

**END GAME OR A NEW GREAT GAME?
INDO-PAKISTAN RIVALRY AND POST-WITHDRAWAL AFGHANISTAN**

Muhammad Muzaffar,¹ Imran Khan,² & Zahid Yaseen³

Abstract

Afghanistan is under occupation by coalition forces led by the United States for almost 18 years. Afghanistan was invaded on the pretext of countering terrorism, dismantling global terrorist network and building democracy in the country. Since the commencement of the war, regional powers have been involved in the post-war state-building efforts with varying roles and interests. War on Terror forced regional powers to cooperate in counterterrorism operations, but now when the withdrawal plan of international forces is announced, a new wave of competition has begun between India and Pakistan to serve their relative geo-strategic, geo-political and economic interests. The US and Afghan officials have launched a concerted effort to initiate a dialogue with the Taliban to end the war. A stalemate in the battlefield between the Taliban on one hand and the Afghan security forces backed by US-led NATO troops, on the other hand, and President Donald Trump's quest for quick results in South Asia strategy has built momentum for a negotiated peace among Afghan and U.S. officials.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, cooperation, Taliban, NATO, war, terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is under the occupation of international forces led by the United States (US) since October 2001. For almost 17 years, the US and international forces are occupying the country on the pretext of "War on Terror" that was launched to counter the terrorism, dismantle international terrorist networks, especially Al-Qaeda and to change the Taliban regime, allegedly the sole supporter of Al-Qaida network, in Afghanistan. Since the start of war regional actors became involved in the war and post-war counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and state-building measures with varying purposes and stakes.

The question is not about the involvement and interests of the regional powers; it is an established fact. The substantial question is why regional powers were interested and involved in Afghanistan and immediately when the war is almost over and the schedule and policy of the withdrawal of International troops have been announced what are the interests and fears of the regional powers especially that of Pakistan and India. The two regional powers have expressed their concerns and having interests in post-withdrawal Afghanistan because of the geo-strategic and geo-political relevance of Afghanistan to their strategic and national interests. War on terror for more than a decade has forced the regional powers to collaborate in the counter-terrorism policy and operations in Afghanistan, but as the war ends in Afghanistan and the withdrawal plan is announced by the US and NATO forces a fresh wave of competition has started among the regional powers to acquire influence in Afghanistan to advance their relative national interests.

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, GC Women University Sialkot.
Email: muzaffarrps@gcwus.edu.pk

² Ph. D Scholar, Department of Political Science and IR, GC University, Faisalabad.

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, GC Women University Sialkot.

Regarding the role of the regional powers in the Afghan war, there is a mixed response. On the one hand, it is been viewed as a facilitator role by considering "part of the solution" regarding the attainment of the war on terror objectives. On the other hand, the involvement of the regional powers in Afghanistan is viewed as a threat to the stability and security in Afghanistan as it is alleged that regional powers have made Afghan territory a playground for their game of interests. It is further contemplated that the state of the affairs would be exacerbated in the absence of international forces.

With the current conflict in Afghanistan approaching its 18th year, the US has yet to discover a way to escape its longest war. The United States and its NATO allies are but one component invested in Afghanistan's future, as the nation finds itself once again a focal point for great power competition. Despite the rhetoric of the current U.S. administration and a revised strategic approach, relying more heavily on airpower, the stalemate on the ground has yet to be broken. The NATO-backed central government in Kabul continues to hold the country's urban areas while the Taliban exerts influence over broad swaths of the countryside ("Afghanistan in 2018," 2018).

On the diplomatic front, Russia has produced more significant gains - seeking to needle its Western opponents - while Pakistan continues to muddy the waters. All the while, China watches and waits. As we take stock of what transpired in 2018, two late developments have the potential to affect the trajectory of the embattled country in 2018: the impact of a purported 50 percent reduction of U.S. forces in Afghanistan ("Afghanistan in 2018," 2018).

This is mainly because of the lack of comprehensive, well-structured and coordinated effort for the real grass-roots change in Afghanistan and partly because of the complexity of the regional dynamics of the problem. Initially the military strategies were pursued to sort out the problem of insecurity and instability of Afghanistan, but when all the military and strategic means were exhausted the US decided to negotiate and reconcile the major stakeholders within and outside Afghanistan. To facilitate and expedite reconciliation and peace talks, the US announced the withdrawal of its forces and demonstrated its seriousness in the peace talks with the insurgents including the Taliban (Abbas & Qaisrani, 2014).

The objective of the paper is to evaluate the endgame politics and US withdrawal policy. A particular focus has been on the analysis of the nature of Pakistan and India's interests and concerns in relevance to endgame and post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan. An attempt is likewise made to sort out the solution of conflicting interests and concerns of the two states.

US INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN: GOALS, STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

After the catastrophic event of 9/11, a conflict started between the Taliban regime and the US when the latter demanded al-Qaeda leaders alleged to be responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the former refused to pass over their "guests" as proclaimed by them. The US then decided to start a war named "War on Terror" and the Taliban and its supporters opted to resist the invasion instead of cooperating or meeting the US demanded.

The goals of the war were set as; breaking down overseas support for the Taliban; disrupting terrorist sanctuaries; effective operation to get rid of al-Qaida and its operational base in Afghanistan, and; overall to establish democracy and functioning democratic institutions in

Afghanistan. These goals were set to attain through multilateralism. For military operations, NATO and coalition forces and for state-building the UN and the international community played their role in the achievement of the above-stated goals which is yet in progress.

Obama administration after the failure of surge policy has focused on the policy of reconciling the Taliban and re-integration of all insurgent groups, including the Taliban, into the mainstream political power sharing of Afghanistan. And this is not possible without the assistance-of regional stakeholder, especially major regional players. For this intent, several approaches were taken up to engage regional powers to sort out a political solution of the Afghan problem and to oversee its regional setting.

Overall, the situation in Afghanistan is precarious and volatile. Afghanistan has neither upheld peace nor yet established viable political stability. Insurgency is continuously increasing by inflicting damages to the government as well as foreign troops and installation. The resurgence of the Taliban and deterioration of security situation, the complexity of the state of affairs which required well-coordinated and careful effort, especially in the wake of the US and NATO forces withdrawal in 2018. The matter of grave concern is that after all war and counter-insurgency efforts by NATO and ISAF forces in Afghanistan; “they are not leaving this country in a state of peace and democracy for future generations” (Umbreen & Ali, 2013). On this occasion, the main challenges to the Afghan government and international forces are the security situation in the country and accommodation of competing interests of the regional powers.

From Surge to Withdrawal and Reconciliation

As a result of the NATO Conference in Chicago in May 2012, the Obama administration with the consent and approval of NATO and other allies formally announced the end of combat operation till mid-2013 and the withdrawal of forces. At the Chicago summit, the leaders of the NATO members endorsed an exit strategy from Afghanistan and also announced their loyalty to the Afghan government and society (“Chicago Summit Declaration,” 2012).

Vice President Mike Pence of the US stated in these words, “That decision has been made. There will be a significant withdrawal” (“Decision made for,” 2018). He also explained that President Donald Trump had decided to draw out a significant number of troops from Afghanistan. Furthermore, in the coming months, the Trump administration ordered the military to begin withdrawing approximately 7,000 troops from Afghanistan. This is a sudden shift in the 17-year-old war (Lubold & Donati, 2018; Gibbons-Neff & Mashal, 2018).

The assumption of that plan is that the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) would be capable enough to gross the concern of the safekeeping of country and that it would be capable enough to prevent the overthrow of elected government and to maintain law and order situation (Vowell, 2012). The Obama administration gave the impression that it had achieved the goal set by its military in Afghanistan; killing of Osama Bin Laden, thus breaking the Al-Qaeda network, eradication of terrorism from the region, by declaring that “Afghanistan is a much more safe [sic.] place now as compared to the time of invasion” and final goal that it has reconstructed state apparatus and a political system for its better future functioning. President Obama asserted,

“Afghanistan no longer represents a terrorist threat to the US, time of war is receding and it is the time to focus on nation building at home” (“Chicago Summit Declaration,” 2012).

Negotiations have been carried on the strong belief that, as US political and even military commanders have long concluded, Afghan war could only be terminated through a negotiation settlement with the all local and regional stakeholders especially the Taliban and Pakistan. Taliban perceive themselves as the victors and want their demands given priority, on the other hand, the US actively counter the perception that it is war-weary and ready to strike a ground bargain (“Peace Talks with,” 2012).

It has become appearing that the Obama administration neglected to hold meaningful talks and negotiation and daunting challenge to convince the militants to give up insurgent activities and negotiate a peace deal, especially with the enemy with whom they are fighting for over a decade. The actual error was that initially, the US did not engage or even did not take into confidence regional actors, especially Pakistan in the negotiation process, though the Obama administration nuanced a regional approach to the problem. After Obama’s stabilization and surge policy failed, the US opted to engage the regional actors, especially Pakistan, through accepting its role and interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan as a major stakeholder in the region agreed to help the US in the reconciliation and negotiation process. In this regard, Pakistan seems able to convince the Taliban to conduct talks instead of resorting to violence (Abbas & Qaisrani, 2014).

Different overtures have been made by all the stakeholders in this regard including the release of Taliban leaders by the Afghan government and Pakistan's supporting stance towards the resolution of the problem. Despite the US security strategies concerns and various problems and risks involved in the exit plan the US is committed to following the withdrawal plan, reconciliation and peace talks and wants ending the war gracefully as the US public is varied of this unwinnable war because of heavy financial burdens and rising death tolls which had increased in recent years (Donati, 2013). At the strategic level, a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) has also signed between new the Afghan government and the US that would also facilitate stability in Afghanistan. BSA would facilitate the stationing of US forces in Afghanistan, to train and assist Afghan forces for the maintenance of law and order situation in Afghanistan.

US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban representatives held talks in Abu Dhabi on a peace deal that would terminate the war. Officials from United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia also took part. The Saudi ambassador to Washington, Khalid bin Salman, described that the discussions had been productive and would bring “very positive results by the beginning of next year” (“Extended U.S. Taliban,” 2019).

Dialogues between U.S. and Taliban authorities in Qatar was going on for four days with both sides seeking to establish a ceasefire mechanism in Afghanistan and open conversation with the government of Afghanistan. The meeting of Khalilzad with Taliban officials was initially scheduled to go for two days and its unpredicted imposition was a good sign, according to two senior Taliban representatives in Afghanistan who were fully briefed of development in Qatar (“Extended U.S. Taliban,” 2019).

According to one of Taliban leaders, who wished to stay-anonymous. "The mechanism for a ceasefire and ways to enter into an intra-Afghan dialogue were the two other big topics that were supposed to be discussed," Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson Muhammad Faisal told reporters that "the ongoing peace talks in Qatar have been facilitated by Pakistan." He maintained, "Pakistan, as a part of the shared responsibility, is facilitating the ongoing cycle of talks between the US and the Taliban in Doha." Faisal further stated, "Negotiations are between the two parties, for which Pakistan and Qatar are providing the necessary support and facilitating the talks" ("Extended U.S. Taliban," 2019). A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid said "Following American acceptance of the agenda of ending the invasion of Afghanistan and preventing Afghanistan from being used against other countries in the future, talks with American representatives took place today in Doha, the capital of Qatar". In recent months, Khalilzad has retained some rounds of negotiations with representatives of the Taliban in Qatar, and the last talks between the two sides took place in the UAE in December (Constable & Sonne, 2019).

Zalmay Khalilzad, the special representative for Afghan peace from the Trump administration, left Doha on Saturday and was on his way for consultations to Kabul. He said meetings in these six days were more productive than they have been in the past. We made significant progress on vital issues. Still, he claimed that there were "a number of issues left to work out" and that there could be no general settlement without a cease-fire period that contains conciliation among Afghans. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed (Constable & Sonne, 2019).

End Game in Afghanistan and Regional Powers

Afghanistan has been the playground of the game of international and regional powers. Historically, a great game was witnessed during the 19th century and the main actor was Great Britain. That game was played to secure the trade and the transit route to Central Asia and the Middle East and even to China, but since last 38 years, a new and complex game is being played. During 1979-1989, there was communist expansionism and anti-communist insurgency. During 1989-2001 was mainly an internal game, but with regional dynamic (Hanauer & Chalk, 2013).

The contest between India and Pakistan is aggressive and dynamic than any other actor in the region. It is viewed as the outset-of the Cold War between India and Pakistan that can be transformed into a hot war, which can endanger regional stability and security and will have international implications (Hanauer & Chalk, 2013). And under this notion tension and cross border firing and killing on Line of Control can be brought up in this context.

To evaluate the actual end game in Afghanistan, the interests, concerns and regional dynamics of interaction between Pakistan and India are observed and evaluated. These two have faced a new profound opportunity to gain power, influence, and prestige to play an influential role in Afghanistan. Both states have been involved in Afghanistan's domestic and regional issues and have also begun extending their influence and interests in Central Asian Republics (CARs) through Afghanistan. It is viewed with concern that Pakistan-India competition may further complicate the situation during the withdrawal and especially in the post-2018 Afghanistan. Pakistan is marginalized and ignored at various levels by the US to accommodate Indian interests and influence in Afghanistan, which has been watched with great fears-in Pakistan foreign policymaking circles. It

is obvious that in post-withdrawal Afghanistan, India and Pakistan's competition of interests and influence would be the major game in the town.

Positive signals from Pakistan suggest that Islamabad may be interested in further cooperating and reducing mistrust with India, with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi recognizing India's role in Afghanistan and calling for India-Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan. Indian analysts have expressed skepticism over Qureshi's statement, insisting that it does not suggest a major shift in Pakistan's foreign policy given that the Pakistani military, the entity in Pakistan that is responsible for a strategy towards Afghanistan, did not endorse it (Dwivedi, 2019). Even then, in the light of Pakistan's economic crisis and an uptick in pressure on India to increase its engagement in the Afghanistan conflict, the acknowledgment does open doors for limited dialogue. Peace initiatives such as the Russia-led multilateral conference, which demand that India and Pakistan share the same platform, could help the two countries in exchanging dialogue on Afghanistan, building trust, and even engaging in state-building and investment projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) project. Through such efforts, India and Pakistan can ensure that their bilateral tensions do not come in their way of engagement in Afghanistan (Dwivedi, 2019).

Pakistan's Interests and Concerns

After the withdrawal of the NATO forces in 2019, two possible scenarios are likely to emerge in the regional setting. Foremost, the two major states of the region will have a genuine opportunity to play an influential role in the post-2019 situation of Afghanistan and thus serve their national interests in Afghanistan, but on the other hand Pakistan-Indian competition for control and influence might lead towards a more grave and precarious situation posing threat not just to Afghanistan's security and stability but may also cause a potential threat to the regional peace and stability. Historically the course of events has shown that because of instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan suffered more than any state in the region not merely because of its geographical proximity but also because of historical, cultural, political links and trans-border non state actors' activities. Hence, the mark of the highest possible effect after the withdrawal of NATO forces, scenario would be Pakistan, more of its interests and apprehensions are linked with the scenario (Abbas & Qaisrani, 2014). Pakistan's ambitions in Afghanistan are primarily Indian centric and focus entirely on demeaning Delhi's influence in Afghanistan while enduring its own. Islamabad, thus, seeks to maximize Taliban influence in a weak Kabul government that can provide and maintain strategic depth against India in case of an Indian invasion. It is alleged that Pakistan facilitated the Taliban in terms of preparation and conduct of operations through Pakistani backed extremist groups (Hanauer & Chalk, 2013). On the other hand, there are potentially prioritized Pakistani interests to go after, first, to marginalize or to neutralize Afghanistan claims over Pakistan's territory and secondly to get and develop enhanced trade partnership with CARs to increase its influence as well as to strengthen its ties with these republics in the perspective of possible future settings in Afghanistan. Among other involvement, it is in the best interest of Pakistan to avoid and neutralize civil war in Afghanistan after the US and ISAF forces' withdrawal. It is speculated that Afghanistan will soon become a victim of instability and the future instability may ultimately affect the security and stability of Pakistan. The warlike situation in Afghanistan may

exploit the state of affairs in Pakistan, especially in erstwhile FATA. Pakistan expects and views it in favor that the Afghan the national army and other security agencies would take real control of the country and sustain security and stability, as Pakistan wants to see a stable Afghanistan in pursuit of its interests. Although it is alleged that Pakistan still brings about and patronizes Afghan opposition groups and extremist elements like Haqqani Group that could be used by Pakistan to serve its interests in Afghanistan after the departure of international forces. But the fact of the day is that Pakistan has changed its policy of supporting Taliban activities against the Afghan government in Kabul and gave up maintaining its influence in Afghanistan through non-state actors (Abbas & Qaisrani, 2014).

Pakistan is Afghanistan's largest trading partner, and Afghanistan is Pakistan's third-largest importer of commodities. Both the states have signed very important agreements related to trade and commercial activities such as the formation of a joint chamber of commerce in 2010 and also transit trade agreement. It is worth to mention that Pakistan has allowed Afghan exports to India through Pakistani territory. Besides, it is vital Pakistan's interest that Islamabad use Afghan territory for its trade with CARs (Hanauer & Chalk, 2013).

At the moment Pakistan desires a stable and friendly Afghanistan. Pakistan has been blamed that it treats the Taliban as its proxies in Afghanistan, and as a barricade against the Indian way. Nevertheless, in recent years a visible policy shift occurred to the extent that Afghan officials maintain that currently, Pakistanis are less suspicious about India (Mazhar, Khan, & Goraya, 2013). But Pakistan showed a firm tendency that any harm to its security of strategic interests in Afghanistan would be treated as an offense and may lead to retaliation.

Pakistan views itself a potential relevant stakeholder in talks between the US and Taliban as well as part of the post-withdrawal game as it wants to curtail Indian expansive influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's focus on the constructive engagement of the regional actors to reach a workable peace deal with guerrillas in Afghanistan. Pakistan wants to take on a greater role and responsibility in this esteem. Pakistan used to assume that no progress in Afghanistan could take place without its consent and approval (Mazhar, Khan, & Goraya, 2013). Although there are suspicious indications from US and NATO circles about the intentions of Pakistan regarding its future role in Afghanistan, the aims and motivations of Pakistan are positive and it tries to facilitate a peace settlement for the future security and stability of Afghanistan. Pakistan has suggested a series of positive gestures where we can judge that Pakistan is serious in its intentions and practices for a stable Afghanistan. Pakistan has released midlevel Taliban leaders on the request of high peace council of Afghanistan and Afghan foreign minister. Pakistan's chief of army staff and foreign minister represented Pakistan in Brussels conference related to Afghanistan held in December 2012. Pakistan is also working with Afghanistan to conclude a strategic partnership agreement (Mazhar, Khan, & Goraya, 2013).

The history of the last three decades demonstrated that Pakistan is directly touched by any type of war in Afghanistan. As experts and practitioners have predicted the chances of civil war in Afghanistan after US and ISAF withdrawal, Pakistan is much concerned and cautious of any such development. Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement is viewed in Pakistan with serious concerns and as a challenge to the strategic interests of Pakistan in the region. During a trip to New

Delhi in December 2013, former Afghan President Karzai described India as a "strategic and natural partner." These developments have been viewed by Pakistan with distrust and fear. It is seen as a sign of Indian expanding influence and a means of encircling Pakistan and bringing down its strategic depth (Luthra, 2013). Pakistan has been preoccupied with the fear of encirclement by India and views the establishment of Indian influence and strategic and military ties with the neighboring countries, especially Afghanistan, in the security spectrum. India has developed the Chabahar Port in Iran and expanded the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan; that is being used as a de-facto Indian airbase hosting a squadron of MiG-29 fighter jets. These strategic developments are seen as a grave concern for Pakistan in terms of strategic and security perspectives (Padukone, 2012).

India's Interests and Concerns

Historically, India remained in close ties with Afghanistan except for the short period of Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001. In its posture is having close ties with Northern Alliance and enmity with the Taliban. India believes that there is no clear difference between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. These are not to be regarded as separate entities. This has contributed to distrust of India towards the process of reconciliation and political settlement with the Taliban. The very established and substantial Indian interest is to prevent Afghanistan to be used as a strategic depth to Pakistan and Islamist militants operating in Kashmir (Price, 2013).

Among the other interests expansion of Indian influence in and outside the region is regarded as vital Indian interest related to the endgame in Afghanistan. India has maneuvered to expand its influence in Afghanistan and CARs. India requires to use Afghanistan as an economic hub and use it as a route to its access to resources of CARs. In pursuit of its interests, India has put approximately \$2 billion since 2001 in Afghanistan in the name of reconstruction assistance (Luthra, 2013). In fact, this investment is used as a means to extend its influence in Afghanistan. India has constructed Afghan Parliament building, Zaranj-Delaram highway in Nimruz province of Afghanistan that connects the Afghan ring road to the Iranian border (Padukone, 2012). These Indian initiatives have strategic intent on the part of India. Through these routes, India may deploy its military and defense apparatus and the possibility of their use against Pakistan cannot be overruled in the event of India-Pakistan tensions.

Although India has diverse geopolitics and geo-strategic interests, its principal interests lie in Afghanistan's economic potential and its proximity to the Gulf and Central Asian Oil and Natural resources. India desires a transit route from Afghanistan to Central Asia and is mainly interested in investment opportunities. India hosted an investment summit on Afghanistan in Delhi in June 2012 which was investment opportunities in different sectors of the Afghan economy (Price, 2013). While India shares obvious security concerns about Afghanistan's future, it is keen to play a role in ensuring a more optimal outcome post-2014. It is particularly interested in Afghanistan's lucrative mineral deposits. The US government estimates Afghanistan's mineral wealth at \$1 trillion, while the Afghan government puts it at closer to \$3 trillion" (Price, 2013).

Another major worry is that the return of the Taliban into power after withdrawal may cause a serious challenge to Indian interest since the Taliban are anemic to India and considered as being

used as instruments of Pakistan's Afghan policy. Hence India desires of a government in Kabul with minimum Taliban influence and heavily backed by international community. In this regard, India views in favour of the utility of non-Pashtun candidate, Abdullah Abdullah as a leader in the future government of Afghanistan, for the future course of Afghanistan and Indian relations. India views any Pashtun representation in Afghanistan government with suspicion because of the historical-cultural affiliation of Afghan Pashtun with Pakistan and regards them under the influence of Pakistan (Abbas & Qaisrani, 2014).

Enhanced Regional Cooperation: Need of the Hour

The possibility of Afghanistan's drift towards instability and even civil war is gaining weightage day by day. To tackle the future unstable situation of the country, the Afghan state, especially its security forces would have a critical role play. Till today it can be witnessed that the Afghan National Army (ANA) is not capable of maintaining future security situation, particularly in the instance when the regional states compete for their relative interests in the country. Until the regional actors' interests and fears are not managed regarding the Afghanistan issue, there is a bigger chance of proxy wars among regional powers in Afghanistan, which may lead Afghanistan again to its historic situation of the 1990s (Karim, 2017).

As Pakistan and India are having varying and somehow conflicting interests and foresee the harms of the unsteady Afghanistan and the competitive part of others, the pacification and counterbalancing of the concerns of these two regional powers would be positive for global actors' efforts to create peace through a political settlement in Afghanistan. Regional players should be engaged in peace talks or at least should be taken into confidence regarding the peace deals and future political settlement in Afghanistan. In this regard enhanced regional cooperation on Afghan issue would be the key. Afghan peace and settlement should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led but not at the expense of regional powers' interests. History suggests that any situation in Afghanistan directly affects its neighbouring countries and most of its effects are linked with the integrity and stability of Pakistan. Afghanistan has long been a locus of geopolitical competition among external powers, great and small. Nations such as the US, Pakistan and, increasingly, India and China have a shared interest in containing the spread of militancy and securing their own imperatives ("Afghanistan in 2018," 2018).

Need of the hour is to find out the ways that are interrelated to the convergence of interests among the regional powers and with those of international community and regional powers. In this sensitive situation and critical time fundamental thing is to pick up a positive side of relations between regional states instead of highlighting the conflicts. The primary focus should be the aligned interests of the stakeholders involved. The need is to avoid contradictory positions and undue blame game regarding the declining state of affairs in Afghanistan. International forces and especially the US should take the responsibility of the situation in Afghanistan instead of blaming regional powers for instability and insecurity.

CONCLUSION

Announcement of withdrawal plan has expedited the "end game" in Afghanistan. Regional powers have set about running the game of influence and attitude to acquire their relative interests and influence. Several players are involved in the end game, but the regional powers, especially Pakistan and India are strategically involved and have strategic stakes in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan has become fundamental to the endgame politics in Afghanistan. The US devised a strategy for the peaceful withdrawal of forces and logistics. Taliban are also included in the negotiations on the assumption that they would not cause damage to the withdrawing forces if they are engaged with the US through a deal. The role of Pakistan in such negotiations and the peaceful withdrawal is seen as essential by the analysts and policymakers in the US and other important capitals of the world.

The current situation is favorable to Pakistan to such extent that it is considered that the US cannot withdraw its forces and strike a political or peace deal without assistance from Pakistan. Endgame in Afghanistan is very competitive among the major regional powers. Until it is handled and the stakes of the regional powers are valued by the international community and by one another, there is a clear indication of chaos and even the chances of proxy civil war in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international forces.

Initiatives such as TAPI, provision of the transit trade route to India from Pakistan, persuading both the nations to meaningfully start CBMs to resolve Kashmir issue as well as convincing Pakistan for the grant of most favored nation status to India will bridge the trust deficit and will lead to neutralizing their rivalry. It is very much evident at this stage that without managing the interests and neutralizing concerns of Pakistan and India peace and stability cannot be assured in Afghanistan.

References

- Abbas, H., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2014). End game in Afghanistan: Interests and concerns of regional powers. *UOS Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 3(1), 19-38.
- Afghanistan in 2018: No end to the stalemate. (2018, Dec. 22). *World View*. Retrieved from <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/afghanistan-2018-no-end-stalemate>
- Chicago summit declaration. (2012, May 12). *NATO*. Retrieved from North Atlantic Treaty Organization website: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87593.htm
- Constable, P., & Sonne, P. (2019, Jan. 26). U.S. Taliban talks appear closer to pact after marathon negotiations in Qatar. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-taliban-talks-appear-closer-to-pact-after-marathon-talks-in-qatar/2019/01/26/685e638e-20f5-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html?utm_term=.6ba21f19bc0d
- Decision made for significant troop withdrawal from Afghanistan: US official. (2018, Dec. 21). *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1452794>
- Donati, J. (2013, Sep. 31). Civilian casualties Afghanistan: Deadly attacks rise as international forces hand over security. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/civilian-casualties-afghanistan_n_3680526

- Dwivedi, N. (2019, Jan. 16). It's time for regional countries to take the lead in Afghanistan. *South Asian Voices*. Retrieved from <https://southasianvoices.org/its-time-for-regional-countries-to-take-the-lead-in-afghanistan/>
- Extended U.S. Taliban peace talks in Qatar raise Afghan hopes. (2019, Jan. 24). *Al-Jazeera*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/extended-taliban-peace-talks-qatar-raise-afghan-hopes-190124144710617.html>
- Gibbons-Neff, T. & Mashal, M. (2018, Dec. 20). US to withdraw about 7000 troops from Afghanistan. Officials Say. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal.html>
- Hanauer, L., & Chalk, P. (2013, Sep. 21). *India and Pakistan's strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for United States and region* (Occasional Paper). Arlington: RAND Center for Asia Pacific Policy. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP387.html
- Karim, M. (2017). World powers rivalry in Afghanistan and its effects on Pakistan. *The Dialogue*, 12(3), 247-264.
- Lubold G., & Donati, J. (2018, Dec. 20). Trump orders big troop reduction in Afghanistan. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-is-considering-substantial-afghan-troop-drawdown-11545341452>
- Luthra, S. (2013, Dec. 19). *India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan*. Retrieved from The National Bureau of Asian Research website: <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=387>
- Mazhar, M. S., Khan, S. O., & Goraya, N. S. (2013). Post-2014 Afghanistan. *South Asian Studies*, 28(1), 67-84.
- Padukone, N. (2012, Nov.-Dec.). India and Pakistan's endgames: What lies ahead. *World Affairs*, 175(4), 79-86.
- Peace talks with the Taliban. [Editorial]. (2012, Oct. 4). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/opinion/peacetalks-with-the-taliban.htm/?=0>
- Price, G. (2013, Aug. 26). *India's policy towards Afghanistan*. Retrieved from Chatham house Website: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp%20ind%20iaafghanistan.pdf>
- Umbreen, J., & Ali, Z. (2013). War on terror partnership: Problems and prospects for Pakistan. *Journal of Political Studies*, 20(1), 50-65.
- Vowell, J. (2012, Dec. 12). After 2014: The U.S/NATO mission in Afghanistan. Retrieved from E-International Relations website: <http://www.eir.info/2012/12/17/after-2014-the-us-natomissions-in-afghanistan/s>