

Endgame in Afghanistan : A Litmus Test to Pakistan-US Relations.

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Abstract : Afghanistan features an important rather primary actor in Pakistan - US relations post 9/11. Pakistan joined the US-led war on terror to dethrone Taliban and eliminate the Al-Qaeda base camps in Afghanistan. Pakistan's geographic proximity, ethnic ties and historical relationship with Afghanistan became a guiding principle for US to involve Pakistan as a 'frontline state' in Global War on Terror (GWOT). However, Pakistan's historical disputes with Afghanistan, and Afghanistan's good relations with India, has not only soared the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but it does have a profound impact on Pakistan-US relations and the successful resolution of 'Endgame' in Afghanistan as well. So, this paper is an attempt to understand and analyse the impact of Afghan Endgame on the Present and future relations of Pakistan and United States.

Keywords : 9/11, Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, Pakistan, Afghan Endgame, United States.

Introduction : Afghanistan has become a centre of global attention since 2001, when the United States launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom', in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It has been more than Eighteen years, since United States invaded Afghanistan, but peace still continues to elude there, because neither U.S. has defeated the Taliban completely on ground nor any conclusive peace deal has been signed by different parties involved in Afghan War. After 2003, when United States shifted its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq, the country has been ravaged by a series of ever increasing Taliban insurgency taking more and more Afghan territory under their control, thus, putting the Afghan peace process as well as nation-building there into oblivion.

Afghanistan in Pakistan -US relations post 9/11

Following the September 11, 2001, horrific attacks on twin towers of World Trade Centre and Pentagon Towers, United States launched a comprehensive global campaign of 'War on terror' to bring justice to the perpetrators of this barbaric act. After refusal by Taliban to handover Osama Bin Laden, the chief architect of this attack, United States launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' to dismantle Taliban and eliminate Al-Qaeda. After Eighteen years of continuous fighting in Afghanistan, war in Afghanistan has now entered into a critical phase. United States is yearning for a face saving exit from Afghanistan, the longest war in its history.

In order to have a peaceful solution of endgame in Afghanistan, the role of Regional powers becomes important than any time in Afghanistan's history. The conflict that has ravaged Afghanistan over the past Eighteen years is much more than a local or national power struggle. It must be seen, rather, in its regional context, in order to get a better understanding of the different dimensions of the precarious situation prevailing there. After the drawdown of Allied forces in 2014 and Afghanistan being a landlocked country, the role of regional powers especially Pakistan, has increased manifold.

During these Eighteen years of Afghan war, the role of Pakistan to ensure success of US led 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan against Taliban and other insurgent groups has remained very dubious and critical, because of the diverging interests between Pakistan and United States.

Pakistan is the most critical player in Afghanistan's Endgame, because of its geographical proximity, ethnic linkages with Afghans especially Pashtuns, besides being a frontline state in War on terror.

Historically, Pakistan and Afghanistan relations suffered from mistrust and suspicion, as the chequered history of bilateral relationship has been more of animosity than of cooperation with "Durand line and Pakhtunistan", as major irritants.ⁱ Pakistan sees Afghanistan as potentially providing 'strategic depth' against India. Pakistan does not want a pro-India regime in Kabul. Consequently, Pakistan is trying to increase its stakes in Afghanistan via Taliban. Defying U.S. pressure, Pakistan is not ready to attack the Afghan-Taliban or destroy its sanctuaries on its soil, because of her geo-strategic interests. In January 2018, President Trump has directly accused Pakistan of "housing the very terrorists that we are fighting".ⁱⁱ However, Donald Trump a year later sought Imran Khan's help in bringing Afghan endgame to a logical conclusion.

Endgame in Afghanistan

The endgame in Afghanistan is evolving rapidly. Expectations of an end to America's long military adventure in Afghanistan have unleashed multiple moves to shape the country's future. Following 'Operation Enduring Freedom', and as a result of unrelenting U.S. and allied military operations since then, the core of Al-Qaeda has been dismantled to the point of incoherence. Despite this achievement, however, the extremist ideology embodied by Al-Qaeda persists across Pakistan-Afghanistan border as a more diffused movement, and there are residual fears that the resurgent Taliban insurgency could re-establish a sanctuary for transnational terrorist successors viz; Al-Qaeda, or Lashkar-e-Taiba, which could provoke major crises involving nuclear armed powers of India and Pakistan. Permanently eliminating Al-Qaeda and Taliban constituted the core objective of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. But, after failing to subdue Taliban completely, US finally realised that without taking Taliban on board, they cannot have a face saving exit from Afghanistan. Consequently, U.S. strategy evolved by 2010 to focus on transitioning the conflict's resolution to be an Afghan responsibility, with Washington underwriting its financial costs.

US succeeded in changing Pakistan's Policy towards Taliban but not Pakistan's interests. As one of the Pakistani official put it, "*We are saving the Taliban from rainy days*".ⁱⁱⁱ But, for having any solution to Endgame in Afghanistan, the US knows that Pakistan had a great role to play in order to get things done for US. Among all regional and extra-regional players, Pakistan enjoy greatest influence due to geographical proximity, and its perceived relationship with the ascendant Taliban. In terms of the end game, Pakistani policy elite see their state as having two overriding objectives:

The "settlement" in Afghanistan should not lead to a negative spill over such that it contributes to further instability in Pakistan or causes resentment among Pakistani Pashtuns;

The government in Kabul should not be antagonistic to Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used against Pakistani state interests. Translated into actionable policy, these umbrella objectives lead Pakistan to pursue three outcomes:

A degree of stability in Afghanistan: Pakistan's interests can be best realised by relatively stable government in Kabul that is not hostile towards Pakistan. There is across the board realization among the policy elite that persistent instability in Afghanistan will have numerous fallouts that Pakistan is ill-prepared to tackle.

An inclusive government in Kabul: Pakistan would prefer a negotiated configuration with adequate 'Pashtun representation' that is recognized by all ethnic and political stakeholders in Afghanistan. Some opinion makers insist that a sustainable arrangement would necessarily require the main Afghan Taliban factions—particularly Mullah Omar's group and the Haqqani network—to be part of the new political arrangement.

Limiting Indian presence to development activities: Pakistani foreign policy elite accept that India has a role to play in Afghanistan's economic progress and prosperity. However, many believe that the present government goes beyond strictly development and thus raises concerns in Pakistan. As the Pakistani security establishment sees the dynamic, a reluctance to address Pakistani misgivings increases the likelihood of a growing Indian footprint, and in turn, New Delhi's greater ability to manipulate the end game negotiations and the post-settlement dispensation in Kabul.^{iv}

There has been continuous pressure from US on Ghani government to find some common ground with Taliban vis-a-vis endgame in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan is using its leverage to bring Taliban on negotiating table. Consequently, we saw that despite the failure of various peace overtures offered earlier by former Afghan president Hamid Karzai and incumbent Ashraf Ghani to Taliban failed, Taliban agreed to have talks with US in Doha, Qatar. The Afghan Taliban announced in December 2018, that they will meet with American negotiators in the Qatar to find a peaceful solution to the 18-year armed insurgency in Afghanistan. Consequently, on February 25, 2019, peace talks began between the Taliban led by Abdul Ghani Baradar, while as US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Zalmay Khalilzad was representing the United States. There is a hope that talks would further the national building and democratic strengthening processes in Afghanistan made in the post 2001 period, after the Taliban government was overthrown by a US-led military coalition for sheltering al-Qaeda, the group blamed for the 9/11 attacks. In previous Nine rounds of talks, the two sides agreed on a "draft framework" that included the withdrawal of US troops, a discussion on Taliban's

commitment that the Afghan territory would not be used by international "terror" groups, and that a ceasefire would be implemented across the country.

However, before final draft be signed by Taliban and United States at Camp David on September 11, 2019, Donald trump cancelled talks through a tweet, owing to the killing of an American Soldier in a Taliban attack at Kabul. After the cancellation of talks infuriated Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told that "The agreement along with its annexes were finalized after long discussions, now they are ready to be signed. Now it is up to the U.S., whether they want the issue resolved through peaceful means or military means."^v

After the cancellation of peace talks, Taliban went to Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. On 3 October, Taliban group lead by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar not only met top Pakistan military and civilian officials, but they also met Zalmay Khalilzad at Islamabad along with other US officials which helped to take the suspended peace talks forward. Thereafter, a prisoner swap between the U.S. and the Taliban took place, when Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl was exchanged for five Taliban prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2014. Zalmay Khalilzad second time in this month, on October 29th went to Islamabad and held an important meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, to expedite the peace process forward to find some solution to Afghan endgame. This highlights the importance of Pakistan in Afghan peace process.^{vi}

Conclusion: From the above analysis, it becomes clear that Pakistan is very significant for US interests in the region especially in Afghanistan. United States has realised this fact that any agreement vis-à-vis Afghanistan's future will not bore fruit, unless Pakistan is taken into confidence, because of Pakistan critical role and its geographic proximity with Afghanistan.

It is largely because of the Pakistan's efforts that Taliban agreed to talk to Zalmay Khalilzad. Now, how far Pakistan will exercise its leverage to bring Taliban in the mainstream Afghan politics or convince them to accept the intra-Afghan dialogue to end the Afghan Conundrum is a million dollar question.

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