

## Situation in Afghanistan: Pakistan's Security Concerns and Likely Scenarios

By Majid Mahmood

The strategic landscape of Afghanistan is witnessing a steady shift as the draw down date for coalition forces, set to be 2014, approaches. It would be pertinent to conclude that 2014 represents a transition point not only for Afghanistan but for the entire region. The political and strategic ground work done to meet future challenges in this time frame will largely determine the outcome for the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region.

Pakistan as an important regional player continues to monitor the developments in Afghanistan and will be willing to play a constructive role in bringing the war in Afghanistan to an end in the interest of stability in the region.

Pakistan's foreign minister Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar in her key note address at German Council of Foreign Relations stated that:

*"Pakistan, in its own core national interest is irrevocably committed to achieving stability in Afghanistan through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process. It is for the Afghans themselves to define the contours of reconciliation"<sup>1</sup>*

Important questions, however, persist about the nature of post 2014 geopolitical situation in Afghanistan. For example what will be the future political setup in Afghanistan that can ensure stability in relations with all its neighbors? , what will be the nature of US led ISAF commitment to Afghanistan? , Will Afghan security forces be able to take on the security responsibilities from withdrawing coalition forces? And most significantly the role of India in future political settings in Afghanistan, border security mechanisms between Pakistan and Afghanistan etc.

Newly appointed US secretary of State Chuck Haigel's 2011 remarks as revealed recently, made in his then capacity as US senator, about Indian efforts to finance instability in Pakistan through Afghanistan have confirmed Pakistan's fears regarding Indian activities in Afghanistan.

Bilateral strategic partnership agreements between Afghan government and regional and international powers does indicate a possible blue print of strategic settings

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<sup>1</sup> Hina Rabbani Khar., "Changing Regional and Global Environment; Pakistan's Perspective"(speech, Berlin Germany, September 3, 2012), <https://dgap.org/en/node/22138>

beyond 2014 but the fog of uncertainty will continue to make future developments difficult to determine.

The number of “residual forces” being kept behind by United States has also become a subject of debate recently. Although the final decision on the issue by Obama administration remains to be seen, several options were leaked to media regarding force composition in post 2014 settings but a figure of 10,000 appears more authentic.

German Defense Minister Thomas de Maiziere talked to reporters after recently concluded NATO Defense Ministers summit that *“Panetta had told him at the meeting that US would leave 8,000-10,000 troops in the country at the end of 2014”*<sup>2</sup>

Back channel talks between Taliban and the United States remain murky at best although some observers see some progress in moving forward towards an agreement between some Taliban factions and United States. Pakistan’s key role as a facilitator of these talks has been acknowledged by United States.

Victoria Nuland , US State Department spokesman was of the view that *“The United States and Pakistan were committed to supporting Afghan-Afghan reconciliation, which “needs to be done in a manner that encourages the best possible path forward, a renunciation of violence and acceptance of the Afghan constitution. But we are very supportive of dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan that can support reconciliation.”*<sup>3</sup>

International players such as China and Russia are also keeping a watchful eye on the developments in Afghanistan. Both powers are interested in two important issues when it comes to safeguarding their interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. First, there are perceived fears on spillover of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia as a result of “hasty withdrawal” of international forces. Second, the issue of US retaining permanent military bases in Afghanistan has created strategic anxieties in both states.

In reply to a question about US military bases in post 2014 situation at the conclusion of Russia – NATO ministerial summit in April 2012, Russian foreign minister R.V Lavrov said that:

*“The international and particularly American contingents are in Afghanistan to implement the UN Security Council mandate aimed at eliminating the threats on the territory of Afghanistan. And it is not quite reasonable to set fixed terms of troops*

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<sup>2</sup> **“US to leave troops in Afghanistan after 2014, says German official,”** last modified February 22, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/22/us-troops-afghanistan>

<sup>3</sup> **“ US praises Pakistan’s support for peace in Afghanistan”,** Last modified January 5, 2013, <http://dawn.com/2013/01/05/us-praises-pakistans-support-for-peace-in-afghanistan/>

*withdrawal before the Afghan side gets able to provide security in its state by itself. But when the UN Security Council mandate is implemented, there will be no reasons for the foreign troops to stay in Afghanistan and in the region in general*<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Russia is also enhanced by existing supply route it offers to NATO forces for its mission in Afghanistan known as Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Obviously, NDN creates opportunities for Russia and enhances its position in the region vis a vis US led alliance with regards to the drawdown of NATO forces from Afghanistan.

Iran is also a key player in Afghan end game as it has provided assistance to Karzai government in Kabul and enjoys influence in Hazara and Tajik communities. Afghanistan's South West bordering Iran has been relatively calm as compared to other provinces although recent incidents in these regions too have produced concerns on security situation. How will Iran position itself in future political dispensation of Afghanistan is being closely monitored by regional as well as international actors.

China has significant economic interests in Afghanistan particularly in the development of mineral resources which are estimated around one trillion dollars.

Russian and Chinese response to these challenges may complicate the situation in Afghanistan and present foreign policy challenge for Pakistan.

The post 9/11 developments in Afghanistan have resulted in the development of threats on three fronts for Pakistan as opposed to traditional Eastern threat.

The Eastern threat for Pakistan remains potent even today, but the second internal security problem linked to war in Afghanistan, and the third, danger emanating from the situation in Afghanistan, including presence of extra regional forces (ERF), 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.

Afghanistan will continue to feature prominently in Pakistan's defense and foreign policy planning in the immediate future. Given the uncertainty of trajectory of future events in Afghanistan, scenario building based on existing trends will be helpful in identifying possible dangers, risks and opportunities for Pakistan's foreign policy.

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<sup>4</sup> RV Lavrov., Russia – NATO ministerial level meeting (Press Conference, Brussels, April 19,2012), [http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/55f27937ac7f74af44257a02003e0d9c!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/55f27937ac7f74af44257a02003e0d9c!OpenDocument)

Three scenarios are likely to emerge with regards to conflict in Afghanistan:

**Scenario-1:** US and Taliban factions reach an understanding on an agreed blueprint for Afghanistan Post 2014 which results in the inclusion of Taliban factions in the government, and a long term military presence of United States in Afghanistan. In such an eventuality, the role and position taken by ex-mujahedeens and warlords will be important. Recently reported assertion by one senior Taliban leader regarding formation a political party to achieve movement's objectives might signal a shift in its approach towards reconciliation process.

**Scenario-2:** Progress on reconciliation halts and United States gives a new deadline for withdrawal, possibly 2015, and steps up military pressure on Taliban. Resultantly more pressure on Pakistan to "do more" and spillover effects in Pakistan.

**Scenario-3:** Serious deterioration in already fragile US – Pakistan relations leading to breakdown of Afghan reconciliation process.

**Scenario -4:** Serious crisis situation emerges between India and Pakistan that could shift Pakistan's focus to counter India. The recent LOC tensions are a case in point where India upped the ante against Pakistan and the fragile bilateral relations suffered a temporary strain.

**Scenario-5:** Arrangements for a stable government are not yet in place including security arrangements for a stable government, nor are Afghan security forces yet prepared for taking security responsibilities. Recent killings of NATO and Afghan security members from within the security apparatus is indicative of level of discipline, professionalism and mistrust existing between NATO ISAF, their Afghan counterparts as well as within the Afghan national army cadres.

In sum, the likely strategic landscape that is in the process of development does not promote Pakistan's security in the region. Conflict in Afghanistan has left deep effects on Pakistan's security, politics and economy in the last 10 years. In the next decade or so the challenges for Pakistan's policy makers are not likely to be any less.

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