

## **Current Challenges and Future Settlement Opportunities in Afghanistan**

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Afghanistan has been subject to occupation, invasion, civil war and conflict for almost thirty years. The events that have taken place in Afghanistan have not merely impacted on the region, they have engulfed it. Although thirteen years have passed since the start of the USA's operation in Afghanistan, scholars still discuss its internal and external ramifications, and the prospective developments in the country after the withdrawal of the US forces. This paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which the USA's operation and withdrawal plan have contributed to the current challenges and potential futures for Afghanistan. It takes into consideration the internal and external factors that impact on the stability of the political environment in the region; and proposes foresights of the possible scenarios for future state formation and political (re)orientation in Afghanistan. In conclusion, the paper suggests that the withdrawal plan of the US forces in Afghanistan should be reconsidered as the continuance of instability in the country is likely to have a negative impact on NATO's effectiveness. It also postulates that the regional powers should cooperate in the containment of problems in Afghanistan and reinforcement of the reconstruction of the country in order to build enduring peace in the region.

*Key Words:* ANSF, US withdrawal plan, instability, regional powers, state formation, Taliban

Afghanistan has been subject to occupation, invasion, civil war and conflict for almost thirty years. Within this period, nearly one and a half million people have lost their lives and around six million people have had to leave the country; with more than five million of those going to Pakistan. A number of scholars refer to the current conflicts in Syria as the "New Afghanistan". The experiences of Afghanistan have not only impacted on the region but also engulfed it. Although thirteen years have passed since the start of the USA's operation in Afghanistan, scholars still discuss and debate the current situation of the country and whether the USA has impacted upon it positively.

To fully understand this debate a historical analysis of Afghanistan must be undertaken. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great managed to invade neighbouring Iran in six months, whereas it took him almost three years to achieve dominance over the lands of Afghanistan. Britain, whose domain was so far reaching that it was said that the sun never sets in the British Empire, attempted to invade Afghanistan three times, all to no avail. As a matter of fact, in the first war, almost fifteen thousand British soldiers were killed. The Soviet Union was the next key state to seek to control Afghanistan, but had to call their invasion to an end after losing fifteen thousand people in ten years. This invasion without doubt dealt a big blow to the "Communist Bloc" and the Soviet Union has since dissolved.

This history begs the question of whether the USA's invasion of Afghanistan was to be any different. Has "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF-A) really brought permanent freedom to Afghanistan? Without a doubt, these questions will continue to be asked for the foreseeable future. In analysing Afghanistan's position, it is important to examine the possible scenarios for the future of the country and the surrounding region once the transformation process has been completed. What will the main policy decisions of the regional powers entail? What will the impact of the results be on the security architecture and unity of the West?

The aim of this paper is to analyse the internal and external impacts of the prospective developments in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US forces. This includes the current challenges in Afghanistan, primarily the future role of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which are a major component of the USA's withdrawal plan. Along with the evaluation of the role of a wide range of internal dynamics, this paper also focuses on the external forces. This includes the regional powers that are susceptible to the after-effects of the US withdrawal plan, and the context in which they will take part in affecting the stability of the political environment in the region. This paper concludes with foresights of the possible scenarios for future state formation and political (re)orientation in Afghanistan.

### **The withdrawal plan of the USA and the Afghan National Security Forces**

There are three main reasons why Afghanistan is chosen as a case study. The first being that throughout history the strategies of great powers such as Britain, the Soviet Union and the USA, have involved the spread of their power in Central

Asia through establishing a firm control over Afghanistan. Today, the control of Afghanistan not only results in the spreading of power, but also the ability to oversee China, Pakistan, India and Iran. These countries are considered to be crucial nuclear powers with respect to political, economic and global security. It can be argued that the inclusion of Western Turkestan states to this analysis would also be beneficial in gaining a better understanding of the power dynamics of the region.

Secondly, along with the military capabilities and resources of Afghanistan, its geopolitical position in the middle of three major cultural basins – Islam, Hinduism and China – indisputably provides Afghanistan the ability to affect geo-cultural dynamics.

Finally, Afghanistan, as an intersection point of the three main transit routes from Asia to the South, along with the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, has great importance geographically in the movement of petroleum and natural gas resources from the Caspian Basin to the Indian Ocean. This, in turn, highlights the necessity to establish control over its territory.

Today, the international community is predominantly focused on issues in Syria and Yemen. However, the release of Afghanistan as an unstable country, by the withdrawal of the USA, will cause more severe regional and global problems. These problems are not easy to tackle. In that respect, the main debate is whether the ANSF are ready to control the whole country. Although the withdrawal plan of the USA seems to be specific to Afghanistan, the plan has wider regional and global impacts.

The USA, arguably the principal actor in instigating instability in Afghanistan, has begun to withdraw without achieving its goal of bringing enduring freedom to the people of Afghanistan. As per the security agreement signed between the USA and Afghanistan, the USA began to withdraw 41,000 of its troops. The agreement was to remove all but 12,000 foreign soldiers associated with NATO and its allies responsible for the training and support of the ANSF. Since this agreement was made, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani paid an official visit to the USA and renegotiated the number of US troops to be maintained until the end of 2015. Subsequent to this new agreement, it is stated that the USA will increase the number of troops it is committing to Afghanistan as part of the NATO force to around 9800, instead of the original lower figure of 5500 (Bowman, 2015). Although both Presidents agreed to slow down the withdrawal of the US troops, they also declared that the remaining forces' remit would only extend to training and counterterrorism activities, with the intention of reinforcing the military capabilities of the ANSF. They would not be carrying out offensive combat missions (Ahmed & Goldstein, 2015).

On the other hand, one of the most important, as yet unresolved, problems in Afghanistan is ensuring the ANSF have the ability to protect and guarantee the unity of its country. At the NATO Summit in 2010, where the withdrawal plans were discussed for the first time, there was a strong consensus and political support for the finalisation of the passing of responsibility from the foreign military forces to the Afghan Army and police. However, the reality was a very different story. There is a great disparity between the opinion of the Afghans and the Western powers with respect to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

The Afghan forces have drastically failed in their independent attempts to prevent suicide attacks; many lives have been lost as a result. This outcome points to the fact that the insufficient levels of able personnel and the lack of necessary resources are of great concern for Afghanistan.

It was decided at the most recent NATO Summit in Wales, that the allies will provide financial support worth 4.1 billion dollars annually for use within the security organisations of Afghanistan. However, this does not meet the annual cost of the Afghan Army, which is nearly 6 billion dollars. If the security situation allowed, it was intended that the number of Afghan military personnel would be reduced from 325,000 to 230,500 (Ferris-Rotman, 2013). Due to the effects of the most recent conflicts in the Middle East, this reduction of ANSF numbers has come to a halt. Instead, USA officials, including the Secretary of State John Kerry and Defence Secretary Ash Carter, declared that there has been a series of agreements that will lead to the increase of the ANSF personnel to 352,000 (Shinkman, 2015).

In spite of these agreements, it is predicted that the unwarranted distribution of the financial resources among Afghan soldiers, will cause an average of 63,000 to leave the Army annually (Grare, 2014: 2). This situation directly impacts on the ability of the Army to carry out its duty, and raises a real concern that these trained soldiers could join other forces.

In addition to these problems, the Afghan Army does not have any direct air support, nor does it have an intelligence service. When the inadequate logistics are also taken into consideration, the reality of the Afghan Army's current situation becomes discernible. Although the Afghan Army continues to have the responsibility for the security of Afghanistan, it is not difficult to foresee that they will be incapable of controlling the whole country. If they cannot act as a strong deterrent, then Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, will undoubtedly be frail, exposed and defenceless.

#### **The regional impact of the (in)stability of Afghanistan**

In light of these internal and external dynamics, and the political quarrelling in Afghanistan, it can be deduced that any security development at domestic level will be susceptible to external political influence, primarily from Pakistan, but also other countries in the region such as Iran, India, Russia, China and many others in Central Asia.

### **Pakistan; a lone country**

The origin of Pakistani political influence in Afghanistan can be traced back to the 1980s. The main aim for Pakistan is to establish amicable and peaceful relations with Kabul, particularly focusing on border management whilst protecting the Afghan refugee presence in Pakistan. However, the border is not currently recognised by Kabul. The border, also known as the Durand Line, was drawn by Britain and is an unrealistic border in demographical, social, ethnic and tribal senses, underpinning the current conflicts in the region.

This border has not been changed since it was first created by the British Empire and has led to major problems in the region. The border region is largely rough, mountainous terrain with a harsh climate which makes it difficult to provide control and security (Stratfor, 2008). Furthermore, as the border passes through the middle of the Pashtun community, the legitimacy of the border can be called into question. It is important to note that the Pashtun population in Pakistan is higher than it is in Afghanistan. The border has never been taken seriously by the Pashtun community living on either side of the line and this has made it difficult to prevent movement across the border. The disregard for the border among Pashtun communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with the terrain and weather conditions, makes it impossible to carry out an effective border control (Karaca, 2011).

The failure to provide border security for Pakistan is a concern, not only due to threats such as drug, arms and human trafficking, but also its combat with Tehrik-e Taliban. The lack of border control poses a great internal security problem for Pakistan, but the main priority for Pakistan is minimising the threat this border poses for India. For this reason, there are external powers, led by the USA, pressuring Pakistan to deploy additional military power on the Afghan border; this additional military requirement cannot be met by Pakistan. Regardless of Pakistan's ability to provide a greater border presence, Pakistan believes that further control could put pressure on the Pashtun community, leading to disorder within Pakistan.

Pakistan is currently trying to prevent a possible unification of the Afghan Taliban and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan. This explains Pakistan's reluctance to assault the Afghan Taliban; and they instead attempt to bring them to the negotiation table. Nevertheless, even if a workable relationship is achievable, the emergence of Afghanistan under the influence of the Taliban could be a great threat for establishing 'Pashtunistan' in the future. Moreover, Pakistan is fearful of the possible manipulation of the Pakistan Taliban by the Afghan Taliban and the Indian intelligence services.<sup>1</sup>

For Islamabad, the instability in Afghanistan being controllable, combined with the low density of conflicts are reason enough for the prevention of the establishment of 'Pashtunistan' as a separate state. This would suggest that the stability of Afghanistan is more important to Pakistan than it is to Afghanistan's other neighbours. On the other hand, Pakistan's promise to the Northern Alliance to deter a possible Taliban intervention in the North, with the acceptance of the Taliban's domination in the South, actually serves for its desire to prevent the Taliban's overall domination in Afghanistan. In turn, this prevents the Pashtun community from achieving the power that Pakistan is so fearful of (Grare, 2004).

Furthermore, this policy ensures India's influence over Kabul is not strengthened. Conversely, it also causes setbacks for Pakistan; Iran, Tajikistan and even Uzbekistan can potentially increase their effectiveness in the North by struggle or mutual consent to mediate with the Taliban which could result in the isolation of Pakistan.

### **Iran; an active player**

Iran saw the second highest influx of immigrants after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. In contrast to Pakistan, Iran has never exploited its own land for resistance and insurgency.

Iran strongly believes that the USA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have created a situation that allows the Taliban to seize power in order to weaken Iran's regional power. However, it can be argued that the conduct of the Taliban has widened the sphere of influence of Iran over Shiites in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, the policy pursued over Khazarians has negatively affected Iran's potential to build positive relations with other groups. Whilst Iran antagonizes the US military presence in Afghanistan, it does not want the Taliban to re-seize power. This situation puts Iran somewhere between a rock and a hard place. For the time being, the US presence is the fundamental guarantee of the Taliban's failure to take control. It can be argued that it is imperative for both the USA and Iran to prevent the country from being presided over by the Taliban and turned into a safe haven for terrorist groups (Nader et al., 2014: 1-58).

Although the turmoil created by the civil unrest in the Arab world, particularly in Syria, is primarily a threat to Iran; it has also created an opportunity for improved relations with the West. Iran has been cut off from the outside world by sanctions since the Iranian revolution in 1979, but there have been opportunities to build a relationship with the West through nuclear negotiations and the combined fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Given this, it can be argued that the relationship that Iran has built with the USA through the joint fight against ISIS can also contribute to a combined working relationship to help improve the situation in Afghanistan.

One of the most striking recent developments is the result of the 6+1 talks that led to the peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear programme (Borger & Lewis, 2015). As a result of this agreement, Iran is exempt from the economic sanctions

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<sup>1</sup> For further information see (Rashid, 2011: 305-317).

previously enforced by the West. Now that Iran is no longer reliant on its close economic relationship with Pakistan, it is willing to isolate Pakistan on the issue of Afghanistan.

The conclusion of the nuclear negotiations with Iran was a much awaited landmark for all of the major international actors. The unique element to the nuclear talks is the compulsion for the West and Iran to cooperate. This cooperation is critical given the current climate in the Middle East, particularly the threat levied by ISIS both in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, if the negotiations were not to be successfully concluded, then the internal dynamics in both Afghanistan and Pakistan could continue to deteriorate. However, most recently on 14 July 2015, the world powers have reached a deal with Iran on limiting the country's nuclear ability in return for the lifting of international oil and economic sanctions. The deal is widely accepted as a "historic" deal that not only opens "new chapter" in Iran's relations with the world (BBC News, 2015) but also makes future cooperation between Iran and the USA more likely on global and regional security matters.

In light of these developments, it can be argued that Iran is one of the crucial actors in shaping the future of Afghanistan. This is highlighted by Iran's immense influence over Tajik and Khazarian communities within the northern groups, despite the formation of a Taliban sympathising Afghan government in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. In fact one could conclude that this influence is more important given the current Afghan governance. A reason for the influence of Iran on the Khazarian community is the ethnic demographics of their own state, with a large Shia sect and that the official language of Iran is the Khazarian native tongue: Persian. Due to this link between the nations, a peaceful settlement that does not involve Iran will most certainly be deficient.

#### **India; a role model or not?**

India is considered to be one of the key states that try to exert influence over Afghanistan. New Delhi yearns for Afghanistan to be a trade bridge between Central Asia and South Asia for the transportation of Caspian energy resources. Nonetheless, it is among New Delhi's intentions to give support to the democratic process in Afghanistan, as they believe that their own multicultural social structure and democracy can serve as a role model for the future of Afghanistan. Therefore, India chooses to ignore that the Afghan community is not keen on accepting any different model of state because of their own geography and cultural heritage.

The ignorance of the same truth by the West could make the Pashtun communities think that there will be consensus between India and the West. This situation in turn makes India vulnerable to the influence of Iran on the Indian Khazarian and Tajik communities. The improving relations between the USA and Iran also impact upon India, as they bring Iran to the table as one of the vital actors in the resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan; this in turn positions the country at the centre of the resettlement of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the USA, reducing India's own level of influence.

Although the withdrawal of US and NATO forces could pave the way for Indian control in Afghanistan, there is a high risk that in the aftermath of the withdrawal, the Taliban will seize both power and Pakistani support. This would cause India and Pakistan to be on opposite sides once again, just as they are emerging from clashes of religion - Islam and Hinduism and economic "asymmetry". Of course there are also the ever present scars as a result of the "legacy of the trauma of partition" (Hussain, 2011: 319-347). Another important factor that should be considered by India is the potential settling of jihadist groups in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This would pose a direct threat to the security of India, as these groups could become involved in stoking up the fires of old in Kashmir.

#### **Russia; an untrustworthy power**

Russia is seen as an untrustworthy power by almost all concerned due to the policies it pursued as part of the Soviet Union in the periods before and after the invasion of Afghanistan. Since the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, it appeared that Russia had chosen to be abstinent from forming and implementing policy on Afghanistan. However, since 2007 Russia has once again started to pursue an active role with respect to Afghanistan. This change in the attitude of Russia can be explained by the shifting internal dynamics in Afghanistan.

Due to the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, it became advantageous for Russia to insert influence domestically, and increase its prominence internationally. For instance, it can be asserted that Russia greatly benefits from refining its relations with the national government in Afghanistan, whilst at the same time making successful attempts at building coalitions with the Western powers. It also intends to minimise the influence of other adversaries, such as the USA and Pakistan, both of which are inclined to act in ways that inhibit Russian interests (Menkiszak, 2011: 7).

Russia believes that the repercussions of the military operations taking place in Afghanistan, legitimised and legalised by the West as "humanitarian action-enduring freedom", cause a great threat to Russia. In every instance of the USA interfering and then withdrawing from a region, the region is left vulnerable to fundamentalism and extremism. For this exact reason, like Iran, Russia is concerned by the possibility of the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan. Particularly the opportunity for Afghanistan to then become so unstable in the aftermath of the US withdrawal, that the country becomes open to being an established training basin for terrorism. This could influence the Muslim community within the Russian Federation and lead to greater recruitment of Russian Muslims to these terrorist groups.

Furthermore, Russia is also vulnerable to becoming the biggest market for the Afghan drug trade. This poses a great threat to the young Russian generation. For these reasons, Russia has become more interested in reconciliation with the Afghans, with a view to influencing their governance to protect Russia against these threats. In that respect, it is highly probable that Russia could offer support and take on responsibilities and duties approved by the UN to be conducted by the international community.

It is likely that Russia would decide to support the Afghan government, whilst building contacts with the representatives of the former military front, the Northern Alliance, which includes Tajik warlords and the leaders of a number of other ethnic groups. It is also expected Russia will attempt to develop contacts with the Pashtun principals and establish a dialogue with forces in support of the Taliban. Moreover, Russia could sustain and even enhance its support of the national government and international actors to help secure Afghanistan's security, conditional upon certain political and financial benefits. It is also conceivable that Russia could push the West, primarily the USA, to reduce their military presence in Central Asia either by collaborating with or by pressurising them. What's more, the other subjects Russia will aim to influence across Central Asia are the rise of Islamic radicalism, the strengthening of its security presence and the substantiation of the controlled destabilisation of the region (Menkiszak, 2011).

Nonetheless, it is still unknown to the international community whether the war in Ukraine and the subsequent repeat isolation of Russia from the West will affect Russia's compliant attitude towards international policy on Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Russia is satisfied with the instability in Afghanistan as it prevents the energy resources in Central Asia from being transported to the Indian subcontinent. This increases Russia's importance as an energy supplying state in the region. This domination further strengthens its position against the West concerning the Ukrainian crisis, as it is not just Central Asia, but also large portions of Europe that now rely on Russian energy resources.

#### **China; new actor**

China is predominantly concerned with the instability in Afghanistan due to its direct impact on its most important ally in the region, Pakistan. Furthermore, China assumes that if Pakistan becomes subject to a western orientated intervention, the fundamentalist movements could expand their influence over East Turkistan. The spread of conflict in Afghanistan to the Middle East could cause great concern to China, ascribed to its effect on energy imports.

Like Russia, China benefits from the instability in Afghanistan as it prevents the transportation of energy resources and trade from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent. This leads to Central Asian energy resources and trade being redirected to China. It also has the benefit of limiting the trade relations of India with Central Asian countries causing India's development to be hindered. This increases China's status by reducing the number of rapidly developing Central Asian nations.

To summarise, like Russia and Pakistan, China is content with the controllable instability of Afghanistan. However, China is nervous of the USA's presence in the region due to its ability to affect the control of energy resources to simultaneously benefit the US and detriment China politically, economically and militarily (Rafique, 2003: 56). This concern is balanced by China's awareness of the potential uncontrollable nature of the instability in Afghanistan if the USA fully withdraws.

#### **Central Asian countries; ineffective actors**

The positions of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan on Afghanistan are almost identical. These countries want Afghanistan to reach political stabilisation so as to develop a safe region for trading routes and pipelines. For this reason, they support India in attempting to strengthen Afghanistan's independence of Russia and China.

Nonetheless, drug trafficking and fundamentalism originating in Afghanistan can deeply influence the stability of Central Asian countries. The biggest problem for the administrations of these countries is the presence and activities of the fundamentalist Islamic groups. For this reason, the withdrawal of the USA could potentially create a safe haven for these groups to settle, from which they could spread their influence across the whole region. As a matter of fact, even the countries that don't share borders with Afghanistan, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are troubled by these fundamentalist movements.

#### **Foresights**

##### **Continuation of the current situation by peace building**

There are two main features of the continuation of the current (reasonably) stable situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the USA. These can be identified as the Taliban taking an active role in the government and also non-Taliban parties checking the Taliban's power by joining them in a coalition government. It can be argued that without building a consensus with the Taliban, it is highly unlikely that security can be provided to reach the end goal of enduring peace and stability in the region.

For this political solution to be possible, an agreement with the Taliban must be formed by means of negotiation. On the evidence of recent history, it seems it is impossible to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban; instead, a consensus with the Taliban emerges as the best possible option for peace building.

With this in mind, the central government and foreign powers negotiate with the Taliban, encouraging it to actively take part in the governance of the country in the future. In the meantime, it has been shown that the current government fails to present a strong leadership representing all of the people and parties of Afghanistan.

It is difficult to conceive that all of Afghanistan will support the Taliban taking an active role in government. Some of the ethnic, political and social groups of Afghanistan were damaged under Taliban rule. Whilst the Taliban has been out of the political picture, these groups have become militarily stronger. This makes it seem impractical to try and get these groups to support the Taliban's place at the negotiation table.

The trust of these groups in the Taliban can only begin being built if the resistance to their place in the political negotiations comes to a halt. For this reason, it is highly important that the USA continues to allocate resources and provide

training to the ANSF, at least until the end of the resistance. During the most recent visit of President Ghani and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, to the USA, the White House pledged to continue to provide financial support to the ANSF until at least 2017 (Mason and Rampton, 2015). Nonetheless, the unpredictability of the post-2017 period could lead to a degree of instability within the central government, leaving it open to the influence of the external actors in the region.

Aside from these resource allocations, it is also necessary to give durable financial assistance to Afghanistan in order to provide development in important areas such as education and health. It is not clear in the latest agreement for how long the assistance and support will continue.

When all elements are considered, it is unrealistic to expect peace in Afghanistan in the short term.

#### **A disintegrated Afghanistan**

Generally in Afghanistan, particularly during the Soviet occupation and consequent civil war, political parties were based on ethnicity. Regions where one ethnicity was dominant, and therefore the relevant political party had large support, tended to be controlled by armed groups linked to the political party. In spite of there being several examples of these groups forming their own autonomous governmental regions across the country in the early 1990s, there has never been concerns that the country would disintegrate into smaller states (Karaca, 2011).

Modern day Afghanistan is divided into two parts – North and South – by invisible borders. Whilst the northern groups support the presence of the US and NATO forces in the country as a protective shield against the Taliban, the Pashtun community in the South are generally against the presence of western powers in Afghanistan.

However, the withdrawal of US forces could accelerate the process of disintegration in Afghanistan. The potential spread of instability and terrorism, combined with the nuclear security threat, posed as a result of disintegration, would most certainly create a security problem deemed as important as the struggle for control of Central Asia between Russia, China and India. In addition to these threats, the expansion of drug and arms trafficking as a result of increased instability would directly impact upon the Caucasus, East Turkmenistan, Central Asia and Kashmir.

Furthermore, the dissolution of Afghanistan will bring the possibility of fragmentation in Pakistan. The ramifications of Afghanistan breaking up would affect more than just the region of Central Asia, ripples would be felt across the World. The potential for nuclear weapons getting into the hands of terrorist groups is a disastrous scenario, but if Afghanistan were to disintegrate it is not implausible.

Moreover, if terrorist groups are able to train in this region with ease, the effects will not only reach the West, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also Russia, China, India, all of Central Asia and the Middle East. It can also be argued that the emergence of a country under the leadership of Taliban in the aftermath of the disintegration will confirm beyond all doubt the failure of the US operation in Afghanistan. None of the global or regional powers, particularly the USA, will covet the emergence of a new country ruled by Taliban. Due to the general agreement of the Taliban's terrorist group status, the UN could seek for an international consensus against a state forming under the control of the Taliban, leading to the prevention of the disintegration of Afghanistan.

#### **The Taliban's powerful influence and civil war**

It is highly likely that the Taliban will seek to seize power in all parts of the country following the withdrawal of the US forces. This would be likely to start a civil war. However, as previously indicated, the current conditions are different from that of 1990s. There are now other groups in Afghanistan that have access to as many weapons as the Taliban, with better trained personnel and most importantly, in contrast to 1990s, a wider range of external support.

Given this, Taliban control of Kabul would not mean they had control of the entire country. If a civil war breaks out in Afghanistan, Pakistan may not be able to direct the war as it did in 1990s. Instead, a number of other countries in the region may become embroiled in the war, which, in turn, could bring the region to the brink of a bigger crisis than occurred in the 1990s.

#### **Conclusion**

Afghanistan can be portrayed as a patchwork cloth; it is a nation made up of areas controlled by different groups such as the ANSF, the Taliban, Warlords and organised crime gangs. Parallels can be drawn to the similar situation in Vietnam after the US invasion; due to the relative stability of the current system and that the USA still has a military presence in the country, the White House will have the opportunity to provide an honourable depiction of the situation in Afghanistan to its own people. However, the US forces that remain in Afghanistan will not be able to guarantee the future of the country.

Whilst the main threat to the USA, and the initial reason for their operation in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, seems to have been exterminated, it can potentially rematerialize, as it did upon the retreat of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. However, it is believed that this time, the withdrawal could lead to a greater problem that may result in higher numbers of losses, as all the groups that would be looking to seize control, particularly the ones in the North, are armed, trained and more powerful than they were in the 1990s.

Although billions of dollars have been spent, and thousands of lives have been lost, only a limited transformation has been achieved in Afghanistan in comparison to the initial intentions of the western powers. In addition to that, it can be argued that the recent developments in Syria, Iraq and Yemen will directly impact on the future of Afghanistan. Considering this, it is possible that the instability will spread over time and Afghanistan will be brought back to the state it was in in the early 1990s.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, the country will lose its strategic importance to the other western powers and it could turn into a training centre for the terrorist groups. This will then pose a great potential threat for the western countries. If, as this paper predicts, the situation in Afghanistan has not improved after a 14 year operation there is likely to be a negative perception of the effectiveness of NATO. This is bound to have a long term impact on the organisation's prestige and reputation.

The plans for the withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan strongly emphasise the strengthening of the Afghan Army to reinforce the central government. Whilst the government in Kabul does need this military force to give it authority, it is in greater need of a base that will provide political legitimacy.

There is a wide consensus that the only way to prevent a new civil war and contribute to the future settlement opportunities in Afghanistan is to build a sustainable secure environment and to improve the effectiveness of the government's ability internally. Externally however, Afghanistan requires the active involvement of the countries in the region, along with the actual commitment of the international community. The only way to attain these internal and external objectives is to form a coalition government or, at the very least, a working relationship with the Taliban. As, if no agreement is made, the nature of the Taliban's strategy when left to their own devices would indisputably affect the stability of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the USA.

Nonetheless, it is highly likely that Afghanistan, in the post-US deployment period, will become extremely vulnerable to external impacts. If the external Asian players decide to use Afghanistan as an excuse to engage in conflicts and quarrels to further their own external political interests, Afghanistan could reach a higher level of instability. This instability in turn, could not only absorb the Central Asian region, but also worsen the instability in the Middle East. In other words, if the bloodshed in Afghanistan cannot be stopped, it is inevitable that it will spread to the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Moreover, it could be asserted that the forces that benefit from reorganisation of the geography of the region have successfully completed their mission. Maintaining political order in the absence of external assistance (e.g. the USA and NATO) will inevitably be difficult for Afghanistan, particularly when the issues of unresolved disputes as well as changing internal and external dynamics are taken into consideration.

As a matter of fact, the current situation in Afghanistan shows that there is still a strong need for the further military training and financial assistance agreed upon in bilateral agreements. These agreements are surely accepted as important influence mechanisms for the sustainability of the basic military level necessary for combatting terrorist groups in the short term, and to maintain local and regional peace in the long term.

Nonetheless, the extensive fear amongst the Afghan community of the possibility of civil war in the event of the complete withdrawal of foreign forces exposes the general demand for the continuation of international support. Whether or not the US forces still deployed in Afghanistan would be able to repress the uprising created by the powerful internal and external influences poses another great concern. In that respect, it can be argued that the US forces left in Afghanistan will not be a decisive element for the future of the country. As a matter of fact, the withdrawal of the US forces without the successful completion of the operation could create an immense security vacuum in the country; this, in turn, could become an attractive motivation for the internal actors to seek control. These internal dynamics thereby reveal the reasons why external forces are so keen to attain peace and stability at the regional level.

Furthermore, the potential outcomes of the withdrawal, and their after effects, should be taken into consideration, not only for political settlement in Afghanistan, but also for the reintegration of the region. In this context, it becomes evident that the necessary and successful means of a resolution in Afghanistan includes military transition and peacekeeping, socio-economic sustainability, effective national institutions for self-governance and a successful ANSF internally. To achieve these goals Afghanistan needs security-orientated, peace-building operations, durable international support for political transition and solution-orientated political negotiations involving positive roles for other countries in the region that have a vested interest.

The current challenges and future settlement opportunities in Afghanistan portray a wide range of issues, actors and processes. Today the greatest problem Afghanistan faces may be the unknown nature of the future settlement opportunities in the country. The major operations and peace building efforts are predominantly carried out by the western powers, who expect to be able to provide democracy, but they fail to appreciate that the Afghan people have never been governed with a democratic mind-set. Therefore the imposition of a western orientated government could only worsen the situation. Especially if the realism surrounding the societal and political culture of Afghanistan is not taken into consideration.

It can be concluded that the withdrawal plan of the US forces in Afghanistan should be reconsidered. As further evidence to this end, in a recent speech, Barack Obama notes the need for a reassessment of the strengthening of the way the ANSF functions, so as to prevent the requirement for the USA to return to Afghanistan after their withdrawal (Shinkman, 2015).

Last but not least, in the year 2015 and beyond, Afghanistan seems to be more significant than ever to the regional and international powers, not only because of the challenges, but also the opportunities it involves militarily, politically, socially and economically. The optimistic approach in dealing with Afghanistan in the post-2015 period for the aforementioned regional powers should primarily involve the containment of problems ranging from instability, struggle and conflict, to the reinforcement of constructive developments such as state formation, and social, political and economic

development. Although these regional powers could at times dispute the ways in which to reach a settlement in Afghanistan, it is evident that they have good reason to cooperate in building peace in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

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Received: April, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Revisions Received: Sept, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015