



## **US Presence in Afghanistan Post-2014: Assessment and Implication for Pakistan's Defense Policy**

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### **Introduction**

Major Powers and the international community will be closely watching the developments in Afghanistan as US led international forces plan for a drawdown after thirteen years of military engagements in the year 2014. At the regional level, considerable doubts exist within Afghanistan's neighbors and near neighbors regarding the stability in Afghanistan, its future political dispensation and more importantly about how the long term presence of "residual" United States forces will shape Afghanistan's regional behavior after 2014.

In the backdrop of limited drawdown of US led international forces from Afghanistan in 2014, preserving and maximization of power under a complex and uncertain environment will be the prime considerations of regional states including Pakistan. Security dilemma theorizes the state's behavior under the conditions of competition and uneven distribution of power that security maximization of one state leads to the decrease in security for other states. Security dilemma however does not exist everywhere despite anarchic system of international relations e.g. between Canada and United States, between Japan and United States etc.

The necessary condition for the existence of security dilemma is the fundamental divergences in the states perspective on foreign policy objectives and ambitions. Given these conditions or as some might call them misperceptions, long term relations will be understandably fraught with hostility even as there may be a trend of short term tactical cooperation between states locked within this framework. United States military, political and economic presence in Afghanistan has impacted the regional distribution of power for Pakistan. As would be discussed in the sections below, long term US presence in Afghanistan has practically complicated Pakistan's management of its threat perceptions.

Afghanistan, given its geography, has historically been impacting the political developments in the regions of Central and South Asia and Persia (Iran). It has also been an important trade route in Asia between Central, South and West Asia (Middle East) for over three thousand years. In recent history, it has also acted as a buffer between the competing powers of Asia and Europe. Geopolitics suggests that a state dominating Afghanistan will enable that state to greatly influence the strategic and economic landscape of South, Central and West Asia.

Pakistan as a neighbor of Afghanistan has thus natural stakes in the geopolitical developments occurring in Afghanistan. The existing situation is fraught with uncertainty and may restrict Pakistan's role in the region as US led international forces begin the drawdown process this year.

Pakistan today stands at a critical geopolitical juncture. Vital national security and foreign policy decisions taken today will largely determine the position and future of Pakistani state's regional influence in an environment of global and regional transitions. For Pakistan to respond, and position itself in an increasingly complex political environment, it is imperative to critically analyze the evolving regional situation with particular reference to the US military presence in Afghanistan.

The contemporary strategic landscape of South Asian region is undergoing a transition with Afghanistan at its center. As the draw down date for the US led international forces approaches it could be concluded that 2014 represents a critical point not only for Afghanistan but for the entire South Asian region. This is due to the fact that US military presence in Afghanistan has resulted in the focus of contemporary regional politics around Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the fact that the two major powers in South Asia i.e. India and Pakistan have historically been involved in Afghanistan, it is also true that last thirteen years have seen the development of South Asian strategic landscape independent of the dynamics of Indo - Pakistan bilateral relationship. The year 2014 is expected to see a new form of US presence in Afghanistan and thus the political and strategic developments within this time frame will largely determine the future strategic composition of the region and consequently influence Pakistan's defense policy.

This paper, however, focuses on one aspect of the policy that is post 2014 US strategic posture in Afghanistan. It is contended here that perceived US plans of withdrawal from Afghanistan with "residual forces" and military bases will complicate Pakistan's management of its threat perception; which in this scenario will result in over-stretching of its defense resources on multiple fronts. Moreover it is also postulated that US presence in Afghanistan and India-US strategic alignment are interlinked and aimed at reinforcing US strategy in South Asia. This alignment is a reality, despite its difficulties, and a piece in the puzzle in a big regional picture of the United States Asia-pacific posture.

This picture conceptualizes propping up India as a counter weight to China by doing two things. One, relieving India from regional political and strategic stress through a US mediated regional negotiations framework with Bangladesh and Pakistan. Secondly, pace up the speed of Indian defense and economic modernization through opening the doors of international high tech cartels for India. Post 2014 US presence in Afghanistan, therefore, is inextricably linked to Pakistan's threat perception as its effects are not confined to Pakistan's western borders alone.

Important questions confront Pakistan about the nature of post 2014 geopolitical order in Afghanistan. For example what will be the future political setup in Afghanistan that ensures stability in relations with all its neighbors? What will be the nature of the US led ISAF commitment to Afghanistan? Will Afghan security forces be able to take on the security responsibilities after drawdown of coalition forces? What will be the role of India in future political settings in Afghanistan and border security mechanisms between Pakistan and Afghanistan etc.

Appreciating the current strategic environment, it is pertinent for Pakistan to critically re- evaluate its current defense policy to meet the emerging challenges. Contemporary defense posture of Pakistan is not adequate to combat the complex and uncertain environment ahead and its defense industry in extension will also need an overhaul to meet the requirement of a new vision.

### **Transition from a Pakistani perspective**

The South Asian security dynamics have traditionally been defined by bi-polar confrontation between Pakistan and India. In the post-Cold War era, the bi-polar

regional competition between India and Pakistan has only increased with overt nuclearization of both the adversaries.

This pattern of regional security continues to be relevant in the contemporary period; however, direct US presence in the region has steadily been transforming the traditional patterns. Notwithstanding the fact that US has always been a factor in South Asian political discourse, its direct military presence in Afghanistan and the subsequent "long war" have directly affected the dynamics of regional politics which was traditionally centered on Indo-Pak rivalry and competition.

The transition would mean that the US presence in Afghanistan has the potential to change the established bi-polar pattern of security competition in South Asia towards a weak uni-polar model of security where Pakistan's capacity to influence the regional political and strategic discourse will be reduced due to the pressures generated by the US South Asia policy centered around its military presence in Afghanistan.

Despite internal challenges of economy and political uncertainties, Pakistan has been able to balance its regional rival India through a mix of defense configuration containing both conventional and nuclear components. These two components of Pakistan's security are not going to collapse any time soon. The assertion here is that the pressure generated by changing security configuration has the potential to weaken this arrangement as we pass through the second decade of the 21st century.

These challenges of post 9/11 regional environment, as discussed in the next section, have directly affected the orientation of Pakistan's war fighting strategy which it had been following since its inception. For the last one decade, Pakistan, as a result of US intervention in the region is fighting a counter insurgency war in its tribal frontiers for which it was not prepared. This change in Pakistan's military strategy from a conventional war fighting paradigm towards a more counter insurgency oriented doctrine is a direct consequence of United States intervention in the region and therefore contributes towards the larger transition i.e. Pakistan becoming a weak regional pole.

### **Identifying the Pressures**

As the region is transforming, two pressures will be critical for Pakistan's defense planning for this decade. These are: US strategic posture in post-2014 Afghanistan and US – India alignment.

These factors are instrumental in establishing a regional environment where threats have developed on three fronts for Pakistani state in post 9/11 international and regional settings as opposed to traditional eastern threat only. The eastern threat remains potent even today, but the second internal low intensity conflict, and the third of dangers emanating from the situation in Afghanistan, including extra regional forces (ERF) and US post-2014 posture, are Pakistan's new concerns.

Additionally, US – India strategic alignment, which is the South Asian component of US Asia –Pacific reorientation for containing China, compounds Pakistan's strategic problems.

### **Post 2014 US Strategic Posture**

Strategic Partnership Agreement between Afghanistan and United States in May 2012 has laid the foundations for post 2014 US military presence in Afghanistan. This US presence remains undefined, however, unless the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) is signed between Afghanistan and the US. Exact details of the number of US troops to be stationed after 2014 remains classified but certain media reports within the US have suggested these numbers between 10,000 to 20,000 troops stationed in four or possibly nine military bases. As of January 2014, US has approximately 38,000 troops in Afghanistan along with 20,000 personnel from 28 NATO nations and 22 partnering nation.

Moreover there are additional 108000 US defense contractors in Afghanistan which are playing an important role in supporting US operations in Afghanistan. Their mission includes intelligence gathering in the 'Af-Pak' region, logistics, active fighting where required, and assist in building capabilities of militias composed of local elements working in support of US objectives in the region.

The planned strategic milieu for post-2014 Afghanistan enables United States to closely monitor military activities inside Pakistan, in particular its nuclear weapons complex and other major powers such as China and Russia. A US raid deep inside Pakistan's Abbottabad city, Salala check post attack and multiple covert special operations inside FATA are a stark reminder of the exploitation of possible vulnerabilities in Pakistan defense system and thereby increasing the challenges for its security.

### **India - United States Strategic Convergence**

As noted earlier South Asian strategic landscape in the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a strategic partnership between India and the United States. With renewed focus and interest in South Asia, United States requires a regional partner for acting as a balancer against other regional powers such as Pakistan and China. This new regional balance envisages a strategic and economic order anchored around India's political and economic influence in the region with US overseeing the Indian management of the region through its limited presence in Afghanistan after 2014. Despite the problems of India's domestic political dispensation, the process initiated by Clinton's second administration was carried forward by Bush Jr and the current Obama's administration as well.

Geoffrey Pyatt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs at the state department, in his remarks at US-India Business Council in California in April 2012 said;

India is at the center of this vision..... Over time, we look forward to India playing an essential role in our joint vision of economic connectivity and shared prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region. <sup>1</sup>

US secretary of state John Kerry underlined the importance of a new regional vision as discussed above, in his speech delivered during his official visit to India in June, 2013:

... that is why the partnership between India and the United States is in fact more important than ever... India is a key part of the US rebalance in Asia and we are committed to that rebalance. I want to emphasize this point: Our security interests with India converge on a wide range of

maritime and broader regional issues, and we value India's role in our mutual efforts to ensure a stable and prosperous Asia.<sup>2</sup>

This renewed thrust of US policy towards South Asia will increase the pressure on Pakistan's defense posture precisely because it is limiting Pakistan's capability to shape the region in a way that maximizes its security. Increasing India's policy options in the region would have faced many complications without the assistance from United States, and hence will not stabilize but destabilize the balance existing between India and Pakistan.

### **Challenges Emanating from Transitional Pressures**

Following is the list of challenges for Pakistan's defense policy that emanate from the transitional pressures discussed above.

- Deterrence Stability
- Over-stretch on two fronts and Proximity of US forces
- Reduction in capacity to take major strategic initiatives in the region.
- Pakistan's Relations with China and Russia

### **Deterrence Stability**

As mentioned earlier, traditionally, Pakistani threat perception emanates from a hostile eastern neighbor i.e. India due to historic, political and strategic reasons which are not a subject of discussion in this paper. Pakistan by virtue of its geography, resources and the nature of regional politics requires a strategic counter weight against a neighbor which outnumbers it in terms of both qualitative and quantitative aspects of conventional forces. A credible nuclear weapons capability provide Pakistan the capability to deter the threat of aggression from the east thus acting as a strategic equalizer to check perceived Indian strategic ambitions *vis a vis* Pakistan. This also creates space for Pakistan for a more proportionate or balanced financial spending on both military and non-military sectors, and avoid a destabilizing arms race.

This framework remains relevant today after thirteen years of nuclearization of India and Pakistan. In South Asia, Pakistan and India have departed from the phase of consolidating the initial nuclearization and are now entering the phase



of strategic contest by qualitative and quantitative improvement of their strategic nuclear forces to create and exploit the possible gap in their deterrent relationship. The fundamental problem created by the pressures discussed in the above section is their potential to establish a psychological environment, which envisages making the deterrent factor irrelevant in the region, by eventually establishing asymmetry in strategic capabilities. This asymmetry can be used subsequently as a bargaining chip for achieving a desired outcome at political and strategic level.

### Over-stretch on two fronts and Proximity of US forces

Pakistan's military deployment and operations, in the last ten years, already signal the effect of the pressure at the operational level. Pakistan has deployed approx 140,000 troops on its western front to combat insurgency in its tribal areas along the Afghan borders which is linked with US presence in Afghanistan.

Following is the pictorial description of the existing distribution of ISAF forces in Afghanistan:



Source: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Official Website

Although post-2014 US troops concentration is not yet clear, but the decision to station "follow on force" in Afghanistan spread across a network of bases coupled with more than one hundred thousand US defense contractors is confirmed. Media reports suggest that recently retired ex-Commander ISAF General John Allen had submitted a draft proposal containing recommendations to the White House for a final decision<sup>3</sup>.

The role of US Special Forces and intelligence operations in the region is likely to increase when bulk of US forces withdraw from Afghanistan. This is also signified by the shift in US strategy from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism led by President Obama himself. This shift will result in the increase of low intensity conflict within Pakistan.

Evolving military situation on Pakistan's western front poses challenges for Pakistan's defense policy whose fundamental orientation is geared towards countering conventional threats from its eastern neighbor. Moreover, the current distribution of Pakistan's conventional forces on both eastern and western borders represents a stretch which limits Pakistan's capacity to respond to perceived aggression from its traditional adversary.

These plans will in addition, enable United States to enhance its visibility inside Pakistan and to conduct deep penetration operations on the lines of Abbottabad operation in future.

### **Reduction in capacity to take major strategic initiatives in region**

As opposed to bi-polar model of regional competition in South Asia, the region today is contested by multiple actors both regional as well as global. These complex multilateral networks place certain constraints on Pakistan's ability to maneuver and take bold strategic actions in the region.

In the larger strategic picture, the fundamental obstacles for Pakistan are Afghan driven i.e. the presence of multiple interests of extra regional forces and counter forces. Due to multiple influential actors at play in Afghanistan, Pakistan does not seem to enjoy the leverage that it had in the 1990's. Additionally, this weakens Pakistan's ability to monitor multiple conflicting interests and threats emanating

as a consequence of these developments. As a result it will not be in a position to pursue long term strategic objectives.

The current composition of regional security complex, therefore, poses serious concerns for Pakistan's security interests in immediate, near and distant future.

### **Pakistan's Relations with China and Russia**

US military presence in Afghanistan in post-2014 period is both a subject of discussion and a source of anxiety in Beijing and Moscow. Russia is of the view that United States should be more transparent about its intentions regarding the long term military presence in Afghanistan, as in their assessment, Central Asia could become the ground for a new great game centered around securing the regions' vast energy resources.

Russian deputy foreign minister Igor Morgulov voiced concerns of his country during the third ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan held in Almaty in the following words:

I want to say openly, colleagues that we will not accept reformatting the international security assistance force into long-term foreign military presence in Afghanistan under a different cover and without a relevant UN mandate...we are confident that such a step will not bring stability to Afghanistan and will only escalate tension in the region.<sup>4</sup>

This in extension also means the increasing possibility of greater political instability in Central Asia. Whether or not Russia and United States achieve an understanding on Central Asia, it is likely that the US will have other options ready to strengthen its position in Central Asia by maintaining a military foot print in Afghanistan.

From the perspective of China, US military presence in Afghanistan post 2014 is a component of a larger US pivot to Asia policy, aimed at what it perceives as a containment policy. US' long term military presence in Afghanistan will pose challenges to China in two domains. First is the energy security prospect through Central Asia and Middle East via land corridor and second is internal security in

the restive Xinjiang province of China through exploitation and creating opportunities there.

In sum, concerns over long term US intentions in the region remain in Beijing and Moscow. They prefer a more cooperative framework with the US in Afghanistan on parallel tracks to reduce their anxieties. Whatever the ultimate posture Russia and China present for Afghanistan, Pakistan will be the center of their focus for obvious strategic reasons. Which way Pakistan puts its weight will be the defining point of its relationship with both the major powers. If Pakistan tends to support the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between United States and Afghanistan then it is risking a possible China – India –Russia trilateral grouping that might be counterproductive to Islamabad's regional objectives. In other words, potential regional isolation.

### **Conclusion**

Significant regional geo-strategic and geo – political currents are likely to pose serious challenges to Pakistan's defense policy in the coming years. Historic trends of India – Pakistan competition leading the trajectory of South Asian discourse will not be the only ones to drive it. The debate in Islamabad focuses not only on plans pertaining to reacting to the changing regional circumstances, but to strategize a new vision for its defense policy and regional posture.

A new and clear vision is required to develop a framework that may create synergy between different elements of the state structure especially foreign, defense and economic policies, keeping in view both the opportunities and risks in the back drop of changing regional environment.

The basic premise of such debate should be the recognition that Pakistan has the potential to play a proactive and dominant role as a major regional power and in the larger Asian security architecture. Bilateral Security Agreement expected to be signed this year will institutionalize US presence in Afghanistan and create more complications for Pakistan's defense policy. Therefore in extension, enhancing of US security in the region has progressively diminished Pakistan's security prospects in the last decade as predicted by the classic security dilemma framework.

In order to solve this dilemma, the broader contours of Pakistani statecraft should start by addressing the question as to what should be the place of Pakistan in the broader Asian strategic architecture. If Pakistan wants to play a proactive rather than reactive role in the region and beyond, then it will have to identify diplomatic, military and economic barriers presented in its western neighborhood and actively seek to remove them by redefining its alliances in the region and calibrating the defense doctrine accordingly.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffery Pyatt, "US-India Strategic Partnership: A Way Forward," Speech at US-India Business Council Meeting, Menlo Park, CA, April 27, 2012, accessed January 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2012/188935.htm>

<sup>2</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks on US - India Strategic Partnership," accessed January 6, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/06/211013.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Micheal R. Gordon, "U.S. in Talks With Afghans on Presence After 2014," New York Times, November 15, 2012, accessed January 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/world/asia/us-in-talks-with-afghans-on-presence-after-2014.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Long term foreign military presence not beneficial to Afghanistan- Russian Deputy Foreign Minister," last updated April 26, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014 [http://voiceofrussia.com/2013\\_04\\_26/Long-term-foreign-military-presence-not-beneficial-to-Afghanistan-Russian-Deputy-Foreign-Minister-265/](http://voiceofrussia.com/2013_04_26/Long-term-foreign-military-presence-not-beneficial-to-Afghanistan-Russian-Deputy-Foreign-Minister-265/)