

## **ENDGAME IN AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN**

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### **Abstract:**

*After the end of Cold War the geopolitics of the Asia Pacific witnessed a great momentum and change. Right after the 9/11 incident, the Bush administration while addressing the State of Union speech unequivocally expressed that he would send US troops into Afghanistan in order to root out Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, his policies have borne no fruit so far. Since Nine Eleven, it has taken USA at least 11 years, to have a complete sway in Afghanistan. Given the agonizing panorama of incidents, like: desecration of the Holy Koran and killing of 16 civilians in three villages in Afghanistan, speaks volumes about Americans mishandling of the war. The of-late policy of Obama administration is focused on troops to pull out. American drawdown policy in Afghanistan has rendered the researchers and analysts to think that Endgame in Afghanistan is not going to be an easy ride. It is widely held that Iraq-like withdrawal will leave many questions unanswered. This paper will examine the painful process of Endgame in Afghanistan. It will also attempt and address a few questions regarding political and economic stability of Afghanistan before American withdrawal. Moreover, this study will analyze critically the entire process of pull out in Pakistan's perspective besides highlighting, challenges and opportunities for Pakistan in the Post-withdrawal Afghanistan.*

**Key words:** *Drawdown, Governance, Terrorism, Economic retardation, Radicalism.*

### **Introduction:**

Afghanistan is a gateway to Central Asia. Although it is a landlocked country yet holds great geopolitical importance. USA invaded Afghanistan in order to drive out Al-Qaeda and terrorists. But after elapsing of 11 years, they have failed to reign in anti-state and non-state actors from creating trouble in the region. Mr. Leon Panetta announced troop's withdrawal in 2013 where as Afghan government is asking Obama administration not to start early pull out. They are of the view that early troops going back to home will create worst crisis in their country. However, it is widely held in American circles that "Since the invasion of Afghanistan by US, their major focus was happen to be to foil ill designs of the terrorists and militants to use Afghanistan as their launching pad" (Telegraph: 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2012).

Afghanistan and Iraq have been the hot spots in the world. The major focus of American policy makers has been on South Asian issues. Since a decade Americans sole concentration has been on Afghanistan. The Obama's policy of drawdown from

Afghanistan has been the subject of hot debate at national and international forums. He announced that his country is going to withdraw her troops from Afghanistan by 2014. In addition to this, it is said that after 2014, the peace and stability in Afghanistan will be restored. The institutions will be in a better position to run itself. However, the most of the strategic analysts are of the view that American-NATO withdrawal is not going to be an easy ride.

“Afghanistan urged the Obama administration to stick to an agreed timetable for withdrawing its troops after the US caught allies off guard by saying it would switch to a training role next year. The remarks by Leon Panetta, the defense secretary, surprised Afghan and NATO officials, who had assumed the US, would continue to play a main combat role until the completion of a phased security handover to Afghan forces in late 2014” (Green, Dyer and Blitz: 2012).

After the Vietnam War, Americans believe that Iraq is going to the second expensive war. The promises were made with Iraq about restoration of peace and stability in Iraq. The so-called slogans for democracy, human rights, economic sustainability and institution building have deadly failed to bring peace and stability in Iraq. The country like Iraq is not devoid of civil wars, chaos and anarchy. The colonial masters including Uncle Sam have failed to deliver the goods to the people of Iraq. This country is witnessing crisis of governance, dissatisfaction among political factions, rise of Shia factor, generating an atmosphere of intolerance etc. There are some people who hold a view to even handover Iraq to Iran. However, political parties are also divided over American stay or withdrawal. Some of the political parties in Iraq think that America should stay for long period so that unwanted forces may be neutralized. And a few others believe that America should quit Iraq as soon as possible and let alone Iranian people to decide their line of action.

Before this study analyzes the process of Endgame in Afghanistan, it is notable to highlight the current issues and problems involved in the process of Endgame.

- Crisis of good governance in Afghanistan
- War lords divided on ethnic lines/ Reconciliation with Taliban
- Role of regional players in Afghanistan

“Mr. Obama announced plans to withdraw 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of this year. The remaining 20,000 troops from the 2009 “surge” of forces would leave by next summer, amounting to about a third of the 100,000 troops now in the country. He

said the drawdown would continue “at a steady pace” until the United States handed over security to the Afghan authorities in 2014” (USNEWS: 02 February, 2012).

### **Crisis of Governance in Afghanistan:**

Afghanistan is a country where peace and stability has hardly been witnessed except Taliban rule in 1990's. For decades, ranging from invasion of Sikander Azam to Uncle Sam, Afghanistan has almost remained unruly, ungovernable, conflict-ridden etc. The roles of powers that be in terms of restoration of peace and security have almost been pipedreams. “However, most of the leaders in Afghanistan are known for their criminal behavior and lack competency. They are believed to be not fit to govern themselves. Hamid Karzai- Afghan president while displaying his displeasure said that he would take stern action in terms of rooting out corruption from his own government” (Filkins: 2011).

The civil wars between Afghan warlords, poppy cultivation, corruption, injustice, poverty and hunger, malnutrition, weak institutions, destabilization, conspiracies, unemployment, radicalism, economic retardation, political inaction and lack of accountability are the obvious symptoms of bad governance. “The ongoing violence in Afghanistan's east, along the Pakistan border, and the high-profile attacks and assassinations that continue to wreak havoc in and around Kabul. The violence is compounded by worries about government corruption, the fragile economy, and fears that Afghan forces won't be ready to take over security of the country as American and NATO troops leave” (Joyner: 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2012).

However, the crisis of governance can only be solved with restoration of tribal culture, bring moderate Taliban in the political mainstream of Afghanistan, rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan, non-intervention of external powers, frequent elections, strong leadership, consensus-ridden constitution, trade and economic investment, equal employment opportunities for all, equal representation of all sections of society, justice , accountability and transparency. This is a gradual process. It will require consistent effort from all stakeholders who wish to see Afghanistan as a peaceful and stable nation among the comity of nations of the world.

### **War lords divided on ethnic lines/ Reconciliation with Taliban:**

After the withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan, this country was running on the path of painful journey. The Russian left them without giving the reliable, logical, reasonable political solution for the future of Afghanistan.

The noted writer of Guardian newspaper, Michael Williams, wrote an article entitled: “The Real Endgame in Afghanistan”, “the writer acknowledged that Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were not responsible for the deteriorating law and order situation in Afghanistan. Further he said that Taliban maintained peace and stability after USSR withdrawal in 1992” (05 May, 2011).

However, this deteriorated situation riddled with political feuds, civil wars, corruption, violence and general crime gave birth to the rag tag army like Taliban. These guys were supported financially, politically, diplomatically, militarily by regional and global players. At present, the yesterday's good guys turned to be today's bad guys.

After a decade or so to the invasion of Afghanistan by America and its satellite allies on one pretext or the other, is having a secret dialogue with Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan is being ignored in this dialogue process. She may not agree to the terms and conditions with which Americans are conducting the process of reconciliation with Taliban. Pakistan has great strategic interests in Afghanistan. It will be a great blow to the interests of Pakistan if it is ignored deliberately. Pakistan believes in the peace and stability of Afghanistan. And this is one of the supreme interests of Pakistan. Iran, India, Russia believes that Afghanistan should be divided on ethnic lines. However, this solution is not acceptable to Pakistan.

### **Afghanistan: An American Conundrum:**

George Friedman- an analyst, writer and author of many books, writes an article in Stratfor- Global Intelligence, dated: March 19, 2012, the caption of that article was:

“Afghanistan and the long War”. He writes that it has taken America more than 10 years to establish its writ in Afghanistan. Moreover, not only this but also larger war and smaller wars are being fought by America. He believes that Afghan war is one of the longest one ever fought by American forces. The off-shoot of this long war is affecting politically, militarily, economically and psychologically.

Politically speaking, as the period of election in USA is near there is visible decrease in Obama's graph. Militarily, this afghan quagmire is being equated with Vietnam. And the frequent changes in military top brass are also indicative of dissatisfaction of American leadership. James Joyner wrote in National Interest magazine, the title of his article was “Ending the Afghan Slog”, He says while quoting David Cameroon and Obama meeting. The latter said: that this is a “hard slog. This is a hard work. When I came into office, there had been drift in the Afghan strategy, in part because we had spent more time focusing Iraq instead” (March 19, 2012).

Economically, this war has affected USA in terms of rising inflation, heavy taxation, burgeoning unemployment and billions of dollars have been invested in what we call Afghanistan-the graveyard of empires. Robert Bales was a staff sergeant in US force. It was the fourth time after Iraq war that he was sent for combat duty in Afghanistan. He killed innocent people in Afghanistan This and a few other events shows that how much their forces are psychologically ready for waging a war in other countries.

Given the panorama of events like: Salala check post attack; burning of Holy Quran; killing of innocent people in Afghanistan; Israel-Iran looming war clouds; American's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan; failure of talks with Taliban; Pakistan's review of relations with USA will affect American's Grand Strategy in the context of South Asian.

### **Role of regional players:**

Realizing the gravity of Afghan quagmire, Barack Obama, during his election campaign (2008), had clearly delineated that without taking into confidence the regional stakeholders over Afghanistan matter, till then there would be no lasting and durable solution for the said problem. After embarking upon the most difficult and daunting challenge of being American president at this critical juncture, his administration reiterated upon India as well as Pakistan to have a common solution for the common problem. The Guardian news quotes: "American policies directly contradict with Pakistan. America intends to have Afghanistan free from what they characterize radical Islam besides its stability. This policy without doubt, leads one to think that the USA wanted to give Indians a safe passage to Afghanistan. This kind of nexus and policy was seen against Pakistan's Strategic Depth" (Guardian: 05 May.)

"Hastening America's exit will be painful, and undercuts years of U.S. efforts, but it's our least bad choice in this doomed war." (BBC: 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2012). Afghanistan is a country where the political, economic, security interests of regional players intersect. Keeping in view this wide range of interests, external intervention, Tribalism, factionalism, Cold War, conflict and anarchy have been the order of the day. The work of reconstruction, rehabilitation and rebuilding of war torn Afghanistan has been undertaken by not only regional players but also international donor agencies. Americans believe that "Neither they will try to make Afghanistan a perfect place, nor make police streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely". (Project Syndicate: Laidi: 2012) However, these so-called measures and assurances have almost failed to deliver goods to the war starved people of Afghanistan. Until or unless there is convergence of interests among regional or global powers, inter-Afghan Taliban dialogue, till then one may not hope for peace, tranquility and stability in Afghanistan.

### **Iran:**

Iran is a neighbor of Afghanistan. It has a geo-political, cultural and religious stakes in its neighbor. It can play a vital role in the political and economic stability of Afghanistan. However, the Post-Cold War era suggests that Iran did not welcome the Afghan refugees to enter into their land. This incident triggered civil war, poverty and hunger. After the incident of 9/11, the US and its allies engaged with nuclear Iran in order to topple down Saddam Hussein and Taliban from Afghanistan. With the end of Taliban and Saddam Hussain, the closeness and cordiality in US-Iran relations were witnessed.

Right from the Bonn Conference to the Obama's policy for withdrawal from Afghanistan are seen as positive developments by Iran. The Iranian involvement in Afghan matters is not devoid of politico-economic, religious, strategic and cultural interests. They see Herat, Farah and Nimruz as their areas of influence. Iranian thinking is dominated by two factors: one, Hazara- Shia dominated city, second, support for the Northern Alliance. They wish to see Afghanistan disintegrated on ethnic lines. These factors are considered as bottlenecks in the peaceful exit of America from Afghanistan. However, other regional and global players are not on the same page with what Iranian leadership believes.

According to State Department of the US: "The discovery of the first caches of Iranian – made weapons in Afghanistan, sent shock waves. It further stated that Iran was doing more than just bringing Western Afghanistan into its sphere of influence."

### **Russia:**

After Iran, Russia has a great role to play in Afghanistan. Russians believe that American exit from Afghanistan would result in the Vietnam-like defeat. It is widely held that America and its satellites will stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014. They fear that their cold war rival is going to have secret deal with Taliban. In addition to this, it is said that this type of American shift in thinking will lead to illicit drug trafficking and terrorism in to what Russian describe as their sphere of influence-Central Asia. Moreover, American stay in Afghanistan is seen by Russian as a grave threat to their security in the Caspian region.

"The continuous focus of NATO/ISAF on Northern side of Afghanistan-adjacent to Russia, have given birth to the fragile security in the region", writes Aunohita Mojumdar in Christian Science Monitor, Jan 20, 2011. Many analysts are of the view that development and security are interlinked with each other. Without ensuring security, how can one undertake huge investment in rebuilding and reconstructing Afghanistan? Keeping in view above analysis, Russia currently seems to be in a fix on various accounts. Firstly, engineered elections in Russian, Secondly, Post Arab Spring scenario, thirdly, loom war clouds over the Gulf region. Fourthly, American long stays in the Asia-Pacific region.

### **India:**

Indians have no geographic proximity with Afghanistan as Pakistan and Iran, yet it has strategic and economic interests. After the incident of 9/11, India was ready to offer her bases to America in order to launch military attacks over Afghanistan. But due to lack of geopolitical importance and relevance, it did not get attention of the Great Powers. Broadly speaking, Indian strategic goals in South Asian region are: Indian encirclement of Pakistan, Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership, containment of Islamic extremism, use Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia and regional policeman.

Pakistan was pressurized by Great Powers to give India transit facility or route towards Afghanistan. India is trying to have an assertive role by introducing Soft Power presence besides socio-political, economic and security areas in Afghanistan. India has established consulates in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-e-sharif. Pakistan feels that these steps on the part of India- like Strategic Partnership, and establishment of consulates, have triggered a new Great Game, clash of interests, civil war, and unrest in the region. India is believed to have been interfering in Pakistan's Baluchistan. These and a few other Indian activities have left great shock waves for Islamabad. Indian deep involvement in Afghanistan is also considered as a big hurdle in the dialogue and reconciliation process with Taliban.

### **China:**

After the invasion of Afghanistan by USA, China has been investing millions of dollars not only in energy sector (Aynak Copper-South of Kabul) but also in the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan. According to analysts, Beijing believes that USA's troop withdrawal from Afghanistan would herald in the power vacuum in the region. This power vacuum will lead to a New Great Game, strategic, economic and power rivalry in Afghanistan.

However, India with the help of Americans is trying to play a hegemonic role that is not acceptable either to Pakistan or China. Indo-US and Indo-Afghan Strategic partnership are not received as positive signals by the stakeholders in the region. India and China are competitive powers in the region. Their interests intersect with each other on many grounds. Their cooperation or competition is natural, given their past territorial dispute-1962.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan:**

Pakistan holds a great geopolitical importance in the region. It is considered as a Pivot of Asia. It is a hard country as portrayed by American writer Anatol Lieven. It is surrounded by nuclear powers and dangerous porous borders. After the joining of Pakistan with the Western allies, it has witnessed troublous and turbulations and highs and lows in its ties with western powers on the one pretext or on the other. Being a close ally of USA, Pakistan has much to offer in terms of US War on Terror. It provided a logistic support, strategic military bases and closely exchange of secret information on Afghanistan.

Zaki Laidi- Professor of International Relations wrote in Project Syndicate, 2012: "Despite a 10-year military presence, involving the deployment of more than 100,000 troops at a cost of \$550 billion, the US still has not succeeded in creating a credible alternative to the Taliban. Worse, its political alliance with Pakistan has frayed." He further said that Pak-US relations are not what they were depicted in the post 9/11 scenario. He also acknowledges Pakistan's sacrifices, responsibilities, sensitivities and mass exodus at Afghan border. He said, "If the US has been unable to involve Pakistan in

resolving the Afghanistan conflict, that failure simply reflects America's refusal to give the Pakistanis what they wanted: a shift in the regional balance of power at the expense of India" ([www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/obama-s-middle-east-malady](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/obama-s-middle-east-malady)).

The relations between Pakistan and USA are largely based on love and hate and from convenience of marriage to bad marriage. In spite of this highs and lows in relations they have enjoyed good and cordial relations in the past. America has been supporting Pakistan: economically, politically, defense. According to the US Congress: 'Pakistan was provided \$20 billion in aid between 2001 and 2011. In addition, Congress passed the Kerry-Lugar bill, which promised \$7.5 billion in economic aid from 2009-2014. The US also encouraged the International Monetary Fund to give Pakistan emergency financial assistance equivalent to \$11 billion, to be disbursed starting in late 2008'. However, the underlined pictures clearly reflect what Pakistan wants from America.

However, recently, given the Raymond Davis saga, Abbot Abad Operation, Memo gate scandal has resulted in the fracture and fissures in their relations. Obama has announced the date of troop exit from Afghanistan in 2013-14. This American withdrawal is not being taken as a good omen not only for Afghanistan but also for the entire region. American process of reconciliation with Taliban or secret talks is seen as a suicidal for the interests of Pakistan. Qatari dialogue-USA, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia-Taliban, is recipe to ignite Sunni-Shia factor in the region.

Therefore, clash of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan's interests are inevitable. Iran with the help of India and Russia can create a disturbance for Pakistan in Baluchistan and Afghanistan. This constant disturbance and interference in Afghan transition and Pakistan's Baluchistan may result in the security dilemma for Pakistan. Currently, Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership is widely perceived as an encirclement of Pakistan. If blame game and trust deficit will never ensure peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan believes that if America withdraws from Afghanistan without taking into account what Pakistan likes or dislikes will forestall peaceful dialogue process in Afghanistan. Pakistan that has been already bearing the burden of millions of Afghan refugees will further deepen the crisis for her weak economy. This population influx will lead to an abysmal socio-economic situation in Pakistan.

Keeping in view the above daunting challenges for Pakistan in the wake of American exit from Afghanistan is also seen as an opportunity. The process of dialogue with Taliban by Americans is in consonance with what Pakistan wants, and then it is an opportunity for Pakistan. It can revive its strategic depth in Afghanistan. Since Pakistan believes in integrated, stable and strong Afghanistan. It can neutralize its rivals in the region. Pakistan along with Beijing can play a great role in reconstruction and rebuilding process in Afghanistan. They can exploit natural resources not only in Afghanistan but they can also have easy access towards Central Asian Republics. Afghanistan is a bridge between South Asia and Central Asian region.

## **Conclusion:**

It is an open secret that since invasion of Afghanistan by NATO forces, peace and stability has remained a forlorn hope. The region is embroiled with crisis of multiple natures. For instance: poverty, extremism, mismanagement, bad governance etc. Peace in this region is linked with Afghanistan. Not only Pakistan but also entire region is very much affected by this self-inflicted chaos. Obama's fading and failing strategy and Pakistan's shrugging support with respect to US troops pull out from South Asia might cause a deep rupture between their relationships. From Raymond Davis saga to the tabling of resolution regarding Baluchistan by USA are not considered as good omen for Pak-US relation. This misperception has further confounded the peace overtures with Taliban.

Pakistan believes in peaceful, prosperous and stable Afghanistan. According to the current Foreign Minister of Pakistan, that Pakistan supports Afghan-led solution. And this support should not be seen as interference in Afghan matters. Until or unless the major powers find a logical, durable and reliable solution, taking into account what Pakistan believes, till then peace and stability might remain a pipedream. However, Americans off the hook policy, regarding troop's withdrawal may create a big vacuum in Afghanistan. This wide gap will be filled by regional stakeholders. It is feared that this situation will trigger a Cold war, conflict and conflagration in the region.

Before the US pull out from volatile region, they have to revisit their policy like peaceful coexistence and treat Afghanistan as a buffer state; should follow a regional approach; besides taking into account Pakistan's sensitivities. The need of an hour is to follow the famous adage of T.E. Laurence that it is better to let "them" do it than it is to try to "do it better" for them. Thus it is safe to say that Afghan nationals, local and communities should be allowed to choose their future line of action for their country. Pakistan has to follow careful, conscious and considerate steps in the wake of American's hasty pull out and phenomenon of realignment in the region.

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