

Withdrawal of Foreign Troops from Afghanistan 2014: Peace Negotiations and its Significance (From a Local Perspective)*

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Abstract

The year 2014 is crucial for Afghanistan. It has been decided by the Obama administration and the NATO authorities that by the end of the year 2014, the foreign troops would leave Afghanistan. What will be the future of this war-torn country? If abandoned by the world community at this critical time there are chances that the situation will retrograde and revert to civil war, as was seen previously. What would be its repercussions? Military experts say that the Afghan government is not strong enough to defeat the al-Qaida and the like-minded would require some military support. Precipitating violence, the American government decided to leave a strong contingent of their troops to help the future Afghan government to restore peace and stability in the country. However, to the chagrin of the US authorities, the

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then Afghan President Hamid Karzai put some conditions, thus making it a contentious issue. The present research would examine these and many other similar unresolved issues.

Introduction

In summer 2014, Afghanistan will be at the crossroad of its history. As the date of withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan draws closer, apprehensions are looming large about the future of this war-torn country: will the global powers help the future Afghan government to bring back stability, restore peace and normalcy to the country or will they simply abandon Afghanistan and leave it to its destiny. There are apprehensions that the latter would lead to a renewal of civil war, the rise of war lords and or of Taliban, which would pose a serious threat to world peace as was witnessed previously after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. What will be the role of the regional powers in the post-foreign troops' withdrawal scenario? Will they help the country to resume its normal life or will they be silent spectators to the ongoing violent struggle for supremacy and authority in Afghanistan? Most recently a paradigm shift was observed in the policy of the Afghan government. Karzai, the former Afghan President, a close US ally, accused the US of destabilising Afghanistan. Is this true or he is maligning the US just to secure a place for himself in the future Afghan setup. What is the response of the US administration to such allegations? What is the opinion of locals regarding these changes and the new developments which are taking place on daily basis? These and other similar kinds of issues will be analysed in the present research which will also take into consideration the historical context, the ethnic conflicts and the politics of alliances in Afghanistan and their overall effects at the regional and the global level. The present research will help resolve many ambiguities and questions regarding the future of Afghanistan and will be of particular interest to the academics, policy makers, researchers, as well as for those

desirous of learning more about the latest developments in this crucial region of the globe.

Before further discussing the recent Afghan imbroglio, it is imperative to analyse the current volatile situation in the region in the complex scenario of direct US involvement in Afghanistan, the presence of temporarily more than one hundred thousand foreign troops in the war-ravaged country and the various announcements regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 2014. Why the US, the NATO and the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops came to Afghanistan is a known fact and probably needs no further explanation. Despite the presence of international troops for more than a decade, it is still unclear whether the years long military engagements was a fruitless effort or did they succeed in routing out terrorism which threatened not only the USA but peace and stability of the whole world. Afghanistan remained a battle ground during all this time and despite all tall claims by the US and its allies, bringing peace and tranquillity to the country still seems to be a far cry. Daily increase in the number of the casualties forced the US administration to change its strategy in Afghanistan. Some of its old allies, including France decided for an early withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. Internal pressure to pull out its forces from an un-ending and un-winnable war compelled the US government to get out of the Afghan imbroglio and to avoid the stigma of defeat. Although, the administration of US President Barack Obama tried to use its triumphant card by citing the major gains i.e. elimination of Osama bin Laden and other top most al-Qaida and Taliban leadership, but many believe that instead of eradicating terrorism it increased abhorrence against the Americans. "For many Americans support for the war boiled down to a simple question: What are America's strategic interests in Afghanistan?"¹ They think that the war is un-

1 Seth G. Jones, *In The Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (London: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2010), 328. More details can be seen in Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2012).

winnable and instead of more involvement in the Afghan imbroglio and that the US should withdraw its forces and precisely target the al-Qaida and other terrorists by using other methods.

In such scenario, the US President Barack Obama announced that by the end of 2014, the US war in Afghanistan would be over. Although, this decision was lauded by many in the US but it left ambiguities and many unanswerable questions in the minds of the scholars working on the subject such as what would be its implications on the region? Whether the Afghans are prepared for it or not? What would be the role of its neighbours in the future set up? It is still unclear that the pull-out would bring stability or will be followed by an anarchical situation as was seen previously. What about the role of the Taliban in the future set up of Afghanistan? Are they prepared for a comeback as a ruling group? Are they willing to accept the present Afghan constitution and ensure that their policies regarding women rights and other ethnic communities, and civil society participation have been changed? If they are successful in regaining power in Kabul, what would be the reaction of their traditional rivals i.e. the 'Northern Alliance'? The Taliban who previously opposed direct negotiations with the regime of President Hamid Karzai, calling it a puppet regime, have recently softened their stand and indicated that they are willing to enter into direct negotiations with the then Kabul administration. Whether it would improve the law and order situation or further aggravate the situation by escalating the militancy thus contributing more to the violence and chaos in the volatile region. Similar questions pertinent to the debate on the foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the local responses are analysed in the present research. This paper deals with the most recent topic. As there are no books or academic writings available on the subject therefore, the contemporary newspapers are the main source and have been utilised extensively to construe an argument and help in the final analysis.

President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union Address announced the return of American troops 'coming home'. Lauding their services he said that:

Tonight, we stand united in saluting the troops and civilians who sacrifice every day to protect us. Because of them, we can say with confidence that America will complete its mission in Afghanistan, and achieve our objective of defeating the core of al Qaeda 'and by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over.'²

When Obama was making this announcement from Washington, by that time thirty three thousand troops were already back. Another thirty four thousand troops were scheduled to go back home by the end of 2013.³ This phase-wise withdrawal created a mixed reaction. While President Obama was in favour of speedy return, this kind of accelerated withdrawal was opposed by the military commanders, who were in favour of keeping the bulk of American troops in Afghanistan until the end of 2014, when their mission is supposed to end. Their opposition left Obama in a dilemma, who revised his strategy, and as pointed earlier, to avoid the stigma of defeat, tried to portray the success for NATO and allies in Afghanistan and said that "It's important for us to make sure that we get out in a responsible way, so that we don't end up having to go back in".⁴

One of the major issues faced by the US administration was whether to leave a sizeable number of US troops in Afghanistan or to simply trust the Afghan security forces, trained by the US and its allies, and give them the whole responsibility of taking care of Afghanistan. They would be facing huge challenges in maintaining peace, bringing normalcy and safeguard the Afghan interests. The officials of the Obama administration voiced their feelings clearly. In one of interviews, Benjamin J. Rhodes, one of the prominent

2 "Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2013.

3 "Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2013

4 "Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2013.

national senior security advisers of Obama, remarked that “the trajectory we have set here is one of transition and Afghan sovereignty”. He further added that “we have a goal here of having the Afghans more into the lead and having us steadily pulling back”.⁵ According to some sources, the new strategy of the US and the NATO partners was to get in touch with the Afghans and to dispel the impression that while the US and the NATO troops will be leaving Afghanistan, the West will not abandon the country.⁶ Leon Panetta, the then US Defence Secretary was unclear about the number of troops US intended to leave behind after its withdrawal. Although, he did not mention the number of troops to stay back in Afghanistan, he said that the US would keep its troops in Afghanistan even after the combat mission ends in 2014 because still al-Qaida was present in the country, and if left un-routed they would strengthen themselves, regain their influence and regroup themselves thus once again posing serious threat to the global community.⁷

Obama and Karzai reached at understanding on many key agreements including the foreign troops’ withdrawal and their replacement by the Afghan Security Forces. Obama told Karzai at White House that after the planned withdrawal, relatively few troops would be left in Afghanistan who would be performing the dual duties of advising and training the Afghan troops and hunting down the remnants of al-Qaida. “That is a very limited mission, and it is not one that would require the same kind of footprint, obviously, that we have had over the last 10 years in Afghanistan”, Obama said. Karzai did not show any concern over the residual US troops levels and had no allusion and said, “Numbers are not going to make a difference to the situation in Afghanistan. It’s the

5 “Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2013.

6 “Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2013.

7 “US Senate Backs Quicker Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Dawn*, Islamabad, December 1, 2012.

broader relationship that will make a difference to Afghanistan and beyond the region”.⁸ The American President made it clear, time and again, that the US and the NATO troops would give up a combat role and revert to an advisory and support role. The responsibility to restore peace in Afghanistan would be entrusted mainly to the Afghan National Army. The future relations with the Taliban were also discussed. Despite having some reservations against the Taliban in the future set up of Afghanistan, Obama favoured a ‘political settlement’ with the Taliban and keeping in view the planned peace talks in Qatar, he made it clear that in the reconciliation process, the Afghans should be given a leading role. “The United States has been very clear that any peace process, any reconciliation process, must be Afghan-led. It is not for the United States to determine what the terms of this peace will be”.⁹

US-Taliban Talks in Doha

It was reported that a twelve member delegation, representing various militant factions of the Taliban had already arrived Doha for meeting with the Afghan officials. The Taliban delegation was led by Tayyab Agha, brother-in-law and the spokesman for Taliban leader Mulla Mohammad Omar. Maulvi Shahabuddin Dilawar, a former envoy of the Taliban regime in Saudi Arabia was another prominent member of the delegation.¹⁰ Similar efforts had not been successful in the past due to various reasons. Among many other demands, the Taliban wanted the release of their five prominent leaders, kept in Guantanamo Bay since 2002. They were Mulla Fazaldad Akhund, Noorullah Noori, Abdul Haq Waseeq, Khairullah Khairkhwa and Mohammad Nabi for the exchange of a US soldier, Bowe Bergdahl,¹¹ taken

8 *The New York Times*, January 12, 2013.

9 *The New York Times*, January 12, 2013.

10 “Taliban Open Qatar Office: US Announces Direct Talks,” *The News*, Islamabad: June 19, 2013.

11 Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, captured in 2009, is the only American soldier, the militants hold. The Taliban wanted an exchange of five high-profile prisoners in Guantanamo Bay but till date the talks are not successful.

hostage since June 2009 and reportedly with Commander Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹² The Taliban demanded the inclusion of Pakistan in the talks which was opposed by the Afghan government. Pakistan Foreign Office welcomed the intended direct talks between the Taliban and the US officials in Doha and reiterated its stand that “Pakistan is ready to continue to facilitate the process to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan in accordance with the wishes of the Afghan people”.¹³

In the third week of June 2013, the Taliban opened their office in Doha, aimed at opening dialogue with the international community and Afghan groups. The US and Pakistan both responded positively and welcomed the decision. Obama described the opening as an “important first step towards reconciliation” between the warring groups and the Afghan Government. British PM David Cameron called the opening of the Taliban office as “the right thing to do”. Pakistan also welcomed the announcement regarding the opening of the Taliban office in Doha. The Foreign Office officials, recalling Pakistan’s role in the establishment of the office issued a statement that Pakistan had long called for a peaceful and negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict. Further, Pakistan has repeatedly urged an early end to the war in order to re-establish peace and security in the region. It also eulogised the ‘constructive and positive role’ of Pakistan and regarded it as ‘important milestone in support

According to some sources, Sangin Zadran, a commander of the Haqqani network, killed in a drone attack on September 6, 2013 in Miranshah (North Waziristan), was holding the US soldier.

- 12 Mullah Fazal Ahmad belongs to Kakar tribe from Uruzgan and was the Taliban army chief when was captured. Mullah Fazal was in Northern Afghanistan when was captured by the Uzbek war lord Rasheed Dostum, who after taking huge amount from the US handed him over to them. Noorullah Nori, who belongs to Ghazni, was the governor of Balkh province, when captured. Khairullah Khairkhwa was the Interior Minister of the Taliban and belonged to Spin Boldak near Kandahar. Abdul Haq Waseeq was the Deputy Intelligence Chief under the Taliban and belonged to Paktia. Mohammad Nabi was also an important Taliban military commander.
- 13 “Pakistan Welcomes Opening of Taliban Office in Doha,” *Dawn*, June 19, 2013.

of a peaceful process for Afghanistan'.¹⁴ Pakistan's role in persuading the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the US and the Afghan authorities for the sake of peace was also confirmed by Scott Smith, a former UN official who worked in Afghanistan. According to his observation, it appeared that Pakistan forced the Taliban leadership to accept the talk offer. He linked it with the recent changes in Pakistan including the formation of a new government, worsening of law and order, the domestic economic crisis and upsurge in the militancy. According to him, after realising the importance of these issues and of the latest situation, the newly elected government of Muslim League was forced to rein in their protégé to come to negotiation table. According to Smith, "May be they've made a calculation it's getting too dicey, to allow the situation to go on in this manner".¹⁵ While Pakistan was expected to play the role of a 'broker' for the Taliban, the US was given the same role for the Karzai administration, which had expressed its reservations about the Doha talks. At the same time, it insisted that the discussion be held in Afghanistan under the auspices of the Afghan High Peace Council,¹⁶ a body nominated by the Afghan government.

The official view of the host government was also in favour of negotiations between the warring factions. Ali bin Fahd al Hajri, assistant to the Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar regarded the negotiations as the 'only way for peace in Afghanistan'.¹⁷ According to some reports, Obama was personally involved in working with Karzai to enable the opening of the Taliban office in Doha.¹⁸ However, before any

14 "Pakistan Welcomes Opening of Taliban Office in Doha," *Dawn*, June 19, 2013.

15 "Pakistan Pushed Afghan Insurgents to the Table," *Dawn*, June 20, 2013.

16 The High Peace Council was constituted for intra-Afghan dialogue headed by Salahuddin Rabbani, who succeeded his father Burhanuddin Rabbani who was assassinated on September 20, 2011.

17 "US-Taliban Breakthrough: Talks to Begin in Doha Tomorrow," *Dawn*, June 19, 2013.

18 "US-Taliban Breakthrough: Talks to Begin in Doha Tomorrow," *Dawn* June 19, 2013.

major breakthrough on the main issue, a row erupted on the name of the Taliban office and their hoisting of the flag on the newly opened office. The Taliban in their pre-talk press conference called themselves as the representatives of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', the formal name of its 1996-2001 government, and hoisted their white flag in the background behind them thus giving an impression of the representatives of the state in exile. This infuriated the Afghan government which immediately boycotted the talks and described it as unacceptable. They criticised the US role in the opening of the office affairs and made it absolutely clear that the talks should be Afghan-led. "The latest developments", according to a statement issued by the Afghan authorities, "show that foreign hands are behind the Taliban's Qatar office, and unless they are purely Afghan-led, the High Peace Council will not participate in the talks".¹⁹ It further stated that the "opening of the Taliban office in Qatar, the way it was opened and messages it contained, contradict the guarantees given by the US to Afghanistan".²⁰ The US also showed its indignation on the adoption of the said name, i.e. 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', and the State Department's spokesperson Jen Psaki insisted that "we do not recognise the name Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" and added that "the government of Qatar has taken steps today to ensure that the political office is in compliance with the conditions established by the government of Qatar for its operations". She further said that "the office must not be treated as or represent itself as an embassy or other office representing the Afghan Taliban as an emirate government or sovereign".²¹

The Afghan government seemed unsatisfied with the excuses put forward by the US. While showing their

19 "Karzai Suspends US Talks, Sets New Conditions for Taliban Negotiations," *Dawn*, June 20, 2013.

20 "Karzai Suspends US Talks, Sets New Conditions for Taliban Negotiations," *Dawn*, June 20, 2013.

21 "Karzai Suspends US Talks, Sets New Conditions for Taliban Negotiations," *Dawn*, June 20, 2013.

determination for bringing back peace and normalcy to Afghanistan, Janan Moosazai, the Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman said that they still need a full explanation about what happened and why the office was established in clear contradiction to the written assurances given to the Afghan government by the US. He further told the reporters that the aforementioned office can only be used for peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban and could not be used for fund raising or other similar purposes. He further informed that according to some reliable reports the disputed flag, flagpole and signs had been removed from the Taliban's office in Doha.²²

Interestingly, after the failure of the proposed talks in Doha once again all eyes were fixed upon Pakistan to play its vital role in bringing back the warring factions to the discussion table. Couple of months back, the importance of Pakistan for such kind of talks was already highlighted by the NATO Secretary-General. In Brussels, Anders Fogh Rasmussen before his formal meeting with the NATO Foreign Ministers commented on the role of Pakistan and said "If we are to ensure long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan we also need a positive engagement of Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan".²³ In this particular connection, to remove the stalemate in the Doha talks, the US Special Representative on Afghanistan, James Dobbins, and Pakistan immediately called on Nawaz Sharif, the newly elected Prime Minister of Pakistan. He arrived at Islamabad on Tuesday, June 25 and called on him to discuss the latest developments regarding peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Karzai regime. Nawaz Sharif highlighted the role of Pakistan in the peace process and stated that durable peace in the region is in the interest of both countries. He linked the peace, normalcy and stability of one country to the other. He reiterated his full support to the Doha talks which, if successful, would bring

22 "Taliban Deny Accord with US Over Qatar Office Opening," *The News*, June 24, 2013.

23 "Kayani Meets Karzai, Kerry for Afghan Peace Talks," *Dawn*, April 24, 2013.

peace and tranquillity to the region. Moreover, he assured the American representative of Pakistan's full support and commitment to the Afghan-led and Afghan owned peace process.²⁴ They tried to remain engaged with the Taliban to put the Doha peace process back on track after the said controversy. To show their commitment and sincerity further to the peace cause, they even expressed their willingness to release some of the Taliban leaders kept in various prisons of Pakistan. Aizaz Chaudhry, the Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman made it clear that it is in the interest of everyone that the peace process should continue and remain alive. "We have affirmed our commitment", he said, "to consider all possible measures that we believe could contribute to the reconciliation process in the larger interest of peace in Afghanistan".²⁵ He further stated that "Doha process was facilitated by stressing on all stakeholders the need to hold dialogue to reconcile their positions in the interest of bringing lasting peace to Afghanistan".²⁶ For confidence building measures, the Pakistani Prime Minister called President Karzai and informed him of the talks took place between Pakistan and the US Special Representative focusing on bringing back durable peace to Afghanistan. Karzai appreciated the goodwill gesture of Nawaz Sharif and thanked him for his support for the peace process in Afghanistan.²⁷

To show his special interest in the peace process and to dispel the impression that Pakistan is desirous of destabilising Afghanistan, Nawaz Sharif sent Sartaj Aziz, a Pashtoon, Advisor to Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs, as his special envoy to deliver personally his invitation to Karzai to visit Pakistan.²⁸

24 "Afghanistan, US Reaffirm Support for Taliban Peace Deal," *The News*, June 26, 2013.

25 *Dawn*, June 28, 2013.

26 *Dawn*, June 28, 2013.

27 "Regional Peace Impossible if Pakistan Ignored," *The News*, June 26, 2013.

28 *Dawn*, August 28, 2013.

Political pundits eagerly waited for the response of the Afghan President who was accusing Pakistan of harbouring militants and was particularly disturbed over Pakistan's alleged secret links with the Haqqani network which was directly involved in many anti-state activities in Kabul, including the suicide attack on security installations, foreign missions and Presidential Palace. However, to the utter surprise of many, Karzai did not repeat the allegations this time and it appeared that a 'better sense' prevailed. According to a source:

There was a sense that Karzai himself had realised that he was ill advised to put forth conditions for a visit, his relations with western capitals is at an all time low, and he appeared surprised that after all that hateful rhetoric against Pakistan, reaction was quite cool from Islamabad. Of course, Aziz's visit is also a face saver for Karzai and his ego must be massaged that here is bigger country at the receiving end, yet taking an initiative to break the ice.²⁹

During his meeting with the Afghan president, Sartaj Aziz reiterated Pakistan's efforts for the Afghan peace process and reminded Karzai of Pakistan's positive role in helping organise the Doha talks which according to Sartaj Aziz unfortunately did not work. He further told Karzai that Pakistan would definitely extend its full support for holding the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan authorities but made it absolutely clear that the Afghans should understand that though there are contacts between Pakistan and the Taliban, Islamabad 'does not control them'. He further stated that "In the future, if to this extent we are requested we can play same role but at the appropriate time and in consultation with other interested parties".³⁰ Karzai assured Sartaj Aziz that he will visit Pakistan in the last week of August, 2013.³¹

Karzai's intended visit to Pakistan was seen as a step to 'reduce tensions' between the neighbouring states. However, some political analysts saw it differently. They

29 *The News*, July 23, 2013.

30 *The News*, July 23, 2013.

31 *Dawn*, August 18, 2013.

were bit sceptical about Karzai's role in the future Afghan set up. To them Karzai had lost the ground because early next year would be the presidential elections in Afghanistan. The Afghan Constitution debars Karzai to contest the elections for the third term. According to some reports Karzai wanted to put his weight behind Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a former Afghan Mujahideen leader. But Sayyaf would definitely face stiff resistance from the 'Northern Alliance' who are better organised and hopeful of getting this prestigious position through ballot. They accused Karzai of scuttling the Doha peace negotiations with the Taliban who refused to recognise the Karzai regime as the Afghan people's representatives. The US on its part is interested in the safe pullout of its troops and equipment from Afghanistan. They simply need a kind of understanding with the Afghan Taliban during the withdrawal of the troops. They are more concerned with the safe exit. If they find Karzai an "impediment to a deal the US wants with the Taliban, he will be quickly sidelined".³² In his overall assessment of the Afghan situation, Munir Akram, a former Pakistan ambassador to the UN, highlighted the role of Pakistan in peace negotiations, withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in 2014 and the future set up in Afghanistan. He remarked:

Due to its old links with the three principal Afghan insurgent groups — Mullah Omar, the Haqqanis and Hekmatyar — Pakistan is well placed to assist in facilitating an understanding with the Taliban to ease the US-NATO withdrawal and, perhaps even promote a more durable political solution in Afghanistan. It is in Pakistan's interest to do so.³³

He further added that Pakistan would be obviously doing this for its own sake. Pakistan's priority, according to him, is a friendly Afghanistan in the post-troops withdrawal scenario and a government which is not too close to India, thus posing a double threat to Pakistan from both eastern and western borders. He argued for opening of an 'informal

32 *The News*, August 18, 2013.

33 "Aziz Seeks to Allay Afghan Concerns," *Dawn*, August 18, 2013.

dialogue' with the 'Northern Alliance' to secure their support in this particular connection. According to him:

Securing peace in Afghanistan and on Pakistan's western frontier remains a daunting task. With so many 'moving parts' there are no neat or clear solutions or strategies that can be prescribed and pursued. Success will require all involved parties to adopt flexible positions and imaginative solutions responsive to the interests of all...Pakistan cannot afford to be a passive player in this 'Great Game'. It should take the lead in promoting positive and viable outcomes to the various components of this political puzzle.³⁴

Karzai's Visit to Islamabad and its Impact

Karzai visited Islamabad on August 26, 2013. The main purpose of the visit, it seems, was to seek Pakistan's cooperation and support in getting the Afghan peace negotiations back to track which faced stalemate owing to the non-flexible attitude of both sides i.e. the Taliban and the Afghan authorities. In addition, the release of the Taliban prisoners was also on agenda. The Afghan government believed that these prisoners, detained by Pakistan, can play important role in convincing the Taliban leadership for the resumption of the peace dialogue. Although, there were not very high expectations from the visit, at least it was interpreted by many as a positive step in connection with the peace process for the future of Afghanistan. Previously, many attempts to reach an understanding of the real type i.e. to help one another to get rid of insurgency and cross-border infiltration from both sides failed. Moreover, the longstanding mistrust between the neighbours was because of Kabul's tirade against Islamabad for maintaining close ties with the Taliban, particularly with the Haqqani network, and the accusations of Pakistan of seeking Kabul's coming closer to India, was seen as the major impediment in confidence building measures. The main focus of agenda was the reconciliation. Karzai said that 'he is in Pakistan with the expectation that the government of Pakistan will facilitate and help in manners it can the peace process in Afghanistan and in providing opportunities or a platform for talks between

34 Aziz Seeks to Allay Afghan Concerns, *Dawn*, 18 August 2013.

the Afghan High Peace Council and the Taliban movement. We hope that with this, on top of our agenda, we can move forward in bringing peace and stability to both countries'.³⁵ Pakistani authorities affirmed their help and full support and showed their readiness to work together with Afghanistan 'for the furtherance of shared objectives of peace, stability and prosperity in the region and beyond'.³⁶

Although, the original visit was initially planned only for one day but Karzai was requested by the Pakistan Prime Minister to extend his visit for another day to discuss further steps to be taken to facilitate talks with the Taliban. He immediately accepted the invitation which was termed by many as a positive step. Karzai also took this as a golden opportunity and requested the Pakistani authorities to release Mullah Baradar, the number two in the former Taliban hierarchy, who would persuade the Taliban leadership to talk to the Afghan High Peace Council inside Afghanistan. Pakistani authorities showed their readiness for the release of Mullah Baradar and other prominent leaders of the Taliban who can play a leading role in the peace process.

On Tuesday August 27, both leaders met at Murree, the hill resort near Islamabad. They discussed the matter again but according to Baqir Sajjad Syed "could not come up with anything concrete about revival of the reconciliation process in Afghanistan except for reiteration of principled stance that Pakistan remained committed to helping the Afghans in restoring peace to their country".³⁷ After his return to Kabul, Karzai asked Islamabad to fulfil the promises made during the two days talks. In a reference to Pakistan, Karzai said acrimoniously that the Taliban backers wanted to keep Afghanistan "impoverished and underdeveloped forever".³⁸

35 "Karzai Concludes Pakistan Visit with Invitation to Sharif," *Dawn*, August 27, 2013.

36 "Karzai Concludes Pakistan Visit with Invitation to Sharif," *Dawn*, August 27, 2013.

37 "Afghan Leader Returns Disappointed," *Dawn*, August 28, 2013.

38 "Afghan Leader Returns Disappointed," *Dawn*, August 28, 2013.

The US appreciated Pakistan's role in initiating the talks with Karzai government. James Dobbins praised Nawaz Sharif for seeking 'more meaningful dialogue' with the Karzai regime and supporting the peace process in Afghanistan. "This seems to be genuine desire. I think it's somewhat accelerated since the new government came into office", Dobbins said.³⁹ He further commented that "Pakistan has also, particularly over the last six months or so, become active in supporting an Afghan reconciliation process and urging the Afghan Taliban to participate in that process".⁴⁰

However, the ground reality was different. As a gesture of good will and after sharing the names and other information with Afghanistan, Pakistan released thirty three Taliban prisoners from various jails. The idea behind the release of these people was that they would definitely encourage and convince their comrades to come to negotiating table to resolve the issues. However, some Afghan officials showed their strong reservations regarding the manner in which Pakistan released the Taliban prisoners without handing them over to the Afghan officials. "When they decide to free Taliban, they only inform the Afghan government a few hours before", complained Ismail Qasimyar, a senior member of the High Peace Council.⁴¹ Some Afghan officials disclosed that in many cases the released Taliban have gone back to the battlefield against the US and its allies. Actually, the Afghan authorities wanted that an Afghan delegation be present at the occasion of each release to get direct access to the released Taliban prisoners "to talk to them and say, look! We have been asking for your release, now you have been released, it would be better for us to cooperate to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan".⁴² The Pakistan authorities clarified

39 "Dobbins Doubt Complete Afghan Withdrawal by 2014," *Dawn*, September 13, 2013.

40 "US Lauds Pakistan's Role in Afghan Peace Process," *Dawn*, September 18, 2013.

41 "Taliban Releases 'Pointless' for Afghan Peace," *Dawn*, September 14, 2013.

42 *Dawn*, March 15, 2014.

that some of the released prisoners refused to meet the Afghan officials.

Either convinced by the Pakistani authorities or being themselves desirous of bringing back peace and tranquillity to the region, Mullah Muhammad Hassan Rehmani, a former Governor of Kandahar and a close associate of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader, has reminded the US to fulfil its promises it has made with the Taliban. In a recorded interview with some Pakistani television channels and newspapers at Helmand Province, Mullah Rehmani stated that the US should honour its promises and they would resume negotiations with the US authorities in Qatar. He further said that the Taliban and the US representatives would then exchange their demands during the talks. He also claimed that the Taliban now wanted to build relations with countries other than the US.⁴³

To give a further boost to the Afghan peace process, the government of Pakistan decided to release Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. He was released on September 22, 2013 to 'further facilitate the Afghan reconciliation process'.⁴⁴ He is the 34th Taliban detainee released since November 2012 when the process was initiated. He has been considered as the 'most senior' and 'apparently the most influential leader' yet to have been freed by Pakistan. The Afghan government appreciated the decision of the Pakistan government and hoped that this would be having a positive impact on the peace process. They hoped that Baradar would play an important role in the peace process.⁴⁵ At the same time they made it clear that if Baradar is unable to play his significant role in the peace process than his release is meaningless. Syed Farukh Faryabi Jenab, Secretary of the *Meshrano Jirga* [Pashto: Upper House/ Afghan Senate] during his visit of Pakistan tried to address the apprehensions of Pakistan

43 *The News*, September 16, 2013.

44 "Pakistan Releases Seven Afghan Taliban Prisoners," *Dawn*, September 22, 2013.

45 "Pakistan Releases Seven Afghan Taliban Prisoners," *Dawn*, September 22, 2013.

that after the NATO and US forces pull out from Afghanistan in 2014, the forces against Pakistan would be using the Afghan soil for their anti-Pakistan activities. As a sovereign country, he said, Afghanistan has the right to develop relations with the countries of its own choice, keeping in view the Afghan national interest as supreme. However, 'the principle remains that the Afghan soil would not be used against any other country'. He made it clear that prolonged stay of some US troops would in no way harm the interest of Pakistan. Also Afghanistan's relations with India, according to him, should not worry Pakistan because it is not build for this specific purpose.⁴⁶

US-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement and its Effects

Another step regarding the future relations of Afghanistan with US which generated heated debate and aroused lot of controversial statements leading to an unpredictable futuristic rapport is the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the two in the wake of the foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. In one of the previous pacts, popularly known as the Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed on May 2, 2012, it was made clear that both sides would strengthen their long-term strategic cooperation in various areas of 'mutual interest' including peace, security and stability of the country. It also promised that US would support Afghanistan's long term economic and social development and would encourage the regional cooperation. In Washington, the Obama administration insisted signing a bilateral agreement to be signed between the US and Afghanistan as soon as possible, preferably by the end of October 2013 to allow the US troops plan withdrawal from Afghanistan and to further discuss a limited number of US troops' stay in Afghanistan beyond December 2014 to help eradicate al-Qaida and its remnants from the country. The Afghan president also

46 "Afghanistan Wants Key Role for Mullah Baradar in Peace Process," *Dawn*, September 26, 2013.

appealed the Taliban and their allies to join the assembly. Karzai convened Loya Jirga (Grand National Assembly) for this specific purpose i.e. to discuss the future bilateral agreement between the US and the Afghanistan. "We invite them, please come to this national *Jirga* of Afghanistan, raise your voice, raise your objection ... and share your views", he remarked in a news conference at Kabul.⁴⁷ However, the Afghan Taliban rejected the president's call and warned the *Jirga* members that they would be treated as 'traitors' if they endorsed the deal.⁴⁸

The Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement between the USA and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has twenty six articles and two Annexure. Its detailed preamble states that the main purpose is:

Reaffirming the continued support of the Parties for regional cooperation and coordination mechanisms, with a goal of increasing security and stability by reducing tensions, uncertainty, and misunderstanding.....⁴⁹

It further states:

Desiring to develop further the means of defense and security cooperation between the Parties, based on the principles of full respect for the independence, sovereignty, and integrity of their territories, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of each other, in order to promote security and stability in the region, and to combat terrorism; Agreeing on the importance of cooperative relationship between Afghanistan and its neighbours conducted on the basis of mutual respect, non-interference, and equality and calling on all nations to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to refrain from interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs and democratic processes; and Affirming also that the Parties' cooperation is based on full respect for the sovereignty of each Party, the purposes of the United Nations Charter, and a shared desire to provide a framework for defense and security cooperation between the Parties; and reaffirming their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity,

47 *Dawn*, November 16, 2013.

48 *Dawn*, November 16, 2013.

49 "Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul, Afghanistan, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/bsa>.

and national unity of Afghanistan, as well as respect for Afghan laws, customs and traditions.⁵⁰

The Afghan authorities informed the US administration that before final approval of the treaty by the president, they needed an endorsement from the Afghan people. For this specific purpose Karzai immediately convened a Loya Jirga to discuss the future security agreement with the US. The said *Jirga* was held at Kabul from November 21 to November 24, 2013. However, couple of days before the proceedings of the *Jirga*, Karzai stunned everyone by objecting to some clauses of the agreement and put the entire deal in 'jeopardy'. His main objection was regarding the authorization to the foreign troops to search the Afghan homes after the NATO's combat mission ends and has been termed as "a sticking point of an agreement setting out the terms under which remaining US forces will operate there".⁵¹ The American Ambassador for Afghanistan James B. Cunningham and NATO Commander Gen. Joseph F. Dunford met Karzai but were told that "there is no flexibility on this issue of allowing Americans to search Afghan homes".⁵² Reportedly, the impasse was removed and the US president tried to convince Karzai through a letter that:

I know that you have been concerned for some time to limit the impact of the conflict in Afghanistan on the Afghan people, with particular attention to sensitive issue of the safety and privacy of people in their homes. Over time, and especially in the recent past, we have redoubled our efforts to ensure that Afghan homes are respected by our forces and that our operations are conducted consistent with your law. We will continue to make every effort to respect the sanctity and dignity of Afghans in their homes and in their daily lives, just as we do for own citizens.⁵³

It was expected from Karzai that in return of such letter from the US president he would end his "vehement

50 For full Agreement see <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/bsa>.

51 *Dawn*, November 19, 2013.

52 *Dawn*, November 19, 2013.

53 For full text of the letter, written on November 20, 2013, see "President B. Obama's letter to Hamid Karzai," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2013.

opposition to American counterterrorism raids on private homes — one of the most contentious issue between allies over a costly dozen-year war — clearing the way for an agreement to keep a smaller American troop force in the country past the 2014 withdrawal deadline”.⁵⁴

The agreement having 22 pages text with 26 articles, written in three languages i.e., Pashto, Dari and English, was placed before the 2500 participants of the Loya Jirga for approval. Karzai also informed the Jirga members that the agreement will be valid for the next ten years (till 2024) and will come enforce on January 1, 2015.⁵⁵ He further informed them that “There’s mistrust between me and the Americans”, he said. “They don’t trust me, and I don’t trust them. I have always criticized them and they have always propagated negative things behind my back”.⁵⁶ Karzai’s remark that even if the Loya Jirga approves the pact, he would “wait until after the April presidential elections to sign it”, surprised the American officials.⁵⁷ They immediately responded by making it clear that it would be jeopardising the stay of American troops in Afghanistan and they linked it with the international funding which they say would not come to Afghanistan. Some segment of the Karzai administration including the military and police departments also showed their anguish on the undue delay. According to Azam Ahmed, ‘they have urgently pushed to finalize the deal because it would ensure training and heavy international funding for the Afghan security forces’.⁵⁸ *The News* reported that eventually the Loya Jirga endorsed the BSA and urged Karzai to sign it. “Given the current situation, and Afghanistan’s need ... the contents of this agreement as a whole is endorsed by the members of this Loya Jirga”, said the statement read out by

54 *The New York Times*, November 22, 2013.

55 “Security Pact to be Valid for 10 years,” accessed November 21, 2013, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/>.

56 *The New York Times*, November 22, 2013.

57 *The New York Times*, November 21, 2013.

58 *The New York Times*, November 21, 2013.

the Jirga deputy Fazal Karim Imaq.⁵⁹ However, Karzai remained adamant and to the chagrin of the US set some conditions for signing the deal with the US. He insisted on an end to the military operations on Afghan homes, a reiteration of his previous demand, sincere US help and support for the peace processes with the Taliban, and the US support for the transparent forthcoming elections scheduled for April 2014.⁶⁰

The American authorities, reported *The News*, reacted immediately with 'anger and exasperation', and warned the Afghan president to act quickly and sign the Pact otherwise it would not be possible for the Obama administration to keep the American troops in Afghanistan after the NATO troops withdrawal by the end of 2014.⁶¹ The State Department further warned that failure to sign the Pact could jeopardise the vital financial aid for Afghanistan. The Americans were not alone in criticising Karzai for his annoying statements. They were joined by Sibghatullah Mujadidi, the former Afghan president and the head of Loya Jirga, who also voiced his displeasure over Karzai's remarks and stated that "Karzai doesn't have the right to say this, he is making a mistake".⁶² Representing many other delegates, he reminded Karzai that he should respect the decision of Afghan elders, who endorsed the BSA and wanted this to be signed as soon as possible. Susan Rice, the US national security adviser met Karzai in Kabul and bluntly told him that a delay in signing the BSA would risk the US pulling out troops completely by the end of 2014. "Without a prompt signature, the US would have no choice but to initiate planning for a post-2014 future in which there would be no US or NATO troop presence in Afghanistan", she told the Afghan president. Karzai requested Rice to pass on his demand to Obama but the US officials reacted swiftly and termed it as untenable and impractical to wait until January

59 *The News*, November 25, 2013.

60 *The News*, November 24, 2013.

61 *The News*, 24 November 2013.

62 *Dawn*, 24 November 2013.

to have this thing concluded. Pentagon Spokesman Colonel Steve Warren told reporters that “We want it closed. The American government wants it. The Afghan people want it, so Karzai needs to sign it”.⁶³ General Joseph Dunford, a top US military official, while speaking to the US senators also showed his indignation over Karzai’s refusal in signing the agreement. He warned that if the US pulls out its complete troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, there are chances that “an emboldened al-Qaeda will not only begin to physically reconstitute, but they will also psychologically exploit their perceived victory to boost recruitment, fundraising and morale”. Assessing the situation as a whole, he said that “the complete withdrawal of foreign troops would embolden al-Qaeda, gradually erode the capabilities of Afghan forces and greatly undermine the rights of Afghan women”.⁶⁴

Karzai by insisting upon his toughen stand with the US at this crucial moment is possibly risking his future. In his final address to the Afghan Parliament on March 15, 2014, he reiterated his earlier stand and showed his resolve that he would not sign the Accord with the US despite the repeated efforts of the Obama administration and its allies. “I want to say all those foreign countries who maybe out of habit or because they want to interfere, that they should not interfere”, he said. He informed the parliament members that the Afghan forces are capable of defending the Afghan territory without the help of international troops.⁶⁵ Whether he will succeed in his bargaining with the US over this vital issue or eventually will succumb to internal and external pressures, only time will show this. At present, no one can precisely predict that what will happen when the NATO and the US troops will leave Afghanistan next year. But one thing is quite clear that Obama administration is eager for a safe pullout and is resolving the issue of leaving a sizeable number of American troops in Afghanistan to avoid a return

63 *Dawn*, November 26, 2013.

64 *The News*, March 18, 2014.

65 “Karzai says Afghanistan doesn’t need US troops,” *Dawn*, March 16, 2014.

of the al-Qaida and its sympathisers thus posing a serious threat to the peace and tranquillity of the whole world. Moreover, the seriousness of the Obama administration in signing an accord before the end of the current year is understandable. In the post-2014 troops withdrawal scenario the Obama administration will not repeat the collapse of a similar security agreement with Iraq in 2011 which led to the US pulling all its troops out of the country immediately leaving the country suffer from its worst sectarian violence.

Conclusion

The US and its allies were interested in a safe scheduled pull out from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Are these peace negotiations going to succeed? What would be the response of the various pressure groups in Afghanistan to the domination of the Taliban if the talks are successful, these and some other related questions are yet to be answered. With so many ifs and butts, after the foreign troops' withdrawal what would be the future of this region? Keeping in view the past experiences and their outcome in the region, 'Whither Afghanistan' is still daunting the minds of many.

Another important component of the success of peace is the role of neighbours in the current scenario. As pointed out earlier, Pakistan, also hit by extremism and terrorism, would be seeking good friendly relations with Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops. India, an old friend of Afghanistan, also supported Karzai's stand and made it clear that it is the right of Afghans to decide about their future course of action. Russia, though apprehensive of the Afghan situation is watching carefully the new developments in the wake of foreign troops withdrawal from the country. China is eager to develop new strategic partnership and is seeking more space for itself in the region. Perturbed over the recent escalation of violence in the Chinese Muslim Uighur community, they are aspiring Afghanistan's help to combat terrorism and stop infiltration of the militants from Afghanistan. They offered close relationship with the future

Afghan setup and a huge financial assistance to the Afghan government.

The author had long discussions with the Afghan students studying in Heidelberg University regarding the whole scenario i.e. the withdrawal of foreign troops and its impact upon Afghanistan. He found them full of hope and optimism on the future of Afghanistan. Most of them supported Karzai's stance on not signing the Accord with the US and reposed full confidence in the capability of the Afghan security forces in defending their territory. They showed their resilience in opposing al-Qaida and other foreign terrorist organisations for exploiting the name of religion on the Afghan soil and tarnishing the image of Afghanistan abroad.

Despite a lot of altruism in mind and ambivalence around, one should not remain indifferent to the Afghan imbroglio, or leave it to the forces of retrogression to dictate their terms but inculcate the precepts of refurbishing ideas to recuperate from the civil war like situation and help restore peace and tranquillity in the region.