

**INDIA, PAKISTAN AND NEW GREAT GAME IN AFGHANISTAN (2001 TO 2014)\***Muhammad Shabbir<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

*Afghanistan carries strategic importance for both regional powers, Pakistan and India. As power games in Afghanistan developed over the years from the Communist revolution to the Soviet invasion to the Taliban's rise and eventual fall, India and Pakistan have consistently supported contending internal forces. For India, Afghanistan serves the purpose of "Chanakya" policy: "your neighbour is your enemy and your neighbour's neighbour your friend;" whereas, Pakistan is suffers from its over thirty years involvement in Afghanistan wars and the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). This paper survyes Pakistan's motives and interests in Afghanistan within the configuration of the South Asian security complex. Pakistan's motivations are explored while taken into consideration the evolution of U.S. policy in South Asia. This paper also assesses India's hold on Afghanistan vis-à-vis Pakistan in the New Great Game as well as the US efforts to promote Indian influence in Afghanistan.*

**Key Words:** Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, New-Great-Game, Security, South Asia.

**INTRODUCTION**

Geographically, in both literal and strategic terms, Afghanistan represents a "gateway" to Central Asia. In the examination of South Asian "regional security complex" (RSC), Buzan and Waver stated, "Afghanistan remains the key boundary between the South Asian and Middle Eastern RSCs" (Buzan & Waver, 2003). They further say that internal conflicts within Afghanistan tended to reflect competing for external interests. The civil war in Afghanistan proceeded by the ending of the Soviet intervention "created a mini-complex," attesting to political fragmentation at the sub-state level, while on the other hand generating a conflict pattern that features most of the characteristics of a "state-level complex" (Grare, 2006). The conflict formation predominantly serves as an instrument to external interventions along the lines of the internal conflicts.

As power games in Afghanistan have developed over the years from the Communist revolution to the Soviet invasion to the Taliban's rise and eventual fall, India and Pakistan have consistently supported contending internal forces. Fredric Grare succinctly summarizes the situation: "The Indian factor focuses Pakistan's perception of Afghanistan and its policies there. From independence until 1992, India supported whatever government was in power in Kabul...Things changed after 1992 when the Pakistan-backed

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Mujahedeen entered Kabul...India then supported whoever opposed Pakistan” (Diehl, Goertz, & Saaedi, 2005).

Seeing in this context, Pakistan’s motives and interests in Afghanistan should be viewed within the configuration of the South Asian security complex. The exploration for Pakistan’s motivations must also take into consideration the evolution of U.S. policy in South Asia marked by the current rapprochement with India. This paper, therefore, in this context, will assess India’s hold on Afghanistan vis-à-vis Pakistan in the New Great Game. The paper particularly focuses on the era from US invasion in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. US efforts to promote Indian influence in Afghanistan and its withdrawal in 2014 will be discussed in the paper as well.

### **THE INDIA-PAKISTAN ENDURING RIVALRY**

The rivalry between India and Pakistan is included in virtually every comprehensive list of enduring international rivalries (Diehl, Goertz, & Saaedi, 2005). It is, in other words, an exemplary case. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the South Asian region has been defined by continued hostility, tension, and conflict between the nations of India and Pakistan. According to T.V. Paul, “The India-Pakistan rivalry remains one of the most enduring and unresolved conflicts of our times” (Paul, 2005). Even when compared with other enduring, dyadic rivalries India and Pakistan display an atypical preponderance for war and conflict (Diehl, Goertz, & Saaedi, 2005).

The most salient issue of dispute is clearly the territorial conflict over Kashmir. The tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir have been extraordinarily costly to both sides. While the two countries have many differences and there are many sources of conflict, unrealized irredentism is at the core of the rivalry. Pakistan has been advocating and supporting the Kashmiri’s for their UN acknowledged right for the plebiscite which India has denied them for years. On the other side, India has consistently resisted Pakistan, while stoking the fires of irredentism through its policies in Kashmir.

Since 1947, three wars (1947-48, 1965, and 1971) have been fought between the two, with an additional 43 militarized interstate disputes<sup>4</sup> (MIDs) occurring (Diehl, Goertz, & Saaedi, 2005). The two countries in 2002 and most recently, in 2008-9 narrowly avoided a major military exchange, as tensions mounted along the border but were diffused without incident. The rivalry took a sharper turn after the nuclearization of both the states, however, both countries, conscious of the nuclear destruction, resort to allegations, threats and covert actions against one another. Nevertheless, the rivalry and its attendant competitive behaviour remain alive and well.

In 2001, the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan touched directly on Indian and Pakistani strategic interests. For Pakistan, a previously friendly regime was replaced with a government tacitly connected to New Delhi. On the other hand, India saw a major opportunity to gain leverage in this “game” by projecting its power capabilities into Central

Asia and, as the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated, prevent the reemergence of the Pakistan friendly regime and increase Indian influence in the country. The next section explains the Indian and Pakistani game of interest and security in Afghanistan.

### **AFGHAN THEATER: INDIAN DREAMS AND PAKISTAN'S NIGHTMARES**

The geographical setting of Afghanistan has allowed it to serve as a battleground for numerous outside interests over the years. A fractured national identity, influenced by myriad tribal and ethnic loyalties, means Afghanistan is susceptible to outside interference and clearly puts its neighbours at risk due to its internal and external vulnerabilities. The theatre of Afghanistan at this time represents an ongoing and unresolved venue of the struggle for position between India and Pakistan. Each wants more influence in the country while limiting the other.

Faced with a persistently uncertain Eastern border, Pakistan is loathed to allow inimical forces to also occupy the territory to its West. Further to that, in view of the Indo-US nuclear deal, Pakistan fears the existence of a "US-Indian-Afghan alliance aimed at undermining Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and even dismembering the Pakistani state" (Barnitt & Rashid, 2008). In this scenario, an Indian-influenced Afghan regime "would allow an encircling India to create a backdoor military threat to Pakistan."

### **Indian Covert Operations in Pakistan through Afghanistan**

Since the downfall of the Taliban government in 2001, India has moved to increase its strategic presence in Afghanistan. By the end of 2002, India had reopened four consulates in the country ("The great game revisited," 2007). Moreover, despite Indian insistence as to the goodwill of these outposts, New Delhi is undoubtedly leveraging its newfound position for strategic advantage. Pakistan has continuously been accusing India of performing anti-Pakistan rhetoric in Afghanistan and execution of terrorism inside Pakistani territory through its paid agents. Indian consulates in Southern Afghanistan have been active in providing financial and military support to dissidents of the troubled area of Baluchistan (Baloch & Niazi, 2008). In 2006, Pakistan claimed that it has explicit evidence about Indian consulates instrumental funding to the rebels of Baluchistan who are fighting against security forces ("And now war of consulates," 2008).

The Indian presence in Afghanistan is in no way above suspicion. It has been reported quite often in newspapers and media that Indian diplomatic missions in Kabul and other cities are principally working as a surveillance post on Pakistan's affairs and to create unrest in Baluchistan (Khalid, 2011). Like the government stance, interior minister of Pakistan, Mr. Rehman Malik, has several times publicly spoken about Indian misdeeds in Afghanistan and its aftershocks on Pakistan as a whole and Baluchistan in particular. Once he said while talking to reporters in Islamabad, "I invite their interior minister or anyone else (to come to Pakistan) and I will put on record all the material about India's interference in Baluchistan. I'll prove it to the world" ("Pak has evidence," 2009).

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi also showed deep reservations for the role of Indian consulates in Afghanistan. In an interview with American newspaper while he was visiting America, he said:

They do not share a border with Afghanistan, whereas we do. So, the level of engagement has to be commensurate with that. If there is no massive [Indian] reconstruction [in Afghanistan], if there are not long queues in Delhi waiting for visas to travel to Kabul, why do you have such a large presence in Afghanistan? At times it concerns us (Makarova & Sharma, 2010).

Pakistan, ostensibly has a superior rationale for having a number of consulates in the country because too many Afghans are residing in Pakistan and they have also family associations to Pakistan. With no strict checking at the border, families living on each side of the Durand Line visit across the border frequently. India however, has no such rationale. But, they argue that their consulates are mostly involved in humanitarian projects and for managing development projects across the country.

A suicide bomb outside the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2009 killed almost 40 people followed by a blast in front of the Pakistani consulate in Herat. Pakistan also claimed that the Indian consulates of Herat and Jalalabad are working against Pakistan and the plotted attacks on Chinese engineers who were working on the Gwadar port in Baluchistan (Wirsing, 2007). These two blasts were initially taken as a 'tactic' to threaten each side and were termed as "war of consulates" in the media. Echoes of Pakistan's allegations also come from within the West itself.

As part of a roundtable discussion published by the Foreign Affairs website in March 2009, regional expert Christine Fair cautioned against dismissing Pakistani complaints entirely. She said:

Having visited the Indian mission in Zahedan, Iran, I can assure you they are not issuing visas as the main activity! Moreover, India has run operations from its mission in Mazar (through which it supported the Northern Alliance) and is likely doing so from the other consulates it has reopened in Jalalabad and Qandahar along the border. Indian officials have told me privately that they are pumping money into Baluchistan (Fair, 2009).

Praveen Swami also accepts that "the RAW is guilty of such transgressions in the past" (Swami, 2007). To add insult to injury, Indian agencies have been doing all this with the information and perhaps cooperation of the Afghan government, as Christine Fair noted:

Kabul has encouraged India to engage in provocative activities such as using the Border Roads Organization to build sensitive parts of the Ring Road and use the Indo-Tibetan police force for security. It is also building schools on a sensitive part of the border in Kunar--across from Bajaur. Kabul's motivations for encouraging these activities are as obvious as India's interest in engaging in them (Fair, 2009).

Similarly, there is also a significant concern about India stoking ethnic tensions along the Pak-Afghan border, particularly in the region of Balochistan. As Rasul Bakhsh Rais asserts,

“Pakistan suspects that India and Afghanistan have a hand in some of the troubles in Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province” (Rais, 2008). Further to that, there is a fear that preponderant Indian influence in Afghanistan would obstruct Pakistan's access to the resources of energy-rich CARs, severely curtailing Pakistan's regional economic interests (Rais, 2008).

### **Strategic Value of Afghanistan for India**

The strategic value of Afghanistan is not lost in India as well. It has consistently pursued influence in the country, largely to counteract Pakistani efforts, but also in an attempt to establish itself as a regional hegemon and extend its reach into Central Asia. According to Ganguly and Howenstein (2009), “since the end of 2001, India has developed an arsenal of economic, diplomatic and military tools in its pursuit of a more coordinated strategy in the region.” The authors further argue that India has two-fold goals in Afghanistan: First, it “seeks to limit Pakistan's influence over any emergent regime in Afghanistan and to ensure that no regime emerges in Afghanistan that is fundamentally hostile toward India.” Second, India considers a stable, pro-Indian regime as an opportunity to “leapfrog Pakistan and build robust strategic and economic ties with the energy rich states of Central Asia” (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). India is also busily trying to make inroads in CARs and has achieved substantial progress. India's army is building relations with Tajikistan security forces along with supplying the funding for improving and the advancement of airbases. It has also built a military hospital and logistic depot there. Furthermore, in 2007 India also succeeded to ink a contract with Tajikistan that enables former's airforce to establish itself at Ayani airbase in the neighborhood of Dushanbe and Farkhor airbase that is near to the northern Afghanistan border. In addition to that, it has moved Mi-17 attack helicopters at Ayani base and has leased already stationed Russian jets at the base as well. On Farkhor base, India maintains a squadron of MiG 31 jet fighters (Jha, 2011). The aforementioned two airbases afforded an option to Indian air forces for attacking Pakistan from its behind. Furthermore, by projecting the false notion of Pakistan seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan, India is endeavoring to expand and consolidate its influence in Afghanistan. It reflects its policy of denying Pakistan any leverage there and sandwiching it between Eastern and Western neighbours.

### **India's Hegemonic Ambitions**

The Indian presence in Central Asia reinforces its goal of becoming the dominant power in the region. The main objective of India is to limit Pakistan at maximum value or best to isolate it in the region as well as to have access to the energy recourses of CARs. With having larger influence in the region, India hopes to trim down Chinese power in the region, although a daunting task considering China shares land borders with three CARs namely, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Pant highlights the structural considerations that help shape India's interests towards Afghanistan in these words:

As India's economic and military prowess have increased in recent years, it has tried to use them to gain greater control over its strategic environment. It has become more ambitious in defining the scale and scope of its foreign policy with an increase in its relative material power capabilities. As India has risen in the global inter-state hierarchy, it has tried to expand its economic, political and territorial control and has made an attempt to reshape the regional strategic environment in accordance with its own interests. India's Afghanistan policy is a function of India's regional and global rise and is therefore seen as a test case for Indian ambitions (Pant, 2010).

In a bid to solidify its position in the country, India has provided a substantial volume of aid and support to development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Numerous infrastructure projects — from roads to schools to the Afghan parliament itself— have been funded and constructed by India. Though no official military involvement has occurred, part of India's aid package included the deliverance of three hundred military transport vehicles as well as the use of officers of the Indian army in the field training of the Afghan National Army (ANA), (Wirsing, 2007).

In assessing Indian involvement, therefore, it is important to recognize that its aid and activity in Afghanistan are not pursued merely out of a desire to stabilize the country nor to simply fulfill the role of a good international citizen. Rather, Afghanistan represents a fundamental component of a broader Indian strategy aimed at promoting its status as a regional, and ultimately global, power. As such, “it is highly unlikely that India will curb its activities [in Afghanistan], humanitarian or otherwise, anytime soon” (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009).

However, Robert Wirsing believes the most important struggle involving Pakistan and India to be over energy resources. “Gaining steadily in importance as a driver of security strategy in the calculations of both New Delhi and Islamabad. Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) have developed into major sites of energy resource-led rivalry” (Wirsing, 2007). Considering Indian ambitions to compete with China makes it desperate to get access to the rich resources of CARs. Moreover, cooperation on the construction of gas pipelines in the region has been limited, stagnant, and disjointed. Talks on the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline have been mired by US interference. Similarly, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is yet to materialize despite financial backing by the Asian Development Bank. Problems associated with securing the 1,200 kilometers of pipe traveling through Afghanistan is a likely cause of concern, particularly for India (Wirsing, 2007). As such, the suggestion that Afghanistan might prove a source of economic cooperation for India and Pakistan New-Silk-Route is not borne out by the evidence. Rather, economics and energy appear to be additional components of the competition that is being played in Afghanistan.

### **Indian Game in Afghanistan and Beyond**

As stated above, routes of the Indian's quest for influence in Afghanistan and CARs lie in its thrust for being regional hegemony. With India's newly developing relationship with the US,

they don't seem to be too threatened by U.S. policies and presence in Central Asia or Afghanistan. India is very comfortable with the present Afghan government, as it has been found in Afghanistan, a Muslim neighbour to counter Pakistan (Jafri, 1976). Key leaders of the Northern Alliance who are now holding important portfolios in the Karzai government are virtually acting as Indian spokesmen. President Hamid Karzai himself did his post-graduation in political science from Shimla in the 80s (Asif, 2002). By creating hostile environments from within Afghanistan, Indians through their presence in Kandhar and Jalalabad threatens Pakistan from its western border, thus diluting Islamabad's defence resources by engaging it on two fronts.

Iran and India are enjoying cordial relation with the present leadership of Afghanistan and India has found an alternate to Pakistan-Afghan Transit Trade with efforts for establishing an alternate route to CARs via Iran, besides winning over the Afghan masses thus blocking Pakistan's efforts of developing trade routes to CARs through Afghanistan (Rashid, 2000).

### **Indo-Afghan Strategic Deal**

The signing of the draft of "Strategic Partnership" by India and Afghanistan on October 4, 2011, has opened new dimensions of cooperation for both countries. As by agreement, India and Afghanistan will set up "Partnership Council" at the Foreign Ministers' level along with four joint working groups, on trade and economic cooperation, security and political consultations, education and capacity development and civil society & social culture interactions.

Cooperation in the fields of trade, education, and other fields had already been there, so the notable clause of the agreement is the cooperation in security matters. India will train and equip the security forces of Afghanistan now as well as after the withdrawal of US/NATO forces by 2014 ("Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership," 2011). Though Indian adventure in Afghan affairs is very sensitive because of its delicate and power game in the entire region over the years but, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, probably is very optimistic about the future of Afghanistan. Therefore, he stated at the signing ceremony of this pact that, "India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014" ("India, Afghanistan Sign," 2011). The partnership has significant importance and is a reflection of the Indian wider neighbourhood policy. The message of this agreement is clear and loud to Pakistan.

Islamabad has no objection on the accord of two independent SAARC states which came together for economic or cultural motives, but it becomes intolerable when it comes to security purposes. If India trains the Afghan army or Security personnel, it might send its troops in Afghanistan and this move will directly challenge the Pakistan army (Ahmad K., 2011).

This joint Indo-Afghan adventure came into focus because of India's help in security matters, but it remained unfocused when in 2010, Pakistan offered free training to the Afghan Army. An invitation was sent to General Bismillah, the Chief of the Afghan army, to visit Pakistan and initiate talks regarding this issue, however, no response was given. Later, at a meeting of tripartite Commission, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and ISAF, the offer was renewed, but it was rejected with the justification that almost 83 NATO trainers are already training Afghan Forces ("Pak offer to train," 2010). In addition to that, this partnership is the first-ever by the Indian government with any South Asian state. If India managed to utilize it accordingly, other smaller neighbouring states would look to make such deals with India, which would not be healthy for Pakistan. All these moves are very sensitive for Pakistan. It has to take the issue with soft diplomacy and cautiously so as to keep the tag of "isolation" away.

Having pledged a massive amount of \$2 billion in different infrastructural development and in humanitarian assistance, India is keen to regain political leverage in Afghanistan as it had before the Taliban regime. India always pursued the friendly regime in Kabul, more so after 9/11. It earned its objectives in the shape of Karzai's government in Afghanistan for the last 10 years or so. It tried its best to draw such line by which no Islamic government (in the name of Taliban) can come back into power. Delhi's huge investment in the war-torn country is to prevent anti-Indian and pro-Pakistani administration there (Kumar, 2012). However, ground realities depict other stories. Now, when Taliban rule one-fourth part of the country in presence of ISAF forces, it seems that after the departure of foreign troops, entire Afghanistan or about 75 percent would fall into the hands of Taliban. Keeping in view this scenario, Indians are shifting their state of mind. New Delhi now supports peaceful and meaningful negotiations with "moderate Taliban" (Chandra, 2011), likewise the US, Pakistan, and other regional countries. India probably has realized that sooner or later, Afghan politics would again experience the emergence of the Taliban. There could be a realization in Indian policymakers that if the Taliban return, they must be acknowledged by Pakistan and the see-saw situation between Pakistan and India would also emerge. So, it is sensible to support dialogue with the Taliban to secure future political needs in Afghanistan (Chandra, 2011).

### **Withdrawal Scenario: Ending the game or End of Game**

The announcement by President Obama on US drawdown from Afghanistan in his June 22, 2011 speech marked the beginning of another "end game" in Afghanistan (Katzman, 2011). Notwithstanding the practicalities of US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the prevailing and projected Afghan situation, with its intricate and historical linkages, has a direct bearing on Pakistan and the region. To recall, the transition aimed at bringing the exit strategy to fruition incrementally by 2014. The new policy announcement stayed short of claiming a victory. However, the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the Al-Qaeda leader, in 2011 furnished a "raison d'être" to recount successes: isolating Al-Qaeda, breaking the Taliban



momentum and capacity building of Kabul, and thus peg around this assertion a convenient case for initiating the exit strategy. It can then be claimed that the US had largely achieved its goals and the stage was now set for a gradual transfer of responsibilities from the US to Afghan security forces and to use the existing nucleus in Kabul for a grand reconciliation amongst the Afghans.

### **The New-Great-Game in Afghanistan Beyond India and Pakistan**

While in the Great Game, there were many subsidiary players including the French, the Turks, the Germans, the Iranians, the Japanese, and the Central Asian Khanates; its major competing rivals were British Imperialists and Czarist Russia fighting to gain prestige and power while ensuring that the other player in the Game was kept in check. The utmost objective of each player then was to maximize the advantages of his own country and to avoid the creation of a vacuum that could be fulfilled by an adversary.

Applying the same scenario of the Great Game to the Game underway in Afghanistan today, we can distinguish three sets of major powers contending for influence. The US have had the largest stake and numbers of forces in Afghanistan, Indians and Chinese have also kept themselves involved in an effort to gain influence. In addition, Iran and Pakistan, out of their security concerns are also active in the Game. Russia, on the other hand, kept itself mostly away from active participation until 2015 and has been keenly watching the situation, remembering its own decade-long and messy defeated war in Afghanistan. But, now, it has started asserting itself and has started the alternate peace process named “Moscow process.”

Considering the importance of this new arena for world security and economy within which the new Great Game is currently being played, America can neither win nor walk away from this war. American announcement of withdrawal was a clear indication that it does not want to or even afford to play the game, the way it has so far, any longer. However, on the one hand, Afghanistan’s security forces were weak, therefore, they could not secure the country and on the other hand, Indian influence in Afghanistan was on the rise. This situation carried risks for Pakistan’s position in the game.

### **Risks and Options for Pakistan in the Withdrawal**

Whatever the judgment the future historian may render about Pakistan’s actions in Afghanistan would have an element of hindsight. However, nobody could completely deny the validity of Pakistan’s fears vis-à-vis Indian presence in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US. The nature and focus of war seemed to be transforming as the US, despite the drawdown of troops, maintained surgical strike capacity by securing bases in Afghanistan. This seemed to be a hanging sword for Pakistan and gives rise to two differing views in this context: Firstly, the retaining of bases in Afghanistan may become the thin edge of the wedge for Pakistan and there was a possibility that the war receding in Afghanistan may find its new axis in the future (Khan, 2011). The preceding events post-2014 proved that the fears of Pakistan were true in this regard. Pakistan also did not underestimate the

seriousness of the situation and recognized the dangers underlined by President Obama's speech (Shaikh, 2011). Secondly, and conversely too, another view from our neighborhood read the situation as a formidable challenge for Pakistan, but optimistically titled it "a mixed blessing" (Bhadrakumar, 2011), for Pakistan in the future. However, so far, Pakistan has faced the "challenges" and is yet to witness the "blessing."

There could be multiple scenarios for the Post-US withdrawal situation. The Afghan transition without a sustainable political settlement and smooth US withdrawal unfold the specter of intensification of conflict on Pakistan's borderline and a reenactment of the post-1979 scenario. Ironically, an unchallenged rise of the Taliban would *ipso facto* also marginalize India in Afghanistan (and hence the covert Indian operations to destabilize Pakistan). The US support for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan has obviously been discomfoting for Pakistan. Indian moves for a foothold there, beyond engagement in the reconstruction process, is discussed above. These developments serve as fore-warner of the Indian quest for larger undertakings in and from the post-withdrawal Afghanistan that carry the potential threat to Pakistan's security. Conversely, it evoked thinking in Pakistani intellectual circles that Pakistan should reserve the right to take a "protective reaction," no less than the US' right to strike against remote "safe havens."

Indian presence in Afghanistan is backed up by the US in its hidden desire to install India as a regional policeman as it has been always vocal about the larger Indian role in safeguarding Afghanistan. Although there are doubts that the US would withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by 2014 as it has economic as well as geopolitical interests there, even if it has to withdraw, it would prefer to leave India as its successor.

It is, therefore, important to seek US understanding for a three-fold contention: first, carry Pakistan on board in the process of reconciliation, second, de-emphasize Indian factor in Afghanistan, and third, follow Pakistan's "red lines" such as drones/surgical strikes etc. that cause destabilization and constrain it from contributing to the process of stabilization in Afghanistan so vital in the wake of US drawdowns.

The scope and direction of US – Taliban talks may carry two sides of a coin. The prospects of these talks, without taking Pakistan on board, depict the nature of the relationship between the two uneasy allies. However, there are pockets of Taliban resistance: seen as trump cards in Pakistan's hand, which can be activated as the talks proceed to the dialogue process in the later stages. This constituency ought to be harnessed to neutralize the aggressive overtones in the US posture viz Pakistan.

It is also in its interests that Pakistan must not consent to the American plan of granting a leading role to India in Afghanistan and should evade US pressure and coercive diplomacy. Moreover, through skillful diplomacy, Pakistan should stay relevant in the endgame by retaining its links with friendly Taliban and other Afghan groups as well. It is also beneficial for Pakistan to look for timely withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Having said all that, it also needs to be mentioned that in this New Great Game Pakistan can assert only if its institutions are mutually supporting and it is united at home front. Therefore, there is a dire need to bring our house in order.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion leads to the conclusion that as far as Afghanistan is concerned, it carries strategic importance for both regional powers, Pakistan and India. Pakistan is already suffering from its over thirty years of involvement in Afghanistan wars and Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). India's growing influence in Afghanistan and its covert and overt operations pose serious threats to Pakistan's security. Additionally, the support of NATO and the US to India's growing influence in Afghanistan disturbs the balance of power in the region.

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