



US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Assessment of Internal and External Implications

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Abstract

Following the 9/11 Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush had announced a war against Al-Qaeda and sent the US-NATO forces to Afghanistan. Later the Donald Trump government signed a peace pact with Afghan Taliban in February 2020 in Doha and decided extraction from Afghanistan. This withdrawal decision closed about a two-decades long chapter between the two countries. The Taliban control over Afghanistan post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan brought forth internal and external problems as they have not yet announced any sound strategy or policy to mitigate the governance and foreign policy crises. This situation has created a sense of insecurity in South Asia. Here, few questions that demand investigation are: (a) Why the US-NATO troops hastily withdrew Afghanistan? (b) How the US-NATO

troops' pullout instantaneous decision created copious challenges for the Afghan populace? (c) How this pullout created security challenges for the neighboring states? The present study aims to assess the US-NATO forces withdrawal from Afghanistan and its internal and external implications.

Keywords: Afghanistan, NATO forces, withdrawal, security threats, food insecurity.

Introduction

The United States started a war on terror after September 11 attacks. The targets were mainly extremist groups across the world, specifically Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Taliban. On September 11, 2001, jet airliners were hijacked and passengers had been told about bombs fixed in the jets.¹ The hijackers (al-Qaeda members) crashed two jets into the World Trade Center and a third jet crashed into the Pentagon. The hijackers wanted to hit A fourth airliner in the Whitehouse, but it crashed into the countryside in Pennsylvania. About 2,977 victims and 19 hijackers lost their lives in the attacks. The then U.S. President George W. Bush coined the term '*war on terrorism*' in September 2001 and later 'war on terror' in his formal speech to the Congress. President Bush also declared, "Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them."²

The next U.S. President Barack Obama also announced 'the Global War on Terror' on May 23, 2013 in which military forces would focus on a particular group aimed to obliterate the U.S. On December 28, 2014, the government declared the ending of the war by the U.S.-NATO led operation in Afghanistan, though they

¹ Richard Jackson, "War on Terrorism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2020, May 12). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-on-terrorism>

² Evelyn Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a "Postrace Era," *American Quarterly*, 65, no. 1 (2013): 161-69.

sustained their key role in Afghanistan.³ In 2017, the newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump stretched the military stay in Afghanistan. During the forces stay in Afghanistan, they started search operations and Operation Anaconda in March 2002, to destroy al-Qaeda and Taliban armed groups in the Shah-i-Kot vale and Arma Mountains. In this operation Taliban suffered casualties and vacated the region.

The Taliban unleashed an “insurgent-style offensive” aligned with NATO and the US forces at the end of 2002. A war started between Taliban and Coalition forces in southern and eastern parts. In February 2010, Operation Moshtarak started in southern Afghanistan to destroy the Taliban once and for all. A Peace process debate started between Taliban and Coalition forces. In September 2014, the US and Afghan Taliban signed a safekeeping accord, that permitted the US and NATO forces to prolong their stay in Afghanistan till 2024.⁴ In the second phase of negotiations started in Doha in February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban, it was decided that the US forces would leave the region till March 2021 and decided that “allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including Al Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”⁵ The then Afghan administration was not invited in Doha Agreement so they refused to release prisoners and rejected it. Joe Biden the new elected president announced a withdrawal date to August 31, 2021. Taliban defeated Afghan Armed Forces (trained

³ Vincent Morelli, *NATO in Afghanistan: a Test of the Transatlantic Alliance* (DIANE Publishing, 2009).

⁴ Air Commodore R. Khalid Iqbal, “Afghanistan Through a Transitional Decade: The Role of Major Powers: An analytical Overview.”

⁵ Claire Brenner & Matthew Wallin, “Preparing for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan.” (2021).

by the US) and on August 15, 2021 the fall of Kabul government happened.⁶

The then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani left Afghanistan and fled to Tajikistan⁷ and Taliban declared victory and war ended. Kabul Airport went under the control of US military forces and “Operation Allies Refuge” started to evacuate Afghan citizens.⁸ On August 19, 2021, Taliban re-declared ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’. After the US extraction sever humanitarian issues are rising in the region and people are suffering hunger, shelter, and other necessities of life.

Research Methodology

To investigate causes of the US-NATO troops hastily withdrawal from Afghanistan and its impact on the Afghan populace and on the overall security situation in South Asia, this study is unique in the sense that it has focused on the post withdrawal implications on Afghanistan and its neighboring states. The immediate withdrawal has left remarkable impact on the ongoing situation and its reflection on Iran, Pakistan, and other States. A huge humanitarian crisis started in Afghanistan which resulted in migration to nearing states. This influx is a heavy burden on the neighboring developing states. The study is significant as it brings to the attention of the global community to come forward and support the people and countries in the resettlement of refugees.

Literature Review

Carter Malkasian in his manuscript *The American War in Afghanistan* provides an inclusive history of the US-Afghan conflict.

⁶<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/18/uae-confirms-hosting-former-afghan-president-ghani>

⁷<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/18/uae-confirms-hosting-former-afghan-president-ghani>

⁸ <https://www.vox.com/2021/7/18/22582355/operation-allies-refuge-afghanistan>

The author spent about two years in Afghan region and served as a senior counselor to General Joseph Dunford, a military commander of the US in Afghanistan. He witnessed several phases of the war, 2001 foray, after 2003 Iraq assault, Taliban rise in 2006, Obama-era, and multiple resets in plan and power allocations that of 2011 forward, ending in 2018 to 2020 peace negotiations.⁹ According to him Taliban are the most influential group, and sees the conquest as feasible. The US War in the region explained wars have unsatisfactory consequences. He also offered a vibrant description of the disagreement that would remain the reliable justification for decades to come.

Craig Whitlock *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* blamed on a blazing condemnation of the dishonesty, and gaffes on superior military and native officials, by the similarly terrible reverberation of Vietnam disagreement. *The Afghanistan Papers* made a long-lasting openness part of the American documentation of the disastrous administration of a war. It also provides the answer that why Afghanistan War remained so long? The missed prospects, absolute blunders, and acceptance of the US senior commanders for admitting that they were effusively aware of the War situation in Afghanistan. The top generals and officials knew about the price and the ineffectiveness of the operation. It also reveals that it was America's absurdity hooked on the Central Asia. Its historic records of irresponsibility and ghastly decision-making have created a distrust environment in the country.¹⁰

Dr. Muhammad Tariq in his article "US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Latest Development and Security Situation (2020)"

⁹Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (Simon and Schuster, 2021).

highlighted that the US commitment of extraction from Afghanistan within approximately fourteen months will create issues for the US and Afghans. The US and Taliban agreed on this decision under intra-Afghan negotiations at Doha in February, which is anticipated to carry out peace and solidity in Afghanistan. The issues between the two parties during pandemic are being resolved but few reservations left untouched.

The authors projected that the scenario after the withdrawal of the US-NATO forces will assist in predicting the prospects of Afghanistan. It is hard to claim that tranquility and solidity can contour the outlook fate in Afghanistan throughout the last few months regardless of the Doha conformity.¹¹ Vernie Liebl in “Al Qaida on the US invasion of Afghanistan in their own words” The article covered a phase from first half of 2001 to 2002.

A major part of the article consists of “lessons learned,” and stories shared in interviews told by Al Qaida people by themselves. The author found different documents in different locations from Afghanistan, mostly in ex- Al Qaida ‘Head Quarter’ offices on the battleground. Al Qaida people shared the demise story of Ahmed Shah Mahsoud, involved in the devastation of the ‘World Trade Center’, and different coalition assaults in Afghanistan then the Taliban extraction from Kabul at the end of 2001.¹²

Events Leading to US-NATO Withdrawal

The USSR invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 with support of the Afghan communists. The USSR collided with the anti-communist Muslim groups and the conflict continued until February

¹¹ Muhammad Tariq, Muhammad Rizwan, & Manzoor Ahmad, “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Latest Development and Security Situation,” *SJESR*, 3, no. 2 (2020): 290-97.

¹² Vernie Liebl, “Al Qaida on the US Invasion of Afghanistan in their Own Words,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23, no. 3 (2012): 542-68.

1989.¹³ Mujahedeen were sponsored by the US and were armed with arsenals and religious zeal against the USSR.¹⁴ After the Red Army surrendered Afghanistan, a new civil war for power started among various groups in the region for control in Afghanistan.¹⁵ The Taliban, who were mostly Pashtun, ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. Their regime ended when the U.S.-NATO forces invaded Afghanistan and cracked down hard on the Taliban for offering haven to Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his followers.

Taliban is a word in Pashtu language which means 'student'. They got recognition in 1994 in Kandahar city. It was intra-groups fight for control of Afghanistan after the USSR defeat and departure. It initially recruited Afghans from 'Mujahideen' battalion who were supported by the US forces against the USSR in 1980s.¹⁶ In two years, Taliban exclusively had power over major parts, and proclaimed Islamic State in 1996 with strict implementation of Islamic Sharia. After September 11, 2001 brutal attacks in the US later accepted by Al-Qaeda, motivated the US-NATO forces to capture them; so the US-NATO troops reached Afghanistan and initiated massive airstrikes.¹⁷

¹³ T. Editors of Encyclopedia, "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 11, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Soviet-invasion-of-Afghanistan>

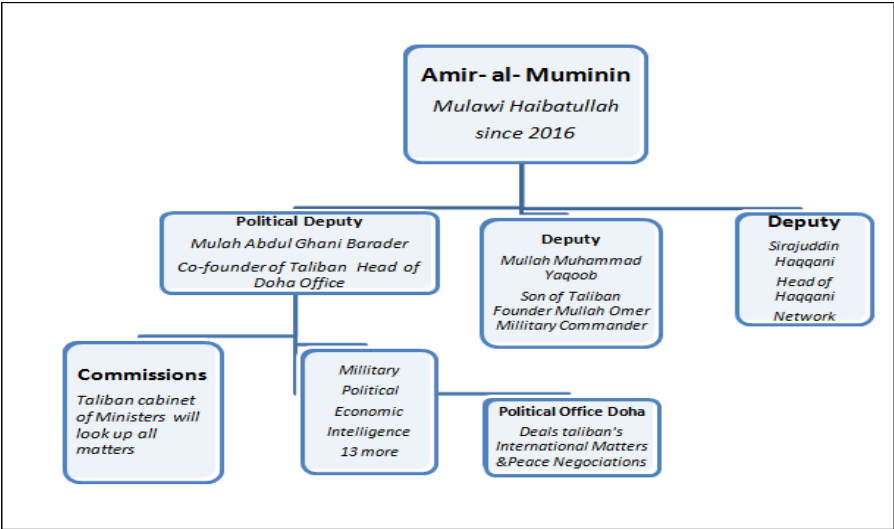
¹⁴ Gregory Feifer, & Robertson Dean, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Tantor Media, 2009.

¹⁵ Ghufraan, Nasreen. "The Taliban and the civil war entanglement in Afghanistan." *Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (2001): 462-87. See also Khalilzad, Zalmay. "Afghanistan in 1994: Civil war and disintegration." *Asian Survey* 35, no. 2 (1995): 147-152.

¹⁶ Eric Nagourney. *Who Are the Taliban, and What Do They Want?* The New York Times. (August. 19, 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-are-the-taliban.html>

¹⁷ The Indian Express, The Taliban: Here are key facts about the militant group's history and ideology. (August 27, 2021). <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/who-are-the-taliban-afghanistan-history-ideology-7456032/>

Fig: 02 Taliban Leadership Structure



After 9/11 George W. Bush announced a war to encounter terrorism that planned in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Taliban group comprised of one hundred thousand fighters but proved strong in last twenty years.¹⁹ As the US withdrew, Taliban took the control in Afghanistan. In the past the Taliban had targeted and attacks on Afghans locals, and controlled²⁰ controlled about fifty-four percent areas of Afghan’s major districts till the end of July 2021.²¹ The US-NATO forces during their stay in Afghanistan trained 30000 soldiers and it aimed that these troops would seek the control after their withdrawal but unfortunately they surrendered and an unhopeful circumstances perceived in the

¹⁸ Zachary Laub, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations 4, no. 7 (2014): 1-9.

¹⁹ Laub, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” 1-9.

²⁰ Jayshree Bajoria, and Zachary Laub. “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations 6 (2011).

²¹ Maia Larose Saldana, “The Future of Afghanistan After Two Decades of NATO Military Presence,” (2021).

country.²² The post withdrawal situation in Afghanistan created insecurity inside Afghanistan and beyond.

Internal Implications and Domestic Problems

Post-withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan created many challenges in the country. The Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and his political officials convened Martin Griffiths and shared that Afghanistan is facing a calamitous humanitarian situation caused by stern water dearth and a failing economy. Shaheen (Afghan Spokesman) in his Twitter statement said that “The UN delegation promised continuation of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, saying he would call for further assistance to Afghanistan during the coming meeting of donor countries.”²³

Taliban assumed control of Kabul and announced their government in July 2021. Afghanistan returned to the condition akin to 1994 that was characterized by Islamic rule. The state became a podium for global terrorists’ organizations. After the US forces’ withdrawal, some fiscal challenges also intensified as the economic support and external financial assistance was terminated. A civil war situation is expected to emerge in the near future that would lead to further fragmentation and division among different and warring ethnic groups.

Afghan women raised their voice over women rights. According to Mary Akrami Sahak (director of Afghan Women’s Network), “After the 1996-2001 oppressive Taliban rule, the women of Afghanistan came out of the dark. We will never go back!”

²² Maia Larose Saldana, “The Future of Afghanistan After Two Decades of NATO Military Presence,” (2021).

²³ *Dawn*, “Afghan Taliban say UN Promises Aid after Meeting with Officials in Kabul,” (September 6, 2021) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644562>

Taliban in their first tenure restricted women to go outside for work, shopping etc. After the US forces pulled out, women in Afghanistan are deeply concerned over Taliban's previous policies. Even if they have promised soft policies towards women in Afghanistan, the issues of emancipation and freedom to work is not announced. Without addressing these issues, progress is hardly possible; as Mary Akrami said, "Without carefully listening to women in all corners of the country and bringing their concerns and demands to the table so far, the so-called peace talks lack this kind of democratic legitimacy."

The issue of gender equality and women is a big test also, for Taliban, the international community's response to it. Civil society in Afghanistan also feel threatened as they know that they cannot criticize or demand reforms in the country because they have bitter past experiences of the past.

After Taliban detained city of Kabul, Farshad Usyan, a member of a news agency, shared that he and his fellows had only one option that is to leave Afghanistan because he is a photojournalist and Taliban will not allow them to work.²⁴ Another journalist described in an interview with Aljazeera that "I was keen to stay back and to try to work more, but it seemed impossible".²⁵ The US-NATO extraction has created a way for Taliban to takeover Afghanistan and it has created pandemonium and bewilderment and countless Afghan people are looking forward to leave the country.

People in Afghanistan have been facing a dire shortage of food, clean water, and medicine in the cities. They are having difficulty in meeting their daily needs. Many organizations have stopped working and left Afghanistan which resulted in acute health crisis as

²⁴<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/26/afghan-journalists-face-uncertain-future-under-Taliban>.

²⁵<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/26/afghan-journalists-face-uncertain-future-under-Taliban>.

people are facing difficulties to access healthcare.²⁶ According to Ramiz Alakbarov, Deputy Special Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan says,

It is extremely important that we prevent Afghanistan from descending into a further humanitarian catastrophe by taking the necessary steps to provide essential items which this country needs right now. And that is to support food, health and protection services, and non-food items, to those who are in extreme need.²⁷

After the takeover many Afghans have been displaced, which resulted in causing a serious issue of refugees on borders. The insecurities and threats to their lives forced them to leave the country. The UN Migrant Agency estimated that more than 500,000 Afghans fled by the end of 2021.²⁸

Many international organizations engaged with health, education and other social work immediately left Afghanistan after the withdrawal, leaving the beneficiaries of those services in peril. Taliban leadership must handle this situation by using diplomatic means and allow all organizations to resume their activities.

External Implications and Foreign Policy Constraints

In the wake of Taliban takeover, the neighboring countries are feeling a security threat. China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia and India, are anticipating emerging security challenges. The local trade and flow of Afghan refugees could destabilize their economic and even social landscapes.

²⁶https://www.msf.org/medical-needs-urgent-ever-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover?gclid=Cj0KCQjwssyJBhDXARIsAK98ITTP_mKkmEh3CE15UhzXBqw6MqNlkXmGwioUFW5KChnu-nOQV3KVF0IaAojpEALw_wcB

²⁷ UN News, "Afghanistan Crisis: Food Supply for Millions Could Run out this Month," (September 1, 2021). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1098972>

²⁸ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "UN Assured of Pakistan Help in Afghan Projects, *Dawn*, (September 5, 2021). <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644562>

Pakistan has the greatest regional influence on the trajectory of the conflict. In Pakistan, 1.4 million Afghan refugees are settled and now more are expected to arrive continuously after the US extraction. This exodus pattern has stayed the same for the past many decades. About 400,000 Afghan natives had runoff during the Communist-led Amin government and entered Pakistan. These statistics gradually got higher after the USSR invasion in 1979. By 1980, approximately four million refugees crossed the border and settled in Pakistan. In the past, the world community financially supported Pakistan in the settlement process, but this time they are not willing to support. Pakistan is already under the effects of the pandemic and the financial crises have brought the economy to near-default. Another factor is Pakistan's internal security which cannot afford terrorism in the country. Pakistan has always focused on the humanitarian aspect of Afghanistan, and recently it has evacuated overseas civilians from conflicted areas.

Afghanistan is an eastern neighbor of Iran with historic relations. The muddled consequences of the Taliban's occupation had an undulating effect that damaged Iran's interests. Iran's officials have deep concerns of a flow of immigrants and migrants, narcotics trafficking, keeping trade, dealing with threat from the extremist groups, and protecting Shia Afghan minorities. Iran set up temporary shelter near Razavi Khorasan, South Khorasan, Sistan and Baluchistan for 950,000 registered Afghan migrants and expecting 2 million more Afghans.²⁹

Taliban control over Kabul has been perceived in India in the perspective of India-Pakistan conflict and altercations with China, creating a situation very different than Ashraf Ghani's regime which is a serious challenge to India's security. Indian media has been busy in portraying the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as Pakistan's

²⁹ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/missing-bigger-implications-us-withdrawal-afghanistan>

victory of its Afghan strategy. India is mainly apprehensive regarding the regional fallout and is also worried about Taliban and their relations with Pakistan and how India would manage this cooperation between the two. Pakistan is as apprehensive to the Afghan Taliban as is India. TPP and its links to the Afghan Taliban is a source of contention for Pakistan.

China invested profoundly in the resource exploitation in Afghanistan. It had its own qualms that Afghanistan would have harmful impact on China if security situation got worse. It is imperative to bring new Afghan leadership onto a political and diplomatic track. China can manage and ensure security in South Asia and Central Asia owing to its ability to provide financial assistance to Afghanistan.³⁰ China has started CPEC and BRI projects, and any demographic or political change in the region would affect Chinese investment. Being a major power, it would come forward and negotiate with Taliban for regional peace for cordial and bilateral relations. It is also projecting that China may provide financial assistance to the government of Afghanistan for better governance on humanitarian basis, following its soft tactics and friendly relations' policy with the neighboring states.

An abrupt extraction of the US forces has numerous traditional and nontraditional threats in Afghanistan, especially various fears of cross-border militancy and drug trafficking can have grave effects on internal security of regional powers. The Central Asian countries are particularly on the edge, as the crisis in Afghanistan can flow outwards towards the neighboring region. All these states want peace in Afghanistan and will never support any armed conflict. Afghanistan has deep historic relations with the Central Asian block and have always looked forward to cooperation and bilateral

³⁰<https://ipripak.org/post-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-internal-and-external-dimensions/>

agreements to increase trade, and political partnerships, but it can only be possible if there is a peaceful Afghanistan.

It is expected that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will continue to influence China and India's internal affairs. If the Afghan Taliban strongly hold and establish a political government, the role of Pakistan would be decisive and influential and will amplify rapidly.

Conclusion

The Taliban takeover of Kabul took the global world by shock and surprise. The effortlessness and ease by which this force captured power in Afghanistan showed unmistakable signs of the US backing. The two-decades long contest ended in August 2021 when the US-NATO troops abruptly left Afghanistan and this immediate move created internal and external challenges and insecurities for South Asia. This withdrawal has had a deep impact on political, economic, and governance issues in Afghanistan, where a shortage of food, medicine, health care facilities, and bulging insecurities have made people afraid and forced them to move abroad. Taliban have not announced any strategic plan for governance. It is also expected that they can divide into various groups for the sake of power and authority and a new civil war is in the offing. In this fragile situation, the victims are innocent Afghan people who have families with children and women. The neighboring countries, Pakistan, Iran, and India have their own concerns about regional and border security. Pakistan and Iran already have millions of Afghan refugees resettled in their territories and are expecting more soon. The UN teams have also been providing communities with access to water and sanitation; however, the World Food Programme (WFP) has expressed concern with reference to food requirements of Afghanistan. The world community did not offer a comprehensive relief package for the Afghan populace. The UN's role is also significant, but it has not broadcast its strategic plans for

Afghanistan's current situation. Afghanistan's shaky financial and humanitarian conditions are reasons enough for the world to engage with Kabul to bring stability as the alternate outcome will surely disturb the regional and world peace.