

Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Afghanistan: A South Asian Perspective

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Synopsis:

After 20 long years of a blood-shedding war, terrorism annihilation project, and continuous unrest across a country, the U.S., along with its alliances, has decided to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Although the destabilization that exists there is beyond imagination, the result of this sudden vacuum that will be created after the withdrawal is apprehending. This commentary has tried to anticipate the future of Afghanistan after this withdrawal, what its surrounding region might face in the coming years and presaged the possible unrest that might persist.

Commentary:

With the commitment of maintaining diplomatic ties and providing continuous backup to the Ghani government to settle down the peace process, the U.S. troops have decided to leave Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attack, this year September. The country has seen the long years of dominating conflicts of the Taliban and its supporting groups with the U.S. and its other internal (Northern Alliances) and external (NATO) allies. The talks of withdrawing forces were ongoing from Trump's administration, but Biden has finally confirmed it and the decision is being speculated from various aspects.

The U.S. entered Afghanistan with the motive to resist the main extremist group there, the Taliban, who they asserted was supporting Al-Qaeda following the 9//11 attack. Presumably, they have articulated that the Taliban is no more the prime threat and the purpose they came here for has been served. But there remain multiple loopholes. Twenty years of conflict have left Afghanistan into an abrupt war-torn country and the Taliban is still on the ground.

The government is not yet stable, and the Taliban is trying to occupy the main cities by slowly advancing from the outside. This will lead to a conflict of interest between the Taliban and the Ghani government since none are willing to compromise. All this long, the Taliban has been considering the U.S. as their prime enemy. As it is gone, the Taliban can stretch its power provision over the country by toppling down a temporary government. The departure of the troops will have both beneficial and harmful implications for the country, but mostly threats for the region.

Seeing the positives:

Finally, Afghanistan will be free from foreign invasion and get the scope to establish its reign, which is also expected by the general people who favor nothing but peaceful coexistence of all the tribes there. Any individual never expects the presence of foreign troops in the motherland and international balance is also disregarded when foreign invasion takes place in the country as military penetration. For the U.S., this withdrawal is serving well because they do not have to allocate a large portion of their defense budget for a troop of military present across another country anymore, where their possibility of sustenance is very low. Additionally, thousands of U.S. personnel living in the adverse conditions of a war-torn country now can finally return home.

Upcoming drawbacks for Afghanistan

The adverse effects of the withdrawal will exceed the positive sides, both on Afghanistan and the region. The troop's presence was similar to a deterrence where the Taliban could not go to any extent to ensure their power privilege. Besides, the local Afghans working at the U.S. camps as assistants, interpreters, translators etc., are finding themselves at threat of being killed. The country will be going through a significant funding cut after the withdrawal, which used to come in as a structural development and investment incentive. Though America has stated that diplomatic support to settle down the conflict between the government and Taliban and training of Afghan force will continue, it is improbable that they will be willing to help a country seven thousand miles away, most importantly, where their purposes have been "served." No matter which government takes over power in the next few years, such a major loss of support will throw the country into desolation and systematically other theories of grief and grievances will

be applicable here. Most natural resources have been either swapped away by the foreigners or destroyed in the war. It was estimated that the natural resources present in Afghanistan might worth \$3 trillion which was more than enough to compensate for the loss from the war (Amini, 2017). But with the U.S. having its eyes on this remaining means of income, it is unlikely that anything will be left for the country. With a declining economy, no resources to expend, barren lands with miles of desert, and millions of people stuck between the conflict of the government and an extremist group, the situation will get worse. With the main fueling military force leaving, the Afghan army will have reduced power to fight the Taliban. Due to Afghan troops having no vital ground training and knowledge of war tactics, the rate of insurgency will increase all over the country and there might be a rise of more sub-militia groups operating inside and outside the boundary. The fight against foreigners might end, but a new civil war between these opponents might multiply the unrest with no one to resist and halt the violence. The corruption rate is already high in the country because the elites have been relishing opportunistic incentives and scarcely leave anything for the public. Almost all infrastructures are in ruins and with the elevating terror of the Taliban, more damage is to be done.

Even before the complete withdrawal, the Taliban has already claimed that the U.S. has lost the war and they are the winning party (Kermani & Zubaide, 2021). This indicates that they are not even counting the Ghani government a major issue and now with their main enemy gone, they can start their rule over the country. This is true because they have already taken over more than 13% of the total districts in Afghanistan and with the increasing insurgency, they are still in active combat against Afghan forces. In fact, the U.S. intelligence community has predicted that the Ghani government might not even survive more than the next six months without the troop's assistance (Lubold & Trofimov, 2021). This inevitably indicates that soon the country is ultimately going to be under Taliban occupation. Its result for Afghanistan will be as it has been in the 90s—functioning on Shariah Law with the sole motive of Talibani Jihad, turning the country into a highly conservative ground with no access to cultural diversification or practice. Some locals might be okay with the situation considering that they adhere to such dynamics of life and ask for the Taliban to stay and regulate the system. But its effects will not be appreciable as it seems. With Taliban in the government, al-Qaeda might emerge asking for their fair share of the country and even, new terrorist groups might be formed. Very naturally, oppositions to the Taliban, with western vigor of "new modern life," assumably among the youth, will arise,

leading the country to its next civil war. Thus, will follow the atrocities of the Taliban causing extensive inhumane killing and torture. On the other hand, if no opposition persists, the country's internal situation might remain pacifistic to some limit. Still, it is hardly presumable that the Taliban will interact with any regional or international entity to protect the relations based on international laws.

Implications for South Asia

A 25 hundred thousand square miles of area in Southern Asia with no definite regulation and the recent removal of a mighty army does not only leave a vacant land but also a vacuum of power dynamics. Afghanistan is a connecting land between the Middle East and South Asia and any anomaly in this buffer zone means contamination in this region. When the buffer party itself is the origin of turmoil, both sides face the equal shade of the problem. No sooner had the U.S. decided to leave the region, China and Russia have started to enlist the prospective opportunities in Afghanistan. China is endorsing the participation of Afghanistan in BRI and thus making way for further developmental projects like China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Corridor¹. This indicates that China would try devouring the power vacuum created here and extend its economic capture up to the last boundary of the Middle East. Since most economic development projects of China contain military components, it is perceived that this regional superpower might try to fill up the vacancy of the U.S. military. Whether this situation leads to another era of Afghan conflict will be decided upon who forms the government in Afghanistan and how China or Russia deals with it. Besides, rising insurgency in Afghanistan will result in an increasing number of terrorist groups, thus higher participation of extremists in the process. The radicalization of South Asia is already posing a regional threat which is evident from the terrorist attacks in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and predominantly Pakistan over the last few years. Pakistan is considered one of the main well-wishers of Afghani terrorist groups— even the U.S. was unable to stop its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency from helping the Taliban². With the U.S. not being a resistance on the ground anymore, Al-Qaeda might find the opportunity to extend their regime or even form a better coalition with the Taliban to spread their activities all over the region. The resonance of establishing an Islamic State in Bangladesh is already high and

¹ Babb, C., Gu, B., & Yang, L. (2021). *China's Plans in Afghanistan Following US Troop Withdrawal*. Voice of America. Retrieved 30 June 2021, from <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/chinas-plans-afghanistan-following-us-troop-withdrawal>.

² Boot, M. (2021). *America Still Needs Counterinsurgency*. Foreign Affairs. Retrieved 22 June 2021, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-06-02/america-still-needs-counterinsurgency>.

with the further ground-making for an insurgency, threats for the country are uprising. The upsurge of Taliban and Al-Qaeda's influence in this region is encouraging extremist groups to disseminate their activities towards forming a Talibani state in Bangladesh—the intention which is seeing the light of confession as cited after Bangladesh Intelligence (IANS, 2021). This emphasizes that the ideology is spreading and people are interested in it. With the presence of Taliban inside the region, cross-boundary terrorism focusing on youth engagement, drug smuggling to sponsor the terrorist groups, transnational human trafficking to participate in the process, propagation of extremist ideologies, formation of separatist groups to form Islamic nations, supply of illegal weapons with their residual entry into transit countries, and increase in small ranged or violent terrorist attacks in different countries across the whole region will be experiencing its peak time.

Unfortunately, the web of preaching and training into radical attributes spreads throughout the region mainly through overseas higher studies, easy border access, and ample opportunity for communication. In countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, it is easier to manipulate people's sentiment through speeches, propaganda, and activities that contain devotion towards groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, resulting in larger circles with extremist doctrines.

Recommended measures

Since the regional organizations have hardly handled any crisis here, let alone terrorism, the individual state's governments have to manage the situation. Bar on any religious practice cannot be imposed with 'secularism' in the constitution, but the national intelligence of the countries needs to be very alert. A coalition among the intelligence agencies of this region should be formed to specifically work on dominating the ideology of the Taliban in this region, considering the recent development of the situation. If the Taliban government comes to power, states might need to rejuvenate their security policies keeping in mind that they will no longer be a belligerent group, but a state head. A government, sponsoring terrorism is a more significant threat for the region than an insurgent group because then states have to get together unanimously to decide sanction, prohibition, or domination considering their safety. South Asia needs to start ruling out every possibility that might come out from this change of events.

If the Ghani government can endure this period of collision, and by any chance, demolish the reign of the Taliban, which is far-fetched to assume, only then a peaceful democratic region, free from fear can be expected. On the other hand, if the Taliban can establish its permanent authority, it will not only turn an Islamic nation into an ultra-conservationist state but also make efforts to disperse its influence across the region. Decisions taken by the U.S. might serve them well but will have adverse effects on this region. With the motive of "America First," it is unlikely they will consider its impact in other countries, but we must be vigilant. The rise of terrorism will be a massive threat since most countries here are up the ladder of economic development. A fall in social security parity will be a considerable pushback and the presence of an extremist government in the middle is more threatening. So, with the advance of the situation in Afghanistan, governments in South Asian countries need to observe the phenomenon cautiously and modify their foreign relations and security policies accordingly.

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