

TEST OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM TO EXPLAIN REASONS OF U.S. WITHDRAWAL (2021) FROM AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Smithsonian magazine (Jan-Feb) 2019 edition published facts about U.S. military intrusion in 14 countries including Afghanistan, as a consequence of the 9/11, 2001 attacks on its soil. U.S. invasion and its following bleak strategy raise questions on the rationale of this decision because Afghanistan had never been that powerful and capable of posing a security threat to U.S. Foreign invasion and following withdrawal that is pledged to be completed 9/11, 2021 have its specific reasons as well as implications in the region that need to be explored. Hence, the pretext of military invasion on the territory of Afghanistan and maintaining it for two decades is not very strong. However, after this long military presence the U.S. finally decided to withdraw from the state that could be strategically important. Little scholarly work has been done to explain the reasons of withdrawal of superpower from a small country after a long-time presence. South Asia is one of the important regions to study for several reasons firstly considerable size of the region's population, strategic location, contribution to the productive capacity of the world, and variations in political systems. The theory of neoclassical realism better explains the role of a domestic political system to distort the pursuit of security. It focuses on the behaviour of the United States in deciding on withdrawal. This study addresses a key research question that is, why the United States, being a superpower willingly withdraws its military presence from a much smaller country, Afghanistan that could have a strategic value.

Keywords: U.S., Peace, Afghanistan, Power Transition, Withdrawal Strategy, South Asia

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Introduction

Superpowers of the 20th century used to dominate certain areas or countries to fulfill their national interests of expansionism. And all of it is a part of the Great Game and power politics. It was initially a political and diplomatic confrontation between British Empire and the Russian empire over Afghanistan and neighboring states in Asia. Afghanistan appeared as a significant U.S. foreign policy alarm in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban government that allegedly protected and supported it. In the paramount of twenty years, United States has suffered over 22,000 military casualties (including around 2,400 fatalities) in Afghanistan. U.S. government is eager to withdraw from what Joe Biden said in his speech “America’s Longest war”. Further, he claims to withdraw from the remaking of other countries. The study attempts to explain the possible reasons for the withdrawal of forces of the United States from Afghanistan. Neoclassical realism better explains the domestic reasons for the withdrawal of any empire/superpower from the occupied state.

U.S. Invasion in Afghanistan

Since October 2001 the United States and Allied forces have been operating in Afghanistan. Initially, the military action, which was considered a defense under the UN Charter, was carried out by the US under Operation Enduring Freedom. NATO had just submitted its joint defense clause to Article V on September 12, 2001. In December 2001 the UN authorized the deployment of the 5,000-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to deploy in the region, and in Kabul, the purpose of providing security and support in rebuilding the country. While the UN was in power, ISAF continued as a unified coalition. The operation of US terrorists under Operation Enduring Freedom continued to operate differently. In August 2003 NATO took command of ISAF. Over the next decade, and strengthened by the transformed and expanded UN mandate, ISAF operations spread across the country and shifted from security and stability to anti-emergency services.¹

At its peak, in 2011, ISAF had 132,000 forces with troops from 50 NATO and its allies. The number of troops varied according to the security situation in the region. On 31 December 2014 anti-unity activities, including the US Operation Enduring Freedom, came to an end. On 1 January 2015, the Afghan National Forces took up a security case in Afghanistan and NATO and moved to a new non-combat organization, called Resolute Support. The

¹Claire Mills, (2021) accessed on 8/19/2021, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9241/CBP-9241.pdf>

main function of the Resolute Support has been to support the Afghan National Security Forces. Operation Enduring Freedom was replaced by the US Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which supported Resolute Support but also continued to freely fight terrorism in Afghanistan (approximately 2,000 workers).

U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

In 2011, President Barack Obama announced that the US would withdraw from Afghanistan in late 2014, completing Operation Enduring Freedom. Because the Americans did not support the war, and Obama is under pressure from lawmakers, especially Democrats, to reduce US forces in Afghanistan. Although a large number of US troops were withdrawn in 2014 and NATO's International Security Assistance Force was depleted, 9,800 U.S. troops remained stationed inside Afghanistan during Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which was part of NATO's successor Resolute Support Mission. In the summer of 2017, with the official number of 8,400 U.S. troops serving in Afghanistan, President Donald Trump gave U.S. military authority the mandate to increase the number of troops in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan without first seeking a formal agreement with the white house.

On August 30, 2017, the Ministry of Defense revealed that there are more troops in Afghanistan than ever before. In September 2017, Trump officials began sending more than 3,000 troops to Afghanistan, bringing the number of US troops to Afghanistan to more than 14,000. When General Austin "Scott" Miller took over the reins of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan in September 2018, 15,000 US troops were deployed. In October 2019, after the abrupt end of peace talks with the Taliban last month, General Miller announced that the US military had been reduced to 13,000 within a year as a result of a double decision by US command in Kabul.²

In February 2019 at that time U.S. President Donald Trump announced he would take America out of “endless wars”. On February 29, 2020, American and Taliban leaders signed an agreement aimed at being the first step in Afghanistan's peace agreement. There have been major problems with the agreement, such as the failure to involve the Afghan government in negotiations. However, key provisions of the agreement include the US pledge to withdraw all American and foreign troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban's commitment to prevent al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from using Afghanistan to intimidate the United States and its allies, and the promise of both sides to support peace talks. of Afghanistan. By the year

² CNN *politics*, (2020), accessed on 8/20/2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/17/politics/afghanistan-iraq-withdrawal-pentagon/index.html> .

2020, the United States withdrew its troops from nearly 14,000 earlier this year. On November 17, 2020, Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced that the United States will deploy troops in Afghanistan to approximately 2,500 troops in January 2021. At the end of President Trump's term in office in January 2021, U.S. military standards in Afghanistan were reduced to a minimum of about 2,500. However, significant progress has been made in peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. The agreement was reached in December 2020 on the basis that strong negotiations could continue, but no progress was made before President Trump left office.

On April 14, 2021, Biden announced his intention to withdraw all U.S. troops each September 11, 2021, a 20th anniversary of the attack on September 11 and four months after the deadline set for May 1, 2021. The day before the announcement, Biden called on former US presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama about his decision to withdraw. According to the plan, NATO troops will also follow the same timeline for withdrawal. The United States has indicated that some troops (the exact number has not been determined) will remain in the country to provide political security. On July 2, 2021, Germany and Italy withdrew their troops from Afghanistan. On the same day, the U.S. military left Bagram Airfield. Afghan officials complained that the Americans left without informing the new Afghan leader for more than two hours leaving the base. On July 8, 2021, President Biden announced that the official end of the war in Afghanistan would take place on August 31, 2021. On July 12, 2021, Austin S. Miller stepped down as US military and NATO commander in Afghanistan. On July 21, 2021, the US Air Force launched airstrikes against Taliban positions in Afghanistan. On August 17, 2021, President Biden held a media briefing in which he outlined the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.³

Process of Withdrawal

U.S. withdrawal actually started on 13 July 2011 when the first few hundred troops left Afghanistan during the administration of the Obama administration. On 18 April 2012, it was also decided to slow down the war in Afghanistan by gradually handing over the security control to the local Afghan forces. Same year both governments signed a strategic partnership agreement. Combatant withdrawal also took place under Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). Mutual consents were built on several issues such as the U.S. pledged to support financially and tactically Afghanistan till the end of the process.

³ *CNBC*, (2021), accessed on 8/17/2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/19/biden-says-aug-31-deadline-in-afghanistan-might-have-to-be-extended.html>

Literature Review

Olson, B. (2013) in his article “Withdrawal from Empire: Britain’s Decolonization of Egypt, Aden, and Kenya in the Mid-Twentieth Century” states that powerful states normally tend to embroil in the affairs of other states, comparatively weaker. On one hand, this study is useful to analyze the patterns of withdrawal of a superpower from its colonies but it less talks about the reasons of withdrawal. There is a need to identify the reasons of withdrawal.⁴

Krishnaiah, J. Signorielli, N. McLeod, D. M. (1993) in his article “The Evil Empire Revisited: New York Times Coverage of the Soviet Intervention in and Withdrawal from Afghanistan” explores the events published in a leading American newspaper. That actually set the frame of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan to analyze and cover the news items but its main focus is on image of Soviet ideology rather than the reasons of withdrawal.⁵

James, R. R. (2008) in his article “The Conservative Party and the Empire: A Pragmatic Withdrawal” describes the environment of colonial government and their reasons to enter into the territory of the occupied. Particularly the conservative party had set its milestones as a colonial power and remained for the longest period in history. But eventually, all the powers withdraw from their colonies the reasons behind this should have been discussed in a detailed manner but unfortunately this area has never been covered.⁶

In 2016 it was reported in the newspapers and media reports that most of the Afghan militant groups are enthusiastic to continue their fight against U.S. forces and they are more capable than before. Most of the facts regarding this news were over exaggerated. According to a PEW survey more than 50% of the population of United States is in favour of U.S. forces withdrawal from Afghanistan there are very few against it and very few that are neutral.⁷

⁴ Brian S. Olson, *Withdrawal from Empire: Britain's Decolonization of Egypt, Aden, and Kenya in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. (Army Command And General Staff Coll Fort Leavenworth Ks School Of Advanced Military Studies, 2008).

⁵Jothik Krishnaiah; Nancy Signorielli, and Douglas M. McLeod. "The evil empire revisited: New York Times coverage of the Soviet intervention in and withdrawal from Afghanistan." *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1993): 647-655.

⁶ Robert Rhodes James, "The conservative party and the empire: A pragmatic withdrawal." *The round table* 60, no. 240 (1970): 511-519.

⁷ T. W. Green, and K Doherty, “Majority of U.S. Public favors Afghanistan troop withdrawal: Biden criticized of his handling of situation”, (31 August, 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/>

This withdrawal is proved to be very dynamic in nature. On one hand it releases the occupied state and end up the restoration of autonomy of the political setup of Afghan State. On the other hand, it leaves the country with the huge possibility of the structure of the Afghan government and possible renewal of civil war. Moreover, a large number of insurgent groups emerged and migration occurs. There is a possibility of reemergence of terrorist groups on U.S. soil due to migrations but Biden's administration tried to take precautionary measures in order to avoid this threat. Biden administration opted the best possible option for withdrawal that is to gain the confidence and support of Afghan public through the use of diplomacy and dialogues. This time U.S. particularly focused on the peaceful withdrawal and continuing peace process in Afghanistan that led to a gradual withdrawal.

But aforementioned study leaves some aspects untouched while analysing the situation. This withdrawal was not that gradual and timely as it could be. There is power vacuum left behind in the government. A speedy takeover of Taliban shows the incompetence and poor intelligence of U.S. forces and Biden administration in Afghanistan. After a long presence of two decades U.S. should have familiar with the strength of adversary particularly the nontraditional one i.e., Taliban. This is pointing towards the incompetence of U.S. forces that could be one of the reasons of withdrawal. United States has also failed to consult its partners like U.K. blamed it for not consulting them in Afghan matter. U.K. stated it as poor foreign policy measures of U.S. for its transatlantic partnership. Although U.S. and U.K. have a long history of cooperation of shared intelligence. After a long military presence and spending multi millions of dollars on war against terrorism in Afghanistan it looks absurd to withdraw without any success. Therefore, U.S. needed to make a reason for its own public consumption to justify this decision as a rational foreign policy choice. Joe Biden in a speech on national day said that as U.S. army was here to provide the peace and security from the belligerent groups but Afghan army and government is not only incapable but also unwilling to cooperate hence there is no point to stay more. He further explained that U.S. army should not stay and defend that country that is not capable to defend itself.

Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism explains and predict political phenomena ranging from short-term crisis-behavior, to foreign policy, to patterns of grand strategic adjustment by individual states up to long-term patterns of international outcomes and ultimately to the evolution of the structure of

international system itself⁸. According to neoclassical realism, the size and goals of a nation's foreign policy are primarily determined by its relative material power. However, it argues that the influence of power capacities on foreign policy is indirect and nuanced since systemic pressures must be translated through unit-level factors like decision-makers' perceptions and state structure⁹. It proposes a shaky transmission line between structural incentives and restrictions on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, foreign, and economic actions states choose on the other. Long-term outcomes in international politics typically reflect the actual power balance among the states. But based only on a systemic analysis, states rarely adopt short-term policies that are objectively effective or predictable.

Withdrawal of an empire or a superpower from the occupying state is a political process as well as a transition of power. One of the reasons behind is revolution, insurgency of civil war, and sometimes independence movements. This withdrawal occurs as a result of success of any of these. As neoclassical advocates the domestic elements as reasons of withdrawal. Reasons of incursion as well as reasons of decision of withdraw are very important to explore in the light of theories of international relations. Theory of neoclassical realism fits best in case of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan after two decades of long presence. United States had no enduring reason to stay in Afghanistan. Military was just being installed to make its presence possible in China and Russia's neighbourhood. Although reason of U.S. presence in Afghanistan was fight against terrorist groups residing the country but in fact, they are international in character and have global networks. Therefore, only Afghanistan is not to be monitored like that. Neoclassical realism advocates the domestic politics and circumstances become the cause of U.S. withdrawal. U.S. presence made the insurgent groups angrier and they flourished and penetrated not only within Afghanistan but across the eastern border as well and this created the security issues in Pakistan. Internal strife of different groups in Afghanistan made U.S. withdrawal inevitable in other case a stable victory was impossible to achieve.

Reasons for U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan:

Though American withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed on 31st August 2021 which left researchers with many paradoxical reasons for hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Ambassador Richard LeBaron rightly emphasized that by the time any serious issue is taken up to the US

⁸Ripsman, Norrin M., Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell. *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics*. (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Gideon Rose, Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy, *World Politics* 51 (1) (1998): 144–172. doi:10.1017/S0043887100007814.

presidential house it has already become a matter of sorting out difficult choices with bad options at disposal of the administration.¹⁰ All these choices at a crucial moment came up with uncertain outcomes. To understand the US withdrawal from Afghanistan it seemed crucial to understanding the pre-existing factors that shaped the situation, conditions, and choices that led to an abrupt geopolitical transition in the behavior of the US administration. Therefore, setting up “why” problems for analyzing the choices/decisions gets fascinating as all of a sudden researchers can find out that history could have taken a different turn with a choice. It’s the things that didn’t happen due to certain stumbling blocks or reasons that make it exciting to explore the things that happened in Afghanistan and led to an embarrassing withdrawal of another superpower.

End of Forever Wars or Realignment for the Continuation of Great Geopolitical Wars:

It seemed extremely important to explore the true rationals and perceptions behind the choices made by the world leaders. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan can be understood with the lens of internal factors in the USA like anti-war and anti-involvement movements that shaped the public opinion in favor of ending forever wars abroad.¹¹ The purpose of these movements is to build back better at home instead of draining US wealth and power in the far-flang areas of the world. The proponents of this motive emphasized that though after the attack of 9/11, there were strong emotions in the USA, and at that time they also reluctantly supported the attack and punishment for relevant organizers of the so-called terrorist attack on the twin towers but after the assassination of Osama Bin Laden and senior Al-Qaeda leaders with swift, decisive, and accurate intelligence and military operations they are now contented that they already fulfilled their desired mission in Afghanistan.¹² Therefore, some people in the upper echelons of the White House started to believe that the war on terror was over, and it was unwise for the United States to remain there. Moreover, there was a clear difference of opinion that was observed between the Republicans and the Democrats over the longest war of US history. Joe Biden as a Democrat President who got a thin majority and host of problems at disposal decided not to enlarge the gulf/crevices and opted for the end of the so-called "War on Terrorism". Thus, the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was gradually molded in light of US public sentiments, a change of priorities, and the need for stabilizing internal power politics. On the flip side, critics suggest that US withdrawal from Afghanistan is the onset of a new realignment aimed at a transition or pause for recalibrating

¹⁰ (William F. Wechsler 2021)

¹¹(Bansal 2021)

¹²(Bansal 2021)

the supreme interests of the US in a competitive geopolitical environment. These critics underscore that open military intervention is no longer credible in a region that is the backyard of a major power like Russia or an emerging power like China. Joe Biden in his speech hinted towards the start of future wars. These future wars based on economy, resources, and artificial intelligence require the US to reassemble or restore its assets and wisely invest them in the quest of maintaining its reputation/ prestige as a superpower in the world.¹³ So, this withdrawal is a pause in forever wars but the military, industrial and bureaucratic complexes of the US knew that their businesses prosper on wars so they may replace direct military intervention with other means such as a new race for armament as it already started under the new AUKUS military alliance that brought the indo-pacific on the brink of a new race for the development of nuclear submarines.¹⁴ So, from this standpoint, the USA shifted its geopolitical strategy for the Asian region due to the structural changes in the balance of power in the international system. Thus, Afghanistan no longer remained the priority of the US administration as they decided to double the pressure on the eastern side of China instead of merely focusing on the western side. This rationale, therefore, led to the hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan.

Continuation of Carrot Stick Policy:

After extended rounds of dialogue with Taliban leaders in Doha US administration gradually realized that they can influence and manipulate Afghanistan without their physical presence on the ground as the Taliban is yet again seeking an international de jure recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.¹⁵ Instead of using hard power against an unconventional enemy in difficult terrain, the Joe Biden administration decided to take refuge in soft power. Through this time-tested instrument, the US could use human rights and social issues for forcing the Taliban for coming to terms with US interests.¹⁶ Thus, the US decided to withdraw from Afghanistan as a balanced blend of economic or diplomatic aid backed by sanctions will be sufficient to actively engage and pressurize the new Taliban government in Kabul. Moreover, Washington believed that in case of any mishap they can rely on their assets like shadow agents, proxies, and propaganda that can force the Taliban to abide by liberal international order.¹⁷ As if they will be unwilling to come to terms with US aspirations then they will bleed more as their efforts aimed at much-needed de jure recognition and economic development will be significantly delayed. The

¹³(Sheppard 2020)

¹⁴(Pannett 2021)

¹⁵(William F. Wechsler 2021)

¹⁶(William F. Wechsler 2021)

¹⁷(William F. Wechsler 2021)

persistent efforts of the Taliban for reconstructing their global perception can easily trick them into the vicious cycle of the US carrot and stick policy. The critics of this approach to US withdrawal emphasized the Russian, Chinese and Pakistani tilt towards supporting the Taliban government in Afghanistan. They focus on the strategic needs of Pakistan for having a secure and stable friendly government in Kabul through which Pakistan can extend its trade to central Asia. China is also deeply interested in huge stockpiles of rare earth minerals found in Afghanistan¹⁸. Despite some economic and strategic interests, the extent to which these countries are willing to secure the Taliban from the manipulation of the USA remained rather ambiguous. It will be quite interesting to observe that how the USA will create a balance between aid and sanctions for controlling the Taliban in the presence of the friendly neighboring states.

Economic Burden or End of Nation Building Efforts:

The United States has spent more than \$ 3 trillion on the so-called "War Against terrorism" in the last 20 years. Maintaining a level of fiscal and monetary control and sustainability in such an environment where the huge amount of resources were constantly drained out gradually became extremely difficult for subsequent US administration. Procurement retention has also been an important consideration. Earlier the entire US military base was located in Pakistan, and so Pakistan also benefited from this transactional relationship, but in the past five years, the relations between the US and Pakistan have not been positively progressing. Currently, the amount spent was around 45-50 Billion USD per year which was more than 100 Billion USD per year during the war. Spending so much money was not wise for US leaders and that is US administration decided to withdraw from Afghanistan.¹⁹ On the flip side, the critics like Amer Zafar Durrani who worked closely with the Afghan government underscored that about 70 to 80% of all the money that the US poured in Afghanistan landed back in the western countries and USA under the disguise of security, advice, and lobbying by the Afghan government.²⁰ The corrupt elites of Afghanistan who robbed off the wealth and resources of people also accumulated large reserves of their money in offshore safe heavens. So, realistically this war has not brought any significant economic damages to the USA as its economic backbone remained intact. The increase in the US deficits has little to do with the war in Afghanistan rather the main reason for economic losses is the competitive trade tussle between China and the USA that was

¹⁸(Constable 2021)

¹⁹Scott Worden, Andrew Wilder, *11 Things to Know: Afghanistan on the Eve of Withdrawal*, (N.P 2021).

²⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7wA9x-k1oU> (Hard Talk with Dr. MoeedPirzada, September 9, 2021)

started by the ex-president Donald Trump.²¹ Thus, it would be flawed to relate that US withdrawal was driven by economic losses. These critics emphasize the different dynamics of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and believe that the grand strategy of nation-building in far-flung areas of the world failed in Afghanistan²². Therefore, the US decided to withdraw as its economic resources and aid remained unsuccessful in changing the norms and culture of Afghan society. Except for few circles of elites, people were unaffected by the US-led nation-building efforts and largely supported or paid taxes to the Taliban. Thus in a state of utter dismay USA decided to leave Afghanistan.

Foreign Policy Concerns:

The end of the war will give the United States permission to redirect its power to tackle new, more pressing challenges, one of the most important of which is "greater competition" with the stronger Beijing. As a major apartheid state, it threatened the United States technologically, militarily, and economically. The idea that the U.S. It needs to get out of the big Middle East to be free with the Indo-Pacific has a natural complaint. It's not new anymore. The Obama administration similarly justified his withdrawal from Iraq as part of the basis for a trip to Asia.

In practical terms, the withdrawal advocates offered three major ways to leave Afghanistan that would strengthen Washington in its strong rivalry with Beijing. It could free the military equipment currently held in Afghanistan, allowing them to be sent back to the Indo-Pacific Theater. It could liberate the political and economic barriers of top U.S. officials, allowing them to give China time and attention that is otherwise diverted by the Afghan quagmire. And in the end, it could save U.S. money, opening up billions of dollars in better funding to programs that improve America's position in its competition with China.²³

Failure in Suppression of Information and Calls for Accountability:

The Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, since late 2017, started making open calls for probing in US actions that stood in contradiction with the UN charter and rejected the revival of block politics and zero-sum mentality amid propagating rules-based international order by the USA.²⁴ Russia restricted and despised the increasing presence and influence of US in the central Asia. The unwillingness of Russia for a long

²¹(How China Won Trump's Trade War and Got Americans to Foot the Bill 2021)

²²(Horton 2021)

²³ *The Diplomat*, (2021), accessed on 8/6/2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/can-americas-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-help-its-china-strategy/>

²⁴(Corporation 2017)

presence of the USA also contributed to shaping the perceptions of leaders in Washington. Moreover, international media started exposing CIA black sites in Afghanistan where alleged crimes against humanity were carried out.²⁵ This oppression jeopardized the US mission and efforts amid eliminating terrorist groups, as victims started to support and joined the Taliban-led insurgency against foreign occupation. Afghanistan became another flashpoint where gross human rights violations and the killing of civilians in collateral damages demanded international probes. Thus, Joe Biden tried to amend the distorted image of the USA by deciding to withdraw from Afghanistan. Additionally, western scholars were extremely discontented with the false information disseminated by the US administration. This false information highlighted that the US had complete control over the reins of power in Afghanistan.²⁶ While in reality, the Taliban controlled more than half of Aghan territory, where they made the laws and received taxes as well. The suppression and manipulation of information on Afghanistan were no longer possible with the previous president Donald Trump openly criticizing the pentagon for its debacle in Afghanistan.²⁷ So, US president Joe Biden decided to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Odds with Pakistan:

Since the period of Trump US administration openly used and mentioned Pakistan for scapegoating on the issue of Afghanistan. The statements by the US government concerning the alleged sponsorship of terrorism by Pakistan started hurting the core interests of Pakistan amid at economic development, connectivity, and progress of the region.²⁸ Moreover, the closer cooperation between India and the US for real-time satellite imagery and technology transfer endangered the delicate balance of power in South Asia.²⁹ The US hinted that it would like close collaboration/partnership between India and the Kabul government that was negatively perceived by policymakers of Pakistan as it was likely to put them in a difficult place where two hostile governments were sitting on both sides of their borders.³⁰ So, Pakistan openly negated US aspirations in Afghanistan and refused to provide any airbases on US requests. Pakistan gradually moved towards the Chinese vision for the region that proved to be a big blowback for the US grand strategy in Afghanistan. The unwillingness of Pakistan for providing support for military solutions in Afghanistan changed the regional dynamics and perceptions in Washington. The direct

²⁵(Mayer 2007)

²⁶(Whitlock 2019)

²⁷(Kube 2017)

²⁸(RAZAQ 2021)

²⁹(Indian military to get access to US satellite data, agreement today 2020)

³⁰(Kaura 2017)

calls from Islamabad for meaningful dialogue or engagement with the Taliban and discontent over US allegations increased tensions for the US government, due to which Washington decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

Revival of Operational Realism and A Host of Miscalculations:

The US denied operational realism in Afghanistan for a very long time. It means understanding the limits of what can or cannot be achieved in a given space and time.³¹ The realization that US presence cannot bring in any fundamental changes on the ground situation paved the path for US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from this much-awaited confession and realization by US President Joe Biden the hasty withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan seemed to be largely based on strategic miscalculations of the US government regarding the capability, influence, and will of the Kabul government for suppressing the insurgency of Taliban. The US failed in an appropriate estimation of the strengths of the Afghan military for preventing the fall of Kabul.³² Washington believed that the fall of Kabul will take months and the Taliban will face a strong military trained by the USA and equipped with the latest weaponry. The US president Joe Biden publically stated that the fall of Kabul was not inevitable in the presence of a so-called central and democratic government backed by a strong military of international standard.³³ US policymakers either miscalculated or remained ignorant towards ground realities in Afghanistan. The irresponsible withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan immediately created a power vacuum that was exploited by the Taliban. The morale of Afghan forces declined and they started surrendering without any fight against the Taliban due to which the fall of Kabul became a matter of days instead of months.

COVID-19:

COVID has gripped the entire country and looks more contagious and deadly than in the previous round. Concerns over COVID deaths are second to none in the Taliban violence. But the impact on the overall economy and future lives will also be equally important. The condition of COVID is getting worse, with more than 96,000 current cases, according to the World Health Organization. Two major hospitals in Kabul have closed their doors to new patients due to a lack of beds and oxygen. Amid international withdrawal and deteriorating security conditions, this third wave of COVID will be even worse than the previous two. People who have left their homes inside are also rising due to conflict and drought, disrupting the government's ability to provide basic services. All of these health

³¹ (William F. Wechsler 2021)

³² (William F. Wechsler 2021)

³³ (Joe Biden Says Kabul's Fall To Taliban "Not Inevitable" As Fighting Rages 2021)

problems and government inefficiencies in providing basic services have put America's finances in jeopardy. And that was the reason for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Taliban Factor:

The assassination of civil society leaders and journalists and threats from the Taliban, the lack of government protection and general uncertainty about the future exacerbate the mental anguish of leaders who can leave and oppress those who want to stay. Leaders of civil society organizations emphasize that their priority is to achieve harmony and reduce violence in their communities and not just the conflicting issues of political power sharing at the national level. There is a great deal of interest in ensuring that any compromise with the Taliban in negotiations ensures that fundamental rights are not traded for temporary peace. In addition, the modern Taliban are determined to stamp out a terrorist organization and demand legal recognition. This is one of the main reasons for opening a political office in Doha-Qatar. Their participation in the peace process testifies to their desire for similar benefits. Moreover, today the Taliban is much stronger than the previous Taliban. The former Taliban lived on the contributions and support of Pakistan ISI, but today's Taliban have their own economy where they earn money through drug trafficking, taxes, fraud and other means. Their equipment, weapons and training have been improved. This was evident in the various Taliban attacks on American troops in Afghanistan over the past five years. In fact, because of such a catastrophe, the US will never dare to create chaos as it did in Vietnam and that is why respectful withdrawal was the only thing.³⁴

Future Scenario of Afghanistan:

The future of Afghanistan does not present a gloomy picture on the basis of current developments. For the lasting peace to attain government has to address multiple issues including pervasive corruption, organized criminality that focuses on the opium trade, violations of human rights, and the patron-client system that excludes most Afghans. All ethnic groups must be represented in government to bring the house in order. Then, the international community has to play its role in helping Afghanistan to stand on its own feet. As far as the regional dynamics are concerned China and Pakistan are very much interested to engage Afghanistan in development Projects generally and in CPEC particularly. So, the US withdrawal has also

³⁴ Amit Bansal, (2021), retrieved https://www.india.com/opinion/five-reasons-for-american-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-taliban-attack-us-troops-4894307/amp/#aoh=16302306744559&_ct=1630230706751&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s, accessed on 8/15/2021.

given the opportunity to regional actors to invest in Afghanistan that will have multidimensional impact on its economy, politics and society. And on this road to economic growth Afghanistan will not remain a vulnerable country to be attacked anymore in the longer run.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is a country that is notoriously difficult to govern. Empire after kingdom, nations have failed to occupy and rule. First, because Afghanistan is located on a major international route between Iran, Central Asia, and India, it has been frequently attacked and resolved by multitudes of nations, many of whom are hostile to each other and to foreigners. Second, because of the frequent attacks and racial tensions in the area, its lawlessness leads to a situation where almost every house is built as a fortress. Third, Afghanistan's visible landscape makes victory and rule extremely difficult, furthering nationalism. This made Afghanistan known as the Graveyard of Empires. U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan does not mean withdrawal from the region. United States will definitely make sure its presence through civil and military aid if not in Afghanistan but may be in Pakistan to secure its national interests. In current times physical presence of an aggressor may not sustain particularly due to economic constraints.

U.S. withdrawal is ending an era of western presence but starting a new transnational threat, challenges as well as opportunities. Whatever the reasons are behind U.S. withdrawal one thing is very clear that U.S. has no other plan to counterterrorism. U.S. invaded Afghanistan due to being threatened by terrorists and now withdrawing with the statement that if they themselves are unable to protect their land we should leave them on their own.

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