

## AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGION IN 2013

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### Abstract

*The war against terrorism by USA and its allies, has brought disastrous implications for Afghanistan. It has not only contributed to human but also capital loses. The involvement of the various countries in Afghanistan has further deteriorated the situation. The presence or the withdrawal of the NATO forces, for maintaining tranquility in Afghanistan, has also become a debatable issue.*

*The present paper tends to explore the war against terrorism, the involvement of the various countries in Afghanistan and the implications of presence or withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan.*

### Keywords

War against terrorism, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, China, Central Asia countries, India, Russia, USA, NATO, Taliban.

### 1 Introduction

Afghanistan is a landlocked country which is devastated by decades of war from the first Anglo-Afghan war to the US led war on terrorism which started from 2001 and which is continuing. The people of Afghanistan have suffered most of their casualties in the civil war and also in the war against terrorism, in which houses were accidentally bombed in which many civilians were killed. In 2014, US led forces would withdraw from Afghanistan as the US had spent billions of dollars on this war and achieved nothing because they could not win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Afghanistan is in a state of crisis due not only to the presence of foreign forces and also due to the corrupt and incompetent government. International community in order to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan needs to pour more money to lift its war-torn economy by investing in their medium and long term projects like rebuilding the infrastructure in areas which are already hit by local insurgency i.e. roads, schools, irrigation channels, dispensaries etc.

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The current administration of Obama faces more and tough challenges in South Asia after the announcement of withdrawal of their forces in Afghanistan 2014. As Afghanistan prepares for its transition, it is faced with challenges like insecurity, corruption, drug-trafficking and political instability and also the rising of militancy and extremism in Pakistan which threatens the stability in the region.<sup>1</sup> After 12 years of fighting in Afghanistan which has affected the US and NATO countries' economies, and created economic crisis. As the war became unpopular in these countries, so they decided to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan because they cannot sustain it for the longer period. ISAF faces a number of challenges in the security sector especially the training of Afghan security forces, during the past several years ISAF forces faced attacks from local forces which the ISAF/US forces termed as green on blue attack which has created distrust among foreign and local security forces in Afghanistan. It will take decades for Afghanistan before it stands on its own feet, the international community needs to support the Afghan government with necessary funding from international financial institutions. As the time passes the United States plans to reduce its combat forces in Afghanistan, last year on 30<sup>th</sup> September the United States had reduced its military personnel to 65,936 from 86,692 as of March 31, 2012.<sup>2</sup> Even the regional countries had showed their concerns over US-NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan. In 2014 especially India which worries about the return of the Taliban. It is important for the international community to include the Taliban in the negotiations with the Afghan government. Conducting conferences outside Afghanistan will not work unless any practical steps are taken on the ground. Many conferences had been conducted in the past 12 years but none of them were useful for the Afghan people, the security situation which has already deteriorated in the country suicide bombing, killing of high level government and security officials has proved that the Afghans are not safe in Afghanistan. China which is also taking keen interest in developing Afghanistan, it wants to see Afghanistan a stable country and free from extremist elements. Similarly India has also invested in sectors in Afghanistan like in energy, transportation, education and health etc.

## **2 Role of Neighboring States**

The neighboring states also has the responsibility to work hard for a peaceful Afghanistan in years to come, the ethnically divided Afghanistan is not in the interest of the neighboring states and also the world as a whole.

### **(i) Pakistan**

One of the most important neighbors of Afghanistan is Pakistan. It not only shares a 2500 km long porous border, but most of the tribes living across the border overlap into each other, having the same ethnic, cultural and religious background. Pakistan is the only closest outlet of Afghanistan to the sea. Pakistan has already setup more than 1000 post on Pakistani side of the border more than

the post setup by the Afghan National Army (ANA) and US/NATO combine.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Afghanistan in infrastructure projects like roads, education sector and in other projects. But unfortunately Pakistan is now facing its own financial crisis which had reduced financial support to Afghan development projects. Internal conflict in Pakistan is also not in the interest of Afghanistan and the region because both are interlinked with each other if any incident happens in Afghanistan so Pakistan is directly affected. As estimated in March 2009 nearly 1.7 million Afghan refugees are living in Pakistan, but due to economic constraints Pakistan can no longer afford prolonged stay in Pakistan. That is why Pakistan is in favor of stable and economically developed Afghanistan which would benefit both the countries.<sup>4</sup> Both Pakistan and Afghanistan can bridge the gap which exists between the countries by people to people contacts, visits between the parliamentarians of the two countries this will help reduce the mistrust. In 2010 Pakistan had offered to train Afghan forces both Afghan National Army and Police, which will take over the security responsibility from NATO/ISAF forces after 2014.<sup>5</sup> Similarly the training of Afghan Forces was recently offered to the high level Afghan delegation visit led by Defense Minister Gen Bismillah Khan Muhammadi which was on five day visit to Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Once Gwadar port is fully operational than it will be beneficial for Afghan exporters to send its goods to other countries through Gwadar deep sea port and it is much shorter than Karachi. Most of Afghanistan's foreign trade passes through the Pakistani port of Karachi. Pakistan is Afghanistan's biggest trading partner, and unrecorded trade through the porous border has been estimated up to the tune of \$ 6 billion. Afghanistan is the biggest market for Pakistani products, and the de facto economic integration between Pakistan and Afghanistan has already taken place.

The country that most affected by events in Afghanistan is Pakistan, no matter which party or group forms the government in both Afghanistan and Pakistan they cannot ignore each other. As Pakistan is nearest outlet for Afghanistan to the sea, Afghanistan is Pakistan's trade corridor to Central Asia, so this way both can benefit from each other by having good relations and cooperating with each other.

## **(ii) Iran**

Iran is another important neighbor of Afghanistan. Although Iran and Afghanistan have long time dispute of Helmand River water distribution, and an old historic claim of Iran on portions of western Afghanistan which were once a part of Khurasan Province of Iran. Iran has a lot of cultural and religious influence on the Tajiks and Hazara community of Afghanistan. The Iranian strategy towards Afghanistan is divided into three; first to strengthen its influence over western Afghan provinces; second, to find potential allies to counter western influences in Afghanistan and third, to create buffer zone along Iranian-Afghan border for its own security and to control the drug-trafficking.<sup>7</sup> Iran is totally

against the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan; they fear that their presence in Afghanistan is against their national interest and would destabilize the region.<sup>8</sup> The Tajiks being the second largest ethnic group after Pushtoons, plays a dominant role in the affairs of Afghanistan. Through Tajiks the Iranians can influence events in Afghanistan, both during peace, and in times of crisis. The Hazara's are of Shia sect of Islam, and they take their religious, and political inspiration from Iran. Iran has a very important role to play in this region, and specially bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. Iran is also against the Taliban version of Islam, and the Taliban were also against the Shia sect of Islam, but on the other hand Iran does not want the US to establish a firm hold on Afghanistan, or this region. Secretly they have been aiding the Taliban, to maintain their resistance to the US/NATO forces. The Iranian strategy in Afghanistan is to maintain their influence over the Afghan western borders, and create a sort of a buffer zone through which it can maintain their own security, and control drug trafficking from Afghanistan.

### **(iii) Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan, a country situated to the north of Afghanistan, is a country which is extremely rich in natural resources and has a population of around 4.5 million. Turkmenistan has abundant natural resources which including the minerals and hydrocarbons. Afghanistan is the gateway for Pakistan to get access to the Turkmenistan's mineral wealth. TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and India) gas pipeline was the only mega project which was jointly launched with the initial cost of \$7.6 billion but due to the instability in Afghanistan it was never operationalized. Afghanistan can serve as an outlet to Turkmen gas export to India and Pakistan, and in return Afghanistan serves as a link, from the Gulf to Central Asia. Turkmenistan has around 744 km border with Afghanistan, and it's all a plain area, with no obstacles, but it has remained peaceful even in the days of Taliban rule. During 1990's Turkmenistan was among the few countries that had intention to established diplomatic relations with the Taliban.<sup>9</sup> Peaceful and cordial relations can help both countries economically, and can play an important role in bringing stability to the region.

### **(iv) Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan situated to the north of Afghanistan, has a small border of 137 km, and both countries are linked through Friendship Bridge on River Oxus, which serves as a border between the two countries. Uzbekistan is playing important role in the stability of Afghanistan; it also has strong ties with Northern Alliance which had opposed the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. After 9/11 attacks on US Uzbekistan fully supported the US led coalition against the terrorist in Afghanistan by offering air bases for logistic support. Uzbekistan being the most important country politically, and the Uzbek also consider themselves as the leaders of Central Asia, has a lot of stakes in Afghanistan. In 2008 Uzbekistan

announced to improve international cooperation in reconstruction in Afghanistan and also stated that the country is ready to sign an agreement with NATO for providing the corridor and transit facility in its territory and to deliver non-military goods through the border junction of Termez-Khayraton railway system with Afghanistan<sup>10</sup>. Uzbekistan's other assistance include providing the aerospace and basing rights to the international coalition forces for humanitarian goods; including constructing of electric transmission lines for exporting electricity; constructing of railway system between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, constructing road between Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul, building schools, hospital and other infrastructure related projects.<sup>11</sup> It has a lot of economic investment in communication and agriculture. Uzbekistan has built a railway line from Herat to Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan, and is now extending it to Herat in Western Afghanistan. Uzbekistan wants to see a stable and stable Afghanistan, for it has a large Uzbek population, and they look towards Uzbekistan, during crisis. Any instability, or civil war, can force Uzbeks of Afghanistan to cross over to Uzbekistan as refugees. All Central Asian Countries are allergic to refugees

**(v) Tajikistan**

Tajikistan can play an important role in bringing peace to war torn country like Afghanistan; it can persuade the Afghan Tajiks in bringing towards the negotiating table which will help to bridge gap among the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Tajikistan has a strong support among the Tajiks in the Northern Alliance which are also have representatives in the Karzai's government which also have ties with Russian Federation. CASA 1000(Central Asia and South Asia) is an important electric project for both Afghanistan and Pakistan which will deliver 1000 Mega Watt of electricity from Tajik and Kyrgyz hydel power plants to Pakistan and Afghanistan, so Tajikistan hopes to take full advantage from this project.<sup>12</sup>

**(vi) China**

China which has a very small border with Afghanistan, it connects Wakhan with Xinjiang province of China where the majority of population are Muslims. China has limited role in Afghanistan, its main aim to stabilize Afghanistan so there is no room for extremist elements which will threaten not only Afghanistan but also destabilize the Chinese Muslim Region.<sup>13</sup> China had already provided millions of dollars in aid between 2002 and 2011 and other than that it had decided to invest \$10 billion in development projects like building railways, exploring coal mines and constructing 400 megawatt electric power plant.<sup>14</sup> China-Afghan bilateral trade had been increased from 19.58 million dollars to 216 million dollars from 1999 to 2009; both countries had signed bilateral economic cooperation agreement in 2006 which will further boost their trade.<sup>15</sup> China is also investing billions of dollars in Afghanistan's oil sector and recent investment took place in the Amu Darya river basin in Northern

Afghanistan, China's state owned company CNPC won the rights to drill these three oil fields in the basin for a period of 25 years these field contain 87 million barrels of oil which is much smaller than the Iran's oil fields that contain billions of barrels of oil.<sup>16</sup>

### **3: Role of Regional Countries**

#### **(i) Russia**

Russia has been playing an important role in Afghanistan, since colonial period when Afghanistan was a buffer zone between the British Empire and the Czarist Russia. Russia is enjoying good relations with the common Afghan population especially with Tajiks and Uzbeks, which had established anti-Taliban alliance known as the Northern Alliance. But after 9/11 terrorist incident in US, Russia provided full support to against war against terrorism by military support to US and the Northern Alliance. But US and Russia have clash of interest the Russians wants to maintain its relations with the Northern Alliance faction, on the other hand the US is supporting the Zahir Shah's bloc to counter-balance the Northern Alliance and to strengthen the Pashtun element in the Afghan ruling structure.<sup>17</sup> The other two points which Russia wants to focus on is developments in Central Asia were US was allowed to have bases to help in their fight against Taliban and Al Qaeda and the third factor is Russia wants its share in international reconstruction in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> So far Russia wants to focus on two major issues in Afghanistan which are related to its national security (i) illicit drugs and (ii) counter terrorism which feels as a part of their strategy in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

#### **(ii) India**

India is already involved in the infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan; it has strong relations with the anti-Taliban forces which had anti-Pakistan inclination. On one side India is spending its resources on the development of Afghanistan and on the other it is trying to launch a proxy war against Pakistan by using Afghanistan as launch pad. India had already signed strategic agreement with Afghanistan; this will boost the trade between the two countries. India has already spent nearly \$2 billion in Afghanistan's reconstruction projects, trade between the two nations also increased from more than 80 million dollars in 2001 to nearly 280 million dollars in 2010.<sup>20</sup>

#### **(iii) Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia also has influenced the Afghan internal politics since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when they supported the mujahedeen against Soviets, both Iran and Saudi Arabia had waged a proxy war against each other. Saudi Arabia provided support to the Taliban against Soviet back regime and also to contain the Iranian influence in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> This proxy war between Saudi

Arabia and Iran had a devastated affects in both Pakistan and Afghanistan which had created tensions among Sunnis and Shia community in both the neighboring countries.

#### **4: Role of Taliban in Afghan Peace**

Taliban has important role to play in Afghan peace process, after 12 years of war the people of Afghanistan needs peace so they could rebuild their country. Unfortunately the United States took 12 years to realize the importance of the Taliban in the Afghan peace process; peace cannot come without the participation of the Taliban. Taliban had already inflicted heavy losses on both foreign and local forces in Afghanistan in which high level government official have been killed during their attacks on the security forces. Taliban still has support among rural Afghan population and also enjoying some support among the urban population. It was reported that the Taliban activities in Afghanistan got stronger in 2008 than in 2007, they have stronger presence in Pashtun areas but they also have some presence in non-Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> Taliban even took retaliatory action against the foreign forces when any anti-Islamic movie was released in western countries like United States and Denmark which had boosted their morale against them. Last year the ISAF's military complex in Afghanistan which includes both American and British military camps was attack by the Taliban in which they had destroyed their six aircrafts, aircraft hangers and refueling stations and damaging two other aircrafts.<sup>23</sup> NATO led ISAF had already divided Afghanistan in five security regional commands, (i) Regional Command North, (ii) Regional Command South, (iii) Regional Command Central, (iv) Regional Command West and (v) Regional Command East but still they cannot control the Taliban attacks on their forces.

#### **5: Role of US**

United States started its war against the terrorists in Afghanistan in 2002; it was supported by the international coalition forces known as International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which help them to over throw the Taliban government. So far the United States as allocated more than 500 billion dollars for Afghanistan which includes aid for Afghan people and also for American military operations against Taliban.<sup>24</sup> US taught that eliminating the Taliban they will bring peace to the country after years of war which had brought misery to the people of Afghanistan, but that did not happen the Taliban had changed their military strategy from conventional war to non-conventional guerrilla warfare which the US and allied forces are facing. United States had already lost more than 2000 soldiers in this war against the Taliban and many are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>25</sup> According to US official the withdrawal from Afghanistan will cost them billions of dollars because transporting goods from Afghanistan through Pakistan will require a 1000 mile journey to Karachi Port which is still cheaper than the Northern Route which will cost them extra 100

million dollars.<sup>26</sup> This war had already affected the U.S economy the United States is facing tough challenges like during Fiscal year 2011 it cost them 113 billion dollars which may affect a small portion of its society but it has big financial burden on its economy, but another challenge is if US wants to increase the strength of Afghan Security Forces from 305,000 to 378,000 forces than US will need to spend more than 12.8 billion dollars on Afghan Security Forces for 2012 budget.<sup>27</sup>

## **6: Role of NATO**

After the end of cold war NATO's rival Warsaw Pact was dismantled because of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, its main role was mostly concentrated inside European Continent. After the 9/11 attacks on United States NATO's role have been changed, for the first time in NATO's history it is focusing on its future global role in international politics as the NATO countries have deployed its forces in Afghanistan. NATO took the responsibility since 2003 its main objectives were to help the Afghan government to secure and stable environment in Afghanistan, to disarm illegal armed groups, reconstruction and development and counter-narcotics are the main objectives of NATO.<sup>28</sup> During NATO summit last year it was decided that they will provide 4 billion dollars fund every year for the Afghan Security Forces, they praised the success of the Afghan Forces against the Taliban and also discuss the future role of the alliance in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After 12 years of war in Afghanistan it proved little success in War against Terrorism has not only affected Afghanistan but also Pakistan. Even international and regional players also have stakes in Afghanistan, like India which has invested hundreds of millions of dollars. As draw down begins for NATO's with drawl from 2014 there will be more challenges facing the neighboring countries of Afghanistan like drug trafficking problem, ethnic differences and also the reconstruction of entire Afghan nation. Russian and three Central Asian Countries like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan also have security interests in Afghanistan like counter-narcotics, control extremism. Afghan problem can be solved if its neighbors come and help the people of Afghanistan to stabilize their after the withdrawal of NATO/ISAF forces from Afghanistan. But it will take time for peace to return to Afghanistan the people of Afghanistan needs time so they can resolve their issues peacefully. The United States had already wasted hundreds of billions of dollars on war against terrorism in Afghanistan which hasn't eliminated the Taliban and Al-Qaeda force completely but unfortunately it has caused further destruction and its investment in Afghan Security Forces has made very little contribution to the security of Afghanistan.



The country that would be affected the most by any event in Afghanistan is Pakistan. With even the announcement of withdrawal, Afghanistan has already started facing problems, e.g. security and economic. The current Afghan economy is war related, with the presence of foreign forces. Once the foreign forces leave there will be a big economic collapse, and the only place where the Afghans look for any relief is Pakistan. So Pakistan will have an influx of refugees from Afghanistan looking for economic relief.

After the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, there will be a big security vacuum. The Afghan National Army and Police are not in a position to hold ground against the Taliban, presently the defection rate in Afghan National Army and Police is around 40%, a high percentage from any standard, but if once the foreign forces leave this can go up to 60% or 70%. Defection of forces and absence of authority could lead to war lordism and anarchy and civil war. Under this situation civilians would flee to Pakistan to protect themselves. Pakistan should be prepared to face any eventuality like this.

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