

# Impact of the US Military Drawdown on the Future of Afghanistan: An Analysis

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The US military drawdown from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 will be a new development in the entire history of Afghanistan as well as the United States. The drawdown process is going to be completed as a result of the US-Taliban agreement signed between the US and the Taliban on February 29, 2020 in Doha. But the future of Afghanistan seems to be marked by the rise of Taliban to the throne of Kabul, which may add further to the miseries of the common public and the political stakeholders in the country. The objective of the study is to analyze the impact of the US military drawdown and the future of Afghanistan as a consequence of the drawdown. Research questions of the article focus on the resurgence of Taliban, the anti-Taliban upsurge, role of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces, future fears and the resolution of the conflict by the regional actors. It is a fact that Taliban are gaining more strength day by day in order to show their popularity and capturing the key cities of the country within a very short period of time. Methodology for the study is provided by the secondary sources of data. The study is very significant for focusing on a very burning issue in the history of both Afghanistan and the United States.

**Key words:** *U.S, Withdrawal, Future, Taliban, Security and Politics*



## Introduction

The US Military drawdown from Afghanistan is one of the most significant events in the modern history both for the United States and Afghanistan. For the first time in the history of the United States she has to sign peace treaty with a non-state actor (Taliban) that she had been waging war for the last 20 years. Efforts are still under way for the timely withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan but much depends upon the extent to which all the parties [Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban] to the contract show their sincerity. Despite all efforts, security situation in the country is greatly affected by the worsening law and order situation where bomb blasts and attacks from the various quarters have made the life of the common people miserable. On June 12, 2021 at least seven people were killed and six wounded as result of the two separate bombs hit the mini-vans Kabul (ALJAZEERA, 2021). The bombs targeted the ethnic minority of the Hazara tribe Afghanistan, populated by mostly the *shia* Muslims. At another attack on May 8, 2021 targeted the people of Hazara tribe in which 100 people were killed and four wounded, most of them were young girls. It is important to note what types of explosives were used in the bombs but nobody claimed to take responsibility for these attacks.

## Problem Statement

The US is going to leave Afghanistan after a period of lapse of twenty years. During this period, there has been many ups and downs in the political and security structure of the government. The real change will be in the post-September 2021 scenario when the government of Afghanistan may be left with only 650 US security forces to guard the US embassy in Kabul. The real test for the political and security agencies of the country would be the survival of the democratic government which will be great challenge before the Afghan security forces in the wake of the resurgence of Taliban. The focus of this study is to analyze issues faced by the Afghan security forces, the role of the security agencies in the fight against the anti-state elements, future fears and the resolution of conflict by the various actors.

## Objective of the study

The main objective of the study is to analyze the impact of the US military drawdown on the future politics of the country.

## Research Questions

The article focusses on five basic research questions:

- i) Are there the fears of the resurgence of Taliban in the post-US withdrawal scenario?
- ii) Why have anti-Taliban forces been emerged in Afghanistan?



- iii) What role has been played by the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces in maintaining peace and security and do they have the potentiality to face the future challenges posed by the Taliban?
- iv) How are the future fears prognosticated regarding the worsening law and order situation in the country?
- v) Are the regional powers in a position to resolve the issues of civil war and prevent the country from being dragged into fiasco?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study is very significant for dealing with a very basic issue of the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan that will usher in a new era for the country and will determine the future politics and security situation of the war-stricken country of Afghanistan. This will help in addressing the gap in the existing literature and will provide guidelines to the policy makers for working out a viable solution to the Afghan problem.

### **Methodology**

The present study is basically qualitative in nature that mainly relies on the secondary sources for the documents analysis.

There have been rise in the number of casualties since the US has announced the official withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan from May 1, 2021. Round about 17 districts have fallen to the hands of Taliban showing the strength and potentiality that are expected to gain more power and capture some more districts in the near future (ALJAZEERA, 2021). Afghanistan had already has a bad experience in the post-Soviet withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan 1989 when she witnessed power vacuum, civil war and leadership absence resulting in the ascendancy of Taliban to power in 1996 that attracted the whole world towards Afghanistan. The situation worsened to such an extent that the whole international community turned against them and they had to initiate the war on terror against Afghanistan. Now, since the US is going to leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 on the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 episode to show the importance of the occasion. The US has spent 20 years in Afghanistan during which she has tried her level best to improve the law and order situation in the country besides build the entire infrastructure and help in the rehabilitation of the Afghan refugees. But security in Afghanistan still remains a cry in the wilderness where the non-state actors (Taliban, the ISIS and the ISKP) have trying to disturb the law and order situation in the country.

### **Resurgence of Taliban**

The US is of the view that the troops reduction in Afghanistan would not result in any major changes to the two complementary missions in Afghanistan: counter-terrorism strategy and the



strategy of training, advising and assisting the Afghan forces (Thomas , 2021). But still the main function of the US forces is to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces in the key sectors and sensitive areas of the country. Rumors are there in the offing that the Al-Qaeda may regain strength and vitality in Afghanistan in the post US withdrawal scenario (Ziauddin, 2021). It is feared that the so-called Indian Subcontinent's Al-Qaeda Chapter comprising members from the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan and operating inside Afghanistan is more expected to help revive this chapter (Ziauddin, 2021). According to the report of the UN Analytical and Sanction Monitoring Team the main link between the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban is the Haqqani Network. The Al-Qaeda elements are also reported to be sheltering in the Pak-Iran border areas (Ziauddin, 2021).

Taliban is gaining more and more strength in Afghanistan and claim to have got the potentiality of establishing their government in the country despite the fact that the US has yet fully withdrawn from Afghanistan. This has resulted in growing security concern for the regional and international community and particularly for the United States, stakeholders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban are supposed to have got 'victory' over the law enforcement agencies in Afghanistan and claim to have gained over at least 26 outposts and bases. They claim to have got control in four District centers in Leghman, Baghlan, Wardak and Ghazni in May (Ziauddin, 2021). In case the Taliban gain control over the government of Kabul then serious security concerns for the stakeholders in Afghanistan leading to great repercussions on the security paradigm of Pakistan.

### **Anti-Taliban Upsurge**

Keeping in view the gravity of security concerns emanating from the Pak-Afghan border, the government of Pakistan is going to fence much of its 2,640 km border with Afghanistan at the cost of \$500 million in order to strengthen its security and defense system against movement and infiltration by the militants and insurgents. The anti-Taliban elements in Afghanistan are trying to get them united under the banner of *Mujahideen* in Afghanistan showing their allegiance to the government in Afghanistan and fully equipped with the modern warfare (Ziauddin, 2021). This may lead to civil war and internal conflict in Afghanistan creating great leadership vacuum coupled with instability in the war-stricken country as was witnessed in the post-Soviet withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan in 1989. An instance of the anti-Taliban movement can be gauged from the fact that on April 18, 2021 Muhammad Ismail Khan, ex-Minister for Water and Energy and now a leading politician in the country held a ceremony in Herat at his residence, which was shown live on Facebook in which several armed groups were shown to resist the Taliban in Afghanistan in future in order to save the country from the clutches of civil war. He even went to the extent of saying to offer the deployment of *Mujahideen* for fighting against the Taliban in cities and Districts saying, "... there are hundreds of armed mujahedin in each district and the government [should] trust them. It isn't necessary to send forces from the city of Herat to the districts who then suffer casualties. We have enough forces from the sons of this land in each district and they can defend their areas."

In support of the anti-Taliban movement there has been a gradual increase in the strength of such people, an example of this can be quoted from the province of Takhar where the armed militant groups have re-emerged under the leadership of the Ahmad Shah Masud, the son of late *Mujahideen* commander, Ahmad Shah Masud showing their strong determination to resist the Taliban in case they rise to power in the post-U.S withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan (Ziauddin, 2021). This has resulted in the gaining strength of the Ahmad Shah Masud group in some of the provinces of Afghanistan particularly the Takhar, Baghlan, Kunduz and Samangan where the possibility of war aunts the minds of the people because they are likely to engage in war against the Talban and the security forces of the country or even they may stand along with the security forces of the country against the Taliban. In either case, the government of Afghanistan is likely to find herself in the clutches of civil war coupled with the tug of war among the various stakeholders in a continuous struggle against one another. Thus, the people of Afghanistan may face the same security situation, leadership vacuum and power sharing formula that would result in utter fiasco for the already war-stricken state of Afghanistan.

Another anti-Taliban group has emerged under the patronage of the former *Mujahideen* leader, Atta Muhammad, who is known as the ‘Teacher’ on account of his providing training and assist the Afghan *Mujahideen* during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979- 1989). This group has made it clear that they are ready to side with the law enforcement agencies of the state against the Taliban and would thwart any attack pose by the Taliban. So, this group is also determined to resist the Talban and stand by the Afghan government through every thick and thin, particularly against the Taliban by stating in clear terms they “stand by the system and government” (Ziauddin, 2021).

Thus, two important group seem to have developed against the Taliban under the patronage of the former *Mujahideen* Commanders, son of Ahmad Shah Masud and Atta Nur Muhammad who are more determined to fight tooth and nail against any possible attack by the Taliban over the elected government of Afghanistan. Their allegiance to the Afghan government by showing their support and determination to stand by the law enforcement agencies of the country may to some extent mitigate the possibility of the eminent civil war in Afghanistan leading towards the strength of the security of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (Tariq, 2021). But this would also great repurcussions on the future politics of the Afghan governmnet and securtiy paradigm of the country though on one hand this shows the loyalty of these groups towards the governmnet yet on the other hand this also shows the weakness and inability of the law enforcement agencieso f the country to fight agianst the non-state actors single-handedly. This may also lead towards war-lordism and rise of different warring factions that may in future unite agiaanst the governmnet and may compel it to include them in the power sharing formula of the state.

In such a case even the security of the regional powers and particularly the neighboring countires may be put at jeopardy where the cases of infiltarion through borders by the terrorism



and insurgents (Tariq, 2021). The regional powers need to focus on playing their role by bringing all the stakeholders and non-stakeholders including the Afghan government, the Taliban, the ISSI, the ISKP and the anti-Taliban groups to agree on a certain power sharing formula so as to the future of Afghanistan secure and safe. It is in the best interest of all the regional powers and the neighboring countries to work together for the political stability and future security of Afghanistan so as to avoid any instability, insecurity and civil war in the country. The most affected country that has greatly suffered as a consequence of the war on terror is Pakistan that has been bearing the pain of infiltration by the insurgents and terrorists through the Pak-Afghan border. The other neighboring countries are not going to be affected to a greater extent by any security lapse or political instability in Afghanistan. Another area of concern for Pakistan is the Indian involvement in the political and security paradigm of Afghanistan, resulting in the irreparable loss for the security of Pakistan since Pakistan is going to be sandwiched on both sides by Afghanistan and India (Tariq M. , 2016).

### **Role of the ANDSF**

The Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) need to focus on strengthening their position vis a vis the non-state actors so as to overcome the issues of political stability and security. The efficacy of the ANDSF is a determining factor in maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan but its actual strength and potentiality will prove itself in the post-US withdrawal scenario from Afghanistan on September 11, 2021, the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 syndrome. The Afghan government needs to concentrate on strengthening the security of Afghanistan by utilizing all the resources of the country and the equipping them with the modern warfare and use of modern techniques of counter-terrorism strategies. But the situation does not seem to be normal and embarrassment seems to prevail as has been expressed by the President of the country stating that “[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support.” (Shah, NATO report says Pakistan wants peace deal in Afghanistan, India against it, 2021). It is a matter of great concern that since 2014, when the US government decided to drawdown their forces from Afghanistan, the US has spent about 75% of the estimated \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year meant for funding the ANDSF, with the balance coming from the allied partners of the US and the Afghan government.

Even in the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ANDSF would remain dependent upon the financial support of the United States but it is also a matter of serious concern that for the Financial Year 2021, the US government has appropriated just over \$3 billion for the ANDSF, which is the lowest one since 2008. The decrease in the annual budget for the ANDSF to almost half is a very discouraging factor for the security of Afghanistan besides being a matter of serious concern for the US government and the Congress that remain very much concerned about the growing need of security in Afghanistan. The US Congress and the Afghan government express the same view regarding the decrease in the annual budget for the law enforcement agencies of the country. The Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani has already shown his concern by urging that the ANDSF would not be even able to maintain the security of the



country for just six months after the US forces withdraw from Afghanistan. US Secretary, Blinken, while expressing “Even with the continuation of financial assistance from the United States to your forces after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned that the security situation will worsen and the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.”

### **Future Fears**

The US government has shown serious concern over the future of Afghanistan’s stability and security situation that could not last well for a long time in the post-US withdrawal scenario (Trofimov, 2021). They fear that the Afghan government could hardly last for six months keeping in view the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. This assessment is based on the report of the intelligence agencies of the United States as the Taliban swept through seizing dozens of Districts and the suburban major areas during a period of short span in the last week (Trofimov, Afghan Government Could Collapse Six Months After U.S. Withdrawal, New Intelligence Assessment Says, 2021). The inability of the Afghan security forces can be gauged from the fact that they had to surrender before the Taliban without fighting and had to leave all Humvees and other US-supplied weapons to them. Now, this surrendering of the Afghan security forces without fighting the Taliban leaves a question mark on the combating and fighting of the Afghan security forces while leaving all their possessions while the date for complete withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan is drawing near and nearer. It is also a matter of serious concern for the US government and allied partners that around about 1750 US forces are about to leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 as per the terms and conditions of the US-Taliban agreement (Trofimov, 2021). The US security forces along with the allied partners have almost spent twenty years in Afghanistan and were able to install a democratic set-up in the country, improved the infrastructure, made success in the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction and above all focused on the strengthening of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces during this period. But the irony of the situation lies in the fact that security still remains a great challenge in the country despite the availability of modern weapons and latest technology of warfare. The Taliban fighters were fighting the security forces in the northern city of Kunduz having occupied the main border crossing with Tajikistan on June 22, 2021 and reaching the suburbs of the northern Afghanistan’s main hub, Mazar-e- Sharif (Trofimov, 2021). According to the Tajikistan’s border service, 134 Afghan troops were granted shelter during crossing while 100 others were either killed or captured by the Taliban.

The offensive by Taliban in the northern part of Afghanistan has resulted in the fall of many Districts during a short period of one week, putting much of the countryside under the insurgent control. Local politicians and tribal elders negotiated a series of surrender agreements with government forces. It is also a fact that the security forces have been unpaid for months which was also a great contributory factor for leaving the convoys of armored vehicles and stockpiles of weaponry, including artillery pieces, mortars and heavy machine guns, in exchange for Taliban guarantees and passage.



Fears have also been expressed by the Chairman High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), Abdullah Abdullah while addressing at the leadership committee at the Presidential Palace said that the future of Afghanistan is in danger (News, 2021). The sixth leadership committee at the Presidential Palace was also attended by the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, members of the HCNR and other officials of the Afghan government. He urged that “The truth is, today the survival, security and unity of Afghanistan is in danger, there is no other way than peace”. Abdullah while speaking of the recent Washington trip says that “The United States’ message was even though we are withdrawing our troops, we are supporting the people of Afghanistan and we are with them” he further adds that “The US is of the view that we want peace and we also know the obstacles and the issues that have been created against the peace but the people’s consent will help us support you”.

Fears have also been expressed regarding the growing strength of the IS elements since Moscow has shown her concern that militants of the Islamic State are building up their forces in Northern Afghanistan as the US and NATO troops leave the country and it is a matter of utmost concern for the Moscow. This was cited by the Interfax news agency while referring to foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrow as saying this. He further says that the Islamic State has been gaining territory in Afghanistan in the wake of the US withdrawal and what he describes as the “irresponsible stance taken by the officials in Kabul (Reuters, 2021).

President of the United States, Joe Biden, is of the view that the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan is on track and will take a little time to be completed (Tribune, 2021). He is not in favor of the withdrawal for the US forces to be withdrawn but wants some of them to remain there even in September 2021 as part of a “rational drawdown with our allies”. It is also significant to note that the Biden administration had already expressed in April 2021 that the US forces will completely withdraw from Afghanistan on September 11, 2021 on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 9/11 attacks but now he has changed mind by giving more time for the troops to stay in Afghanistan till complete security prevails in the country (Tribune, 2021). Now, this change in the complete withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan will put the future of the country at stake since many dates have been changed. This will have great impact on the security parameters of Afghanistan and the US under the Trump administration was in great hurry to leave the country but the current administration is using a different strategy of delaying the final withdrawal allowing the US forces even to stay inside Afghanistan even after September keeping in view the worsening law and order situation in the country.

Complete withdrawal of the US forces and NATO troops from Afghanistan is imminent as the biggest air base in the country has been left by them (Dawn, 2021). The Bagram Airbase has been very important throughout the military operations of the NATO forces in Afghanistan where the war against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban was fought from this airbase. Now, all the foreign troops have left the Bagram Airbase but it has not yet been handed over to the security forces of the country. It is also significant to mention that some of the US forces have decided



to stay in the country to safeguard the interest of the US installations and key sectors in Afghanistan (Dawn, 2021). The US and NATO troops are about to leave Afghanistan on September 11, 2021 but still the number of residuary forces in Afghanistan has not been decided by the American government. During the last two months the Taliban have been struggling hard to get as much control of the country as possible as they have taken control of the dozen of the Districts on account of the excessive involvement of the Afghan security forces in the major urban areas of the country (Dawn, 2021).

Latest reports from the NATO opine that Pakistan is not in favor of the Taliban take over in the country rather they want them to have a deal with the Afghan government for sharing the power in the government while the same report also says that India is against the establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan (Shah, 2021).

### **Resolution of Conflict**

The Afghan enigma can be resolved through political process in which all the stakeholders can be given their due representation in the political set-up of the government. Most of the regional actors are of the view that the power-sharing formula can be represented by the Taliban but they should not be given complete takeover of the government (Shah, 2021). Pakistan is of the view that Taliban would have a significant role in the future set up of the government but that too in coalition with other political parties of the country. Even China shares the same view that the current government of Ashraf Ghani should be replaced with the interim government in which the Taliban must have a role to play in the government. These views are balanced by the anti-Taliban power brokers like Iran that may be willing to accept a power-sharing formula if her interests are protected. But countries like India may not be willing to accept the establishment of an interim government because that would not serve the interest of India in any case. For India Taliban are a force that are opposed to the Indian interest in the region since India has mainly focused on the training, assistance and funding facilities of the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) besides making huge investment in the country. For India, Taliban is a great security risk, since their take over in the country would greatly implant Pakistan's influence in country that would have far-reaching influence on the overall security of the region. Moreover, India is also not ready to have talks with the Taliban nor is she in a position to include the Taliban in the Afghan peace process on account of its tilt towards Pakistan.

Iran is more interested to play her due role in the future set up of the government. She has exclusive interest in the country for having close ties and affiliations with the northern alliance of the country. While other neighboring countries of Afghanistan like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are often underestimated for their little involvement in the affairs of the neighboring country. Despite the fact that China enjoys a short border with Afghanistan but operates more as a great power in the region for her involvement of economic activities at both the region and global level. Russia views Afghanistan as bordering its sphere of influence



in Central Asia and as a potential source of insecurity. But it is also important to mention that India is playing a significant role in Afghanistan, primarily driven by rivalry with Pakistan.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Afghanistan has been facing the sense of insecurity for the last four decades partly due to the intervention of the Soviet Union in 1979 and partly due to the intervention of the United States in 2001. In the former case, the country was confronted with leadership vacuum coupled with power vacuum that resulted in the creation of a various war-lords and civil war in the country. In the latter case, the US has not completely withdrawn from Afghanistan but still security situation in the country is going from bad to worse as Taliban have been in control of most of the key sectors of the country. Comparing the aftermath of the two scenario, it can be guessed that Afghanistan is going to face the same bleak picture that she witnessed in the post-Soviet withdrawal scenario.

Different stakeholders have different interest in Afghanistan in so far as the future set up and form of government is concerned. The regional powers have a different role to play on account of their involvement in the internal affairs of the country. Some countries are very crucial to the security paradigm of Afghanistan and the region. Pakistan has been the most important country that has more sphere of influence in Afghanistan due to her involvement in the internal affairs of the country particularly during the Taliban regime of 1996-2001. Now, the US withdrawal scenario will provide another opportunity to her to have her role played in the future form of government. But it is also significant that Pakistan may have a different strategy to adopt in Afghanistan in order to avoid the politics of blame game and supporting the Taliban because she had a very bad experience of being blamed for her support of Afghanistan. Till now, Pakistan has played a very positive role in bringing the United States and the Taliban to the negotiating table, which has been highly appreciated by the government of the United States and the Afghanistan.

It is very significant to mention that the Afghan security forces may not be able to overcome the security situation in the country. Taliban are gaining more and more momentum and claim to have got to control over 85% of the country but the US has a different view to present saying that the Taliban are in control of 1/3rd of the total Districts of the 421 Districts. The rise of Taliban may create further problems for the people and government stakeholders but an important thing is the development of the anti-Taliban elements that have shown their determination to fight against the Taliban and stand with the government and state machinery of the country. But in any case, the country is going to be doomed to the state of civil war and power vacuum. Hence, the regional powers need to focus more on playing their role and resolve the issue of security in Afghanistan since their personal security is directly linked with the security of Afghanistan.



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