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**NATO in Afghanistan: Resolute Support Mission
and Beyond**

By

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Abstract

NATO launched the non-combat Resolute Support Mission in 2015 following the culmination of the ISAF. This paper encapsulates the structural flaws inherited by the RSM from the previous mission and how it failed to address Afghanistan's deteriorating security adequately. Moreover, it explains why the Afghan forces remain perpetually incompetent to take Afghan national security responsibility independently.

As the withdrawal of the US and NATO allied forces is already afoot, peace and security of Afghanistan hang in the air. The paper highlights that with the western allies extricating themselves from the longest mission, insurgent and terrorist groups continue to terrorize people. The Taliban is swiftly gaining territory, and a political settlement between the Government and the Taliban has hit an impasse. At the same time, weak and corrupt Government institutions make the future of Afghan people's economic and social development increasingly murky.

Moreover, the re-emergence of warlords and terrorist groups has spillovers on the security environment in the sub-regional area. Therefore, the stakes are exceptionally high for the regional powers to facilitate a peace agreement between Kabul and the Taliban. However, with diverging interests motivated by domestic strategic policies, it is difficult to visualize all the regional stakeholders to unite and avoid spillovers from their bilateral issues in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Peace Deal, Regional actors, Resolute Support, Security, Transition, Taliban, Withdrawal.

Table of Contents

| | Page No |
|--|---------|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Table of Abbreviations | 5 |
| 1. Introduction | 7 |
| 2. Background | 8 |
| 3. Post 2014: Resolute Support Mission (RSM) | 11 |
| 3a. Deteriorating Security Situation | 12 |
| 3b. Paralyzed Afghan Forces | 13 |
| 3c. The Political Ordeal | 15 |
| 4. The Withdrawal and its Implications | 17 |
| 4a. Domestic Stakeholders | 19 |
| 4b. Regional Powers | 24 |
| 5. The Way Forward | 27 |
| 6. A NATO for the New Age | 29 |
| Bibliography | 31 |

Table of Abbreviations

| | | |
|-------|---|---|
| AAF | : | Afghan Air Force |
| ANA | : | Afghan National Army |
| ANDSF | : | Afghan National Defense and Security Forces |
| ANP | : | Afghan National Police |
| ANSF | : | Afghan National Security Forces |
| BRI | : | Belt and Road Initiative |
| BSA | : | Bilateral Security Agreement |
| CFACC | : | Combined Forces Air Component Commander |
| COMRS | : | Commander, Resolute Support |
| CT | : | Counterterrorism |
| GIRoA | : | Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan |
| GENAD | : | Gender Advisor |
| IED | : | Improvised Explosive Device |
| IS | : | Islamic State |
| ISAF | : | International Security Assistance Force |
| IS-K | : | Islamic State-Khorasan |
| NAC | : | North Atlantic Council |
| NAC-A | : | NATO Air Command-Afghanistan |
| NATO | : | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NUG | : | National Unity Government |
| OEF | : | Operation Enduring Freedom |
| OFS | : | Operation Freedom's Sentinel |

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| PRT | : | Provincial Reconstruction Team |
| RC | : | Regional Command |
| RSM | : | Resolute Support Mission |
| SACEUR | : | Supreme Allied Commander Europe |
| SOFA | : | Status of Forces Agreement |
| TAA | : | Train, Advise, and Assist |
| TAAC | : | Train, Advise, and Assist Command |
| TF | : | Task Force |
| UN | : | United Nations |
| UNAMA | : | United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan |
| US | : | United States |
| USSR | : | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics |

“There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.”

Winston S. Churchill

1. **Introduction**

With decades of suffering, the struggle for democracy, under-development, and political turmoil, Afghanistan delineates the international community’s failure in eliminating terrorism and establishing lasting peace for the Afghans.

After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union, NATO’s purpose gradually started fading with loose objectives. Due to its out-of-area operation after the Cold War, NATO’s mission in Afghanistan is often labeled as “the litmus test” for the transatlantic Alliance. The big break served tremendously to reshape its warfighting capabilities and modulate its mission planning expertise. However, the complex regional geopolitics and domestic political climate of Afghanistan proved highly challenging for NATO.

After almost two decades of combat, non-combat, peacekeeping, and training missions, the western forces leave the south Asian country in a mess. The west claims victory in the “forever war,” but the insurgency continues and paints a gloomy picture of the country’s future. Analysts and strategists worldwide are apprehensive about the doom of Afghanistan’s peace and security and, with it, the lives of Afghan people.

2. Background

After World War II, the US, along with Canada and Western European countries, formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). On its birth in 1949, the transatlantic Alliance's purpose was to safeguard the security of its members from the Soviet Union. However, following the disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, NATO's *raison d'être* disappeared, and the Alliance began finding its place in the changing metrics of power.

However, the horrific event of 9/11, which shook the world, marked the beginning of the longest war in the American history and somehow turned around the fate of the Alliance. NATO stepped forward and invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty - collective defense - for the first time (NATO, 2021c). It took command of the *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)* mission of the United Nations in August 2003 (NATO, 2015). The Alliance managed the command, coordination, and planning of the forces (NATO, 2015).

Initially concentrating on Kabul, NATO gradually expanded its operations after the North Atlantic Council (NAC) authorized the SACEUR to assume responsibility of the German-led *Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)* in Kunduz in December 2003 (Hanagan, 2019, p. 68). PRTs played a central role in NATO's development and stabilization contributions in Afghanistan. At the Istanbul summit in June 2004, NATO officials announced that the ISAF would take over Mazar-e-Sharif and create additional PRTs in the northern part of the country (Hanagan, 2019, p. 69). For stage 2, NATO announced expansion into the west in February 2005, which was completed by September of that year (Hanagan, 2019, p. 69).

However, this created an overlap between the stabilization operations of the ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)'s various combat and stabilization operations (Hanagan, 2019, p. 69). As a result, based on geographical calculations, new commands were established called Regional Command (RC)-North, RC-East, RC-West, and RC-South (Hanagan, 2019, p. 69). Furthermore, the PRTs expansion Stage-3 was initiated in December 2005 in the South, and ISAF implemented the final stage covering East in October 2006 (NATO, 2015).

With a surge in insurgent activities by the Taliban coalition, NATO allies began to rethink their strategy and operational capabilities in Afghanistan. Collectively, NATO lacked any prior experience in countering insurgency. As a result, individual members sought independent strategies, which affected the military interoperability of the Alliance. Moreover, Counter-terrorism (CT) Operations faced similar issues of lack of a common approach.

As the mission expanded, NATO saw an opportunity to reinvigorate the members of the Alliance to promote a unified image. But it struggled with operational inefficiency and haphazardly set strategic ends, which exposed the institutional deficiencies of the Alliance. As a result, NATO lacked a cohesive political and military strategy to handle its ISAF mission effectively.

With the changing dynamics of global power and shift to multipolarity, the *political strategy* of new members of the Alliance was inconsistent with the existing ones. The principle of collective defense was the primary reason for joining the Baltic states and Poland (Schreer, 2012, p. 142). On the other hand, members like Germany and France were skeptical about NATO's global role and relevance of Article 5 with the disintegration of the USSR (Schreer, 2012, p. 142). On the other hand, another group comprising the United States and the United Kingdom, among others, vouched for the increasing capability of the Alliance in global crisis management (Schreer, 2012, p. 142).

Moreover, the widespread notion was that since Europeans did not have anything at stake in Afghanistan, many European Governments took part in the operation to maintain good relations with the United States (Robb, 2015). Due to varied political interpretations and divergence in individual strategies, there was a lack of coherent strategy. The US unilateralism has been another factor of the persistent delivery deficits. The ISAF mission was also constantly plagued by the caveats imposed by member states on their forces.

Besides, the *security strategy* of the Alliance was also not cut out to function in such a combat-intensive, insurgent-dominated environment. After the end of the cold war, the Alliance's system was steered in a new direction with the change in the political, defense, social and economic dimensions of international relations. The New Strategic Concept, released in 1991, aimed to forge strong partnerships with former rivals and maintain collective defense and stability across Europe (NATO, 2020). Furthermore, in

1999, as NATO completed its half-century into existence, the New Strategic Concept was introduced, which outlined the fundamental tasks - security, consultation, deterrence, defense, and crisis management - to promote peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO, 2020). It acknowledged new age challenges and risks like terrorism, human rights violation, nuclear weaponry, chemical warfare, and political instability.

However, after years of operational gaps in Afghanistan, NATO updated its *Strategic Concept* “Active Engagement, Modern Defense” in 2010, which outlines the essential functions – “collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security” (NATO, 2020). Furthermore, it highlighted the need to continuously adapt to the changing environment to reshape its crisis management capabilities, defense, and deterrence strategy (NATO, 2020).

As NATO’s peacekeeping and crisis management missions expanded, the Karzai Government expressed an aspiration for the (ANSF) to take the lead in the country’s security. Hence, *Inteqal* (meaning ‘transition’ in Dari and Pashto) was formally set in motion to transfer command to the ANSF at the Lisbon summit in November 2010 (Hanagan, 2019, p. 163). A multi-dimensional transition approach was adopted wherein economic, political, social, and security factors were taken into consideration. To commence with a gradual transition process, four general areas were assessed: the level of violence affecting day-to-day activities of the civilians, the level of development of local governance, the level of socio-economic development, and the preparedness of ANSF (Hanagan, 2019, p. 163). A “Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal Board” was formed to oversee such developments (Hanagan, 2019, p. 163).

Following the assassination of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in 2011, the US claimed victory in its war against terrorism and was thus, eager to go out of Afghanistan. By December 2014, the ISAF mission culminated, but a hasty transition negatively affected US and NATO operations ahead.

3. **Post 2014: Resolute Support Mission**

The year 2014 was pivotal for the security in Afghanistan due to the first democratic political transition and the concluding phase of the ISAF mission. As the foreign troops were thinning out from the country, Afghanistan continued to be affected by insurgent groups, warlords, and terrorist organizations. The continued presence of NATO and the allied forces was to address the fluidity in the country's security environment. During the Lisbon summit in 2010, NATO inked a *Declaration on Enduring partnership* - for the continued support of the Alliance after 2014 - with the Afghan Government (Hanagan, 2019, p. 138). It laid down the framework for continuous political consultations and practical cooperation commitment to Afghanistan after 2014 (NATO's 2014).

Even though the competence and readiness of Afghan forces took a giant leap forward, there were shortcomings in independent operations handling. Lieutenant General Nick Carter, the Deputy ISAF Commander, expressed the need to provide assistance for counter-IED operations, air support, logistics support, among other areas (Hirsh and National Journal, 2013). Honoring its commitment, NATO also signed a *Status of Forces Agreement* (SOFA) with Kabul in September 2014 to establish a *Resolute Support Mission* (NATO, 2021c). Consequently, the Alliance launched its non-combat mission in January 2015 to "train, advise and assist" the Afghan National Security Forces and institutions (NATO-Afghanistan relations, 2021). The mission's essential functions include assisting in budgetary matters, transparency checks, and building effective recruitment and training mechanisms (NATO, 2021d).

Additionally, the US Government and the new Afghan Government led by Ashraf Ghani signed a *Bilateral Security Agreement* (BSA), which outlines cooperation and implementation of agreements on wide-ranging issues like personnel management and defense mechanisms (Operation Freedom's Sentinel, 2015). The US forces shall undertake counter-terrorism operations in coordination with the Afghan forces along with special provisions for access to operating bases for air operations and launching US drone strikes (Zulfqar, 2014, p. 198). *Operation Freedom's Sentinel* (OFS), a transition from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), was launched on January 1st, 2015, which marked a new course for the Afghan - US bilateral ties (Operation Freedom's Sentinel, 2015).

In contrast to ISAF, only 13,000 troops were deployed for RSM, covering a wide-ranging goal of the mission (Münch, 2015, p. 3). The mission functioned in a *TAAC - Train, Advise, and Assist Command - format*. The core operations were taken up at the central hub in Kabul/Bagram along with four spokes in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Laghman, and Kandahar (NATO, 2021d). TAACs, along with its Task Forces (TF Southwest and TF Southeast), assisted Afghan National Army (ANA) corps and selected ANP provincial headquarters in maintaining accurate reporting of notable activities at the operational level (Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, 2020). In addition, they kept control on maintaining the support system of combat operations and building the overall Afghan capabilities (Enhancing Security and Stability In Afghanistan, 2020).

TAAC-Air works in close cooperation with all Afghan Air Force (ANF) levels to render adequate air support (Enhancing Security and Stability In Afghanistan, 2020). NATO Air Command-Afghanistan (NAC-A) provides all operational-level information to the COMRS (Commander, Resolute Support) while coordinating with the Combined Forces Air Component Commander (CFACC) to ensure synchronization of air and space power with ground operations (Enhancing Security and Stability In Afghanistan, 2020).

Besides, for sustained financial assistance to the Afghan forces, the Alliance and its partners extended the use of the ANA Trust Fund beyond 2014 at the Chicago Summit (NATO's commitment to Afghanistan after 2014, 2014). Furthermore, an ANA Trust Fund Board was constituted to constantly review transparency, cost-effectiveness, and accountability (NATO's commitment to Afghanistan after 2014, 2014).

Moreover, an important agenda of NATO and its allies have been women empowerment. In a majorly patriarchal society, the alliance has stressed women's and girls' rights during its missions. A RS Gender Advisor (GENAD) Office was established to conduct TAA with Afghan leadership to address the role of women in conflict resolution, conflict management, and attaining sustainable peace by bringing their perspectives into the limelight (Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, 2020).

3a. **Deteriorating Security Situation**

Being a non-combat mission, the RSM was supposed to coordinate with the top level of management in personnel selection, procurement, educational facilities, and other bureaucratic tasks (Münch, 2015, p. 2). However, as the NATO allied forces operated

backstage, the Taliban and other insurgent groups gradually regained much of their lost influence. For example, the Taliban's attempt to capture Kunduz city in September 2015, merely months after the end of the ISAF mission, is evident of the lack of preparedness of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 2).

After a mere semblance of peace, insurgent activities intensified in 2016, which led the foreign troops frequently to step in to provide more boots on the ground (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 3). The Taliban regained territories in provinces such as Helmand, Kandahar, Kunduz, Faryab, Ghazni, Uruzgan, Baglan, and Farah (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 3). The re-emergence of terrorists and insurgent groups led to severe deterioration in the security environment. Ashraf Ghani in 2017 mentioned the presence of 20 terrorist groups in the country, including the Haqqani Network, Daesh, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, among others (Arian, 2017). Moreover, civilian casualties increased due to the "highly volatile" security situation and resulted in 3,527 and 3,442 deaths in 2016 and 2017, respectively (Saif, 2021).

These developments point out the epic failure of Obama's 'surge' and the faulty RSM goals. Judging the inadequacy and gaps in NATO's new Resolute Support requires an in-depth assessment of ISAF complications. As the ISAF mission cannot be termed a success, the subsequent mission inherited its strategic flaws. Institutional flaws like the sheer lack of a cohesive strategy, unbalanced budget sharing, and diverging political agendas of the member states continued to torment the RS mission. The lack of domestic support in various European states contributed to the lack of seriousness of the mission. The absence of means to achieve the set goals led to a lack of adequate efforts on the part of the alliance.

Furthermore, an inflow of funds continued through illicit drug exports, extortion and taxes, and financial contributions from private donors and international organizations (Sufizada, 2020). According to a UN report, the Taliban earned 400 million dollars in 2018 from the opium poppy trade despite sanctions from the UN (Maizland and Laub, 2021). This indicates the failure of the allied forces in their counter-narcotics endeavors and disrupting these channels.

3b. **Paralyzed Afghan Forces**

Even though there were over 370,000 ANDSF troops on paper, along with 17,000 capable Special Forces, the assumption that ANSF could take the full responsibility to secure the country created roadblocks for RSM to succeed (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 6). The US and the Alliance grossly miscalculated the preparedness of Afghan national forces, which heavily impacted the security situation on-ground.

As anticipated by the ISAF commanders, ANDSF lacked severe air combat missions capability due to under-developed Afghan Air Force (AAF). AAF lacked resources, funding, equipment, and consequently operational efficiency. The ANDSF's airlift capacity was insufficient to quickly deliver reinforcements and emergency supplies, thus undermining the agility of the troops (Jalali, 2016, p. 21). Moreover, the uneven development of Afghan intelligence caused severe intelligence gaps leading to an uncoordinated approach between different intelligence and reconnaissance elements (Jalali, 2016, p. 21).

But other than logistics and intelligence shortcomings, ANDSF also suffered from several internal problems. There were structural faults in the command-control of ANDSF with a haphazard chain of command, overlapping functions, heavy bureaucracy at top levels, and absence of clearly defined hierarchical structures (Jalali, 2016, pp. 18-19). And as the key positions are dominated by political favoritism, there is a lack of effective leadership along with poor working conditions and inadequate monetary compensation contributed to high desertion and low morale of the troops (Jalali, 2016, p. 17). In addition, as per RSM, the death toll and casualties with the ANDSF were alarmingly high, with casualties reaching up to approximately 59 percent higher in the first half of 2015 compared with the same period the previous year, which further contributed to low morale among the forces (Jalali, 2016, p. 17).

The Alliance's complex and centralized operational mechanisms failed to address the deep-seated institutional flaws with the Afghan institutions (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, pp. 6-7). As a result, the attrition rates skyrocketed to somewhere between 4000 - 5000 per month during the first half of 2015 (Jalali, 2016, p. 17). This was a severe impediment to the goals of the TAA mission as it affected the sustainability of long-term force building and recruitment processes. Furthermore, the training process was hindered by the increase in blue and green attacks (internal attacks) on the foreign troops (Ullah and

Khan, 2018, p. 54). And thus, operational cautiousness by American, Australian, and German trainers was evident (Ullah and Khan, 2018, p. 54).

The fault lines of the transition process overwhelmed the non-combat mission. The initial peripheral role of the foreign troops soon turned out to be heavily invested in kinetic operations due to the incapability of the Afghan forces, which led the allies to take different routes, which in turn created a mismatch between available resources and the operations (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 7). Besides, a “dependency syndrome” amongst Afghan officials resulted from multiple command structures and advisory functions at all levels (Waldman and Schreer, 2020, p. 7).

Hence, the ambitious claims of President Karzai on the transition process that “Afghanistan is ready right now to take all security responsibilities completely” and President Barack Obama’s remarks, “This year, we will mark another milestone; Afghan forces will take the lead for security across the entire country and by the end of next year, 2014, the transition will be complete; Afghans will have full responsibility for their security, and this long war will come to a responsible end,” were unfounded and were majorly motivated by the domestic election cycle in Washington (Ruttig, 2012) (Hirsh and National Journal, 2013).

3c. **The Political ordeal**

NATO’s operations faced setbacks while it tried to balance the prevailing security threats and fragile politics. The enduring challenge of building up the Afghan forces bore the corrosive effects of the tumultuous Government in Kabul. The structural legitimacy of the Afghan Government was consistently undermined since the toppling of the Taliban regime due to its inability to provide services and exert influence on Afghans (Jalali, 2016, p. 11).

The 2014 Afghan Presidential elections created a crisis due to the lack of a majority by any individual candidate (Zulfqar, 2014, p. 201). In the subsequent run-off elections, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (43 percent of votes) charged fraud and rejected the result in which Dr. Ashraf Ghani won by securing 56.4 percent of votes (Zulfqar, 2014, p. 202). Eventually, the US Secretary of State brokered a power-sharing agreement between the two candidates by creating a National Unity Government (NUG), which led to Ghani

becoming the President and Abdullah took charge as Chief Executive Officer (Zulfqar, 2014, p. 202).

However, such an arrangement failed to deliver a unified approach and fundamental changes in the governance mechanism (Jalali, 2016, p. 12). The turbulent political climate contributed towards worsening the developmental efforts taken by the international community due to its inadequacy in fighting corruption. Even though the Ghani administration took steps to control corruption, they could not bring any significant and sustainable change (Jalali, 2016, p. 12).

Furthermore, the Government showcased a weak image to tackle the worsening economic situation in the country. While at the same time, as the Taliban kept on attacking Government institutions, the Government did not respond to the violence effectively, further deteriorating the security environment. Hence, it led to the dilution of efforts made by the Resolute Support and further undermined the public confidence in the mission.

4. **The Withdrawal and its Implications**

The central conundrum of NATO since its arrival in Afghanistan has been the timeline for its exit. Years-long operations have resulted in profound development in the security and political arena of Afghanistan. While diminishing the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other insurgent groups, the alliance was committed to building up capable Afghan forces and legitimate institutions of governance. Nevertheless, the mission gradually transformed into a strategic liability for its collaborators. More than 1,400 Americans and over 1,100 NATO troops have died during the process, along with about 45,000 Afghan soldiers (Maizland, 2020). Besides a massive toll on life, the mission has been a costly affair for the allies and the international community. And with a brittle Intra-Afghan peace process, it is rather dusty to determine its future once the foreign troops withdraw.

Repeated attempts to bring together all the stakeholders have reached a stalemate due to the political discord present between the Ghani administration and the Taliban. Hence, it has acutely stalled the peace process and has cast doubt on achieving a resolution between the two. The *Intra-Afghan Peace dialogue* held in Qatar in July 2019 is considered an achievement after a series of failures to resolve the conflict and provided a way ahead for further talks (Bone, 2019). However, even though there was a discussion on the need to reduce civilian casualties to zero and safeguard women's rights, the talks failed to bring out any significant breakthrough on deal-breaking issues like terrorist groups in the state and the upcoming elections (Kachiar, 2019).

On the other hand, after more than eight rounds of negotiations, President Donald Trump signed a *Peace Agreement* with the Taliban in February 2020, which entailed the withdrawal of foreign troops, a temporary ceasefire, speeding up the intra-Afghan talks, and an assurance from the Taliban that Afghanistan will not become a safe-haven for terrorism and will not pose any security threat to the US and its allies (Maizland, 2020).

However, essential issues like power-sharing negotiations, disarming and reintegrating Taliban militants into the society, and the future of Afghanistan's democracy remained unresolved (Maizland, 2020). Moreover, the lack of consultation with the NATO allies and side-lining of the Afghan Government was intensely criticized. Expert analysts anticipated that the deal, which was again influenced by the domestic election cycle in the United States, is bound to fail. Both the parties could not keep their part of the bargain as

the Taliban kept engaging with the terrorist groups. At the same time, the Afghan Government delayed the release of the Taliban prisoners. Consequently, the arms conflict by the Taliban continued, and it kept attacking the Afghan forces and violence in April 2020 escalated by 25 percent from April 2019 (Jones, 2020).

The trickiest and most unpredictable part of the negotiation remains the settlement within the Afghan actors. After much delay, the subsequent Doha conference, which was scheduled for March, was held in September 2020, wherein ceasefires were stressed upon as a precondition to further talks, but it again failed to bring any success on the real issues (Kulgami, 2020).

With the change in leadership in Washington, a new *announcement on the withdrawal* was made by President Biden on April 14th, 2021 to pull out all US troops from the country with a symbolic date of September 11th to mark the end of the operation (Cronk, 2021). The remaining 2,500 soldiers started formally withdrawing from Afghanistan on 1st May instead of the agreement under the Trump administration - in a “safe, deliberate and responsible manner.” (Cronk, 2021).

On the flip side, NATO mulled over its future in Kabul as US troops continued to withdraw (Cook, 2020). NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg initially said that it is risky to leave as violence continued to rise (Cook, 2020). But since NATO partners rely upon the United States for air support, surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence, keeping troops after the US withdrawal would have been a suicidal move for the Europeans, who have not been comfortable with the mission since the beginning. Hence, after some hesitation and subsequent delay, NATO officiated the withdrawal of allied forces in a statement on April 14th stressing the “Together In, Together Out” principle (NATO, 2021b).

The withdrawal is under scrutiny by analysts, experts, and leaders across the world. Both the after-effects of ISAF withdrawal and the contemporary developments point out that each time the alliance’s mission changes, the level of violence rises. In contrast to ISAF drawdown, the current and final withdrawal culminates with an even worse state of security. As foreign troops retrograde, the Taliban violence has increased tremendously, and the peace process has yet to bring any breakthrough. In such a climate, the hasty withdrawal will invite severe repercussions for the safety and security of the country.

4a. **Domestic Stakeholders**

Peace in Afghanistan is an uphill battle due to the fragility of the negotiation and consultation process between the international community, the Afghan Government, and the Taliban. The key concern that lingers is what does the withdrawal imply for the Afghan people and the overall security of a (still) conflict-ridden country?

- **The Power Play**

A political settlement between Kabul and the Islamist militant group is paramount to establishing sustainable peace and stability. However, the tussle between them is filled with uncertainty. One of the parties involved is marred by Islamic extremism, jihadi sentiments, violence, extreme weaponry, and irrationality and the other lacks a more precise objective. Even though the underlying intent for everyone involved is peace, the sheer divergence in their vision is worrying. As peace talks continue between the Taliban, Afghan Government, and other civil society representatives, it is difficult to visualize a middle ground for the negotiations.

On the one hand, there are different views on the peace deal from the Kabul side. President Ghani outrightly rejected the proposal for a transitional Government before agreeing to step down after a fair election process to form such a Government (Bahiss, 2021). At the same time, Abdullah cautiously supports the interim Government, and other political leaders, including Hamid Karzai, Abdul Rashid Dostum, have tentatively endorsed the formation of an interim Government until the peace process ends (Bahiss, 2021).

On the other side of the table, the Taliban (self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) envision an Islamic form of Government ruled by Sharia for Afghanistan (Bahiss, 2020), disapprove of the democratic system of governance - the right to vote, free and fair elections, and respect for rights of minorities - and consider the Government in Kabul illegitimate (Shah, 2021, p. 8). For them, the departure of Americans means they have won the war.

Now the concerning point is that between the two, the Taliban is getting a more assertive posture. Taliban's upper hand militarily is now getting complimented with some political legitimacy it has earned while engaging with regional

and international actors (Shah, 2021, p. 7). Furthermore, with the recent turn of events, the Taliban has also shifted its consistent messaging of armed resistance against the administration in Kabul to a message of peace with an ambiguous strategy (Watkins, 2020).

On the other hand, the Afghan Government mainly acted as a spectator in most of the talks and lost its bargaining power to deal with the Taliban. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) also appears fragile as a collective consequence of lack of political alignment, excessive western political monitoring, and economic stagnation. The divisions among the Government side, wherein preservation of individual political interests is prioritized, reflect a fragmented image (Motwani, 2021). Moreover, the financial dilemma of supporting the economy and funding the security forces might eventually strip the present support too.

In such a situation, the proposition circulated by US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad for a transitional Government by dissolving the current Afghan administration might reverse the efforts made to build those political institutions (Motwani, 2021). Besides, the election apparatus already lacks credibility, which might disrupt a fair assessment (Motwani, 2021). This might eventually serve power to the Taliban on a golden platter after it overthrows the Government and brings chaos.

A politically balanced Government is the need of the hour. Still, at the same time, it is also the most far-fetched outcome given the contemporary developments and stalled peace process. Both sides are willing to talk for negotiations, but the deep-rooted religious ideologies and a reluctance to change makes it risky to assume that the Taliban will compromise. Along with this clashing internal dynamics within both the sides and other insurgent actors like IS-K, Al-Qaeda, militias could hamper a long-term commitment to the peace process (Jones, 2020).

There is no quick solution, and the current impasse might entail years-long negotiations to unwind, but what is more crucial is the continued allegiance of all the actors for the country's greater good.

- **The Taliban Offensive and the Crumbling ANDSF**

There is no greater evidence of the disaster that this withdrawal brings in than the dramatic rise in bombings, attacks on civilians, and checkpoints across districts of the country. As per a US Congressional Research Service report, the Taliban is currently in a much stronger position militarily since 2001 (Gambrell, 2021). Since May 2021, the group has sought to counter-action and increase violence against the foreign troops in response to the violation of the withdrawal deadline according to the US-Taliban Agreement (Sediqi and Shalizi, 2021). Civilians and pro-Government casualties numbered 260 and 405, respectively, in just a month (Mohananey, 2021).

The territorial grip of the Taliban has increased tremendously over time as it now controls around 26 percent of Afghanistan's 398 districts while the Government commands only 23 percent; others are contested between the two (Bezhan, 2021). The militant group has seized at least 32 districts in the rural areas since May 1st - the earlier date for the end of withdrawal (Bezhan, 2021). In addition, major longtime stronghold districts like Uruzgan (South) and Sar-e-Pul (North) were seized back in just a few weeks after Biden's announcement (Bezhan, 2021). The Taliban has also taken much ground in the northern part of the country, immensely doubting the hold of the Northern Alliance (Malkasian, 2021).

On the other end, Afghan forces' face-off with the Taliban has been highly unbalanced due to the usage of advanced weaponry like IEDs, magnetic bombs, and suicide car bombs, which puts ANDSF at a disadvantage (Malkasian, 2021). Moreover, with the constraints in the US air support and the fault lines in the operational mechanism of the ANDSF, the efforts to thwart such attacks are diminished. Furthermore, the shortage of ammunition and delays in ground reinforcements due to the struggling Afghan Air Force has caused burnouts, high attrition rates, and low morale among the soldiers (New York Times, 2021b).

The capabilities of Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police are impeded due to rampant corruption, ineffective leadership, and political influence (Cordesman, 2019, p. 38). It is a moment of great uncertainty for the forces that struggle with high maintenance costs and the absence of foreign aid on the ground. This points out that as the Taliban continues to terrorize people, the preparation of Afghan forces is not at par to lead the security, which makes a Taliban military takeover inevitable - if the peace process collapses.

Moreover, the Taliban's continued partnership with Al-Qaeda - which has thrived at the Afghan - Pakistan border in close cooperation with Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and the Haqqani Network - negates its commitments to the peace deal (Kachiar, 2019). Even though America has claimed victory by assassinating bin Laden, Al-Qaeda has managed to keep its networks alive (Clarke, 2021). Targeted killings of journalists, activists, judges, and other social workers, resulted in some of the most brutal attacks by the Taliban and IS-K (Gambrell, 2021). It might not be long when the country again gets actively targeted by terrorist groups.

- **Afghan People**

The most important actor in the peace process remains the people who have suffered for decades. Unfortunately, the Afghan Government representatives comprise primarily of the elitists and have failed to incorporate all the sections of the Afghan population. Therefore, Afghan people ask for a renewed chance to represent Afghan youth, Afghan women, and the victims of the war as their voices for a fair outcome of their country's future (Malikzada, 2021). Their perspective upholds the ideals enshrined in the Afghan constitution and safeguards the hard-earned rights (Malikzada, 2021).

An ordinary Afghan bore the brunt from the war and became victims of insurgency and "counter-insurgency." Civilians became targets of the indiscriminate pattern of US airstrikes while fighting with the insurgent groups. The deaths numbered as high as 47,600 and casualties more than twice that in the last two decades (Saif, 2021).

There has been a steady rise in the killing spree as the negotiations progressed, with a 29 percent increase in just the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 (Saif, 2021). In addition, according to the Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2021- First Quarter Report by the UNAMA, women casualties rose by more than 37 percent, and the number of children killed and injured increased by 23 percent during the same period (Saif, 2021).

Besides, the persistent attacks on the security and democracy of the country continue to plague the growth and developmental trajectory of the Afghan people. Moreover, education and health apparatus, the pillars of human resource development, continue to dwindle due to destructive attacks on the infrastructure. Another problem that this withdrawal has intensified is the mass exodus of Afghan refugees leaving the country,

leading to colossal displacement and an eventual migration crisis (Kirişci and Memisoglu, 2021).

There is also an unbalanced gender equation with the lack of women representation in the governance and peace mechanisms. A crucial part of the NATO mission has been the protection of women's rights and amping up the role of females in nation-building. However, in the Taliban's Islamic model of governance, there is complete segregation of sexes and curtailing women's rights (O'Donnell, 2021). The Afghan women dread their fate at the hands of a deep misogynist group. A constant talking point from the international community and the Kabul Government is the rights of women and minorities. But the Taliban messaging has always been vague as it continues to shape its narratives on Islamist underpinnings.

Furthermore, the economic turmoil continues with a rapidly growing population, institutional shortcomings in governance, over-dependence on foreign aid, and a tilt towards a narco-economy (Cordesman, 2019). Afghanistan remains deep in the pit, with alarming poverty rates of over 60 percent by the end of 2020 (Cordesman, 2021a). Additionally, most young populations have a massive shortage of employment opportunities (Cordesman, 2019). The export chains are also heavily dominated by opium which forms a vital source of income for not only farmers but also for the insurgent groups (Cordesman, 2019).

Rural poverty remains critically high as droughts continue to hamper the livelihood of the agricultural sector (Cordesman, 2019). With a desire for economic prosperity and safety, the rural population is increasingly heading to the cities to mingle in the modern economy (Cordesman, 2019). There is also a sense of abandonment from the Government in Kabul, which has neglected to deal with the real issues in rural areas. This has led the Taliban, which is relatively more prominent in rural areas, to sort some local support and impose its conservative ideals. And if it comes to power (quite likely), the Taliban will curtail human rights and weaken the development infrastructure.

Hence, the economic and social development of the country forms the basis of a lasting peace agreement between the two sides. As the international community vows to provide developmental aid, the efforts might fail to substantiate given the continued high level of violence. Afghan people ask for an end to violence and peace

with dignity (Malikzada, 2021). It remains highly unclear whether the negotiations will bring peace or overlook the myriad problems people suffer. This opportunity must act as a savior where conflicting ideas of the elites take a back seat, and fundamental issues of the people are given importance.

4b. **Regional Powers**

Asia is the new geopolitical hotspot due to its loud and significant economic and political expansion, enduring power rivalries, and intense infrastructural development. The geographical positioning of Afghanistan and its history of political disorder has attracted considerable attention from its neighbors in its internal matters. Regional geopolitics play a pivotal role in stabilizing the security environment of Afghanistan, and vice versa as whoever governs Kabul shall highly impact the security of the sub-region, which makes regional actors particularly interested in brokering a deal in accordance with their national interests.

Pakistan, a major non-NATO ally, has been overly crucial in the peace process due to cross-border terrorism and continued links with the Taliban regime. Islamabad's aspirations in Afghanistan are premised on reaping political and economic benefits through connectivity, energy projects, and easy access to transit routes to Central Asia (Sareen, 2021, p. 13). Its involvement in the peace process gives a clear strategic motive of downplaying New Delhi's influence in the country through an interim Government, simultaneously diluting its 'image' nurturing state-sponsored terrorism on its soils.

A risky actor it may be, Pakistan has reluctantly called for "an inclusive, broad-based and comprehensive political settlement" while stepping up its engagement with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) (Wolf, 2021, p. 21). But, on the contrary, Pakistan has also outrightly denied Washington access to its air bases for counter-terrorism monitoring of Afghanistan (Chawla, 2021). Moreover, it has also expressed the possibility of shutting its borders if the Taliban takes over to prevent an influx of Afghan refugees (Bhaduri, 2021).

Another influential neighbor that shares a long border with Afghanistan is *Iran* which has a much ambivalent policy towards Kabul. Iran has advocated an "inclusive Government" while rejecting an interim Government which could give the Taliban too

much power (Lewis, 2021, p. 10). With a history of anti-Taliban sentiments and ideological differences and resentment with the US presence in the country, Tehran's willingness and interests are primarily focused on maintaining access to the Afghan market, promoting Shia ideology, and preventing the influx of cross-border militancy and drug trafficking by securing its borders (Sakhi, 2021).

On the other hand, *China* takes a more neutral stance on the Afghan peace process as it has engaged with all sides and has repeatedly called for de-escalation of violence (Pantucci, 2021, p. 42). Moreover, in a trilateral dialogue with Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Foreign Ministers agreed upon pushing the "peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan" along with welcoming the Taliban to the political mainstream (CGTN, 2021).

Whichever may be the Government, with the deteriorating presence of western countries (NATO allies), China will move quickly to step up its economic interests. For Beijing, Afghanistan fits well to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while looking through the prism of substantial investments. Moreover, as China's appetite for natural resources has grown, Afghanistan's abundant reserves of energy and minerals serve its purpose well (Philip, 2021).

Russia is also rather indifferent to who forms the Government in Kabul as long as they maintain friendly and neutral relations with Russia (Kupriyanov and Davydov, 2021, p. 16). The balanced approach in Afghanistan is a part of the larger objective of maintaining good ties with all the regional actors involved. Moscow's concerns focus on preventing the destabilization of Central Asian neighbors with whom it shares borders (Kupriyanov and Davydov, 2021, p. 17). At the Moscow talks, Russia and other regional partners called for a cease-fire and reduced violence, which shall facilitate progress in the negotiations (AP, 2021).

A particularly concerned neighbor, *India*, has ardently supported peace through democracy and has reiterated support for an "inclusive, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process" (Pant, 2021). India opposes the "Islamic Emirate" return in Afghanistan and remains the only significant regional power that has not engaged with the Taliban (The Wire, 2021). The defense and security establishment in New Delhi is anxious that a Taliban-led Government could lead to Kashmir-targeted

terrorism coming out of Afghanistan and could further strengthen Islamabad's influence to generate anti-India sentimentality.

The bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Kabul over the years has prospered on soft diplomacy. India intends to further a critical role in the infrastructure and humanitarian development of Afghanistan. India needs to proactively participate in the peace consultations by engaging with all the stakeholders - including the Taliban. Even though India is not aligned with NATO due to its non-alignment and strategic autonomy policy, the two share democratic values. They are proponents of a rule-based international order. The mutual security concerns emanating from Beijing call for cooperation between the two in Afghanistan to dissuade China from over-asserting its influence.

Not an immediate neighbor, *Turkey* is a NATO ally that has insisted on supporting Afghanistan and has even offered to maintain the Kabul airport (Jones, 2021). With the Istanbul summit on the cards, there is a real chance for peace agreements between the Government and the Taliban. However, Ankara's moves are driven by the need to create goodwill with the new American leadership, furthering its geopolitical interests and propagating pro-Islamic ideology (Khan, 2021).

The call by the west for a regional unification is certainly chimeric due to cross-cutting regional tensions. On the other hand, the supportive attitude of the resident powers for a mutual consensus among the domestic stakeholders comes with a mix of uneasiness and relief. As many bilateral relations are at crossroads, each of them strives to serve their national interests. Nevertheless, peace in Afghanistan shall remain a distant dream without direct consultation with the regional actors, with each of them acting as a facilitator of dialogue.

5. The Way Forward

Today, we live in the most fractured times since the end of the Cold War and the frailty of the global governance mechanism calls for a moral rethink. With the fall of international cooperation and an inward approach by major world powers, peace and security prospects worldwide appear challenging. As NATO is all set to focus on the emerging security concerns, the Afghan puzzle remains unsolved due to its deep-rooted political complexities, wrecked security establishment, and repeated failure of foreign interventionism.

Mike Malloy famously said, “Afghanistan - where empires go to die.” After the departure of the USSR, the Government could not hold the country’s security for long. And now, as the US and NATO forces withdraw, the future of the safety of Afghanistan is again punctuated by uncertainty as the Afghan security forces continue to languish alongside a weak Government in Kabul which is overly dependent on foreign financial aid.

As the Taliban continues to attack civilians and harden its grip on territory, it is clear that expecting the militant group to comply with any settlement further and remain consciously engaged in the peace process is rather foolish, which the US and allied forces have done. As the west now has a bigger fish to fry and new geopolitical rivalries to attend to, Afghan people will bear the dire consequences of such a move.

Moreover, the halt to the Istanbul Conference owing to the ‘excellent’ timing of the withdrawal announcement shows bleak prospects for the peace dialogue. Nonetheless, continuous dialogue and concrete, result-oriented actions from both parties are the only proper way out. An increase in the representation of youth and women and realizing the full potential of domestic talents go a long way.

The abysmal developmental situation calls for deep synergies with the resident powers in either bilateral capacity or in a constellation of alliances and more equal partnerships with the international community. A stronger association with Russia, China, and Iran and more influx of aid for these countries could help maintain the reconstruction and development projects. Besides, India has a quite favorable image among the representatives from the Kabul side, and it should be engaged proactively in the peace process as it stands much to lose if the peace process ruptures completely. Furthermore,

actively persuading Pakistan to take a strong posture against homegrown terrorist and insurgent organizations is required.

Additionally, without a military, the future trajectory for NATO revolves around its continued diplomatic presence in Afghanistan by retaining its Senior Civilian Representative's Office in Kabul (NATO, 2021a). Continuous training and funding of the ANDSF through ANA Trust Fund was also stressed upon in the NATO Communiqué 2021 (NATO, 2021a). Finally, the Biden administration has asserted that the US humanitarian and development programs will continue after the withdrawal (Crocker, 2021).

The key concern that remains crucial for transatlantic security is terrorism. The US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated the US and NATO allies should maintain counterterrorism mechanisms in the region to prevent a breeding ground for terrorist organizations (Garamone, 2021). For example, suppose the Taliban, a group armed to the teeth, takes over. In that case, it will not only curtail the development of the country but will also have a domino effect on the security apparatus of its neighbors. Moreover, the rise of Islamist terror groups and jihadi ideology would amplify global terrorism coming out of Afghanistan. Austin posits a 'medium' likelihood of regeneration of Al-Qaeda within two years and poses a risk to America (Editor, 2021). However, with the absence of bases, intelligence-gathering presence and operational counterterrorism ability will diminish (New York Times, 2021a).

At this juncture, the western countries shall use the international development aid as a bargaining chip for the Taliban for more international recognition and integration with the world (Cordesman, 2021b). But even that outcome is uncertain as it will not be easy to lure the group. Therefore, the US should step up its diplomatic efforts to engage with Pakistan, even via third actors, too, for the sake of support for its counterterrorism endeavors. Moreover, a check on corruption and accountability for international financial aid is another crucial aspect to be considered.

6. A NATO for the New Age

As the withdrawal of US-led NATO forces is underway, the Alliance's mission can at best be termed as a moderate success. While militarily, it has contributed immensely to the growth and development of the forces over the last two decades, its efforts to fight counterinsurgency warfare largely remained ineffectual. Furthermore, on the nation-building front little has been achieved after spending an incredible amount of money (Grobe, 2021).

NATO's operations in Afghanistan exposed the internal weaknesses of the Alliance. From the outset of the mission, NATO has been time and again tested for its lack of cohesion on the ground and has also suffered the consequences of an uncoordinated approach. The absence of adequate political consultation has resulted in each member individually deciding its strategy. In addition, the laid-back attitude of the Europeans to spend on out-of-area operations exposed the budgetary issues within the group.

The longest mission of the Alliance indeed puts out some lessons for its road ahead in a rapidly changing world. Russia and China pose the key emerging security challenges, but the coalition still struggles with ineffective "collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security" mechanisms. The recommendations put forward by the Reflection Group highlighted the need to update the 2010 Strategic Concept in line with the new geostrategic environment (Reflection Group, 2020).

Most importantly, NATO needs to reinforce trust among its allies to preserve its relevance. It needs to incorporate a more cohesive military planning to boost its military intelligence. Endorsing a more effective political consultation to supplement its military strategy is crucial to unifying the alliance. NATO needs to enhance its crisis management strategy and to take lessons from its mistakes in the RSM. Moreover, adapting to the changing environment and discarding failed systems should be a norm that was largely missing during ISAF and RSM.

As the conflict canvas and warfare tactics have undergone a tremendous change, it is imperative to build capabilities to tackle borderless threats like cybersecurity, information warfare, and psychological warfare. Another threat looming over human existence is climate change, and NATO should step up extensive research and counter initiatives to tackle it.

Hence, as NATO completes seven decades into existence, it has yet to address severe transatlantic and global security challenges. Therefore, it needs to rethink its strategy and incorporate an overarching vision of the security threats across the globe while forging deep partnerships with like-minded democracies to counter the challenges to the rules-based international order.

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