

2014 withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan: implications for regional security

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1. Introduction

The withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan towards the end of 2014 would have implications for the ongoing war against terrorism in the region. Since the launch of this war after the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been fighting against local and foreign militants in their respective territories and border regions as frontline allies of the United States and the international community. Despite these efforts, all indications suggest that tough times lie ahead for peace and security of both countries.

After more than 12 years of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, the US and NATO forces, along with the Afghan security forces, have failed to eliminate the threat that the Afghan Taliban and other militants pose. The Afghan national security forces' capability to secure peace and stability in their country also remains debatable. The United States and the Afghan government are trying to evolve political reconciliation through negotiations with the Afghan Taliban; however, little progress has been made thus far.

The situation of militancy and terrorism in Pakistan is related more to the government's political will and approach to deal with it than the issues of security forces' capacity and capability. However, compared to Afghanistan, Pakistan faces diverse threats to its security and stability in the form of a nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, Taliban-led militancy mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and FATA, ethno-political and criminal violence in Karachi, and growing sectarian violence and religious extremism in the country.

Pakistan has launched at least 17 major military operations in KP and FATA thus far and made about as many peace deals with the militants. Almost every military operation has been followed by a peace agreement with the militants. After every agreement, the government declared its victory. The Taliban used these agreements strategically to their advantage. These deals not only consolidated their control in certain areas but also helped them make new recruitments, vital for making further advances (Rana, 2013). The incumbent Pakistani government is engaged in peace talks with the Taliban, mainly the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in a bid to achieve peace and security in the country, a process that has not achieved success thus far and has earned criticism from scholars and more recently from political parties in the opposition.

This report examines the likely impact of withdrawal of international combat forces from Afghanistan on the militant landscape in Pakistan and Afghanistan and also on security and counterterrorism efforts by the two neighboring countries. It discusses possible post-2014 scenarios in terms of three variables: the international community's security and economic support for Afghanistan; intra-Afghan reconciliation including the Taliban; and the role of regional countries in achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan. The final section of the report focuses on security and counterterrorism implications of the foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan for both Islamabad and Kabul and also other countries in the region.

2. Variables to affect post-2014 security scenario in Afghanistan

The pullout of international security forces from Afghanistan and the process of transition of security responsibility to Afghan forces have already begun and will conclude later this year. The prospects for peace and security in Afghanistan beyond 2014 largely depend on a few variables, which are briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

- *International community's security and economic support for Afghanistan*

Peace, security and stability in Afghanistan ultimately depend on the war-torn country's capacity to generate revenue and the will to evolve a representative political system to govern the country. Experts on Afghanistan argue that the concept and framework for economic regeneration in the country need to be articulated by the Afghans, aided by support mechanisms from outside, where needed (Rana & Sial, 2013). Afghanistan essentially has four economies—the aid economy, driven by NGO, USAID and the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funding;¹ the war contracting economy, driven by massive expenditures on private security and military transportation and construction; the narcotics economy centered in the south, and the “real” Afghan economy (Maunser & Cordesman, 2011). Unfortunately, the “real” economy is by far the smallest of the four, and the largest two of these economies are going to shrink drastically by 2014 and could then largely disappear (Ibid).

Against this backdrop, Afghanistan will need sufficient economic support from the international community in order to rehabilitate its war-torn economy. One of the key challenges ahead for Afghanistan beyond 2014 would be the sustainability and effectiveness of the oversized Afghan security forces (Podesta, Katulis & Caroline Wadhams, 2011). According to some accounts, the combined strength of the Afghan army and police stands at 352,000. According to NATO estimates, Kabul would require over \$4.1 billion a year to maintain this force. But the Afghan government lacks funds even if the number of personnel was reduced to 228,500 by 2017 (Khan, 2012). The international donors have already pledged an amount of US\$ 16 billion till 2015 as developmental aid to Afghanistan, but the money comes with conditions of anti-corruption measures and good governance. The major donors include Japan, the US and the United Kingdom (Dogan, 2014).

The US has been a major contributor to economic and security-related assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. At present, the stalemate between the US and President Hamid Karzai continues on account of the latter delaying the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which could force Washington to exercise the “zero option,” which, although unlikely so far, could negatively impact a peaceful political and security transition in Afghanistan. It is expected that the new Afghan president after the 2014 elections would sign the BSA as the Afghan parliament and most of the political leaders want to do that.

- *Reconciliation with the Taliban*

Peace and stability in Afghanistan after 2014 would largely depend on an intra-Afghan reconciliation that entails all ethnic and political factions including the Taliban. Although most political analysts and

¹ The funds for CERP come from the US Department of Defense.

strategists believe that the Taliban cannot capture Kabul but they do not rule out the role of the Taliban as a destabilizing factor unless they are reconciled and accommodated in the Afghan political set-up.

Nonetheless, the process of political reconciliation in Afghanistan faces diverse challenges, including mainly: Afghan Taliban's unpredictable behavior; regional dynamics of the endgame in Afghanistan; Afghanistan's souring relationship with the US as the foreign troops' drawdown approaches; Afghanistan's domestic political issues and its relations with countries in the region; and the issues of socio-cultural and political acceptance of the Afghan Taliban in their country.

- *Regional context*

At the same time, Afghanistan's sustainability from the political and security standpoints hinges on the involvement of regional organizations and regional actors in the process. The regional context is still not conducive for a political settlement in Afghanistan. Owing to pervasive confusion and mutual distrust, regional and international stakeholders continue to assert their influence in Afghanistan. This in turn has generated cycles of allegations and counter-allegations. There is no clarity or unanimity among regional stakeholders about the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Nor is there a comprehensive regional roadmap about Afghanistan's future outlook. Washington has also been sending mixed signals since long. It seems everyone is in a wait-and-see mode and trying to adjust to the shifting US policies.

3. Withdrawal of foreign troops: security and counterterrorism implications for Pakistan, Afghanistan and the region

As mentioned earlier, the international community's post-2014 financial commitment to Afghanistan, security assistance such as expected under the proposed US-Afghan bilateral security agreement, and reconciliation with the Taliban will pave the way for peaceful and effective security and political transition in the country. Even if the process of reconciliation with the Taliban does not achieve the desired level of success, the former two factors, i.e. international community's security and economic assistance, will largely impact the Afghan counterterrorism and counterinsurgency measures.

Nonetheless, counterterrorism efforts on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan will greatly reflect in internal security policies of the two countries and also their foreign policies vis-à-vis each other. In the past, the two countries have traded accusations of creating problems in each other's affairs. Continuity of such a blame-game after 2014 would mean that the internal security and foreign policies of both countries will not be in synch to deal with the largely shared threat of militancy and terrorism.

On the other hand, withdrawal of foreign troops will further 'mobilize the national (Afghan) and international (non-Afghan) actors in the region and the uncertain political vision of Afghan leadership may contribute towards chaotic future' (Grare, 2014). So far, Karzai's refusal to sign the bilateral security agreement with the US has served as a hindrance for Washington to acquire extra-territorial rights for the American troops that might stay in Afghanistan after December 2014 (Hussain, 2014).

3.1 Implications for Pakistan-Afghan border security

Managing security at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and checking cross-border infiltration of militants to either side would be a huge challenge for both countries, particularly if Afghanistan drifts into increased violence and militancy after 2014. This would not only affect their respective counterterrorism efforts but also bilateral relations. Afghanistan blames Pakistan for sheltering and supporting the Afghan Taliban including the Haqqanis, who carry out cross-border attacks inside Afghanistan. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of sheltering a faction of Pakistani Taliban in Kunar and Nuristan provinces and also of fueling the insurgency in Balochistan province of Pakistan in conjunction with India.

The TTP militants sheltered in Afghanistan have become a major threat for the security of Pakistani tribal areas and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in recent years. The TTP's Swat chapter led by Mullah Fazlullah, who currently heads the group after the death of Hakeemullah Mehsud, has established its strongholds in Kunar and Nuristan provinces of Afghanistan. There is strong likelihood that the group will increase its cross-border terrorist attacks inside Pakistan in case a heightened Taliban insurgency and civil strife are observed in Afghanistan after 2014. These militants had fled to Afghanistan after the 2009 Swat military operation and were reportedly involved in most of the 165 cross-border attacks launched in 14 districts and regions of Pakistan between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2013. As many as 525 people were killed and 475 others injured in these attacks which mainly targeted civilians and security forces and their check posts in North Waziristan, Mohmand, Kurram, Khyber and Bajaur agencies of FATA, and Chitral and lower and upper Dir districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.²

At the same time, Pakistan has serious concerns that if political instability persists or civil war breaks out in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces it would force large numbers of Afghans to take refuge in neighboring countries, including Pakistan. Pakistan considers Afghan refugee camps in the country a source of recruitment for militants and also a factor in insecurity.

Pakistan and Afghanistan will need to evolve and implement a common and cooperative border security mechanism in order to restrict the movement and cross-border activities of local and foreign militants operating in the border areas who pose a serious threat not only to the internal security of the two countries but also that of neighboring countries.

3.2 Implications for militant landscapes of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Afghan Taliban's spokesman Zabeehullah Mujahid claimed in a recent interview with BBC's John Simpson that the Taliban controlled most parts of Afghanistan, were present everywhere particularly in far-flung areas of the country, and believed that they would eventually gain victory over foreign forces there (*BBC Urdu*, 2014). This statement shows how the Taliban mindset is characterized by a sense of victory, which is expected to be further strengthened after the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. This mindset is probably also a factor behind the Taliban leadership's lax and contradictory responses to the offers for talks made by the US and Afghan government. At the same time, they understand that capturing Kabul is not an easy task. However, a lot depends on the approach of the Afghan government and the US to engage the Taliban in a reconciliation process. Following the presidential elections in Afghanistan, it is hoped that

² Statistics are based on Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) digital database on security available at <http://san-pips.com/app/database>.

the new president would not only take the reconciliation process seriously but also work closely and constructively with regional and international partners to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Hizb-e-Islami, a major militant group in Afghanistan, has gradually become more amenable to the political process in the country. It has kept a hybrid face over the years. Some of its leaders took part in the 2014 presidential elections. However, the Afghan Taliban did not recognize the 2014 election and threatened to attack election-related targets; they launched a few attacks before the elections. But analysts are of the view that serious reconciliation efforts could force the Afghan Taliban to be part of the political process, particularly by offering them non-elected positions in the government such as governorship of a province or two.

Nonetheless, withdrawal of international security forces from Afghanistan without some sort of political reconciliation among different ethnic and political groups including the Taliban would have serious ramifications for security of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region. Although most political analysts and strategists are convinced that the Afghan Taliban cannot take over Kabul, it is also true that they can increase instability and civil strife in Afghanistan after further strengthening their position in the southern and eastern parts of the country and far-flung rural areas.

A post-2014 scenario of heightened Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan will also increase the possibility of the Afghan Taliban's presence and activities in the Pakistan-Afghan border areas and its spillover effect on Pakistan's militant landscape. As in the past, the Pakistani militant groups mainly the Pakistani Taliban and other jihadi groups would increase their cross-border movement to aid the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. There exists widespread support among Pakistan's Islamic groups and religious-political parties for the Afghan Taliban, compared to a confused stance about the Pakistani Taliban. A rise in violence and tensions among different Afghan groups in Afghanistan after 2014 would encourage these groups and parties as well as Deobandi madrassas to send militants to fight in Afghanistan alongside the Afghan Taliban, as some of them had done in the late 1990s (Rizvi, 2014). Pakistan is already facing the terrorist onslaught launched by the TTP, sectarian militant groups and splinter groups of jihadi militants including the Punjabi Taliban and cannot afford a rise in the jihadi sentiment in the country.

Some analysts believe that in such a scenario the security situation in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province could become more vulnerable if nationalist insurgent groups operating there taking advantage of the intensifying militancy and chaos in the country tried to seek external support for their struggle (Aftab, 2014).

3.3 Implications for security and counterterrorism efforts of Afghanistan and Pakistan

Afghanistan's major post-2014 concerns vis-à-vis its counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts would be related to: sustaining economic viability and enhancing capacity of its security infrastructure; dealing with an emboldened Taliban; managing an intra-Afghan political reconciliation; and developing good relations with its neighbors and the international community.

As mentioned earlier in the report, economic sustainability of its security forces will be a huge challenge for the largely donor-based Afghan economy. Some analysts claim that the Afghan government will need donors' money even to pay salaries to the Afghan security forces after the withdrawal of international troops in December 2014 (Dogon, 2014). The capacity and loyalty of the Afghan security forces, which

reportedly have elements sympathizing with the Taliban, pose another challenge. Analysts assert that the US and NATO efforts to develop the security forces in Afghanistan focused more on quantity than quality. Secondly, about 70 percent of the recruits to Afghan security forces are illiterate for all practical purposes. Thirdly, Afghan National Police (ANP) is termed by many as massively corrupt and many elements of the ANP are tied to politics and power brokers, either in a bid to be effective or to win or retain popular support (Cordesman, 2009). Fourthly, although the Afghan National Army (ANA) has been portrayed by some as a rare success story, analysts argue that it is far from ready to take over operational command and tackle security responsibilities on its own. The US rapidly increased the number of ANA troops, without taking into account financial sustainability or tackling the persistent structural flaws that continue to hamper the ANA's ability to operate independently despite billions of dollars in US investment. Meanwhile, some analysts have raised concerns over the ethnic composition of the Afghan army which they say is dominated by non-Pashtun fragments of population, and thus cannot be fully trusted by the Pashtun segment of society (Khan, 2012). Also, the ANA suffers from the pitfall of an inadequate evolutionary process as it takes decades to raise an armed force.

Apart from efforts to sustain economic viability and enhance the capacity of its security forces, Afghanistan would also have to deal with an emboldened Taliban movement after the withdrawal of foreign troops. That would require strengthened military and political responses. For the former response, well-equipped, fully capable, non-politicized and financially sustainable security forces would be the main pre-requisite. For the latter, comprehensive reconciliation measures will be required. But unfortunately, the present status of ethnic and political reconciliation in Afghanistan is not quite dissimilar to the situation that existed during the post-Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s and after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. A failure to achieve an intra-Afghan political reconciliation would yield similar results as seen in the past in the form of unrest and instability in the country and proxy games among the regional stakeholders, particularly India, Pakistan and Iran. One can only hope that the mistakes made in the past are not repeated.

Nonetheless, as cited earlier, the main post-2014 implications for Pakistan would be related to the security of its border with Afghanistan and the likely spillover effect of the situation in Afghanistan on the militant landscape of Pakistan. Islamabad is greatly concerned about the post-2014 security of its border with Afghanistan. Although it is almost impossible to monitor such a long border but the presence of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan and also the US drone strikes in border areas had partly contributed to the Pakistan-Afghan border security.

Islamabad is also mindful of the fact that insecurity and instability in Afghanistan will have serious implications for its own security and might increase the burden on its counterterrorism efforts. For that reason, Pakistan has been helping the US and the Afghan government in their efforts to reach out to the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan was part of the international efforts that finally resulted in the Taliban opening an office in Qatar in June last year. Since late 2012 Pakistan has released a number of detained Afghan Taliban leaders on the request of the Afghan government in the hope that they could play a role in political reconciliation in Afghanistan. At the same time, over the years Islamabad has launched extensive efforts to reach out to non-Pashtun Afghans in an effort to demonstrate that Pakistan's Afghan policy was no longer exclusively focused on Pashtuns or the Taliban. Pakistan, like other countries in the region, cannot afford the rule of Taliban in Kabul as that would give impetus to Taliban-like movements in Pakistan.

However, a great deal of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts in the post-2014 scenario will depend on how it addresses the larger security and radicalization challenges facing the country and also the way it

approaches those local and foreign militant groups, particularly based in FATA and Punjab, which are not hostile to Pakistan but act as irritants in the country's relations with its neighbors. At present, the federal and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) governments seem confused on how to deal with the local Taliban-led militancy mainly in FATA and KP. One of the factors could be the flawed threat perception among most leaders of political parties ruling Islamabad and KP that the situation would normalize in Pakistan once foreign troops left Afghanistan. But most security and political analysts do not subscribe to this notion.

3.4 Implications for regional security

It is believed that after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the regional state actors would focus more on Afghanistan mainly due to the perceived threat of Afghanistan once again becoming a hub of transnational militant groups including Al Qaeda and those from Central Asia, and the danger of these militants spreading from Afghanistan to the neighboring countries like China, Iran, Pakistan and Central Asian states (Semple, 2013). The US drawdown from Afghanistan will no doubt result in insecurity for the regional states. The post-2014 period would be a time for the regional actors to learn lessons from the past and carefully examine the nature of threats and possible opportunities originating from the country (Ibid). It is fortunate, as mentioned earlier, that no country in the region including Pakistan wants to see the Taliban rising to power in Afghanistan again.

In order to reduce the perceived threats to their respective security that could emanate from the post-2014 Afghanistan, the country's neighbors have a vital role to play in ensuring peaceful transition and political reconciliation there. This role could entail non-interference or constructive involvement in Afghan affairs, economic development, security assistance and bilateral trade and commerce.

In particular, Pakistan and India, which have remained engaged in proxy wars in Afghanistan along with other neighbors in the past, have the prime responsibility in this regard. Interestingly, it was revealed in a seminar on "Peace and stability in Afghanistan's region: 2014 and beyond" organized by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Islamabad in January this year that the Pakistani and Indian governments had formally started negotiations on the future of Afghanistan while Track-II talks regarding that were already under way (Rasheed, 2014). A peaceful, proxy-free and stable Afghanistan is not only linked to internal security and economic prosperity of countries in the region but can also contribute towards fostering good relations between Pakistan and India, the two arch-rivals. Neither country can afford another civil war and a rise in militancy in Afghanistan. It is probably due to this growing realization that Pakistan and India, along with China and Russia, want President Karzai to sign a security agreement with Washington that allows US forces to stay in Afghanistan after 2014 (Dawn, 2013).

For China, the presence of ETIM, IMU/IJU and Uyghur militants in the Pakistan-Afghan border region has been a threatening factor. Over the years, these groups have developed relations with the local militant groups and also Al Qaeda. After the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, these Central Asian groups, in association with their local counterparts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, can not only put Chinese interests in these two countries at risk but can also make security in China's Xinjiang province uncertain. Similarly, Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov has expressed fears of the Taliban spillover in Central Asian states and his country in particular. According to him, that would be a permanent source of tension and instability in the region (Tolipov, 2014).

India thinks that a Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan after 2014 can create an environment there that can host anti-India militants including those from Pakistan, who can use the Afghan soil to train and launch attacks inside India. For Iran, the Taliban were never acceptable mainly due to their anti-Shia agenda and killing of the Hazara community in Afghanistan during their rule. The Taliban have developed strong nexus with Sunni militant and sectarian groups. Iran has traditionally remained close to leaders of northern Afghanistan. But unlike India, China, Russia and Pakistan, Iran is not in favor of the American forces' stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Security and stability in Afghanistan after 2014 would not only have ramifications for regional security but also for regional trade and economy. Security, peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan can provide an environment conducive for regional trade and business. Pakistan and Afghanistan can immensely benefit from their geostrategic location that offers great opportunities as an energy and trade corridor.

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