



## Afghanistan and Central Asia: Post-NATO Security Scenario

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### Abstract

*NATO withdrawal may pose a serious security challenges to the entire region of Central Asia. It may also give rise to new issues as well. The Russian withdrawal from Afghan soil in 1989, the security situation was thrown into turmoil. The present paper studies the main issues, which the entire Central Asian region may face after complete NATO exit. The present study highlights the main security concerns like terrorism, drug trafficking, civil war etc in Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares borders with the Central Asian republics i.e. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Afghan security issues may have a lead towards Central Asia and Central Asia as a whole region may be thrown into security turmoil. This paper attempts to highlight the security issues that Central Asia as a region may face after NATO withdrawal.*

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Al-Qaeda, Withdrawal, Terrorism, Security, NATO, Taliban.

### Introduction

The September 11<sup>th</sup>, or 9/11 were a chain of four terrorist attacks. These attacks were launched by Al-Qaeda upon United States in New York and Washington DC on 11, September 2001. This caused almost 3000 deaths and damage of at least \$44 billion in property and infrastructure<sup>1</sup>. Soon after the attacks, the U.S. demanded the Taliban regime to exile Osama Bin Laden from Afghanistan. In reaction to Taliban refusal, the Bush Administration attempted to overthrow the Taliban through military intervention and asserted that a friendly regime in Kabul is needed to root out Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The United States received U.N. support in the form of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1368 of 12 September 2001. It was from 2001 onwards that International Security Assistance forces have been present and militarily intervening in Afghanistan in order to eradicate the terrorists from the Afghan land<sup>2</sup>. In August 2003, NATO took over the control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The US provided the bulk of the soldiers. Twenty-one EU member states also contributed troops. The U.S claims to have dismantled the Taliban terrorist group and establishment of 300,000 Afghan troops who will take the security responsibility of Afghanistan after NATO will withdraw<sup>3</sup>. However, as far as the Afghan government is concerned, their area of control has not gone beyond Kabul. On the other side, the Taliban's reluctance to negotiate shows their power balance.

### NATO Alliance in Afghanistan

Soon after 9/11 incident, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the allied forces intervened in Afghanistan. It refers to the war against terrorism, which started soon after and continues until present. Its declared aims were to end the terrorist group of Al-Qaeda and remove Taliban from

Afghanistan in order to deny safe bases for the terrorist groups there. It has been the longest and most challenging mission up to the present day and the forces involved were more than 130,000 coming from 51 NATO and the partner nations. After the 9/11 attacks, the whole world security scenario changed, and NATO decided to share alliance forces in the war against terror in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>.

If we see the achievements of NATO in Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force provided stability in Afghanistan by combating Taliban and other terrorist groups. The combat forces were preparing for improving the security situation in Afghanistan especially for the post-NATO withdrawal period (2014-16), and to strengthen the central governments control. During "operation Medusa" NATO's International Security Assistance Force defeated Taliban and other criminals in southern Afghanistan. It was a Canadian-led operation going on from 2 September to 17 September, 2006. It involved nearly 2,000 ISAF and Afghan National security forces. Troops from other countries such as British, Danish, Dutch took part in this combat operations. In this operation, about 500 insurgents were killed<sup>5</sup>. Afghanistan is facing serious issues of Drug Trafficking. During NATO presence, about 100 Afghan drug traffickers have been prosecuted in Kabul courts. In 2002, ISAF liberated the country from Taliban rule and restored rule of law, which Afghanistan was lacking from more than past 20 years<sup>6</sup>.

In July 2011, US troops started their withdrawal from Afghanistan and the security responsibilities were left over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). US had planned the complete withdrawal by 2014<sup>7</sup>. On Tuesday May 27, 2014 Obama declared that by Jan.1, 2015 only 12,500 foreign forces will be present in Afghanistan to advice and train Afghan

national security forces. In fact, NATO launched the New Non-Combat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to train and assist Afghan security forces and institutions. This number was to be lowered by 2015 and by the end of 2016; a small number of forces are to be kept to protect the embassy in Kabul<sup>8</sup>. President Barrack Obama declared that it is “time to turn the page on a decade in which so much of our policy was focussed on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.” He announced the plan to withdraw all the left American troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016<sup>9</sup>.

It is not only Afghan government and NATO, but also its Central Asian neighbours are worried about Afghanistan after NATO withdrawal. Afghanistan could face various economic, political and security problems and civil war and foreign intervention would turn out to be more constant. After NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Central Asia will face some

practical challenges with certain geopolitical implications. It is assumed that the terrorist groups would be reactivated which could threaten the peace of the entire Central Asian region by dragging the neighboring countries in the war. Consequently, both south and Central Asian security may be endangered by the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are more vulnerable because of exposed borders and significant ethnic minorities in Afghanistan<sup>10</sup>. Many security issues may take birth if Taliban will return to power in Afghanistan. Another security concern may grow by the resurgence of the IMU in northern side of Afghanistan as it may control the Fergana valley which overlaps in area within, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan. The ISAF was not completely able to root out the issue of drug trafficking in Afghanistan. Afghan drug traffickers have used Central Asian countries as the major route to reach Russian and European markets.



Source: Katzman, K. (2008)

Figure-1  
Map of Afghanistan

If the terrorist activities continued, they are prone to spill out into next-door countries of Central Asia. Security continuation can be one of the major challenges to Afghan government. The weak Afghan air forces are not capable of carrying out combat operations against Taliban as the strong US-NATO forces mainly used to do. However, Taliban also has lost its strength as it had in the past, still many areas where no one can enter without their permission<sup>11</sup>. After NATO withdrawal, the war on terror will be continued by Afghan national troops, but the nature of war will be changed as the Taliban may give a powerful response again. In Sep. 2014, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's government signed a Bi-lateral security agreement (BSA) with United States, by which the US army was allowed to stay in Afghanistan to train and assist Afghan national security forces. It shows that Afghan government is still having the threat of failure to Taliban and is not ready to take security responsibility without US assistance<sup>12</sup>. After NATO withdrawal, the war on terror will be continued by Afghan national troops, but the nature of war will be changed as the Taliban may give a powerful response again.

Even though, Taliban have lost the ability of capturing areas, yet, they will continue their confrontation against Afghan troops, what we witnessed in the Taliban's capture of Kundus. The national army of Afghanistan that existed from 1880's got disintegrated after a mujahedin civil war broke up during 1992-96. Thus after 2002 there was a need of new national army, which got shape in the form of the Afghan National Army. Few of the former officers joined the ANA. Since then US has been actively engaged in training the Afghan National Army and nearly 12,000, are considered well trained. The Afghan National Army has many flaws like absenteeism. As the soldiers are far from their own provinces thus taking long trips to their homes. However, at the present time this problem eased as they are now paid electronically. Along with the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police (ANP) is an important component to maintain peace in the country and in combating the insurgency. However, rampant corruption and negative attitude of the ANP made the citizens to mistrust it<sup>13</sup>.

Following the fall of Kundus in the hands of Taliban, U.S. President Obama on 15, October 2015 stated that Afghan national security forces are not yet strong enough to handle the Afghan security situation. In this regard, U.S. will maintain its current security forces of 9,800 throughout 2016 of which 5,500 will be withdrawn in 2017. The focus of post-2016 NATO forces will be to train the Afghan national army<sup>14</sup>. Following the NATO withdrawal, the terrorist groups can again become active and can amplify their course of action in the region. The ANSF has to fight against Taliban, which will use its full potential to re-capture areas in the remotest rural territories. Taliban will strive to demoralize and desert the Afghan security forces by eliminating the country's internal security and political apparatus.

**Significance:** This research paper can help the country planners in the formulation of plans for the betterment of the society. It is possible only when terrorism and terrorist ideology will be routed out. This study is useful for all human beings as it can play a major role in restoring peace and that way progress and prosperity will prevail upon.

## Conclusion

There is a possibility that post-NATO Afghanistan can witness a civil war again. Although NATO forces claim that they have crushed terrorists to a great success, but now they are concerned about their exit. There is a great threat of repeating the struggle for power among Afghans, as was seen after Soviet Union withdrawal. There is a constant dispute of ethnicity, warlords, and drug traffickers, which can cause civil war. Afghan government is going to face another big challenge of rehabilitating the refugees whom Pakistan plans to send back. The above-mentioned threats can pose a serious challenge to the internal as well as external security of not only Afghanistan but also to its neighbours like India, Pakistan and other Central Asian countries. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has been training its thousands of men in Afghanistan and Waziristan. These groups have remained in close connection with the Taliban. They may help Taliban to gain power. The nations bordering Central Asia have a very serious threat from the north of Afghanistan. These nations fear the reoccurrence of attacks by radical Islamic militants from the IMU. China is also concerned regarding the stability of Xinjiang and Central Asia for the IMU activities in Afghanistan. Afghan instability can affect India largely. Both countries share borders. India increased its interest in Afghanistan for security, economic, energy reasons. The role India can play in Afghanistan is to provide training to Afghan national security forces. Closer trade links should be developed between the two nations.

Regional organisations like Shanghai cooperation organisation can play its role to build security environment in Afghanistan. Afghan economy being at the worst stage needs aid, and assistance. Cooperation of neighbouring countries like India Pakistan and China can become a way out for Afghanistan. An honest effort is needed from Pakistan side to continue the combat process. If the process will remain successful, it can benefit Pakistan as well by dealing with the insurgency at home. For that matter, Pakistan must be convinced that the peace process in Afghanistan is in its best interest. Reconciliation between Taliban and Afghan government is need of the hour. Discussions between Taliban should be organized to end the issue and the ultimate aim should be to change discussion into dialogue and then into negotiations. Obama has been asserting the role of neighbouring nations in bringing out Afghanistan out of the crises. Afghans and many humanitarian aid organizations have a general sentiment that Afghanistan has no longer remained a priority for the international donor community and they are now more interested in North Africa and the Middle East. These organisations have invested much in Afghanistan

and they should complete their mission in order to bring Afghanistan on the path of stability. Central Asian states are potentially crucial to Afghan stability. Therefore, it is now the responsibility of the neighbouring nations like China, Russia, and India etc to forward their steps towards regional integration. Economic development is the base for stability in any country. Therefore, the international donors should take keen interest in the country to contribute towards its stability. The New Silk Road needs cooperation of the Central Asian nations so that Afghanistan can become a trade crossroads between South and Central Asia. NATO withdrawal is an opportunity for the central Asian nations to deepen the cooperation.

**Possible Outcomes:** i. NATO withdrawal is posing instability issues to the entire region of central Asia and there is need of reconciliation between militant groups and the government authorities. The successful negotiations may reduce the outside insurgency. However, certain elements in Afghanistan still exist, who don't accept Taliban as a political actor. ii. The Afghan government will struggle to remain in power after the NATO exit. However, Taliban also may not remain salient. It will try to change the centre of power in Kabul. iii. NATO exit may create power vacuum in Afghanistan that will pull the neighbouring actors like Pakistan, China, and Iran to exploit the chance. iv. Afghanistan being the world's largest Heroin producer may worsen the situation. The weak economy of Afghanistan may become poorly dependent on drug trafficking. v. Regional organisations like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can play an important role. This particular organisation involves all the big powers of Asia like China, India and Pakistan and the entire region of Central Asia. So a close cooperation among these nations can be successful in the entire peace process.

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