

Afghanistan in the Snare of External Power Struggle

Samra Naz* and Zafar Nawaz Jaspal**

Abstract

The new Afghanistan policy of the US President, Donald Trump, has once again manifested the problems of country for all domestic, regional and international players in Afghanistan. A few American's partners and allies supported it, including India and UK, while many seem uncomfortable with it, particularly, Pakistan. Indeed, lack of consensus among the major powers not only undermines the peace process in Afghanistan, but also could very well lead to a new power struggle in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, both the neighbouring states and great powers have competing interests in Afghanistan and all desires to maximize their influence in Afghanistan affairs to pursue their objectives. This article will elaborate the US Afghan strategy announced by President Trump and the interests of major powers and regional states including the US, Russia, China, India, Iran and Pakistan in Afghanistan by examining the complexities of conflict within Afghanistan induced by the convoluted power politics among regional and international actors.

Keywords: Afghanistan, US Afghan Policy, Peace Process, Global Powers.

Introduction

On August 21, 2017, President Donald Trump announced his Afghanistan and South Asia Strategy. While acknowledging the Americans weariness of 17 years of an overseas war and the gravity of Afghanistan problem, he stated that immediate withdrawal of the American forces was impossible and thereby 'the Americans must seek an honourable and enduring

* The author is Phd scholar at the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University and also an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Muslim Youth University, Islamabad.

** The author is Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

victory.’¹ He said, “Our troops will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition: attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS (acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”² The Trump administration gives the impression that the immediate withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan will create a power vacuum, which would be filled by the terrorist organisations, including ISIS and al Qaeda. However, the truth of the matter is that Afghanistan, due to its geostrategic location, fits well in Washington’s global strategic calculus.

The geographical location of Afghanistan makes it strategically very significant due to its adjacent position to various regions such as Central Asia, West Asia South Asia and Eurasia. It remained a war zone for the US and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War. The invasion of Afghanistan destabilised the socio-political system of Afghanistan, be it by the Soviet Union or the US. Despite having military supremacy over the Afghan insurgents, the American forces have failed to defeat them and establish the writ of the Afghan government, which is backed and sponsored by the US.

The transformation in the global politics has triggered a new power struggle among the great powers in Afghanistan at a time when the internal strife is on its peak. The external and internal power struggle started due to a number of contending issues among the stakeholders in Afghanistan. The deplorable domestic situation is compounded by the foreign interventions. Therefore, the desire of ending of current civil war in the country necessitates the neighbours and great powers to follow an inclusive conflict management approach.

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the external powers’ interests in Afghanistan and assess the likely outcome of engagement with Kabul. The three interlinked question will be explored in the following discussion: What is the significance of Afghanistan in the great powers’ economic and strategic calculations? How the internal

¹ “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” White House, August 21, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-pressoffice/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia

² Ibid.

anarchical situation affects the neighbouring states of Afghanistan? While answering these questions the attempt would be made to examine the interests of the important international players in Afghanistan such as the US, Russia, China and India and besides them, the policies of the neighbouring states particularly Pakistan and Iran would be analysed.

The United States

The US-led “war on terror” in Afghanistan has changed the strategic environment. It ended the Taliban regime and dismantled the safe heavens of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and installed a democratic-government in Kabul. In addition, the Americans have economic and strategic interests. The US desires to establish its control over the natural resources of Afghanistan and assure an uninterrupted access to Central Asia through Northern Distribution Network (NDN) and New Silk Road Strategy.³ Washington signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Kabul on September 30, 2014, which permitted the American forces to retain military bases in Afghanistan.⁴ It can be assumed that with the military bases Washington could influence the strategic environment of three adjacent regions. According to the unclassified sources, the US spent more than US\$800 billion in Afghanistan and lost more than 2400 lives.⁵ Despite economic spending and military losses, the US victory in Afghanistan is not in the offing, not anytime soon in the future. Adding further instability to the Afghan conflict is Trump’s new strategy, which is extremely ambiguous in nature.⁶ However, it has raised many questions.

³ Andrew C Kuchins, Thomas M Sanderson and David A Gordon, “Afghanistan: Building the Missing Link in the Modern Silk Road,” *Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2010): 33-47.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Afghanistan, “Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America Preamble,”

<http://mfa.gov.af/Content/files/BSA%20ENGLISH%20AFG.pdf>

⁵ Rakesh Sood, “Afghanistan, India and Trump,” *Hindu*, December 28, 2016, http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Afghanistan-India-and-Trump/article16950526.ece/ucbrowser?hbt=uc&utm_source=UCbrowser&utm_medium=Referral&utm_campaign=UCBrowser

⁶ Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, “Trump’s New Strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia what does it Mean to India,” *South Asia Journal*, September 6, 2017, <http://southasiajournal.net/trumps-new-strategy-for-afghanistan-and-south-asia-what-does-it-mean-to-india/>

The regional approach of this strategy is not substantially different than Obama's Afghan policy.⁷ Trump is demanding irrationally that Pakistan should stop supporting terrorist groups and end their sanctuaries in Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. He warned that the future of Pak-US relations is dependent on Islamabad's policy towards the terrorist outfits. He threatened to employ all the military, economic and diplomatic means, at the US disposal, to pressurise Pakistan. Even more, Trump irked Pakistan by urging India to support the US in improving the economic situation in Afghanistan. Trump also warned and pressurised the Afghan government that it must strive for itself and the American forces would stay there until they achieve their interests. He warned, "Our support is not a blank cheque.... Our patience is not unlimited. We will keep our eyes wide open."⁸ The striking factor is that Trump's strategy is entirely focused on the eradication of terrorists from Afghanistan as he considers that to win the war against terrorism is a prime objective of the US in Afghanistan. The Trump administration is not ignorant of its economic interests. It is very much interested in Afghanistan's mineral resources.⁹ The policy-makers in Washington view Afghanistan as a heart-land of their Eurasia strategy. Therefore, it is more likely that the US will maintain its military presence in Afghanistan.

The Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, welcomed Trump's "enduring commitment."¹⁰ He stated, "I am grateful to President Trump and the American people for this affirmation of support for our efforts to achieve self-reliance and for our joint effort to rid the region of the threat of terrorism."¹¹ Afghanistan Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, said, "Our message to our neighbours is that the new US policy is a chance for them

⁷ Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler, "Trump Outlines New Afghanistan War Strategy with Few Details," *New York Times*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html>

⁸ "Remarks by President Trump."

⁹ "Trump Eyes Afghanistan's Mineral Wealth," *Express Tribune*, August 21, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1487164/trump-eyes-afghanistans-mineral-wealth/>

¹⁰ "Afghan President, NATO Chief Welcome Trump's Enduring Commitment to Afghanistan," *Straits Times*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/afghan-president-nato-chief-welcome-trumps-enduring-commitment-to-afghanistan>

¹¹ Jane Onyanga-Omara, "Afghanistan Endorses Trump's Revised Strategy; Taliban Warns of 'Graveyard,'" *USA Today*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/22/trump-afghanistan-strategy/588836001/>

(countries in the region) to utilise and benefit from this opportunity.”¹² Conversely, many Afghans including former President Hamid Karzai had expressed their serious reservations over Trump’s Afghanistan strategy. Karzai was of the view that “it is against peace and the national interest of Afghanistan.”¹³

Rejecting Trump strategy, Afghan Taliban stated that “he is just wasting the American soldiers. We know how to defend our country. It will not change anything. For generations, we have fought this war, we are not scared, we are fresh and we will continue this war until our last breath.”¹⁴ Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, claimed it offered “nothing new.” He added, “If America does not withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, soon Afghanistan will become another graveyard for this superpower in the 21st century.”¹⁵

The NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, welcomed Trump’s Afghanistan strategy. He stated, “NATO allies and partners have already committed to increasing our presence in Afghanistan.... Our aim remains to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists who would attack our own countries.”¹⁶ British Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, endorsed it by stating, “The US commitment is very welcome.”¹⁷ The German Defence Minister, Ursula Von Der Leyen, conveyed Trump administration that “Germany would not be among the first nations to contribute more. We increased our troop numbers by 18 per cent last

¹² “New US Policy a Chance for Taliban, Not an Invitation: Abdullah,” *TOLO News*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/node/59621>

¹³ “Hamid Karzai Slams Trump’s Latest Afghanistan Policy,” *Express Tribune*, August 23, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1488917/hamid-karzai-slams-trumps-latest-afghanistan-policy/>

¹⁴ “Taliban Dismiss Trump’s Afghan Strategy as ‘Nothing New,’” *National*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/taliban-dismiss-trump-s-afghan-strategy-as-nothing-new-1.621722>

¹⁵ “Taliban Responds to Trump’s Afghan Strategy,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/taliban-responds-trump-afghan-strategy-170822045225285.html>

¹⁶ Press Release, “NATO Secretary General Welcomes new US South Asia Strategy,” North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), August 22, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_146442.htm

¹⁷ “Britain Welcomes Trump’s Renewed Commitment to Afghanistan,” *World News*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-afghanistan-britain-idUSKCN1B2008>

year.... So we do not see ourselves in the front row of people who should be asked for more soldiers.”¹⁸ David Kilcullen, an Australian military analyst, said, “Trump’s speech focused on fighting terrorism, rather than fighting an insurgency and that will require more use of lethal force and a restrained approach to nation-building and economic development.”¹⁹ *Guardian* wrote, “by marching [the] US troops back up the Afghan hill, having previously solemnly vowed to march them down and out of the country, Trump risks the worst of both worlds: leaving the US and its allies neither up nor down, without a clearly defined mission and stuck in the middle of a worsening conflict.”²⁰

Many Americans have also strongly criticised Trump’s Afghanistan strategy. They are disturbed because Trump’s blaming of former President Obama’s policies has not only sternly questioned the competence of the American institutions of Presidency and military but also offended many Americans who chose Obama twice as the US President. House of Representative Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, said, “The President’s announcement is low on details but raises serious questions. When President Trump says there will be no ceiling on the number of troops and no timeline for withdrawal, he is declaring an open-ended commitment of the American lives with no accountability to the American people.”²¹ Trump is also putting pressure on all its allies and his only focus on the US payoffs in Afghanistan and demanding more from its allies while ignoring their efforts and interests has changed the ‘global war on terrorism’ to ‘American war on terrorism.’ His strategy has projected the image of America not as hegemonic power, which took the responsibility of world issues but one of

¹⁸ “Trump’s New Afghan Strategy will not Bring Benefits: Russia,” *Nation*, August 23, 2017, <http://nation.com.pk/international/23-Aug-2017/trump-s-new-afghan-strategy-will-not-bring-benefits-russia>

¹⁹ “World Reacts to Trump’s Speech on New Afghanistan Strategy,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-bc-trump-speech-world-reaction-20170822-story.html>

²⁰ “Why Trump’s Afghanistan Strategy Risks the Worst of Both Worlds,” *Guardian*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/22/why-trumps-afghan-strategy-risks-the-worst-of-both-worlds>

²¹ “Taliban Spokesman not Impressed by Trump’s ‘Old, Unclear’ Afghanistan Speech,” *Fox News*, August 22, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/22/taliban-spokesman-not-impressed-by-trumps-old-unclear-afghanistan-speech.html>

the many powers in the multipolar world in which the US is allying with the NATO members and India.

Trump undermined Obama's policies of micromanagement of the US troops in Afghanistan and liberated them from such checks by saying that they can do anything on ground against the US enemies and the US can use all kinds of weapons against terrorists. This policy could lead to more civilian deaths and raise humanitarian issues in Afghanistan. In the UN's mid-year report for 2017, 1,662 civilian deaths and 3,581 casualties have been observed.²² While this conflict has taken the lives of 26,512 civilians and injured 48,931 since 2009.²³ Another ambiguity of his strategy is that he never wanted that the enemies know the US plans in Afghanistan. He has not mentioned the number of troops to be sent in Afghanistan and never declared what is the stage at which America will consider victory has been achieved.

The US' two-pronged policy — increasing military presence and encouraging India to play a significant role in the internal affairs of Afghanistan — definitely alarms the neighbours of Afghanistan. “Both Beijing and Moscow are cognisant of the strategic designs of Washington, which are meant to contain both states role in the global politics, sustain strong foothold in Afghanistan to monitor and influence regional politics and build India to steward South Asia in particular and check the Chinese rise in Asia.”²⁴ The Chinese and Russians have already increased their involvement in Afghanistan. From 2016, the Russians have been in touch with Afghan Taliban.²⁵ Similarly, the Chinese have also revamped their Afghan policy and increased their role in Afghanistan affair by initiating

²² Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig, UNAMA Mid-Year Report 2017, “Number of Civilian Casualties Still at “Record Level,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 18, 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/unama-mid-year-report-2017-number-of-civilian-casualties-still-at-record-level/>

²³ “The World Bank Fiscal Performance Improvement Support Project (FSP),” March 05, 2017,

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/583841502557801639/text/ITM00184-P159655-08-12-2017-1502557795686.txt>

²⁴ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, “Trump: Injudicious Policy,” *Pakistan Observer*, August 31, 2017, <https://pakobserver.net/trump-injudicious-policy/>

²⁵ Kallol Bhattacharjee, “Russia Favours Dialogue with the Taliban: Lavrov,” *Hindu*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russia-favours-dialogue-with-the-taliban-lavrov/article21434509.ece>

peace talks. Hence, the Trump's Afghanistan strategy could restart great powers competition in the Afghanistan.

Trump blatantly accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to the terrorist groups. Such accusation immensely disturbed Pakistan and eventually it is increasingly leaning towards China and Russia. This could be the beginning of a new alignment, leading to a similar proxy war of the Cold War against America. If such situation arises then America will never be able to achieve its interest in Afghanistan and Afghanistan would not be able to strengthen as a peaceful state. Trump's strategy towards Pakistan is setting a detrimental precedent for the US allies and partners. Without realising the limitation of partner, for the sake of its interest, the US coerces diplomatically and even penalises its frontline state by drone attacks and reduction in aid.²⁶ Importantly, Pakistan approached China, Russia and Turkey "for consultation to develop a consensual response to the new American policy for Afghanistan and South Asia."²⁷

Threatening rhetoric and actions of Trump did not only shock the people of Pakistan but also upset the Chinese and Russians. The Russian President's Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, expressed "solidarity with Pakistan and stressed that undue pressure on Islamabad would be perilous for the regional peace."²⁸ In June 2018, Trump administration made significant turn by indirectly approaching Afghan Taliban. This shift can be a result of international and domestic criticism and can be seen as positive and urgent step to end the stalemate in Afghanistan.²⁹ In practice, however, Afghan Taliban expressed their willingness to talk directly with the Americans. The US is reluctant to engage Afghan Taliban directly, because it undermines the significance of the Ghani government.

²⁶ "Pakistan Condemns US Drone Strike Inside its Territory," *Reuters*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-drones-usa/pakistan-condemns-u-s-drone-strike-inside-its-territory-idUSKBN1FD1NK?il=0>, also see, Qasim Nauman and Rebecca Conway, "US Lawmakers Freeze \$700 million to Pakistan, Ties Strained," *Reuters*, December 13, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-usa-aid/u-s-lawmakers-freeze-700-million-to-pakistan-ties-strained-idUSTRE7BC04F20111213>

²⁷ Jaspal, "Trump: Injudicious Policy."

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations," *New York Times*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html>

China

The US military presence in Afghanistan, in a few cases, could be benign for the interests of China. Nevertheless, it is equally challenging for the Chinese role in Afghanistan and Southern Asia. For instance, presence of the American troops in Afghanistan could be a shield for China from the spill over effect of terrorism. The rising terrorist organisation Daesh's threat in Afghanistan can also affect the security and stability of the western border of China.³⁰ At the same time, the increased US military presence in Afghanistan would be challenging for China in terms of strategic encirclement of China by keeping military bases in Afghanistan. The increased US presence in Afghanistan could also increase its influence in Afghanistan, which can challenge the Chinese interests in Afghanistan as China considers it important for its new economic endeavours in Central Asia and global project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is also trying to increase its influence in Afghanistan. In this context, the Chinese have been using soft powers tactics. Beijing has been investing in Afghanistan for establishing a long-term strategic cooperative partnership. It provided material assistance, extracting resources and training of human resources and eradication of terrorism and extremism by signing the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation to fight transnational crime.³¹

Indeed, the stability in Afghanistan is crucial for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC would assist China in establishing the shortest link with the west Asian countries. China is employing a geopolitical approach, combining “*mulinzhengce*” (good neighbouring policy) with “*zhoubianzhengce*” (periphery policy) and “*wending zhoubian*” (stabilising the periphery).³² The Chinese President Xi consider neighbourhood of China as the “Community of Common Destiny” and stated that “security problems in Asia [to] be solved by Asians

³⁰ Raja Muhammad Khan, “China’s Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan,” *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue 1, no.1, (Summer 2015).

³¹ Nerkez Opacin, *China’s Role in Afghanistan: A Capitalist Peace Approach* (Diplom.de, May 01, 2014), 47.

³² Patrick Nopens, “The Impact of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Russia’s Security,” EGMONT Royal Institute for International Relations, no. 54, March 2014, 6, <http://aei.pitt.edu/63590/1/SPB54.pdf>

themselves.”³³ China has been improving its economic relations with the neighbouring states and focusing on multinational institutions, which are not, subjugated by the western powers like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Economic initiatives such as Silk Road are based on an “inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all.”³⁴ Beijing supported proposal to grant Afghanistan the observer status in SCO in 2012. It also made Afghanistan a member of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA), which is organised for cooperation with the Asian states on security issues. China also focused on regular political dialogue. Beijing believes in political negotiation with the Taliban for the stable future of Afghanistan.³⁵ This rising engagement of China with Afghanistan and non-western approach pose a challenge to both the US and Russian dominance. Both Washington and Moscow have been endeavouring to build their monopolies in Central Asia. The Chinese officials never supported a quick US exit from Afghanistan but they are also considering the physical presence of US/NATO forces as a threat to encircle China. So the Chinese are increasing their influence in Afghanistan to guard their national interest in the regional and international setting.

China and Pakistan have convergence of opinion on Afghanistan. Therefore, it participated in the quadrennial dialogue (Pakistan, China, the US and Afghan Taliban) and also it is a part of trilateral dialogue (China, Russia and Pakistan) to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan. They also expressed their reservations on the Trump administration’s criticism against Pakistan. For instance, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, supported Pakistan in reaction to Trumps’ new strategy towards Afghanistan and said that “Pakistan lies on the front line of the anti-terrorism struggle and has made ‘great sacrifices’ in battling insurgents.”³⁶

³³ Thomas Zimmerman, “The New Silk Roads: China, the US and the Future of Central Asia,” New York University and Institute of South, Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies, 2013,

http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf

³⁴ “Why is China Talking to the Taliban?,” *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013,

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/21/why-is-china-talking-to-the-taliban/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “World Reacts to Trump’s Speech on New Afghanistan Strategy,” *ABC News*, August 22, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/world-reacts-trumps-speech-afghanistan-strategy-49350062>

More precisely, the Chinese concur with Islamabad's approach of Afghan-led Afghan-own peace process in Afghanistan.

Russia

The Russians response to the Trump Afghan strategy was lukewarm. The Russian Foreign Ministry official said that "Russia does not believe Trump's new strategy will lead to any significant positive changes in Afghanistan."³⁷ The Russian military experts already assessed that the US will not withdraw from Afghanistan because it gives the US a strategic advantage and Russia is trying to resist the changes to the geostrategic situation and balance of power in Central Asia by the US and the Chinese hegemonic designs, which Russia considered as its "under-belly."³⁸ Though Russia is suspicious about the US but it facilitated the end of Taliban regime and the US-backed Afghan government in Kabul. It also gave permission to transport the required equipments through the Russian territory while allowing the US and its allies to establish bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow allowed the West to do all this to indirectly counter the spill over effects of Islamic extremism like Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Taliban, which could encourage the rebellions in the Central Asian states as many militants have close allies with these terrorist organisations.³⁹

The Russians have established their contacts with the Afghan Taliban because they are convinced that the rise of ISIS could not be stopped in Afghanistan without the cooperation of Afghan Taliban. The Russian diplomat in Afghanistan, Stephan Anikeev, said, "You see Russia's interest in Afghanistan rising.... We want to enlarge our role in the region. It's not only for Afghanistan, but for our own goals."⁴⁰ Importantly, the Russian

³⁷ "World Reacts to Trump's New Strategy on Afghan War," *Al-Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/world-reacts-trump-strategy-afghan-war-170822102826834.html>

³⁸ Z Chotaev, "The Great Powers in Central Asia" in, *Afghanistan and Central Asia: NATO's Role in Regional Security Since 9/11*, ed., Oktay F Tannisever (IOS Press, 2013), 147-155.

³⁹ "An Overview of Russia and Afghanistan," Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/russia-and-afghanistan>

⁴⁰ "Russia Hopes Infrastructure Projects will Build Bridges in Afghanistan," *Guardian Weekly*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/russia-afghanistan-investment-kabul-karzai>

contacts with the Afghan Taliban are not acceptable to the Americans. On April 2, 2018, the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, Gen John Nicholson, in an interview with the *BBC* claimed, “We have had weapons brought to this headquarters and given to us by Afghan leaders and said this was given by the Russians to the Taliban.” He alleged that the Russian weapons were being smuggled across the Tajik border to the Taliban.”⁴¹ In a rejoinder, the Russian embassy in Kabul dismissed the American general’s allegation and called them “baseless” and “idle gossip.”⁴²

Russia has also initiated multilateral regional talks and arranged a convention of 14 nations in Moscow for peaceful Afghanistan on April 14, 2017. It invited Afghanistan, Pakistan, US, India, China, Iran and the Central Asian nations but the US did not participate. The Russians and Chinese can cooperate in Afghanistan as both have same standpoints over the Afghanistan peace process. Russia is also improving its relations with Pakistan, which is clearly shown in Dushanbe Quartet (Russia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan). The concerns over opposite ideologies and strategies will remain in the future between Russia and the West because latter considers that Russia has new imperial objectives in Central Asia and Eurasia, so both will try to increase their influence in Afghanistan to counterbalance each other and to achieve their respective interests.

Iran

Iran, the western neighbour of Afghanistan has also condemned the Trump’s new strategy in Afghanistan. The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qassemi, said:

What the US today is condemning other countries for is the very outcome of its own wrong and irrational policies over the years in the region and particularly in Afghanistan,... Washington’s opportunistic strategies and unilateral policies, coupled with its wrong interventions, have only intensified chaos and tension and spread terrorism and extremism across the region.’ The countries in the region ‘do not need America’s destabilizing and terrorist-breeding policies.’ Washington

⁴⁰ Salman Rafi Sheikh, “Russia’s Turn towards Afghanistan,” *Neo Eastern Outlook*, December 23, 2014.

⁴¹ Dawood Azami, “Is Russia Arming the Afghan Taliban?,” *BBC News*, April 02, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41842285>, accessed on August 17, 2018.

⁴² *Ibid.*

must stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and abandon its 'destabilising' policies in the region.⁴³

Advising Trump against adopting meddling policies and deciding for other nations, Qassemi pointed out "the countries of the region have the necessary capacity to cooperate on the fight against terrorism and maintain stability and security in their own region."⁴⁴ Tensions between the US and Iran can also impact the developmental work in Afghanistan as the US aid projects are not relying on the Iranian products for reconstruction work in areas near the Iranian border.⁴⁵ Iran's relations with the Taliban government, prior to America's invasion of Afghanistan, were at odds because of Taliban's Wahhabi religious doctrine, which originated in Saudi Arabia, the regional rival of Iran. During Taliban regime, Iran supported the Northern Alliance (or Northern Front): a Taliban opposition made by Tajik, Hazara and Uzbeks from northern Afghanistan. Iran convinced the Northern Alliance to support the Karzai government. Iran successfully expanded its influence in Afghanistan during President Karzai regime and current government in Kabul. Iran is also making good ties with other active powers in Afghanistan, such as India and Russia as well as with the Taliban to annoy the US especially after the end of the US-Iran nuclear deal by Trump.⁴⁶ It supported Afghanistan in the spheres of education and economics by providing up to US\$500 million development aid to Afghanistan.⁴⁷ It has also established a soft influence in Afghanistan through cultural, religious and ethnic bonds, which it can use for its own interest. Other than western presence, which challenges Iran in strategic

⁴³ "US 'Destabilising' Policies Spawn Terrorism in Region: Iran," *PRESS TV*, August 25, 2017, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/Fr/2017/08/25/532844/Iran-Ghasemi-US-Afghanistan-Trump>

⁴⁴ "Iran Slams Trump's New Afghanistan Strategy," *Kayhan*, August 25, 2017, <http://kayhan.ir/en/news/43390>

⁴⁵ Corinna Vigier, Conflict Assessment Afghanistan, February 2009 American Friends Service Committee, 43, <https://www.afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicaactions.net/files/documents/Afghanistan%20-%20Conflict%20Assessment.pdf>

⁴⁶ Aziz Amin Ahmadzai, "Iran's Support for the Taliban Brings it to a Crossroads with Afghanistan," *Diplomat*, May 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/irans-support-for-the-taliban-brings-it-to-a-crossroads-with-afghanistan/>

⁴⁷ Alireza Nader, Ali G Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown," Leila Mahnad Rand Corporation, June 11, 2014, Senior Afghan Government Official, Interview with the Authors, February 26, 2013.

terms, Tehran and Kabul also have a centuries-old conflict over water sharing of the Helmand River. Though Iran and Afghanistan signed an agreement in 1973 to regulate each country's share of the river water, Afghan blamed Iran that it is taking more water so the conflict continues between two states.⁴⁸ The other differences between Iran and Afghanistan are over narcotics trade. These issues also compel Iran to increase its influence there and go for a regional solution. However, increasing influence of Iran in Afghanistan is not acceptable to the US.

India

New Delhi and Kabul signed a strategic partnership with the connivance of the US in 2011. India supported Trump's demand for Pakistan to stop offering safe havens to terror groups. The Ministry of External Affairs of India said that "it cherished Trump's determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges faced by Afghanistan and in confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists."⁴⁹ India has used a "soft power approach" in Afghanistan by taking part in the projects of humanitarian assistance and developmental-related help in small-scale industries.⁵⁰ India helped Afghanistan become a member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and also building cultural ties with it. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, stated in a speech at the 2014 Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) summit that India will continue to assist Afghanistan in building its capacity; in governance, security and economic development.⁵¹ India is already the fifth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan and giving aid in infrastructural and capacity building programmes.

⁴⁸ Bill Samii, "Iran/Afghanistan: Still no Resolution for Century-Old Water Dispute," *Radio Free Europe*, September 7, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1061209.html>

⁴⁹ "Trump's New Afghanistan Strategy Draws Mixed Reactions from Around the World," *Dawn*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1353197/trumps-new-afghanistan-strategy-draws-mixed-reactions-from-around-the-world>

⁵⁰ D'Souza, Shanthie Mariet, "India in Post-2014 Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities," Asian Century Institute, March (2014), <http://asiancenturyinstitute.com/international/535-india-in-post-2014>

⁵¹ Pankti Dalal, "Five Things Narendra Modi Said at the BRICS Summit," *DNA India*, July 16, 2014, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-five-things-narendra-modi-said-at-the-brics-summit-2002611>

Moreover, President Trump has asked India to be part of its new Afghan policy. This has given India a new opportunity to increase its role in Afghanistan and to achieve its interests in Afghanistan, which are three pronged: first it is concerned about the spill over effect of terrorism in India; second it wants to have access to Central Asia through Afghanistan to achieve economic interest and third it wants to counter the Pakistani influence in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. India is worried that the return of Taliban could encourage other militant organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizbul Mujahedeen, which challenge India in the Indian-occupied Kashmir. India adheres to the Chanakya Kautilya policy towards Afghanistan against Pakistan. The Indian interests in Afghanistan are conflicting with other regional actors such as China, Pakistan and Iran, because India sees the Chinese role in Afghanistan as serving the Pakistani interests. On the other hand, Iran is against the US/NATO military presence in Afghanistan while India supports their stay for a longer period.

India, Iran and Afghanistan have been working towards establishing a new transit route to Central Asia. It would link Afghanistan and Iran with India through Chabahar port. Strategically, Chabahar port is very significant. It is located in the Sistan-Balochistan province near Strait of Hormuz and Pakistan's Gwadar port in Baluchistan. The Indians consider it a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The port would facilitate a landlocked Afghanistan and also open a trade route for the Indian goods and products to Afghanistan and Central Asia. New Delhi announced that it would assist the Iranian railway for laying railway lines connecting Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, all these projects did not culminate and instead placed New Delhi in a tricky position with Tehran due to the US breakup with Iran over nuclear deal.⁵²

Pakistan: No Exit from Afghanistan

Trump said, "Today, 20 US-designated foreign terrorist organisations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan — the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world. For its part, Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence and terror."⁵³ Such statements of Trump can

⁵² "How India may be Affected by US Scrapping Iran Nuclear Deal," *Times of India*, May 9, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-india-may-be-affected-by-us-scrapping-iran-nuclear-deal/articleshow/64092116.cms>

⁵³ "Remarks by President Trump."

further deteriorate Pakistan and Afghanistan bilateral relations. On this Foreign Ministry of Pakistan issued a statement saying “it is committed to fighting terrorism and called allegations it provided safe havens to militants ‘a false narrative.’ It added that a military solution is not possible, saying ‘only an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned politically negotiated solution can lead to a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.’”⁵⁴ Naeem Khalid Lodhi, a Pakistani defence analyst said that “They are shifting the blame to Pakistan... Pakistan should not remain silent against such US behaviour and we should work on building a new political and strategic bloc with big powers like Russia and China. In this scenario, Pakistan could face international sanctions and more drone attacks by the American forces.”⁵⁵

Today, Islamabad and Kabul have immense mistrust. Several issues are responsible for the continuity of mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. First, the settlement of a border demarcation problem between Pakistan and Afghanistan seems impossible in the near future. Many Afghans believe that the Durand Line was a mere division of spheres of interest between the British and the Afghans other than an official border with Afghanistan. However, Pakistan and the international community officially recognise the Durand Line as the legitimate border between the two countries. Second, the porous border — in both directions — with insufficient numbers of military posts cannot stop the crossing of the terrorists and criminals between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan proposed fencing the border. The fence proposal was rejected by the Afghan administration. To resolve the boundary issue, Afghanistan proposed:

First, it should be resolved according to international laws. Second, the increasing role of India in Afghanistan undermines security of Pakistan. Islamabad is convinced that India uses Afghan territory to sponsor and finance terrorism in Pakistan. Islamabad claimed that the Indian consulates in Afghanistan are involved in supporting secessionist movements in Balochistan and Federal Administrative Tribal Area (FATA).⁵⁶ On November 14, 2017, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General

⁵⁴ “Trump’s Afghan Shift Praised in Kabul but Leaves Pakistan Wary,” *Guardian*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/22/donald-trump-kabul-praises-fight-to-win-afghanistan-strategy>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Pakistan Submits Proofs of India’s Involvement in Cross Border Terrorism to UN Chief,” *Dawn*, January 06, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1306799>

Zubair Mehmood Hayat, claimed that India's premier intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), has established a special cell at a cost of US\$500 million to sabotage the CPEC. Bharat Karnad, Professor for National Security Studies at the Centre for Policy Research at New Delhi and author of *Why India is Not a Great Power (Yet)* also pointed out that New Delhi has been using Tehreek-e-Taliban for bleeding innocent Pakistanis.⁵⁷

The trust deficient, conflicts and lack of cooperation continue between Pakistan and Afghanistan on several issues like sharing intelligence, border management and refugee issues. Pakistan has been conducting counter terrorism operations in FATA. Washington and Islamabad have different strategies to counter-insurgency and terrorism. Pakistan is also concerned with the revival of Taliban in Afghanistan because it could provide support to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Conclusion

The intra-state conflicts and external powers interference significantly undermine national security of Afghanistan. The Afghan political parties are based on loose and shifting alliances of persons without any shared political ideology, led by a leader whose aim is to achieve personal gains in order to get resources to compete and to alleviate their own status. These political leaders get funds from external powers to promote their agenda and to achieve their own interests.⁵⁸ The Afghan ruling elite dependency on foreign assistance encourages and facilitates external interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The India-Pakistan historical rivalry could bring a new proxy war in Afghanistan other than the likely competition between/among the US, China and Russian and the Iranian competing interest in Eurasia have also impacted in Afghanistan specially in increasing factionalism. Consequently, the socio-economic indicators of Afghanistan are pessimistic and the writ of the coalition government is in jeopardy. These developments have resulted in destabilising dimension in the power struggle among all these powers in Afghanistan. Hence, the national

⁵⁷ *Hindustan Times*, September 21, 2017.

⁵⁸ Eckart Schiewek, "Efforts to Curb Political Violence in Afghanistan: Counter Insurgency and National Reconciliation" in *Political Violence and Terrorism in South Asia*, Cheema, Pervaiz et al, eds., (*Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, Islamabad, 2006).

security of Afghanistan has been gravely jeopardised by the external power struggle. The great powers struggle and neighbouring states interference in domestic affairs of the country negatively influence the internal security of Afghanistan. Therefore, the civil war in Afghanistan cannot end without excluding the great powers interference and checking the neighbouring states meddling in Afghanistan affairs.

The continuity of anarchical situation in Afghanistan is conducive for the creation and continuity of transnational terrorist organisations sanctuaries on the territory of Afghanistan such as Islamic State, which is against the interests of all players including major powers and neighbouring states. Though all the international powers ostensibly want to eradicate terrorist syndicate from Afghanistan, yet all of them have contradictory perceptions and policies for restoring sustainable peace in Afghanistan, which needs to be converged on single policy of ending terrorism. While the non-cooperation and mistrust among the domestic, regional and international players are pushing Afghanistan in the turmoil of a new great game and anarchic civil war. Thus, the snare of external power struggle entailing continuous political chaos in the country has a negative spill over effect on the neighbours of Afghanistan.