



Original Article

# Chapter of Twenty Years: An Ultimate End of Proxy War in Afghanistan and Role of Pakistan in Peace Process

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## ABSTRACT

Afghanistan's area is covered by the East-West and North-South of the Hindu Kush range, which pins down the foreign occupier. It forms a life-and-death bridge which joins Southern and Eastern Asia to Central Asia and West Asia. After the 9/11 incident, the journey of war came to an end on 29th February, 2021, the Taliban forces and the US government signed a peace agreement at Doha. This paper engages the withdrawal of US military troops from the landlocked country, Afghanistan and the peace process. The US returned to their home after the end of a twenty-year-long war. Resultantly, the 'new' Taliban and its club house took over the reins of the country. The Afghanistan government, the Taliban, and the US are ultimately involved in a battle of two decades. On 15th August, 2021, the Taliban forces entered the capital of Afghanistan with high speed and drew the world's eyes towards them. After 15 days of the date of entrance of Taliban into Kabul, US military forces concluded their operations and evacuated the land of Afghanistan on 30th August, 2021, marking the end of the proxy war.

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, End of proxy war, Peace process, Role of Pakistan, Taliban movement*

## INTRODUCTION

According to the 2020 report of World Bank collection of development indicators, Afghanistan has secure land of 652,860 sq km. Afghanistan has a great importance in the region due to his geographical position. It is called the cross road for the states of South Asia and Central Asian states. For that cause, super powers have too much interest in this country. Due to his attractive location, Dr. Mondra Dutta revealed that a measure of control over Afghanistan will automatically lead to a measure of control over south Asia (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015). Afghanistan is considered as the burial ground of several kingdoms. Super power countries of the world knee lay-down on the ground without any success. Afghanistan brutally faced foreign invaders from Alexander to British Empire, Soviet in 1980's, and final arrival of American in 2001. Still yet no any outsider has ever got success in Afghanistan.

After all, this country has been declared as the playground of the wars. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, the game started between the Soviets and British kingdom, after that US participated in this game against USSR and now the US play a role of host for Taliban forces. No doubt, all the invaders took a capsule of bad taste with defeat. World super power tried more than couple times but failure to conquer Afghanistan (Norland, 2017). The British government paid huge loss of lives and their sources but the result was the removal of their image and feet from the land of Afghanistan at last. The British endeavours three times from 1839 to 1919 but game in the hands of mountains. The lesson was not enough for Soviet Union, continuing tradition of dominancy over Afghanistan, the Jihadis with other allied members and financial assistance of US, Soviet Union not only faced a crucial time but also disintegrated into pieces. 9/11 incident push up America to take U-Turn and involved

into War against Terror. It has considered as the 21<sup>st</sup> first war ever to led by US against Afghanistan. This war called as the longest war of America after Vietnam War and US contributed loss in trillions of dollars.

### Beginning of Taliban

In 1992, Soviet withdrawal was the reason behind the formation of Taliban. The clerics and students of Peshawar, mostly belong to rural areas, started Taliban movement, in the name of Mujahideen. Taliban word referred as "Talib" means student of Madrassah or Student of Islam. Collective meaning of Taliban is "quester of knowledge". Other roots have followed from "Mullah Umar" founder leader of Taliban group and taught from Marassah in Pakistan (Nojumi et al., 2008). Pakistan seen as the supportive actor towards "Taliban" because it has potential of security from all border sides where Pakistani troops hoped (Kean & Hamilton, 2004.). The Taliban founded, President Burhanuddin was corrupt, weak, and anti-pashtun. Taliban's moral was built higher when the four-year civil war erupted between Mujahideens. In between them, the month of November 1994 witnessed, Taliban entered the fight and took its first control of southern Kandhar and launched numerous military drives all over the country. On 27 September, 1996, Taliban took over the control of the capital of Afghanistan. At that time, the Ex-President Najibullah was hanged and Osama Bin Laden decided back to Afghanistan. Taliban almost controlled 90 % of the total area of Afghanistan and tried to disintegrate the other opposition groups (Bajoria & Laub, 2011).

Taliban argued that all the groups must be disarmed when in order maintain the peace and stable Afghanistan. No doubt, the Taliban faced various hurdles administratively and financially to continue their use of

power. The interpretation of Islam in areas where they were in power deployed harsh punishments, to enforce their decision, ban on television, public execution and ban on dance also on western music caused the loss of prestige domestically as well as internationally. The women are not allowed to attend the school or go outside the home for work, except for hospital purpose.

The United States played a vital role to evacuate the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. After the Geneva Accord of 1988, USSR decided to withdraw from the mountainous covered land. The US was not inclined towards Afghanistan after the removal of Soviet. Due to security conditions, the US was not able to open their embassy from January 1989 to 2001. The US dollars assistance for some groups of Mujahideens continued to fight against the Soviet and their allied members. After 1992, the US government was hesitating to maintain them continue engagements in the landlocked territory (Coll, 2005). The US scheme was not clear cut towards Afghanistan. Someone revelled that American official issued a cacophony of statements, some sceptical, some apparently supportive, from which it was impossible to deduce a clear position (Coll, 2005). US was not interesting towards Afghanistan when Taliban provide shelter to Osama Bin Laden, a most wanted Al-Qaeda leader.

The presentation of Osama Bin Laden at Afghanistan arose several questions between the relations US and Afghanistan. At that time, it was the burning issue affecting the strategy of US. High profile financier, organizer of group, and provide large amount assistance to Mujahideens in 1980's, Osama Bin Laden back to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996. Pakistan's secret agency reportedly introduced Osama in front of Taliban in Kandhar (Falkenrath, 2004); and he made an alliance with Taliban and paid huge financial aid for their support. In response of Taliban, Al-Qaeda made various camps for recruitment and training. The US reported that, almost 10,000 to 20,000 trained people from the Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan (Falkenrath, 2004). Bill Richardson, U.S ambassador to United Nations paid a first official visit in a decade to Afghanistan for the expulsion of Osama Bin Laden. Taliban denied from the appearance of Osama in Afghanistan, and sudden replied that he was not any type of threat for United States (Gutman, 2008).

### **September 2001 Incident**

World Trade Centre and Military HQ of US was targeted by the Al-Qaeda on 11 September, 2001. The Dark night mode showed in the day time of US streets. Almost 3000, people lost their lives and 6000

were injured. On 20 September, 2001, George W. Bush, President of America in a joint session of Congress, demanded from Taliban, the terrorist leaders of Al-Qaeda who were involved in the activities of 9/11. He also demanded the full access of US in their training camps and must hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate (Bush, 2001).

### **Deployment of US Troops in Afghanistan After 2001**

American President G.W Bush delivered in his speech on 20 September, 2001, the urgent demand of Osama and other Al-Qaeda leaders from Taliban. He also added that if refused than "Share in their fate". Al-Qaeda leadership refused to hand over Osama to US government. Less than a month, on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2001, US government launched a quality of operation named as "Operation Enduring Freedom". It was continued airstrike five days against Taliban and Al-Qaeda at Kandhar, Jalalabad, and Kabul. Some of 1000 military special personals including CIA, Army Special forces and conventional ground forces were deployed in Afghanistan at the second last month of 2001. After a year, it increased to 10000 forces (Al Jazeera, 2023). The US approach to Kandhar, the birth place of Taliban and home area of Mullah Muhammad Umar, Taliban leaders tried to fulfil their talks with US desired for amnesty but refused. Many of Taliban fighters and leaders captured and killed by the US Forces and most of them tried escape from place including Mullah Muhammad Umar to ambush areas or to Pakistan for shelter. Taliban rule was ended and the shift of new government installed by the US.

### **Reconstruction of Afghanistan Government Under Foreigners**

The Taliban rule came to end after the invade of US forces in Afghanistan. Bonn Agreement concluded at Germany by the United Nations where political leaders gathered and formed an interim Transitional Administration in Afghanistan. On 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2002, President Bush declared a Marshall Plan to reconstruct Afghanistan with massive assistance of 38 billion Dollars for the purpose to provide training to Afghan security forces and to financial support to peoples. On 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2002, the Loya Jirga appointed Popalzai Durrani Tribes man, Hamid Karzai as Interim President of Afghanistan. No any Taliban member show their presence in the Loya Jirga. After appointment of Hamid Karzai, US security forces approximately 8,000 stayed at Afghanistan till to 2003. In the same year, US Government officially announced the end of "Major Combat" operation in Afghanistan (A&E Television

Networks, 2021). Though secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld delivered that pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country remain (Whitlock, 2022).

Disperse forces of Taliban started to regroup in the year of 2005 in the areas of southern and eastern part of Afghanistan. Some observers revelled that the border line Pakistan was also became the part under Taliban (Knopp et al., 2023). To tackle the Taliban growing activities, US administration enhanced their troops to around 30,000 by the end of Bush government. This number increased to 130,000 under Obama's Government in 2010-11. At that time, the goal was set to conclude the combat operations by the end of 2014.

### **Role of Pakistan in Peace Talks & Doha Agreement**

Afghanistan, situated in a crucial geostrategic position, has long been a focal point for proxy wars waged by various foreign powers. Over the past four decades, the nation has experienced significant historical milestones, including the disintegration of the former Afghan Empire, the incursion of Soviet forces, and the rise of a secular communist regime. This tumultuous period was further marked by the victorious emergence of the Mujahedeen, led by Mullah Omer (Yameen, 2020). In 1996, the Taliban launched an invasion and subsequently established a theocratic government grounded in Sharia Law. However, this regime faced a pivotal turning point following the September 11 attacks, an event that reverberated across the globe and led to the United States accusing Afghanistan of harbouring Al-Qaeda's leadership (Crews & Tarzi, 2009). In the aftermath of this tragic incident, which claimed the lives of countless innocent individuals, the United States initiated a military campaign in Afghanistan aimed at not only dismantling Al-Qaeda but also addressing the underlying issues of religious extremism believed to be emanating from this war-torn country, with the objective of protecting American interests and preventing future acts of terrorism.

As an elected government took charge of Kabul, the rural expanse of Afghanistan remained largely outside its control, becoming the domain of powerful warlords. These warlords, with their own agendas, operated independently, creating a complex web of challenges that soon began to plague the government of Hamid Karzai (Kazmi, 2016). In a bid to stabilize the nation, the Afghan government, particularly under Karzai's leadership, made concerted efforts to negotiate with these warlords and integrate them into the political fold. Unfortunately, these initiatives yielded little in

terms of positive outcomes. Additionally, Hamid Karzai sought to engage the Taliban in dialogue, offering amnesty and various incentives to coax them into negotiations. However, the Taliban leaders dismissed these overtures, contending that Karzai lacked legitimacy and functioned merely as a puppet for foreign interests. They insisted that any discussions regarding peace be contingent upon the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Conversely, President George W. Bush firmly opposed any negotiations with the Taliban, declaring that there would be no amnesty granted and rejecting any talks with what he labelled as terrorists.

Pakistan plays a very important role in the Afghan peace process, a fact underscored by its lengthy border with Afghanistan, along with intertwining ethnic connections and geographical proximity. Central to this dynamic is the historical relationship between Pakistan's military establishment and the Taliban. These established ties position Pakistan as a significant participant in the ongoing negotiations, which strive to foster lasting peace and stability in the region. At this moment, the peace process stands as the primary beacon of hope for all parties involved in Afghanistan. Throughout this journey, Pakistan has consistently extended its support toward various peace initiatives aimed at fostering stability and harmony within Afghanistan (Ahmad et al., 2017). In a notable declaration, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, the military commander of Pakistan, stated that the country possesses the capability to foster an environment conducive to reconciliation in Afghanistan.

This pronouncement, originating from a high-ranking military official, reflects Pakistan's significant and assertive role in shaping dynamics pertaining to the Afghan Taliban (Perlez, 2010). Following the acknowledgment by the military's top officials, the civilian government also recognized the extent of Pakistan's influence over the Taliban. The declarations made by both military and civilian leaders reinforced the international community's position regarding Pakistan's connections with the Taliban, lending weight to the existing narrative surrounding this complex relationship. Within the Pakistan Army, perspectives regarding relationships with the Taliban varied significantly. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency verified that the direct associations between the ISI and the Taliban were disrupted following the events of September 11 (Weitz, 2012).

Tribes living along these borders traverse them with ease, despite the absence of any formal legal structure governing their movements. In addition, groups like

the Taliban and other extremist factions have been implicated in acts of terrorism, resulting in damage to Pakistan's infrastructure, notably the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Consequently, Pakistan had compelling motivations to endorse and facilitate peace negotiations in Afghanistan. In 2010, a significant initiative known as the High Peace Council was formed, comprising a diverse group of 70 members. In January 2011, these council members undertook a diplomatic journey to Islamabad, aiming to garner support for the ongoing Peace Process. However, before any substantial progress could be made, the tragic assassination of former President Rabbani occurred in September 2011. This event marked a pivotal moment, leading to a noticeable decline in the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Ullah et al., 2023).

This led to the historic first peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government, which were hosted by Pakistan and convened in Muree on July 7, 2015 (Niaz, 2017). These discussions were not public, marking a discreet yet crucial dialogue between the two factions—the Kabul administration and the Taliban. The presence of representatives from the United States and China added an international dimension to the proceedings, highlighting the global interest in Afghanistan's future. The meeting was regarded as a beacon of hope, suggesting the possibility of a more peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. However, this initiative did create rifts within the Taliban itself, particularly causing discontent for the group's office in Qatar, which was critical of the talks. Despite these challenges, Pakistan played a pivotal role in orchestrating this critical dialogue between the conflicting parties and subsequently announced plans for a follow-up meeting soon (Osman, 2015). Nevertheless, progress in these discussions remained limited until the Afghan government reached an agreement with Hizb-e-Islami in 2014 (Khatri, 2021).

On the other side, The United States found itself in an untenable position, grappling with the heavy tolls of the protracted conflict in Afghanistan and mapping out a definitive plan for withdrawal. A significant hurdle in this endeavour was the Taliban leadership, which presented a formidable obstacle to the US's aims of promoting an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue that would engage all relevant political stakeholders. The Taliban leadership outright rejected the prospect of dialogue, insisting instead on an unconditional withdrawal of US troops to solidify their control over the nation (Ullah et al., 2023). In response, the US administration turned to Pakistan, seeking to leverage

its influence over the Taliban to facilitate negotiations. Initially, there was a belief within the US that deploying military pressure might compel the Taliban toward compromise. However, the Trump administration prioritized the utility of dialogue, recognizing that negotiations might offer a more pragmatic path to achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan. Consequently, Zalmay Khalil Zad was appointed as the special envoy to spearhead these critical discussions.

Notably, the negotiations involving the Afghan government, led by the democratically elected President Ashraf Ghani, were largely overlooked, leaving them on the sidelines (Pilster, 2020). In this intricate diplomatic landscape, Khalilzad engaged in five rounds of discussions with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, a series of negotiations that extended until March 2019 (Behuria et al., 2019). In September 2019, President Trump took a significant step by inviting a Taliban delegation to Camp David, where they were set to engage in discussions alongside U.S. and Afghan government representatives, all in pursuit of a potential agreement. However, this pivotal meeting was abruptly called off after the tragic killing of a U.S. soldier. Curiously, despite this incident and the loss of over 2,300 other U.S. soldiers (Ben-Meir, 2021), the U.S. Department of State refrained from designating the Taliban as a foreign terrorist organization. This decision likely stemmed from their desire to establish a negotiated settlement and fulfil their plans for troop withdrawal.

On February 29th, 2020, a significant milestone was reached in the quest for peace in Afghanistan, culminating in the agreement widely referred to as the Doha Agreement. This pivotal accord was established between the United States and the Taliban and outlined a plan for the complete withdrawal of American military forces. In return, the Taliban provided assurances, pledging to decrease acts of violence and to cut ties with various terrorist entities (State Gov., Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan). However, one of the key shortcomings of this accord was the absence of a permanent ceasefire agreement and a mechanism for resolving potential conflicts between the Afghan government—then led by President Ashraf Ghani—and the Taliban.

Additionally, the agreement fell short in stipulating any concrete actions to ensure the enforcement of commitments, such as the reduction of violence and the severing of associations with terrorist groups (Boot, 2020). It is also noteworthy that following the

signing of this agreement, the number of American troops stationed in Afghanistan was reduced to 8,600 (Sullivan, 2021). Subsequently, on January 15th, 2021, this figure was cut further to 2,500, marking the lowest count of troops since the onset of military operations in 2001. This reduction was executed in accordance with a directive issued by then-President Donald Trump in November 2020, signifying the conclusion of his term in office (Thomas, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

After two decades marked by conflict and transformation, the last American soldier departed Afghanistan on August 31, 2021. The United States' involvement in the region has evolved significantly since its initial objective of capturing Osama bin Laden, dismantling the Taliban, and neutralizing Al Qaeda. Over the years, the focus shifted towards establishing a democratic state, which included a gradual reduction in the presence of U.S. and allied forces while transferring authority to Afghan military personnel. However, after years of disappointing outcomes, the U.S. ultimately decided to withdraw completely from Afghanistan, a decision spurred by the increasing recognition of the challenges faced on the ground. A pivotal moment in this process was the signing of the Doha agreement under Donald Trump's administration, which set forth intentions to achieve peace in Afghanistan.

Although the agreement was seen as a potential way forward, it primarily reflected the perspectives of the Taliban. Despite explicit terms for reducing violence—a notion that proved nebulous since measuring prior violence was inherently complex—the Taliban persisted in their military efforts to reclaim control over the nation. Subsequently, the adjustment of the U.S. withdrawal timeline, from the original May 1, 2021, to a more symbolic September 11, 2021, and ultimately to August 31, precipitated an increase in conflict. This postponement seemingly invigorated the Taliban's quest for dominance. Their offensive escalated drastically, yielding rapid victories as they captured provinces one after another, culminating in their advance on Kabul on August 14. The following day, Kabul fell, resulting in the Taliban assuming de facto control over the country. During this turmoil, President Ashraf Ghani fled via helicopter to Tajikistan, abandoning his position.

The aftermath of this extensive military engagement, which consumed over \$2 trillion and claimed nearly 3,000 American lives, raises contentious questions regarding its effectiveness. While the U.S. can, at least nominally, claim success in eliminating Osama

bin Laden and curtailing Al Qaeda's operations, it ultimately failed to establish a sustainable government despite substantial financial investment. The Taliban's swift resurgence, reclaiming power and announcing the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan within a mere three months of their offensive, starkly highlighted the fragility of the progress made. Meanwhile, the Northern Alliance in the north, led by Ahmad Massoud with the aid of local warlords, remains a testament to the ongoing resistance; nonetheless, for the time being, the Afghan populace is left at the mercy of the Taliban regime.

## Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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