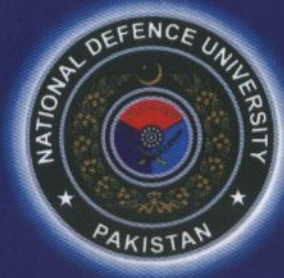
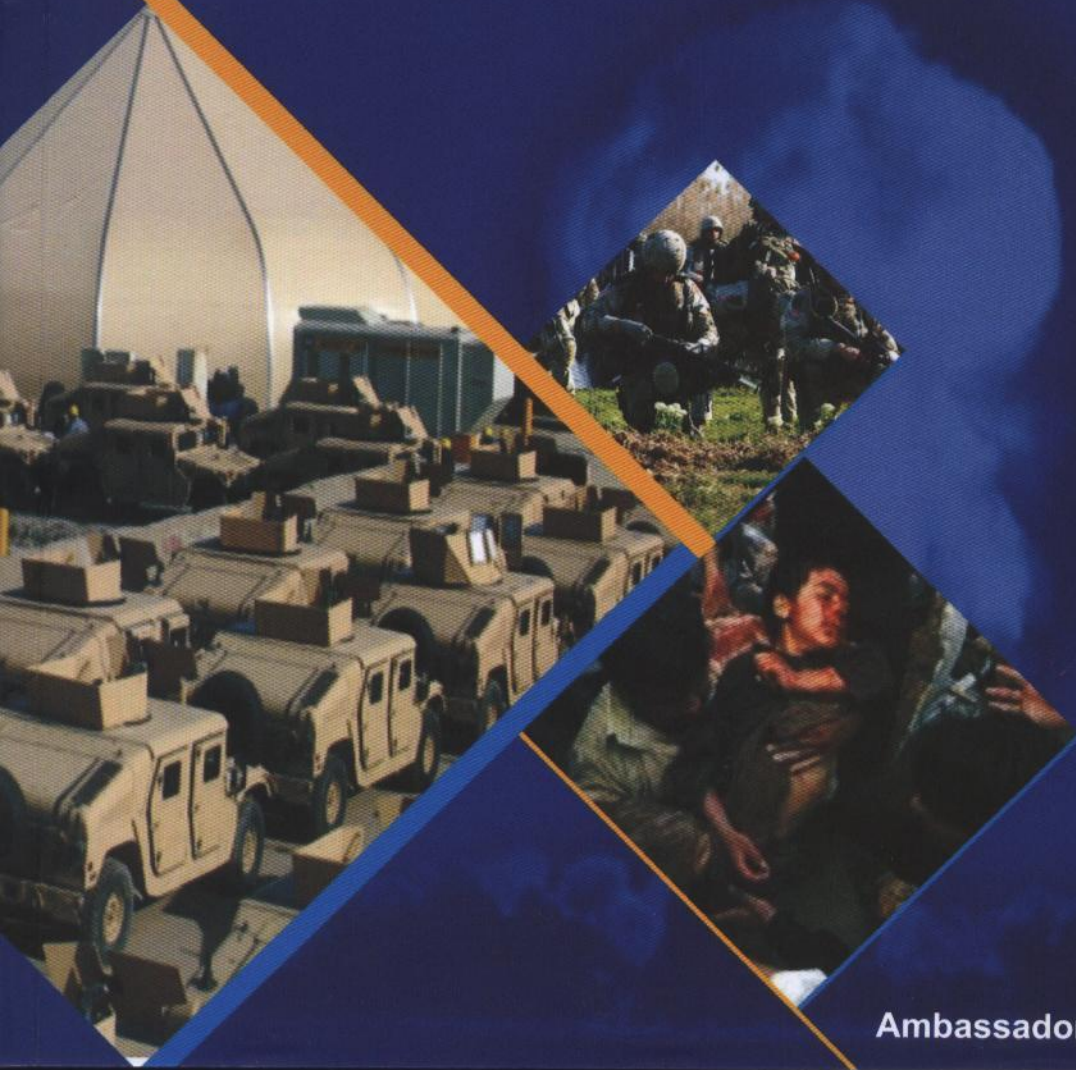


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**THE PROJECTED US WITHDRAWAL
FROM AFGHANISTAN: REVIEWING THE
BROAD CONTOURS AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR PAKISTAN**



Ambassador Arif Kamal

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
عَلَّمَ الْاِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

TAUGHT MAN THAT WHICH HE KNEW NOT

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**THE PROJECTED US WITHDRAWAL FROM
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Introduction

The announcement on US drawdowns from Afghanistan made in President Obama's speech of June 22 2011 marks the beginning of a transition in Afghanistan that holds the promise of a 'responsible end to war'. It aims at giving the administration a tangible report card by way of initial drawdowns (upto the level of three year old surge) in time with 2012 election, and later brings the exit strategy to fruition incrementally by 2014. The transition rests upon notions that the process would unfold possibilities of a broader national reconciliation involving Taliban, while Kabul increasingly takes up a lead role in managing the security environs.

President Obama's pronouncement on the 'receding tide of war' and a glow of 'secure peace' at a distance, comes in tandem with reoriented benchmarks for external engagement and a newer accent on 'investing in American people' instead of undertakings abroad. Certainly, the paradigm shift is propelled by the domestic American agenda. Notwithstanding the preceding highlights, the President reiterates his view of extremism and militancy in Pakistan and his resolve to serve the core US interest: no safe havens that would allow Al-Qaeda to attack US and its allies. The 'receding

war' may, therefore, unfold change of tactics and nature of combat and hence, carry serious implications for Pakistan.

Context

The proclaimed drawdown comes ten years after the US military engagement and warfare in Afghanistan. Since the landmark of 9/11, US has embarked upon a path that overwhelmingly impacted on the very nature of worldwide politics and rules of engagement in international relations. In this backdrop, Afghanistan turned to be a spectacular case study of US unilateralism. Concurrently, the initial US effort against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters gradually transformed into a multifaceted counterinsurgency effort to deal with violent extremism and instability and to support the newly-installed administration in Kabul to attain greater governance capacity and take charge of the situation. The increased military presence was complemented by support mechanism for non-military objectives of building governance capacity, and initiating sustainable economic growth and development. The strategy was to benefit the common man and empower him to serve as an instrument of combating counter-insurgency.

In recent years of Obama administration, the US revisited its Afghan policy twice in 2009, sending 30,000 surge troops to Afghanistan with a mission to break the Taliban momentum and to set the stage for an exit strategy. Nevertheless, the Afghan scenario has evidently reached a stalemate. Now with the announcement on withdrawals, the U.S administration is signaling an end to nation-

building efforts in Afghanistan. “We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place....”¹. Consequently, the U.S strategy will gradually move away from counter-insurgency, to a counter-terrorism² approach rather than dealing with issues in governance and economic growth.

The new policy announcement stays short of claiming a victory. However, the death of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden provides a *raison d'être* to recount successes: isolating Al-Qaeda, breaking the Taliban momentum and capacity-building of Kabul, and thus peg around this assertion a convenient case for initiating the exit strategy. It can now be claimed that the US has largely achieved its goals and stage is now set for gradual transfer of responsibilities from the US to Afghan security forces and to use the existing nucleus in Kabul for a grand reconciliation amongst the Afghans.

Revisiting the Initiative

The timeframe for the drawdown is envisaged in two broad phases: First, the initial withdrawal equal to the surge ordered in 2009 begins from this July till next summer, assuring a high visibility in the return of 10,000 by the end of this year and remaining 23,000 by mid 2012. This is well in time for the near-climax in the US election campaign. Second, the wind-down of the surge would still leave about 68,000 troops whose draws or relocation will be incremental and timed with the completion of transition by 2014. The announcement does not refer to a total withdrawal from the arena as about 25,000 troops may still be

‘stationed indefinitely’ in Afghanistan under an agreement being negotiated with Kabul³.

The pace and direction of the US withdrawals is also likely to impact on the reduction of the ISAF presence. This may go below the reversal in allied surge levels (10,000 odd) as Canadians, British and some other contingents pullout from the arena.

The transition in Afghanistan from now till 2012 comes with a good number of assumptions and each carries with it, implications both implicit and explicit, that ought to be itemized for a greater clarity in as much as possible at this stage.

- The transition is expected to unfold a lead role for Afghan security forces, while the US switches from a ‘combat role’ to a ‘support role’. There would be a greater accent on capacity building of the Afghan forces.
- The drawdowns once announced, must be seen as a “cast in concrete”⁴ in view of the US administration’s political compulsions. However, the drawdowns do not *ipso facto* imply a complete withdrawal.
- The US is evidently negotiating with Kabul retention of bases that continue to provide her operational maneuverability in the wake of withdrawals and beyond. A continued US presence will be an important element in the region’s power calculus.
- The drawdowns are likely to come in tandem with a change in the nature of combat. The operations in 2012

or even earlier, could be focused on surgical strikes rather than troop deployment. This could expand to more drone attacks in Pakistan's bordering region.

- Conciliation within Afghanistan: a catch-phrase for reconciling with Taliban will be the key factor for smooth withdrawal and for post withdrawal stability in the region. However, this key area in the transition still remains in the gray domain, and subject to adjustments as the wheel of implementation moves forward.

The Obama's vision of transition in Afghanistan as announced, does not elaborate on key areas that would have a bearing on the success of the process. It overlooks the role of regional stakeholders including Pakistan, in various segments of the actionable agenda: noninterference from and to Afghanistan while paving the way for its neutrality; and role that the neighborhood could play in carrying forward the process of reconciliation within Afghanistan. He plans to convene a conference of the NATO allies and partners⁵ in Chicago to shape next phase of transition. He however does not address the question as to how and when Afghanistan's neighbors would be associated with the process.

The drawdown in military presence in Afghanistan is indeed sequential to the US domestic political compulsions as engendered by a weak economy and the upcoming Presidential elections. However, its timeframe as unfolded attempts at striking a balance between the level of popular expectations and demands from military⁶, and perhaps, also an operational necessity to avoid a

vacuum in the very early phase of withdrawal. The scale of initial withdrawal, is therefore, viewed as cognizant of the electoral mood as compared with his top brass's expectation of a slower move that would have confined 'initial pullback to a token of 5,000'⁷ while the remaining force in the surge would not return until the end of 2012. The withdrawals equal to the surge would thus allow the President, well in time with the election campaign, to demonstrate his ability to wind-down the war.

No doubt, Obama's speech is a precursor to the 2012 election campaign and therefore, a window on the administration's image building dilemma. It mirrors the American need to reprioritize their resources and capacity to address issues in the domestic arena that rest upon weak economy while promising a "responsible end" to the overseas wars, Afghanistan being in the forefront. This reconfirms that in the days to come, the imperatives of the US recessionary downturn which shapes the domestic electoral issues, would cast its shadow on the country's vision of external engagements.

Notwithstanding the significance of the drawdowns, the speech is a comment on the stalemate between the US and the Taliban insurgency and therefore, on the US inability to win the Afghan war. The very fact of the US decision to initiate dialogue with the Taliban after ten years of warfare provides a latent recognition on this count, though coached in words that relate to both 'facts and fiction'⁸. The current Afghan scenario is neither comparable with the US retreat from Vietnam, nor it is any closer to

the ‘Soviet defeat’ in Afghanistan. However, the situation as evolved in recent years, already provides room for a contention that ‘the US has lost the war by not winning it’⁹ and for comparing President Obama’s ‘vision’ with that of Mikhail Gorbachev¹⁰.

The Obama’s speech while calling for a ‘responsible end to long wars’, seeks to define the benchmarks about the nature of U.S engagements abroad. Instead of overextending the U.S forces or shying away from responsibility as an anchor of global security, the President would prefer a more central course. The U.S ‘need not deploy large armies overseas’ when the source of threat could be targeted otherwise. This serves as a reminder of Vice President Joe Biden’s advocacy of surgical strikes rather than troop deployment¹¹. The scenario may, therefore, bring greater conflict along the border¹² and mount pressure on Pakistan in the coming phase.

Notwithstanding the drawdowns and the new rules of engagement, the speech underscores that audience at home and abroad make no mistake about the US resolve to protect its core interest: ‘no safe haven from which Al-Qaeda or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland or our allies’¹³. The drawdowns do not, therefore, imply the US eclipse from the scene. It is in this context that he speaks of ‘enduring relationship’ with Afghanistan and of addressing the terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and very much in Pakistan.

Sustaining US Interests amidst the Exit

The US exit strategy from Afghanistan though carried in the backdrop of domestic compulsions and a stalemate in Afghanistan cannot be viewed in isolation from the superpower's sustaining interests in the region. The drawdowns do not imply an eclipse from the region in strategic terms. Certainly, a repeat of the Vietnam scenario is not in the offing. Second, the withdrawals are interwoven with the capacity to secure flanks and look beyond the narrow prism of the contemporary phase. Third, the exit should not be at the cost of retaining 'safe havens' within Afghanistan and in the neighborhood that are threatening for the security of the US and its allies. The US need for an 'enduring presence' on the Afghan soil and for reconciliation with the Taliban resistance though ostensibly contradictory ought to be viewed, in keeping with the above considerations.

US Afghan Dialogues

The US relations with Kabul are now entering a new and uncertain period as the regime's governance capacity is still in the making and it is viewed as an embryo for post-withdrawal political dispensation. In the meantime, US policy viz the regime has moved towards securing a long-term security agreement, like the one it had signed with Iraq two years back.

The bilateral strategic dialogue is already in progress to translate the US quest to build an 'enduring partnership' and thus secure a 'permanent beachhead' in the region. It can legalize an arrangement for six US military bases¹⁴ in the country. The

arrangement for secure bases when unfolded, will only reconfirm the view that ‘once the U.S forces take residence abroad-never abandons the military bases, so will be the case of Afghanistan’.

The possibility of US permanent bases in the post-withdrawal Afghanistan raises the specter of a change in the nature of combat¹⁵ in what President Obama has described as a ‘receding war’. With the U.S troops’ drawdown on land, its surgical strikes can become even more intense in terms of ‘specialized operations and air strikes’¹⁶. These target-oriented strikes would have the potential to disrupt any sanctuary of Al-Qaeda or affiliates that are viewed as the source of offence for either the U.S or its allies.

From the standpoint of possible impact, the permanent bases unfold uncertainties for Pakistan, beyond the troops drawdown. This also raises questions as to what would be the level of Taliban rejection of the move and its fallout on the pace of drawdowns. However, on the larger canvas a permanent US presence is likely to create serious ‘social and political discontent’ in Afghanistan and make Af-Pak even more complex than Vietnam, or Iraq for that matter.

US - Taliban Dialogue

The U.S exit strategy necessitates a ‘political settlement’ that entails reconciling with various Afghan streams including the Taliban. In this context, dialogue with Taliban stands out as the most critical factor on which withdrawal is anchored. The US is already

engaged in a ‘reaching-out’ with Afghan Taliban on a bilateral track that tends to marginalize Pakistani role to-date.

The U.S engagement with the Taliban is varyingly described as ‘scooping’, ‘contacts’ and perhaps ‘talks’¹⁷ but certainly not negotiations as yet. The credentials of the interlocutors, the body of resistance they represent and the scope of discussion remains in the gray area. However, the direction if not pace, is already vouched by the US-facilitated preparatory steps: the UN Security Council adoption of measures to separate the lists of Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the context of sanctions regime¹⁸; and the acknowledgements of having reached Taliban for talks.

Notwithstanding the nature of the contact, it is safer to presume that at this time some sort of ‘talks are underway with the go between’¹⁹. A broader and more visible set of peace talks when unfolded, should centre around items such as agenda, scope, level of delegations, venue and preconditions, if any. The conditions at the outset, may relate to the release of prisoners before an ambience can be created for conflict resolution talks and withdrawal of extra regional forces. The core question would then relate to power sharing options: acceptance of the existing constitutional frame and sharing of provinces; and/or changes in the constitution.

The track of a successful dialogue with the U.S would promise Taliban the benefits such as a share of political power in Kabul, together with space to advance their religious practices, control over territory, economic dividends and above all guarantees

of U.S withdrawals. However, from the logic of stated positions ‘there is no indication on the part of Taliban of their readiness to deviate from their consistent stand: ‘no negotiations (with the US) as long as the coalition forces are on their soil’²⁰. Concurrently, the present U.S posture lays down conditionalities that Taliban leaders must disarm, cut ties with Al-Qaeda and recognize the government of Kabul and its constitution. It is unlikely that these conditionalities would sustain as the US talks with the Taliban acquire greater visibility (and the Americans find a way to bring the resistance or a part of it, to a multilateral forum such as the Bonn Conference in December). In the interim, the scenario seems contradictory and offers a hazy picture of future direction of the negotiations.

A broad reconciliation in Afghanistan should serve the core interests of US and Pakistan, beside that of the Afghan people. However, at present, the visible US moves to directly access the Taliban resistance while bypassing Pakistan is a manifestation of the trust-deficit that continues to exist between the two stakeholders. No doubt, in the ultimate analysis, Pakistan’s participation is required for the success of the transition in Afghanistan, and the secure drawdowns as the wheel of implementations moves ahead.

Pak – US Relations: Contemporary Scenario

Pakistan-US relations remain complex, faced with the biggest ever trust deficit even after a decade of alliance in GWOT. The fallouts of the Abbottabad incident have put Pakistan’s decade long alliance of fighting with ‘arms and blood’ under scrutiny in the policy making circles in Washington. Due to this trust deficit, the

two arenas are again seized with debate on the very primary question if and how much the interest of the two states converge. The 'receding war' in Afghanistan does not *ipso facto* diminish apprehensions of the US unilateralism viz Pakistan. The possibility of increasing frequency of drone attacks, cross border stealth counterterrorism strikes and the decreasing Pakistani leverage over U.S due to decreasing logistical support of U.S are some of the serious concerns for Pakistan. Predominant anti-Pakistan feelings in US and anti-US feelings in Pakistan do not help ease the situation. It is therefore, a challenge for leadership of both the countries to fall prey to the public mood.

The spotlight on Pakistan in Obama's speech reconfirms the magnitude of the problem as he directly referred to terrorist safe havens and rise of extremism in Pakistan. He gave out a vivid message to address the menace and presses Pakistan to expand its participation. 'Do more' syndrome continues to haunt.

Pakistan - US relations have been varying, given developments in GWOT, over the decade of alliance. In the same sequence, the defining themes of President Obama's June 2011 speech sets forth new directions for this relationship for the days ahead. Given the transactional (less strategic) nature of the relations, Pakistan is expected to comply with the changes.

The nature and focus of war seems to be transforming as US despite drawdown of troops maintains surgical strike capacity by

securing bases in Afghanistan. This seems to be a hanging sword for Pakistan and gives rise to two differing views in this context:

First: the retaining of bases in Afghanistan may become the thin edge of the wedge for Pakistan and there is a possibility that the war receding in Afghanistan may find its new axis in future²¹. Pakistan should not underestimate the seriousness of the situation and must recognize the dangers underlined by President Obama's speech.²²

Second: conversely, however, another view from our neighborhood reads the situation as a formidable challenge for Pakistan but optimistically titles it 'a mixed blessing'²³ for Pakistan in future.

The Afghan transition without a sustainable political settlement and smooth US withdrawals, unfolds the specter of intensification of conflict on our borderline and a reenactment of the post 1979 scenario. Ironically, an unchallenged rise of Taliban would ipso facto also marginalize India in Afghanistan (and hence the covert Indian operations to destabilize Pakistan). The US support for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan has obviously been discomfiting for Pakistan. Indian moves for a foothold there, beyond engagement in the reconstruction process, is already reflected in numerous consular posts alongside the Durand Line and funneling of equipment and training to Baloch insurgents (on the model of Mukhti Bhani). The development serves as fore-warner of the Indian quest for larger undertakings in and from the post-

withdrawal Afghanistan that carry potential threat for Pakistan's security. Conversely, it evokes thinking in Pakistani intellectual circles that Pakistan should reserve the right to take a 'protective reaction', no less than the US right to strike against remote 'safe havens'.

It is, therefore, important to seek US understanding for a three-fold contention: carry Pakistan on board in the process of reconciliation, second, de-emphasize Indian factor in Afghanistan, and third, follow our 'redlines' (drones/surgical strikes) that cause destabilization and constrain us from contributing in the process of stabilization so vital in the wake of US drawdowns.

The current scope and direction of US – Taliban talks may carry two sides of a coin. The prospects of these talks, without taking Pakistan on board, depict the nature of relationship between the two uneasy allies. However, there are pockets of Taliban resistance: seen as trump cards in Pakistan's hand, which can be activated as the talks proceed to dialogue process in the later stages. This constituency ought to be harnessed to neutralize the aggressive overtones in the US posture viz Pakistan.

Conclusions

Findings

- The pronounced pullout is rooted in the imperatives of US domestic politics, and in the stalemate reached in the Afghan war scenario. However, it does not diminish the overall US core interest to spot and eliminate the 'safe

havens' of militancy that carry the potential of threatening the US and its allies.

- The US drawdowns from Afghanistan are coupled with plans for stabilization from within that involve reconciling with Taliban, progress in handing over security responsibility to Afghan Army and to secure bases for the post-withdrawal phase. The transition is, therefore, a multi-dimensional process.
- Af-Pak strategy earlier coined by the Obama administration stands as an antecedent and precursor to the current wind-down of the counterinsurgency strategy and implementation of counter-terrorism strategy. The so called 'safe havens' in Pakistan are likely to remain in the US spotlight.
- The emerging shift in policy appears to be in consonance with Joe Biden's earlier emphasis on using 'targeted force and drone technology' without deploying large armies overseas for cutting down the war costs. In this context, there is a continuous threat of the unilateral US-led strikes into Pakistani territory. US re-posturing in Afghanistan, adopting strategy of surrender to turn weakness into strength is geared to facilitate its exit strategy.
- The drawdowns from Afghanistan are interlinked with the progression of reconciliation process. The US 'fight-

and-talk' approach if persisting carries the potential to impede rather than give confidence to the opening moves towards a political settlement.

- Reduction in force levels and limited capacity of Afghan national army implies provision of space to TTP for continuing their war against Pakistan from Afghanistan.
- Pakistan has security interests and can play a greater role in the safe US drawdowns and also in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan as the wheel of implementation moves forward.

Recommendations

- Notwithstanding the nature of Pakistan-US relationship, it is important to emphasize on convergence of interests as stakeholder in the facilitation of a political settlement in Afghanistan, side by side with the US drawdowns and reconciliation process.
- The national strategists need to mobilize and harness our constituencies within the Afghan Taliban to be readied for an engagement in the conciliation process as it moves forward and for this, engage President Hamid Karazi into the loop.
- The induction of our constituencies in the Afghan reconciliation process ought to be skillfully used towards neutralizing the US hostility, without sacrificing our national interests in Afghanistan and the region.

- The ‘Kick and Hug strategy’ envisaged by the US might cause further complexities in the reconciliation process. Hence, it is important to impress upon the US to bring strategic pause in fighting at an appropriate stage.
- The regional powers Russia, China, and Iran need to be taken onboard as without their participation a peaceful solution to the Afghan issue can become a difficult task. We should call for involving China on the grounds of common interest in the peace process.

Author

Ambassador Arif Kamal is a former Pakistani diplomat, now chairing Global Studies at ISSRA/NDU. He had moved from teaching politics in the early 1970s to the diplomatic arena across the globe and a full-bloom professional career over 34 years.

Notes

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⁷ Dr. Farrukh Saleem, “American going Home”, The News, June 26, 2011

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²⁰ Op.Cit.17

²¹ Tanvir Ahmed Khan, “U.S-Afghanistan Dialogue”, The Express Tribune, June 27 2011

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