

AN UNSTABLE AFGHANISTAN: THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF NATO'S DEPARTURE ON PAKISTAN

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Introduction: Leaving unfinished business behind?

Observers cannot help but compare the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan between 1988 and 1989 to NATO's exit in January 2015, when it handed over command and control of security responsibilities to Afghan forces and most of the alliance's combat troops left the war-torn country. The situation leading to both withdrawals are hauntingly similar: no clear victory in sight, crumbling state institutions and bloodthirsty, powerful ethnic and tribal groups and factions waiting for someone to ignite the fire. After 13 years of war, Afghanistan looks only slightly better than before, with a relatively peaceful political transition, higher literacy rates, higher life expectancy and an increased GDP.

However, the objectives behind the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which were mainly to root out the Al Qaeda, crush the Taliban and establish security, have not been achieved. And these very security-related missions – the basis of the NATO and US presence in the country – will be left incomplete and unfinished. The United States and NATO forces have been racing against time to train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) so that responsibilities can be transferred to them, but the ANSF still seem far from being independently capable of taking back the areas under control of the Taliban.

The apprehensions are that after the foreign troops leave Afghanistan, a full-fledged civil war might once again break out, just like it happened after the Soviet withdrawal. Or worse, with the harrowing events of the birth of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), fears abound about a similar crisis in the country. However, the most worrying aspect of the situation in Afghanistan is that events in that country will inevitably affect its neighbours, especially Pakistan.

Pakistan has had to witness the death of 50,000 people – the largest number of casualties after Iraq and Afghanistan since the global war on terror began in 2001. Its porous, mostly unguarded 2,640 kilometre long

border with Afghanistan makes it convenient for militants and refugees to easily cross into Pakistan. Therefore, an unstable Afghanistan after a total NATO withdrawal will have dangerous spillover effects on its eastern neighbour.

This paper examines NATO's decision to withdraw its combat forces at the end of 2014 and outlines the reasons behind the decision among the European members of the Atlantic Alliance. The paper discusses the current state of Afghanistan, that is the political and security crises the country faces and will continue to face after the exit of foreign troops and the security implications for Pakistan during and after NATO's withdrawal.

NATO's naysayers: The decision to withdraw

The Afghanistan mission was the first and only time when NATO invoked Article 5 of its charter, soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks that jolted not only the United States, but also Europe and South Asia. The United Nations backed the decision to invade Afghanistan. NATO's intervention in Afghanistan was the alliance's first "out-of-area" mission beyond Europe.¹ At the time, NATO's secretary general, Lord Robertson, said that invoking Article 5 did not necessarily mean NATO would get involved in military action; nor did it mean that Washington was obliged to act through the Alliance.² After the Taliban were ousted from power, in December 2001, the United Nations Security Council created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) through Resolution 1386. NATO took over command of the ISAF coalition forces in August 2003, which underscored the long-term commitment of all NATO allies to the stability and security of Afghanistan.³ And since then, ISAF began conducting security operations, while also training and developing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).⁴ Initially, ISAF's mission was only limited to Kabul but its mandate was extended to all of Afghanistan through Resolution 1510.

¹ Vincent Morelli & Paul Belkin, "NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance", Congressional Research Services RL33627, (3 December, 2009), 1.

² Suzanne Daley, "After the Attacks: The Alliance; For First Time, NATO Invokes Joint Defense Pact With U.S.", *New York Times*, 13 September, 2001.

³ Col (Retd.) Saffet Akkaya, "NATO's Involvement in Afghanistan Crisis: Successes and Failures", *Afghanistan: Unabated Turmoil* (Institute of Regional Studies Seminar Papers, May 2008), 116.

⁴ "NATO and Afghanistan", NATO official website, http://www.nato.int/cps/ar/natohq/topics_8189.htm [Accessed: Sept 13, 2014].

Although all NATO member states agreed on ISAF's mission, they differed from the very beginning on how to accomplish it.⁵ There were debates in Washington about insufficient NATO troops or the "national caveats" imposed by NATO member states which were contributing troops.⁶ These conditionalities specified how individual military contingents were to be used.⁷ Therefore, there were serious issues of mandate during the Afghan war. The US and the UK were resentful for they had to bear a greater share of the combat burden than other states, for example Germany, Turkey and Spain.

Despite grave hindrances, NATO gradually expanded its control from Kabul to western Afghanistan and then across the country in 2006. However, just two years after establishing control across Afghanistan, the participating states began to show war weariness. In September 2008, Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper announced the intention and timeline of the withdrawal of his country's troops from Afghanistan. He declared that "a decade at war is enough".⁸ The situation was similar in Europe. Some analysts termed it "intervention/war fatigue" among NATO's European members, who faced the need to make drastic budget cuts to remain solvent.⁹ Others called it "Europe's own Vietnam Syndrome".¹⁰ It seemed like Europe had admitted defeat. "The idea that we have to be a good policeman of the world has been totally discredited, and we're going to stay home for a while", explained Nick Whitney, senior policy fellow at the

⁵ Akkaya, "NATO's Involvement", 118.

⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, "Stabilizing Afghanistan in Its Region", *Afghanistan: Unabated Turmoil*, 18.

⁷ David P. Auerswald & Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton University Press, Jan 2014), 3.

⁸ "Harper says 2011 'end date' for Afghanistan mission", *CBS News Canada*, 10 September, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/harper-says-2011-end-date-for-afghanistan-mission-1.746890> [Accessed: Sept 13, 2014]

⁹ Isabelle de Pommereau, "France's Afghanistan Pull-Out Signals War Fatigue Driving European Defense Cuts", *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 May 25, 2012. Visit at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0525/France-s-Afghanistan-pull-out-signals-war-fatigue-driving-European-defense-cuts> [Accessed: Sept 10, 2014].

¹⁰ "NATO sets 'irreversible' but risky course to end Afghan war", *Reuters Canada*, 21 May, 2012, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCABRE84J02C20120521?sp=true> [Accessed: Sept 9, 2014].

European Council on Foreign Relations in London.¹¹ “We know now that we can’t do it. We just don’t have the power,” he added.

These sentiments prevailed all over Europe as the war became more and more unpopular at home. Moreover, the recession of 2008 increased pressure on powerful European states to support Greece, Italy and Spain which were nearing economic collapse, and this required major defence budget cuts. More importantly, the Europeans realized that staying and fighting in Afghanistan was like pouring water in a bucket with a hole. An article in *The German Times* described the situation as follows: “The [German] nation realises that the army is ... not [involved] in humanitarian action, a stabilisation effort, nor a peacekeeping mission. They are fighting a war, killing and being killed. Perhaps NATO cannot lose the war. But it is far from certain that the allies can win it.”¹²

After four years of involvement in Afghanistan, in the November 2010 Lisbon summit, NATO countries set the end of 2014 as deadline and decided on a transition and exit strategy. It comprised the termination of the combat programme along with the withdrawal of the majority of the 138,000 foreign troops in the country. “NATO will be more agile, more capable and more cost-effective, and it will continue to serve as an essential instrument for peace,” stated the Lisbon summit declaration, issued on November 20, 2010.¹³

It is to be noted however, that while David Cameron and his cabinet emphasized that 2015 was a “clear deadline” for an end to combat operations by the UK troops and their pull-out, other NATO and UN leaders were much more circumspect.¹⁴ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO secretary general said, “We will stay to finish the job ... The process must be conditions-based, not calendar-based. We have to make sure we don't leave Afghanistan prematurely”.¹⁵ Even though the exit strategy had been

¹¹ Pommereau, *Christian Science Monitor*.

¹² Theo Sommer, “Afghan War Fatigue”, *The German Times*, May 2010, http://www.german-times.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30854&Itemid=165 [Accessed Aug 27, 2014].

¹³ Lisbon Summit Declaration, Strategic Concept, Paragraph 2, Nov 20, 2010.

¹⁴ Ian Traynor, “Nato maps out Afghanistan withdrawal by 2014 at Lisbon summit”, *The Guardian*, Nov 20, 2010.

¹⁵ Traynor, *The Guardian*.

announced, the crucial differences among the 28 NATO member states were quite apparent.

Dutch combat forces left Afghanistan in August 2010, while French President Francois Hollande indicated that he would pull out all 3,400 French troops at the end of 2012 – two years ahead of NATO's timeline. He announced this before the NATO summit in Chicago. Moreover, according to media reports, France also urged NATO as a whole to end its combat role in Afghanistan by the end of 2013 –a year earlier than the schedule announced at Lisbon.¹⁶ There were also reports of other European countries drawing down troops and preparing to shut down their major bases.

On May 21, 2012, leaders of the NATO member states at their summit in Chicago announced that ISAF forces would hand over command of all combat missions to Afghan forces by the middle of 2013, and simultaneously shift from combat to a supportive role of advising, training and assisting the Afghan security forces.¹⁷ NATO then announced that there would be a withdrawal of most of its 130,000 troops by the end of December 2014. The NATO-led mission in Afghanistan would end Operation Enduring Freedom, which included a range of combat and reconstruction tasks, and switch to Operation Resolute Support, which would focus on training and advising Afghan forces.¹⁸ NATO and other partner countries would deploy an additional 4,000 troops as part of the overall “Resolute Support Mission.”¹⁹

Jens Ringsmose and Berit Kaja Børjesen pointed out that public support for the war in most NATO countries had begun to fade. They contended, “The decision by a number of major allies to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, or even before, regardless of the situation on the ground, signifies that several national leaders are more concerned about domestic opinion than intra-alliance pressure for cooperation and their reputation in

¹⁶ Ewen Mac Askill, Nick Hopkins & Emma Graham-Harrison, “France Eager to Avoid Nato Clash over Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal”, *The Guardian*, 17 May, 2012

¹⁷ Scott Wilson, Karen DeYoung, “NATO Leaders Agree on Framework to Wind Down Afghan Mission”, *Washington Post*, 21 May, 2012.

¹⁸ Seth G. Jones & Keith Crane, *Afghanistan After the Drawdown*, Council of Foreign Relations Special Report No. 67, (November 2013), 8.

¹⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy”, Congressional Research Service RL30588, 11 July, 2014, 23.

NATO”.²⁰ Henning Riecke, head of the transatlantic programme at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, explained, “Afghanistan has led NATO countries to rethink their attitude about crisis management, to be less willing to have really complex operations that might spiral into civil wars.”²¹

It was becoming clearer to the European countries that the war in Afghanistan was becoming more vicious, for the death toll of troops had spiralled, while there was no military victory in sight. As of September 2014, there was a total of 3,457 coalition deaths in Afghanistan, with the United States losing 2,200 soldiers, the United Kingdom suffering the loss of 453 men and women, Canada 158, France 88 and Germany 57 troops among others.²² Thus more than 100,000 foreign soldiers and billions in assistance have not been able to yield any result that could be seen as a step towards victory in Afghanistan.

Lost in transition? Transferring responsibility to ANSF

A new and different NATO mission is now to advise, train and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – comprising the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). Whether it is termed ‘transition’ or ‘withdrawal’, the ground reality is that international troops have left and local forces that are still learning the ropes will now be responsible for security in a highly vulnerable country. The international forces will no longer patrol Afghan territory, and the ANSF will be completely on its own in conducting operations.²³

Early in 2006, the then NATO Supreme Commander claimed “The Afghan National Army is the most successful pillar of our reconstruction efforts to date”.²⁴ International trainers helped organize ANSF in the transition

²⁰ Jens Ringsmose & Berit Kaja Børgesen, “Shaping Public Attitudes Towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives”, *European Security* 20, No. 4 (December 2011): 509

²¹ Pommereau, *Christian Science Monitor*.

²² “Afghanistan and Iraq War Casualties”, CNN special interactive report, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/war.casualties/> [Accessed: 27 August, 2014]

²³ Katzman, *IAfghanistan: Post-Taliban*, 23.

²⁴ “NATO Supreme Commander Praises Progress of Afghan Army”, US Department of State’s Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), 21 September, 2006, available at: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2006/09/20060921183416adynned0.1906855.html#axzz3lboefra5> [Accessed: Oct 5, 2014].

period. They numbered roughly 224,000 in May 2010 and increased to an estimated 345,000 by January 2014.²⁵ Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 10, 2014, the top US Commander in Afghanistan, General John Campbell stated, "I have confidence in the strength of the Afghan security forces. They've held strong despite significant casualties during the 2013 and 2014 fighting seasons."²⁶

The Afghan forces have shown better performance over the years, but as Gen. Campbell mentioned, they still suffered the highest number of casualties in the year 2013, which indicates the rapidly growing strength of the Taliban-led insurgency across Afghanistan, especially in the south and the east of the country. The US National Intelligence Estimate, which includes input from the 16 American intelligence agencies, predicted that the gains the US and its allies made during the period 2010-2013 were likely to significantly erode by 2017, even if Washington left behind a few thousand troops and continued economic and military assistance to the impoverished country.²⁷

Moreover, ANSF overall has notable deficiencies in such areas as intelligence collection and logistics, which have adversely impacted on their performance in the battlefield.²⁸ A research paper written for the British House of Commons painted an even more depressing picture. It pointed out how the ANSF had "problems with motivation, absenteeism and desertion, corruption and predatory behaviour".²⁹

According to many on-the-ground assessments and analyses, the Taliban insurgency will become an even greater threat to Afghanistan's stability in 2015–2018 than it is now, which contradicts the assumption in the Chicago

²⁵ "Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition", *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report No.256, (May 12, 2014), 3.

²⁶ Jim Garamone, "Campbell: ISAF 'Brought Hope' to Afghan People", Department of Defense (DoD) News, 10 July, 2014, visit at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122640> [Accessed: Oct 5, 2014].

²⁷ Ernesto Londoño, Karen DeYoung & Greg Miller, "Afghanistan Gains will be Lost Quickly after Drawdown, U.S. Intelligence Estimate Warns", *Washington Post*, 28 December, 2013.

²⁸ Jones & Crane, "Afghanistan after the Drawdown", 9.

²⁹ Ben Smith, "Prospects for Afghanistan as ISAF Withdrawal Approaches", House of Commons Library Research Paper 14/18, 19 March, 2014, 1.

summit of a reduced insurgent threat.³⁰ This fear resonates among the international community and the Afghans.

The Afghan people have faced a spiralling number of civilian casualties with no let-up in sight. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported an 11% increase in security incidents during the summer of 2013 and documented 8,615 civilian casualties (2,959 civilian deaths and 5,656 injured) in 2013, which was a 14% increase from the previous year.³¹ During the first half of 2014 alone, civilian casualties were 24% higher compared to the same period in 2013, mainly as a consequence of the increased ground combat between the ANSF and insurgents in civilian areas.³²

Therefore, it is not just the fact that the ANSF is weak, but also that the Taliban are growing stronger. They are not only gaining more ground in the Pashtun-dominated areas in the southeast of the country, but also in the Uzbek and Tajik majority areas in the north. They have also changed their tactics – after taking over territory, the insurgents are showing flexibility in governing rather than relying on force and arousing fear.³³ “They have a parallel system to the government, one that approves the development projects,” said a stabilization adviser for a USAID contractor in an interview to the *New York Times*. “We can’t do anything without the Taliban approval”.³⁴

The International Crisis Group in a report in 2014 stated that the number of insurgent attacks had increased by 15%-20% in 2013 from a year earlier.³⁵ According to an independent group, the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, there was a 47% increase in attacks by armed opposition groups

³⁰ Jonathan Schrodin, Catherine Norman et al, *Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces*, (Center for Naval Analyses, January 2014), 4.

³¹ UNAMA and UNHCR, *Afghanistan Annual Report 2013: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, (Kabul: February 2014), 1.

³² Julio Miranda Calha, “Afghanistan 2014: A Critical Crossroads for NATO and the International Community”, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Defence and Security Committee’s Draft General Report by the General Rapporteur, 191 DSC 14 E, 14 October, 2014, 8.

³³ Azam Ahmed, “Taliban are Rising Again in Afghanistan’s North”, *New York Times*, Oct 22, 2014.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Afghanistan’s Insurgency after the Transition*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 256 (Kabul/Brussels: May 12, 2014), p.4.

during the first quarter of 2013 (2,331 attacks) compared to (1,581) the same period in 2012.³⁶ As recent as August 19, 2014, over 700 heavily armed Taliban insurgents were battling Afghan security forces in Logar, a key province near Kabul – which is a test of the Afghan military's strength, as foreign forces pull out of the country.³⁷ Although the Taliban failed to control Logar entirely, pressure built on the Afghan government to sign a bilateral security agreement to keep a small force of the American army in Afghanistan till 2016 to back up local security forces in such conditions.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Interior, the Taliban launched 700 ground offensives between March and September 2014, resulting in the deaths of 800 soldiers and 1,368 policemen – the highest casualty rate for the Afghan forces ever over a similar time span.³⁸ A US Department of Defence official dubbed the '2014 fighting season' the Taliban's "most successful campaigns since the start of the war".³⁹

Along with the Taliban, al-Qaeda too is regaining its influence in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's paramilitary commander and emir for north eastern Afghanistan, Faruq al-Qatari, is already attempting to expand al-Qaeda's footprint in the northeast.⁴⁰ Moreover, al Qaeda leaders probably assume that the American and NATO withdrawal will give them more freedom of movement in provinces such as Kunar and Nuristan.⁴¹

According to scholars Seth Jones and Keith Crane, the insurgency will remain diverse and include groups led by the Taliban, the Haqqani network, allied Pashtun tribes and clans, drug mafias, and local militia forces, mostly supported by neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.⁴² Also with less US air cover, Taliban fighters now attack Afghan military posts more

³⁶ Rod Nordland, "Study Finds Sharp Rise in Attacks by Taliban", *New York Times*, 19 Apr, 2013.

³⁷ Ahmad Sultan, "Hundreds of Taliban fighters battle Afghan forces near Kabul: officials", *Reuters*, 19 August, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/19/us-afghanistan-taliban-offensive-idUSKBN0GJOSV20140819> [Accessed: Oct 14, 2014].

³⁸ Calha, "Afghanistan 2014: A Critical Crossroads for NATO", 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jones & Crane, "Afghanistan after the Drawdown", 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*

frequently with the aim of taking and holding ground. This is a shift from the earlier hit-and-run guerrilla strikes carried out by the insurgents.⁴³

However, the most alarming development is that pertaining to the loyalty of the ANSF and the Afghan population. The Asia Foundation found that in 2013, a third of Afghans (35%) – mostly Pashtuns and rural Afghans – were sympathetic to armed opposition groups (AOGs), primarily the Taliban.⁴⁴ Moreover, as noted by Thomas Ruttig an analyst of Afghan affairs, networks linked to the former civil war militias have penetrated the army and police and they may be more loyal to their former armed factions than to the central government.⁴⁵ There is also evidence available that proves that the Taliban have successfully infiltrated the security forces, as the green-on-blue (ANSF vs ISAF) attacks as well as the green-on-green (ANSF vs ANSF) attacks have increased. Such attacks have been termed as ‘insider attacks’. Former Afghan defence minister Shahnawaz Tanai told a Pakistani newspaper “There is a strong possibility that the Taliban have increased influence in the ranks of the security forces that has resulted in the series of recent attacks.”⁴⁶ There have also been reports of the ANSF holding joint patrols with Taliban fighters in parts of the southern province of Helmand.⁴⁷

The most significant green-on-blue attack was the killing of Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene by an Afghan soldier. He was the highest military official and the first general to be killed in the Afghanistan war. The incident proved that the ANSF should tighten discipline and adopt stricter vetting to keep out rogue Afghan soldiers and policemen. Infiltration of such elements remains a threat.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ahmad Sultan, “Hundreds of Taliban Fighters”.

⁴⁴ *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People*, The Asia Foundation (Kabul, 2013), 8.

⁴⁵ Thomas Ruttig, *Some Things Got Better – How Much Got Good? A review of 12 years of international intervention in Afghanistan*, Afghan Analysts Network, 30 December, 2013, available from <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/some-things-got-better-how-much-got-good-a-short-review-of-12-years-of-international-intervention-in-afghanistan/> [Accessed: Oct 18, 2014]

⁴⁶ Tahir Khan, “Increased Taliban Infiltration in Afghan Forces a Cause for Concern”, *The Express Tribune*, 16 August, 2014.

⁴⁷ Smith, “Prospects for Afghanistan”, 6.

⁴⁸ Matthew Rosenberg & Helene Cooper, “U.S. General Is Killed in Attack at Afghan Base; Others Injured”, *New York Times*, 5 August, 2014.

However, there has been a marked decrease in insider attacks against ISAF after a peak in 2012, while green-on-green attacks have sharply increased.⁴⁹ NATO's General Rapporteur in her report claimed that the decrease in green-on-blue attacks was probably owing to a reduced ISAF presence and a change in the strategic aims of the insurgents from forcing out coalition forces to weakening the ANSF and the Afghan government's ability to provide security.⁵⁰

International troops and governments are investing money, time and effort in training the ANSF, comprising all the local major security forces which are now expected to provide safety and security to the people and the state. However, despite the increase in the number of the force – at over 380,000 personnel – the future of the ANSF does not look very bright. The institution is not strong enough to carry the entire burden of Afghanistan's security on its weak shoulders. The late Maj. Gen Greene was the deputy commander of the Combined Security Transition Command, which is responsible for helping to transfer the control of security in Afghanistan to the Afghans.⁵¹ The attack on him by an Afghan soldier points to the dire security situation in the country. It is a brutal reminder of the sentiments of some in the rank and file in the ANA and the ANSF, who believe in 'avenging' the October 2001 invasion and disdain the training and support being offered by ISAF. With the prime issue in the country being security, the appearance of cracks and fissures in the institution integral for that purpose is indeed alarming.

Political transition: Overcoming an impasse

Tensions heightened as the country was paralyzed after the first and second round of the Afghan presidential elections in April and June 2014, for both competing candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, declared that they had won the election, and accused each other of rigging. These historically significant elections in Afghanistan were discredited by the widespread allegations of fraud. There were fears of the formation of parallel governments and the eruption of violence between their

⁴⁹ Calha, "Afghanistan 2014", 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Michael Martinez, Catherine E. Shoichet & Jim Scuitto, "Maj. Gen. Harold Greene, Army officer since 1980, is killed in Afghanistan", CNN, 6 August, 2014, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/05/us/afghanistan-general-greene/> [Accessed: Oct 16, 2014]

supporters – the minority Tajik and Hazara groups against the dominant Pashtuns. Simultaneously, a group of powerful Afghan government ministers and officials with strong ties to the security forces were threatening to seize power if the election impasse was not resolved soon.⁵² The Taliban were emboldened by this crisis and the already struggling economy was further weakened. It left many deeply pessimistic about the country's democratic future.⁵³ According to an International Crisis Group report, "Basic analysis of the [election] results revealed a suspiciously high number of boxes with round numbers on the tally sheets, suggesting tens of thousands of votes for both candidates tainted by fabricated results".⁵⁴

However, luckily the tensions receded after the dangerous escalation. After an international audit of the election result under auspices of the United Nations, the two Afghan presidential hopefuls prodded by the United States agreed to form a national unity government, with Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as CEO. This was an apparent attempt to save the democratic and political process in the country. However, the deal appeared to be an inadequate foundation for a political accord, since both sides had divergent understandings of the text.⁵⁵ The only aspect of government formation that was clearly spelt out was that five senior members of each side (Abdullah and Ghani) would form a council to recommend and vet government appointees.⁵⁶ The other details concerning the distribution of power, had not been worked out and there were fears that the situation would lead to political and institutional friction and more deadlocks such as the one during the elections. "They have created a fabricated national unity government, and I don't think such a government can last," said Wadir Safi, a political analyst at Kabul University, in an interview to the *New York Times*.⁵⁷

⁵² Matthew Rosenberg, "Amid Election Impasse, Calls in Afghanistan for an Interim Government", *New York Times*, 18 August, 2014.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Afghanistan's Political Transition", *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report No. 260 (Kabul: October 16, 2014), 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jason Campbell, "What's the Plan? The Afghan Government", *War on the Rocks*, visit at <http://warontherocks.com/2014/11/whats-the-plan-the-afghan-government/#> [Accessed: November 1, 2014]

⁵⁷ Rod Nordland, "After Rancor, Afghans Agree to Share Power", *New York Times*, 21 September, 2014

Nevertheless, there is evidence available to show that both Ghani and Abdullah are keen to make a success of the national unity government and are committed to its functioning.

President Ghani has been making strong political statements about efficient governance, more powers to provinces and their governors, corruption in the bureaucracy, and women's rights. The former World Bank official and Western-educated president is focusing on domestic issues, and is also working hard to address concerns internationally. He met with Pakistan's army chief, General Raheel Sharif and the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in November 2014, in an effort improve relations between the two neighbours. This is a significant policy shift from his predecessor Hamid Karzai's coldness towards Pakistan. Moreover, it is believed that Ghani's recent visit to China and Saudi Arabia was also a bid to normalize relations with Islamabad and to push the Taliban insurgents to the negotiating table.⁵⁸ In addition, he has also reached out to Turkey, Qatar and the UAE.

Despite the prevailing sanguinity, the crumbling political, economic and social institutions, the growing strength of the Taliban insurgency as well as the arming of the warlords' militias amid the departure of NATO's combat troops, herald more instability than peaceful governance. The Taliban have outrightly rejected the elections, the leadership as well as the security pact with NATO and the United States. "Installing Ashraf Ghani and forming a bogus administration will never be acceptable to the Afghans," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement emailed to journalists.⁵⁹ He further added "the Americans must understand that our soil and land belong to us and all decisions and agreements are made by Afghans, not by the US foreign secretary or ambassador".⁶⁰

A Western diplomat in Mazar-e-Sharif estimated that local commanders had distributed more weapons to their informal militias than at any point in

⁵⁸ Nathan Hodge, "New Afghan Leader Seeks to Mend Fences with Pakistan", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 November, 2014.

⁵⁹ Hamid Shalizi and Kay Johnson, "Afghan President-Elect Promises Unity after Disputed Vote", *Reuters*, 22 September, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/22/uk-afghanistan-politics-idUKKCN0HH18R20140922> [Accessed: Nov 1, 2014].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

the last six years.⁶¹ Vali Nasr, a Middle East and South Asia scholar, opined “In the wake of US [and NATO] departure, the political process could implode, the Afghan army disintegrate and extremists fill the vacuum”.⁶² Indeed, the dilemma is that a functional political system would not be able to guarantee stability in the country, but a dysfunctional one would precipitate chaos.⁶³ Today, Afghanistan is becoming more militarized and more unstable, which will not only have serious security implications for the country but also for its eastern neighbour, Pakistan.

Brothers in Arms: Spillover effects and strategic implications for Pakistan

The year 2015 may prove to be fateful for not just Afghanistan and the United States, but for the entire region. The country that stands to be most affected by any event or a trajectory of events in Afghanistan is Pakistan. But why does Afghanistan, whether in a state of stability, instability, war, peace, with ungoverned spaces or functioning institutions, have such an effect on this particular neighbour?

The simple answer lies in the following:

The two countries not only share a border that stretches for thousands of miles, but also share ethnic populations, common religion, culture and tribes and most importantly, the free and widely unchecked flow of people and goods, which goes far back into history. It was through Afghanistan that all the invaders and marauders came to the Indian subcontinent. Until the late seventies *pawindas* (shepherds) freely crossed over the borders between the two countries. There is no current data available showing the number of people daily or weekly crossing the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa or Balochistan. According to a UNHCR study, on an average day in September 2009, 40,013 single men crossed the border at Torkham compared to 8,930 persons in family groups, while 20,993 single men were recorded at Spin Boldak compared to 2,821 persons in family groups.⁶⁴ With the

⁶¹ Afghanistan’s Political Transition, 23.

⁶² Benny Avni, “Afghans Face Fighting Taliban Without Western Help”, *Newsweek*, 2 September, 2014

⁶³ Frederic Grare, “Afghanistan Post-2014: Scenarios and Consequences”, *Policy Brief: Transatlantic Security Debate Series*, German Marshall Fund (Paris: February 2014), 6.

⁶⁴ UN Refugee Agency *Study on Cross-Border Population Movements Between Afghanistan and Pakistan*, (Kabul: June 2009), 3.

intensification of the war in Afghanistan and an increase in the number of casualties, the number of people crossing into Pakistan has most likely increased over the years. This long and porous border and consequently the close people-to-people contact is what ties the fortunes of the two countries together.

To gauge the security implications of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan on Pakistan, Islamabad's strategic interests must be explained. Some circles in Pakistan's security establishment are still inspired by the idea of Pakistan seeking "strategic depth in Afghanistan".⁶⁵ Briefly put, it means that the country should look westward for more land mass to secure its 'national strategic assets' i.e. its conventional and nuclear arsenals.

Moreover, in the past, Pakistan has been harassed by antagonistic Afghan governments. One example is the regime of Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan, the prime minister of Afghanistan from 1953 to 1963, under King Zahir Shah's reign. He actively pursued the Pakhtunistan policy and in a bid to follow this ill-defined objective, he sent Afghan troops disguised as tribesmen across the border into Pakistan's Bajaur agency in 1960.⁶⁶ A year later, he organized a bigger incursion, against which Pakistan strongly retaliated, causing many Afghan casualties. The subsequent Soviet-leaning governments in Kabul were also not any friendlier with Islamabad.

Therefore, it is but logical that the establishment in Islamabad wants a government in Afghanistan which is friendly towards Pakistan, or at least not actively hostile. A hostile government across its western border would mean that Pakistan's security resources would be more heavily burdened, with a two-front situation. Hence, intuitively, Pakistan wants to ensure that a pro-India government is not formed in Kabul and that New Delhi's influence is minimized. In addition, its interest is in preventing anti-Pakistan groups from gaining a foothold 'in its backyard'. In the present context, the

⁶⁵ See Raheemul Haque, "Strategic Depth: Does It Promote Pakistan's Strategic Interests"? in *Pakistan, Afghanistan & US Relations: Implications and Future Directions* (Centre for Public Policy and Governance Lahore: 2011); *Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 262 (Islamabad/Brussels, 28 October, 2014); Also See report "152 PCNP 12 E BIS - Afghanistan and Southwest Asian Security" by Daniel Bacquelaine, Rapporteur of the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships, presented at NATO's Parliamentary Assembly on 20 November, 2012.

⁶⁶ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York:Public Affairs, 2011), 96.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), particularly its leadership, reportedly, are operating freely from sanctuaries in Afghanistan, to conduct terrorist attacks on Pakistani soil, despite a massive ongoing military operation in the country's northwestern tribal areas.⁶⁷

Thus, owing to historical, geographical, demographical, cultural and strategic reasons, Pakistan's crucial national and regional interests are at stake in post NATO Afghanistan, which is most likely to remain in an unstable condition, as discussed earlier. With the NATO combat troops having gone and the US gearing for an exit in 2016 the country would be left in the hands of weak and underdeveloped security forces, and this situation has serious security implications for Pakistan.

The Taliban have been emboldened by the prospect of fighting a much weakened adversary with little or no foreign backing and therefore have begun to claim that they beat the superpower and its allied forces. As discussed earlier, the Taliban are gaining more and more ground in Afghanistan, even in areas near Kabul and in the north, which are not its traditional strongholds. The military and territorial gains plus the strong narrative about their victory, heralds their growing strength and influence in the war-weary country. This puts Pakistan in a rather awkward position vis-à-vis the Taliban: foreign intelligence and media reports point towards Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban, whose growing influence would be in Islamabad's interest; however, there is also evidence of the Afghan Taliban providing logistical support to the TTP, with which Pakistan is fighting a war. Therefore, the Taliban's gains in post-NATO Afghanistan, would be beneficial for Pakistan's interests in the region, but not at home. The unchecked rise of the Afghan Taliban may also increase the confidence of the TTP and its splinter factions, causing more instability in Pakistan.

Proxy "free-for-all"

The fledgling Ghani government is trying its best to gain political legitimacy, and the real test for Afghanistan's democracy will be the avoidance of the system's breakdown, as it had come extremely close to after the elections. A power vacuum should be avoided at all costs, for it will surely cause more instability. There are chances of India backing the Uzbek and Tajik militias

⁶⁷ Kamran Yousaf and Sohail Chaudhry, "Operation Zarb-e-Azb: TTP Sets up New Sanctuaries in Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, 27 October, 2014; Also, Michael Kugelman, "When the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban Unite", *Foreign Policy*, 25 March, 2014.

and other pro-Northern Alliance elements to counter pro-Pakistan militias and Taliban groups. This may pit proxy groups against each other, resulting in a civil war such as the one in the 1990s. In such a proxy imbroglio, there is the danger that Pakistan might become isolated in the region. China and Iran will be on the fence, while Russia, India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would work together to reduce Pakistan's influence. Since the Western powers would no longer be there to keep various forces and countries in check, there is the likelihood of regional powers being pitted against each other on Afghan soil.

Rogue army and intelligence

As pointed out earlier, the green-on-blue and green-on-green attacks indicate the growing sympathies in Afghanistan for the Taliban or anti-government forces. Apart from attacks by security forces, there have been many reports of human rights abuses and violations by the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the Afghan intelligence agency.⁶⁸ Foreign troops have been providing military and intelligence training to over 350,000 men, of which a significant number do not share the same war narrative nor do they perceive anti-government forces to be the enemy. There have also been reports that thousands of those inducted in the Afghan police force and armed forces quit every month.⁶⁹

Thus there is a grave possibility of significant numbers of Afghan army and intelligence corps going rogue and joining militias, some with an anti-Pakistan agenda. The trained rogue elements could even collaborate with the TTP, adding more muscle to the organization carrying out attacks against the state of Pakistan.

Influx of refugees on either side

There are more than 1.8 million Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan, and there are an estimated 1.3 million refugees who have not been registered and hence are living illegally in the country.⁷⁰ As the situation stabilized

⁶⁸ See UNAMA and UNHCR, *Treatment of Conflict-Related Detainees in Afghan Custody*(Kabul: October 2011); See Alissa J. Rubin, "U.N. Finds 'Systematic' Torture in Afghanistan", *New York Times*; Also, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and Open Society Foundations, *Torture, Transfers, and Denial of Due Process: The Treatment of Conflict-Related Detainees in Afghanistan*, 17 March, 2012.

⁶⁹ Grare, "Afghanistan post-2014: Scenario", 2.

⁷⁰ ICG Pakistan Report

relatively after 2002, many refugees moved back to Afghanistan, but since 2006, when the Taliban revived and began to re-organize, voluntary repatriation has decreased.⁷¹ As violence and instability increases, the influx of refugees is likely to swell significantly, once again exposing Pakistan to a humanitarian crisis. Already the Pakistan military's offensive, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, has reportedly rendered over one million residents of North Waziristan homeless.⁷² With large numbers of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons, Pakistan has a major refugee problem on its hands. It will be an enormous task for Islamabad to provide for refugees from its neighbouring country and the internally displaced people within its own territory.

Sectarian violence

The latest sectarian attack in Afghanistan until the writing of this paper was the execution of 14 Hazara Shias in the western province of Ghor on July 25, 2014. Taliban fighters stopped two buses, identified the Hazara Shia passengers, bound them and brutally shot them dead.⁷³ Similar attacks against Shia passengers have taken place in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. There is the danger that with law and order breaking down in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, sectarian attacks may escalate in the two countries.

Civil-military relations

Pakistan's Foreign Office and civilian bureaucracy have been repeatedly saying that the country has taken a 'strategic shift' in its Afghanistan policy. It maintains that Pakistan has discarded its 'interventionist' policy and realizes that supporting one ethnic group will not promote peace in Afghanistan. "One of the biggest mistakes that Pakistan made in the past is that it saw somehow a Pashtun solution to Afghanistan, whereas now it sees an Afghan solution to Afghanistan", former Pakistan Ambassador to

⁷¹ UNHCR, "2012 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – Afghanistan, , available from ["http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486eb6.html"](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486eb6.html)

⁷² "Pakistan's IDPs reach record one million", *Al Jazeera*, 1 September, 2014; see <http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2014/08/pakistan-idps-reach-record-one-million-201482712311342575.html> [Accessed: Nov 18, 2014]

⁷³ "Fourteen civilians shot dead in Afghanistan", *Al Jazeera*, 26 July, 2014, visit at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/07/afghanistan-attack-201472553221541767.html>.

Washington Maleeha Lodhi has pointed out.⁷⁴ Pakistan has tried to display this policy shift by assisting the Afghan government negotiate with the Taliban. It released top commanders captured in its territory to help the talks between Taliban factions and the Afghan High Peace Council of the Karzai government held in Dubai in February 2014.⁷⁴ However, Islamabad has to prove that this 'shift' is more than just rhetoric, and it is not only the civilian government's policy objective, but also the military's.

Conclusion

The decline in American air support and the withdrawal of NATO troops is considered to be the main reason for the revival of the Taliban and the latter's gains during the summer of 2014. Taliban's Herat leader Ismail Khan, reportedly, had already begun to reorganize his militia which had been active during the Soviet and Taliban eras. Before he died in March 2014, the then Vice President, Muhammad Fahim discussed the possibility of reviving the Northern Alliance to help the Afghan government counter the Taliban.⁷⁵ Pervez Hoodbhoy, a scholar, has aptly described the Afghan endgame: "It's going to be ugly, bloody, and no one is looking forward to 2014, except for the Taliban".⁷⁶ Apparently, commanders and warlords are mustering arms and men and it could be only a matter of time that the country becomes embroiled in yet another prolonged civil war. More instability in Afghanistan inevitably means more instability in Pakistan.

These groups will not only have patrons inside Afghanistan, but also considerable support from regional powers. In an interview, former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf warned, "The departure of NATO combat forces from Afghanistan could push India and Pakistan towards a proxy war in the troubled state."⁷⁷ Thus, there is a strong possibility that the rival neighbours might be pitted against each other in an unstable Afghanistan.

Pakistan must continue exploring avenues to expand its economic presence in Afghanistan, even though security concerns dominate its approach.⁷⁸ Owing to various reasons, the leading ones being its physical location and ethnic make-up, Pakistan has always viewed Afghanistan from a security prism, which is understandable, but the country has to rethink its approach

⁷⁴ Philip Reeves, "Pakistan Fears Afghan Spillover Of Chaos, Refugees", NPR, 13 November, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/13/165034553/pakistan-fears-afghan-spillover-of-chaos-refugees> [Accessed: Sept 15, 2014].

⁷⁴ "Afghan peace team seeks dubai meeting with Taliban figures", Dawn. 17 February 2014.

towards the country, for holding on to an exclusively security-oriented policy towards its western neighbour involves more risks, particularly with the exit of foreign combat troops. Afghanistan is not yet ready to take on the Taliban or to sustain a strong political setup in Kabul and this situation will have serious strategic implications for Pakistan. And Pakistan too, does not seem to be prepared to deal with the situation on the horizon.