, Washington will not tolerate Iran's influence in Middle East, which runs counter to US interests.

Fourth: to keep pressure on nuclear Pakistan and contest Pak-China relationship. US may not like a militarily strong Pakistan having strategic alliance with China and undertaking projects like China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Rather, it would be interested in a Pakistan, which accepts its dictates in the politics of Asia. Fifth: to have an influence in the Central Asian region, this entails two aspects; denying Russian and Chinese involvement and paving ground for its own influence there. Indeed, as a super power, US would always like to counter any effort by rising China and resurgent Russia. Therefore, the geopolitics of Pakistan and Afghanistan is significant in this regard, which US would never like to lose. The above mentioned US strategic objectives can be achieved only if US is able to prolong its military stay in Afghanistan which warrants reconciliation with Taliban and a friendly Pakistan. It is in the same context that, there has been re-engagement between Taliban and US in October 2019, after cancellation of agreement in September 2019.

¹⁸ ED Corcoran, John Feffer, *Why Afghanistan requires a long-term U.S. commitment, not as a military occupier but rather as a development partner*, Institute for Policy Studies, (October 1, 2009). Retrieved from https://ips-dc.org/why_afghanistan/

The recent change in US attitude and its attempt to re-engage with Pakistan is indicative of the fact that, the super power has once again realized the significance of Pakistan towards implementation of its strategic objective. In this regard, the two statements of President Trump need careful analysis. Trump's New Year tweet of January 1, 2018, seriously criticised Pakistan with dire consequences. However, in his New Year statement of January 2, 2019, he seems pacifying and appreciating Pakistan. He said in his statement that, he looks forward to meet the new Pakistani leadership with the desire to "have a great relationship with Pakistan." Indeed, US consider Pakistan as linchpin for the attainment of its strategic objectives. In the same context, Prime Minister Imran Khan along with Army Chief had a significant visit of Washington in July, 2019. Peace process in Afghanistan was one of the main agenda of this meeting. Both sides agreed for a long-term cooperation for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan.¹⁹

The South Asia policy, announced by President Trump on August 21, 2017, was more of rhetoric and blame game against Pakistan and regional countries. Rather taking the ownership and responsibilities for bringing peace in Afghanistan, Trump said, "It is up to the people of Afghanistan to take ownership of their future, to govern their society, and to achieve an ever-lasting peace."²⁰ Contrary to ground realities, President Trump declared Afghanistan as friend and a partner which will not be dictated by US since the people of Afghanistan are well aware of living in the complex Afghan society.' A realistic analysis of US actions on grounds in Afghanistan and its policies about Pakistan give an impression that, US may not be very eager to bring stability in Afghanistan and the region, surrounding it. India very rigidly follows the US policy guidelines in Afghanistan and the broader region. Such an approach has created distrust among the regional stakeholders, having geographical proximity with Afghanistan about presence and role of extra-regional powers. Whereas, these regional countries would like a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, the vested interests of extra-regional forces are quite opposite.

¹⁹ Imran Khan: Pakistan PM meets Trump in bid to mend ties, *BBC News*, (July 23, 2019). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49032495>.

²⁰ Nora Kelly, Full Transcript: Donald Trump Announces His Afghanistan Policy, *Atlantic*, (August 21, 2017). Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/full-transcript-donald-trump-announces-his-afghanistan-policy/537552/>

The Afghan Geo-economics

Besides, its strategic objectives, United States is also eyeing at the natural resources of Afghanistan. As per US Geological Survey Afghan mineral deposits are having worth of trillions of US Dollars.²¹ Survey also includes that, Afghan soil is home to many costly and rare metals like; Uranium, bauxite, tantalum, gold, platinum, copper, iron ore and zinc, besides huge reserves of hydrocarbon. The heavy Chinese investment in Afghanistan is a cause of great concern for US and its allies, since they considered themselves as the one who brought normalcy in Afghanistan while China did not pay any attention.

With the consent of US, India has made huge investment in mineral exploration and other sectors of Afghanistan in last one decade. Indian investments cover larger sectors like; mining, education, Information Technology (IT), reconstruction, agriculture, livestock, communication and many other sectors. Dozens of Indian companies are operating in Afghanistan in almost all fields. While being appreciative of Indian investment and its role in Afghanistan, U.S is critical about the Chinese role in Afghanistan. Afghan Government however, welcomes Chinese investment. President Ghani said in a statement that, “We look at China as a strategic partner in the short term, medium term, long term and very long term.”²² There was a matching response from President Mr Xi Jinping of China. Both neighbouring states had already signed strategic partnership agreement in 2012, covering cooperation in multiple fields. China is providing economic assistance to Afghanistan for development of various projects. The major areas include; professional training for 3,000 Afghan security personnel for next five years, \$330 million in grants, \$5 million humanitarian assistance and scholarship program for 500 Afghan students.²³

Failing to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, the Trump Administration is seriously weighing the options for the privatization of war in Afghanistan.²⁴ Otherwise, there are thousands of US civil contractors,

²¹ Tamim Asey, Are Afghanistan’s Mineral Deposits the Answer to the Country’s Economic Woes?, *Global Security Review*, (December 31, 2018). Accessed at; <https://globalsecurityreview.com/afghan-mineral-deposits-answer-economic-woes/>

²² BBC, Afghanistan's new president starts landmark China visit, October 28, 2014. Retrieved from; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29803768>

²³ Peter Ford. Afghanistan: out with NATO, in with China? *The Christian Science Monitor*, (October 28, 2014). Accessed at; <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2014/1028/Afghanistan-Out-with-NATO-in-with-China>

²⁴ Mariam Amini, Privatizing War in Afghanistan Endangers Civilians US Security Contractors, Afghan Forces Have Long Eluded Accountability, (Human Rights Watch,

already working in Afghanistan, alongside its military since 2011, pursuing the objectives as envisioned by Pentagon. With a failure of a deal with Taliban at the critical moment, U.S is left with only option of privatizing the war, as masses are objecting to its active military involvement in the so far longest US war in its history. However, US would never leave Afghanistan, since it has a number of strategic and economic interests there. Its six major military bases in Afghanistan are situated in the areas having costly and rare metals besides their strategic locations.

Indeed, US deep state feels that, it has right over these resources as war reparation, where it spent billions of USD in last two decades. Besides political and strategic goals, all wars have economic objectives and Afghanistan cannot be an exception. Apart from Afghan geo-economic, US is also eyeing at the vast Central Asian resources, for which it has to remain stick to Afghan geopolitics. US military presence in Afghanistan is indeed a great concern for China and Russia; an aspect of international power play, a mix of geo-economics and geopolitics. Whereas, the great powers play their power politics, the region would remain in turmoil without lasting peace and stability, which in turn minimize the possibility of economic prosperity for the huge masses of this region.

Indo-US Collaboration in Afghanistan

Former US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta had a clear vision of the Pentagon, the US Defence Headquarters, that India must assume a military and political role in Afghanistan, following US and NATO pull-out from Afghan soil. He once disclosed that, “India to take a more active role in Afghanistan as most foreign combat troops leave in 2014.”²⁵ India already enjoyed an enhanced role in Afghanistan, beginning with US invasion in 2001. Under the military cover of US, India has deeply entrenched itself into Afghanistan, controlling all aspects either in collaboration with United States or with the total consent of Afghan Government. India too has its political, economic and military objectives to pursue, while being in Afghanistan. General McChrystal, being a critic of Indian role in Afghanistan was later removed from Command and forcibly retired from the service.

October 2, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/privatizing-war-afghanistan-endangers-civilians>

²⁵ Sanjeev Miglani, Taliban praise India for resisting Afghan entanglement, *Reuters*, (June 17, 2012). Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-india-idUSL3E8HG01G20120617>

A former Indian Army Chief, General Shankar Roy Chowdhury, once gave his assessment about Indian role in Afghanistan as a necessity. This former Indian General emphasized on training of Afghan National Army (ANA) by Indian Army. He said, this indeed, is the main focus, which India must pursue for its “long-term interests.” With Indian trained ANA, it will always be an adversary to Pakistan all along its western frontiers, relieving pressure from Indian Army on Pakistani eastern frontiers. From Afghan soil, India is promoting militancy in Pakistan; Balochistan province and along Pak-Afghan border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Besides, creating instability in Pakistan, India is overseeing the educational system of Afghanistan, thus creating sentiments of hate among Afghan youth against the state and people of Pakistan.

India is also training the Afghan security forces and its spying network (NDS), which always create problem for Pakistan. In fact, this Indian involvement alongside Indo-US collaboration is the biggest hurdle in establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. This was clearly indicated by General McChrystal, the former commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2009. Besides, Indo-US collaboration has undermined the role of Pakistan which has acted as the front line state against the US led war on terror. General McChrystal very clearly indicated in his operational assessment report-2009 that, peace in Afghanistan cannot be attained unless, Indian role and its growing influence is minimised.

Indeed, the General made some recommendations, for improving the security situation in Afghanistan and also to gain some space for bringing peace in Afghanistan. This all was possible, had US and Afghan Government could have minimized the role of India. This ill-fated General had to face the anger of US deep state and President Obama, while giving a realistic assessment. General McChrystal was later removed from Command and forcibly retired from the service.²⁶ Late Senator John McCain also advised President Obama to be careful in promoting Indian interests in Afghanistan. He believed that, if US will criticise Pakistan and encourage India to take a more active role in Afghanistan, it will frustrate Pakistan. A cooperative Pakistan can be instrumental in bring peace in Afghanistan.

The Daesh Factor

‘The Washington Post’ in its editorial page, October 13, 2015 described the terror of Daesh in Afghanistan in the wordings; “When the Islamic State

²⁶ Matthew C. Brand, General McChrystal’s Strategic Assessment Evaluating the Operating Environment in Afghanistan in the Summer of 2009, *Research Paper 2011-1* (Air University Press Air Force Research Institute Maxwell Air Force Base).

fighters seized the Mahmand Valley; they poured pepper into the wounds of their enemies.²⁷ Subsequently, these criminals burnt their hands in containers of boiling oil. People are blindfolded, tortured and blown apart with explosives buried underneath them.²⁸ A victim of their brutalities explained that, these cruel people pulled out teeth of my brother before he was made to sit on the bomb.²⁹

Apart from violently killing the people, Daesh is involved in massive rapes in various parts of Afghanistan. The newspaper quoted evidences from Sheberghan, Afghanistan that, women folk of all ages are under threat of rapes by Daesh terrorists.³⁰ According to locals, Daesh people would enter into any house and rape the women on gun point. In many cases, they would take the women in their camps and rape them for months and months.

Indeed, the rise of non-state actors like ISIS (Daesh) should not be treated as an isolated event. Such non state actors provide excuse to major powers for furthering their agendas. In this regard, many western writers and scholars have written a lot. The Book, *Ghost Wars* written by Steve Coll, relates to events and operations conducted by CIA in the pre and post environment of USSR invasion of Afghanistan. An analysis of the book indicates that, amount of access to information granted to author and the contents of the book indicate that the book has been written with purpose of forwarding US and CIA centric Narratives as an agenda. Indeed, for maintaining its power at the global level, United States needs such narrateves, and excuses in the form of non-state actors.³¹

U.S has been financing the Afghan Jihad when it suited it and left the region in haste for another round, the Post 9/11 Phase. Infact, CIA has been involved in creating, training, equipping and guiding Afghan Mujahideen for fighting against former USSR on the pretext of Jihad. Later, it used various

²⁷ Sudarsan Raghava, *The Islamic State is making these Afghans long for the Taliban*, *The Washington Post*, (October 13, 2015). Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Abdul Matin Sahak, 'Horrors that can't be told': Afghan women report Islamic State rapes *Reuters-World News* July 30, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamic-state-rape/horrors-that-cant-be-told-afghan-women-report-islamic-state-rapes-idUSKBN1KK0WG>

³¹ *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (Wilson Center, February 24, 2004). Retrieved from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/ghost-wars-the-secret-history-the-cia-afghanistan-and-bin-laden-the-soviet-invasion-to>

Afghan war lords against the interests of each other thus resulting into a civil war.³²

According to former President Hamid Karazai, Daesh entry and expansion in Afghanistan is directly controlled by US. It has been a US strategy to exploit the vulnerability of countries (where its interests lies) through organizations, individuals and communities. Later, it would abandon them once no longer required, thus, putting them at risk. As per Afghan officials, ISIS (Daesh) has been quite active in various parts of the country. The rise and indeed rapid expansion of Daesh in Afghanistan has put everyone in Afghanistan and Pakistan at quandary.

The Regional Perspective of Peace in Afghanistan

Peace in Afghanistan is considered as central for the peace in Asian Continent. This realization is felt equally in all regional countries of Asia, particularly; China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. For establishing peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been seeking a regional solution, where all important stakeholders should be taken on board. Indeed, apart from their direct or indirect involvement, these states have been seriously affected by the instability in neighbouring Afghanistan. In the same context Shah Mehmood Qureshi, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan visited four regional capitals; Kabul, Tehran, Beijing and Moscow from December 23-26, 2018. As an outcome of this visit, Foreign Minister was quite optimistic for brokering a peace process between Taliban and Afghan Government.

Pakistan also brokered a direct talk between United States Taliban in Doha, Qatar and Abu Dhabi (UAE). The Abu Dhabi round of talks was conducted under the speculation that, President Trump has ordered a drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan to 50% (7000 troops out of 14000) which is still ambiguous, since Pentagon is differing with such an option.

Mark Landler, the former White House correspondent writes in his analysis that, “So chaotic was Mr. Trump’s decision-making process; so transparent his appeal to his political base; and so lacking in a cogent explanation to allies or the public that the president’s move short-circuited what many say is a much-needed national debate about the future of America’s wars.”³³ A clear annoyance of Pentagon where Defence Secretary

³² Ibid.

³³ Trump Unites Left and Right Against Troop Plans, but Puts Off Debate on War Aims, *The New York Times*, (December 27, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/27/us/politics/trump-syria-afghanistan-withdraw.html>.

decided to depart, President Trump seems to be reconciling to his earlier decision.

Some in Washington believe that, it was an enticing strategy of White House to engage Taliban, since they have primary demand of pull-out of foreign forces from Afghanistan for any meaningful peace talk. Whatever have been the motives of this news, pulling out from Afghanistan is not in the strategic interests of United States. US policies are always debated well at the appropriate level before taking a final decision. Pakistan has an intimate concern for bringing peace in Afghanistan, which compelled it to take an initiative and a lead role for the success of Afghan peace talks. The Government of Pakistan and its establishment strongly realize that, Peace in Pakistan is directly related to peace in Afghanistan. In fact, there is a direct and indirect flow of militancy into Pakistan from Afghan soil. Then, in the absence of peace in Afghanistan, the 2.6 million Afghan refugees cannot go back to their homeland. In the garb of these refugees, at time the militants' carryout militancy in various parts of Pakistan.

Pakistan is an advocate of the fact that, there should be reconciliation between Afghan Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan through negotiations. For the success of these talks, there is need that, regional countries should provide guarantees. The regional assurances are necessary on three aspects; assistance needed for the economic uplift of Afghanistan, non-involvement in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and sureties about the security of Afghanistan against any aggression. Pakistan and China strongly realize that, Afghan problem cannot be resolved by military means. It necessitates a political solution through reconciliation process.

Iran also agreed to Pakistani proposal of intra-Afghan dialogue, supported by regional countries. In Moscow there was concord of opinion between two foreign ministers about the talks, which essentially should be led and owned by Afghan Government and Taliban. Moscow indeed, lauded Pakistani efforts for bringing a political settlement in Afghanistan. Russian Foreign Minister offered his country's full support for establishing peace in Afghanistan and the broader region of South and Central Asia.

Sincerity of Afghan Government is considered central for engaging Taliban and bringing them at negotiating table for a durable peace in this war-ridden country. In this regard, the Kabul regime will have to take independent decisions, rather dictates from elsewhere. Any negotiations between Afghan Government and Taliban should be focused towards larger benefit of Afghan masses; peace, stability and economic prosperity of the country. The regional countries can maximum give assurances for their whole hearted support and security guarantees. Pakistan has already assured Afghan

Government for its full support to end the current state of uncertainty in Afghanistan.

A Workable Way Forward for Regional Peace

Owing to internal strife and major power's involvement, Afghanistan has suffered since last four decades. Towards the beginning of each year, the people of this country hope for peace and stability, but each time, it ends up with more conflicts and human losses. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) took a strong note of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, took place in the first half of 2018. The report indicates that, 1700 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan in internal strife in first six months of year-2018, "the highest number recorded at any comparable time over the last decade."³⁴

The report also indicates that, there is an incessant rise in the rate of casualties, which are being inflicted on the civil population of Afghanistan by the warring factions. Apart from Afghan National Security forces and US Special Forces, a number of warring factions and militant organizations have been found directly or indirectly involved in human losses. Daesh (Islamic State-Khorasan Chapter), Afghan Taliban and host of splinter groups have been part of these conflicts. A report reveals that, 52% killings in Afghanistan have been caused by Daesh, followed by Taliban, who killed 40% people in 2017/18. There have been high numbers of human and material losses as collateral damages during the counter actions from Afghan and U.S forces.

As a credible way forward, the domestic conflicting situation in Afghanistan has to be contested by all stakeholders within the country. With the new mandate for next five years, the Afghan Government under Ashraf Ghani will have to take serious and sincere initiatives for bringing an end to chaotic domestic order which started from Soviet invasion-1979 deepened with US invasion in 2001 and complicated with the involvement multiple stakeholders. The past efforts for the establishment of peace in Afghanistan may be taken as antecedent and basis while initiating the new CBMs. While encouraging the US-Taliban peace talks, the Afghan Government must engage Taliban directly for cessation of attacks on each other. In this regard, both sides must take new CBMs to bridge the existing trust deficit.

³⁴ Afghan war inflicts record civilian deaths: UNAMA, *The Financial Daily* (16 Jul 2018).

Both parties (Government and Taliban) must understand that the ultimate losers of the domestic conflict are the state and society of Afghanistan. Afghans must understand that; external forces could not have invaded their motherland and exploited them, had there been no internal split among Afghans. Unless domestic rift among various Afghan factions come to an end, there will be no let-up in external interference and exploitation. From 1979, it is 4th generation of Afghanistan, facing a war like situation with no stability insight. There is a need that, all Afghan factions should come forward with sincerity for establishing peace, political stability and economic prosperity in Afghanistan. As a pomposity, United States is also working for peace, but, the factual position is quite different. It is pursuing its own strategic interests in this region.

While playing a constructive role towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, Pakistan even assisted US in the Doha peace process throughout from 2018 to 2019. Even after breakdown of talks in September 2019, US Special Envoy for Afghan Reconciliation Ambassador, Mr Khalilzad visited Islamabad and had in-depth discussion with civilian and military leadership of Pakistan for carrying forward the peace process with Taliban.³⁵ Pakistan whole heartedly facilitates a peace process, which is owned by Afghans, led by Afghans and implemented by all stakeholders of Afghanistan in a harmonious way.

Conclusion

The regional countries, especially; Pakistan, China and Russia visualize peace in Afghanistan as the most preferred and needed aspect for the regional peace. China visualizes that, peace and stability in Afghanistan would act as a booster and a precursor for peace in its Xinjiang autonomous region. Russia considers peace in Afghanistan as a contributor for peace in Central Asian region which is still under Russian influence. Iran is apprehensive of continued militancy and civil war in Afghanistan, thus fully support a negotiation process. All landlocked Central Asian states have shown a great resolve for Afghan peace. They all need an outlet through Afghanistan for their trade and commerce and export of huge reserves of hydrocarbon to energy deficient countries.

As an affected neighbour, Pakistan desires a durable peace, agreeable settlement and CBMs between Taliban and Afghan Government. It has

³⁵ Baqir Sajjad Syed, Khalilzad, PM discuss efforts for peace in Afghanistan. *Dawn*, (October 29, 2019). Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1513493/khalilzad-pm-discuss-efforts-for-peace-in-afghanistan>

already broker reconciliation through Murree Peace Process in July 2015 and still emphasizing Taliban and Afghan Government to engage each other for reconciliation and peace. With fresh mandate, the Ghani-Abdullah Abdullah Government should show seriousness with sincerity for engaging Taliban for a durable peace in Afghanistan.

Apart from US-Taliban talks, regional states having geographical proximity with Afghanistan must play a constructive role for the peace and stability in Afghanistan. China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan need to make serious efforts for reconciliation between Kabul Regime and the Taliban through CBMs. Peace in Afghanistan will contribute towards regional peace in South and Central Asia while impacting China and Russia positively.

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