

Withdrawals Of Soviet And American Forces From Afghanistan: Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

At the height of the cold war,Soviet Union attacked Afghanistan in December 1979 which the Afghans resisted bylaunching Jihad (Holy War).The resistance compelled Soviet Union to withdrawitstroops from Afghanistan on February 15, 1989. Subsequently, the Mujahideen (Holy Warriors) entered into a civil war to capture of Kabul but the more radical Taliban succeeded against them in 1996 who imposed strict Shari'ah Law andharboredthe infamous terrorist network which not only antagonized the nationalist and non-Pashtun Afghans but also the regional and foreign countries.After refusing American demand to surrender Osama bin Laden, the Taliban were ousted in 2001. USA and allies then provided a cover to the various Afghan governments against Taliban for twenty years but it also finally quit Afghanistan itself and left Ashraf Ghani at the mercy of Taliban in February 2020 who captured Kabulfrom him in August 2021. This current research study uses analytical method and relies on both primary and secondary sources. Itis an addition to the understanding of Soviet and American withdrawals and comparesthe outcomes of both the withdrawal. This research work tries to find an answer to the question that why the Soviets and Americans withdrew from Afghanistan and how both withdrawals were different form each other in terms of their outcomes?

Keywords: Afghanistan, USSR, USA,Mujahideen, Taliban, Terrorism, Withdrawals

Introduction

During the 'great game'as termed by Arthur Conolly(Lansford, 2002)between Tsarist Russia and British, a tension developed over the Russian expansionist policy to access the warm waters of Arabian Sea. The British fought three wars with Afghanistan (1839-42, 1878-79 and 1919)to make itas a buffer state(Bhat, 2020). However, after the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), beside immediate recognition, regular diplomatic relations were also established withAfghanistan(Gregorian, 1969) through the treaty of Friendship in 1921 which stipulated respect for each other's independence(A. V.

Gorev, 1980, p. 142). Later in 1924, the Soviets helped Amir Amanullah Khan against the threatening rebels and connected Kabul to Moscow through telephone and telegraph lines(Dupree, Afghanistan, 1973, p. 451).Both the states signed the treaty of Neutrality on August

31, 1926 and which was prolonged in the treaties of 1931, 1936, 1955 and 1975,thus,

Consolidating their economic ties beside political relations(A. V. Gorev, 1980, pp. 232-33).TheBasmachis (Bandits) created a little problem but the Soviet troops chased them secretly in 1929(Arnold, 1985, pp. 13-22) without affectingrelations with Afghanistan.

The Soviets continued the support of Amanullah Khantill his abdication in 1929 but withdrew its forces for appeasing the British to resume diplomatic relations with it (Hammond, 1984, pp. 12-18).

Afghanistan also benefited from the Soviet resources and technological developments in the post-WW II period (Braithwaite, 2011, pp. 19-35). After the Saur Revolution in 1978 and the first communist government (York, 2013, p. 4), a power struggle broke out among the leaders of the Khalq (Masses) and Parcham (Flag) factions of the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Khalqis were mostly Pashtuns like Nur Muhammad Tarakai (President) who enjoyed the support of USSR and Hafizullah Amin. The later murdered Tarakai and became President but his pro-American stance cost him dearly as the Soviets suspected him (Kalinovsky, 2011, p. 17) which resulted in Operation Storm 333 by Soviet army to install the leader of the Parcham, Barak Karmal as the new President. The army consisted of three divisions of approximately 8,500 troops and 280 cargo aircrafts (Prakash, 1999, p. 5).

US-Afghan relations have a recent history as compared to Russia (Later on USSR). Since 1921, USA considered Afghanistan as the British sphere of influence (Gregorian, 1969, pp. 69-70) but later on during the reign of Muhammad Zahir Shah, it recognized Afghanistan in 1934 and established diplomatic mission at Kabul in 1942. King Zahir Shah gave concessions to the American Inland Oil Exploration Company in 1937 which did not materialized due to its economic infeasibility (Cullathar, 2002). Afghanistan saw USA as the champion of world peace and democracy while USA regarded it important for its Middle Eastern policy (Emadi, 1997, p. 52). Afghanistan also gave the Helmand Valley project of a Boghra Dam to the largest American firm, Morrison Knudsen in 1946 which failed but it then completed Arghandab and Kajaki Dams in 1952 (Cullathar, 2002, pp. 523-27).

Nevertheless, US-Afghan relations were overwhelmed by Afghanistan border issue with Pakistan. America viewed Pakistan strategically more important than Afghanistan which caused its tilt towards the Soviet camp and heavily relied on its loans, advisors and experts. It became a 'complete economic satellite of Soviet Union' in the eyes of the Americans (Kux, 1996). Sardar Daud first earned this image for Afghanistan and then the displeasure of Brezhnev for hosting the American advisors. When Brezhnev asked him to expel the imperialist advisors, he said to dismiss all if they are not needed and that he is a president of an independent country (Arnold, 1985, p. 65; Garthoff, 1985, p. 895).

Daud's dream of independent policy caused his murder along with his family, to which US showed mild reaction despite the concerns expressed by the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski regarding the subjugation of Gulf oil-producing states (Harrison, 1995, p. 32). Instead it accepted the views of the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance who saw no involvement of USSR (Vance, 1983, p. 385; Harrison, 1995, p. 32). Only after USSR attack, USA started assisting the Afghan Mujahideen, suspended diplomatic relations by calling back its ambassador, started lobby against the invasion and intervention, imposed embargo on the sale of grain and modern technology and banned fishing in American waters for Soviet Union. Except direct military action, Carter administration took every possible step to compel Soviet Union withdraw for withdrawal (Hammond, 1984, p. 124).

Later on, Ronald Reagan and the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) collaborated with Pakistan against Soviet Union and mobilized the Afghan Islamist resistance against it (Bhutto, 2001). CIA covertly provided \$ 625 million to the Mujahideen while the US government provided \$ 430 million humanitarian assistance to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. It even continued supporting the Afghan resistance forces in later

period(Emadi, 1997, p. 114). Nevertheless, American interest waned only after the Soviet withdrawal and the end of cold war era as it did not reopened its embassy at Kabul, withdrew its aid and called back all officials from Afghanistan(Barfield, 2010, p. 251).

Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Military Base)of Osama bin Laden once again compelled America to show concerns regarding Afghanistan. Although initially, USA was sympathetic towards Taliban for being anti-Iran(Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, 2006, p. 223) but afterwards, it turned against them for hosting Al-Qaeda. Since the attacks on US embassies in Africa, a demand to Taliban was made to surrender Osama to it which they refused(Rais, 2008, p. 95) while by 2000; Osama became a global terrorist hiding in Afghanistan and training hundreds of terrorists(Collins, 2011, p. 13). The attacks of September 11, 2001 shook America who wasted no time (Rais, 2008; Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, 2021, p. 53) by launching a war against terrorism on October 7, 2001. The Taliban were ousted and an interim and then transitional government were installed in Afghanistan under the leadership of Hamid Karzai(Rais, 2008, pp. 125-129). The story of American prolonged war of twenty years began which finally resulted in its own exit, leaving Afghanistan at the mercy of those whom it defeated once and battled for 20 years.

Literature Review

The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left is an account by Hassan Abbas. The book sketches the return of Taliban in Afghanistan and clearly points out at the American intentions of leaving Afghanistan. The Taliban seem changed from their predecessors not ideologically but culturally. Their flexibility and adaptation is visible in their striking of diplomatic deals and non-violence. The heterogeneous nature of Taliban and the division of Ashraf Ghani's government making it dysfunctional are covered too(Abbas,

2023). Nevertheless, it misses providing a base to the American withdrawal with that of the USSR which would have made the phenomenon more understandable for its readers.

Craig Whitlock's book, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* claims a true insider story of what the Americans were doing in Afghanistan. The author says that he felt the need of the book because the American leaders were lying to the people (Whitlock, 2021). The book covers the American war in Afghanistan at length but does not show the difference of American withdrawal with that of the USSR and also about the possible outcomes which both Afghanistan and USSR had already experienced.

Another account that covers the complete period is, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* of Carter Malkasian who witnessed many developments in Afghanistan. Although the title mentions the history of American war(Malkasian, 2021) but no background study is made which could have enabled readers to compare the American withdrawal with that of the Soviet withdrawal. Its last chapter is attractive about the reversal of the whole struggle by handing over Afghanistan to Taliban but misses to compel the withdrawal experiences of America and USSR.

Methodology

Analytical and explorative methods are employed in this research and primary data like biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, speeches and reports are utilized in the light of the secondary sources which include books, journal articles, newspapers and internet sources.

Withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan

The rise and fall of Soviet Union as a communist state was a unique political event that altered the face of global competition for

influence. It entered into an ideological tussle with the capitalist USA and had not pursued its conventional economic and commercial interests by establishing hegemony over the land and sea routes for trade. The Soviet Union and its communist adherents confronted the US-led capitalist states on all fronts during the cold war period. Both the super powers though avoided confrontations but competed with each other through their proxies. Afghanistan was one such a battlefield for a proxy war where both the states supported their own favorites. The USSR as compared to USA made a difficult choice of sponsoring the whole PDPA government through the provision of constant aid and logistic support.

The Soviet attack on Afghanistan and the subsequent issue of Soviet future strategy created a debate. The Politburo on watching the repressive measures of Hafizullah Amin and his embracing of westerners, decided to send a small contingent to Afghanistan under Brezhnev Doctrine of securing and supporting communists that would withdraw after meeting the target. Leonid Brezhnev time and again ensured that within weeks the withdrawal will take place but it did not happen because the tribal guerrilla warfare presented a serious challenge before the Soviet contingent. The intervention was miscalculated as the Soviets had not taken into account the introduction of reforms in a tribal-feudal neighbor. Although Moscow wished an early withdrawal but the Politburo could not decide the minimum requirements in the face of stiff Afghan resistance. The Soviet intervention was justified through all means of propaganda for supporting the just communist forces and information regarding Afghanistan was not disseminated among the Soviet public. Army men could not share their experiences but despite that some information got leaked which attracted criticism because the war was costing men and money. The dissenting voices were silenced through hanging, exiling and imprisoning. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, critics of the attack and prolonged intervention

multiplied and even Soviet officials in military and foreign services expressed their dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the attack as it was mishandled and miscarried (Ro'i, 2022, pp. 18-25).

The attack and intervention also resulted in world-wide condemnation and enormous deterioration of relations with US-led capitalist bloc and the Muslims of the Third World countries. In light of these internal and external dynamics, the Soviets started assessing the war and the possible diplomatic solutions since 1980. They expressed their desire for a dialogue with the Americans not only through public statements but also through private contacts. They desperately wanted negotiations even if they were tough. The Soviet leadership was well aware of US containment policy and confrontational approach but still it looked for negotiations (Garthoff, 1985, pp. 1014-15).

Pakistan sensing the effect and threat of the Soviet attack started efforts for negotiations in 1981 because out of the five million Afghans refugees, the registered refugees Pakistan received were three million predominantly Pashtuns while the other two million Shi'a and Persian-speaking refugees were sheltered by Iran (Hoffman, July 2001, p. 14). Pakistan in order to counter the Soviet and PDPA troops, indoctrinated the refugees religiously with anti-communist material (Marwat, 2012, pp. 29-31) in order to have an Islamist not a India or USSR friendly nationalist government in Afghanistan (Lyakhovsky, 2004). Keeping in view these developments and apprehensions, Pakistan's government advisor on foreign affairs, Agha Shahi, urged the Secretary General of the United Nations Organizations (UNO), Kurt Waldheim on January 4, 1981 through a letter for a dialogue between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The Secretary General then appointed, Xavier Perez de Cuellar (a Peruvian diplomat) in February 1981 to reach an early settlement, the prospects of which seem grim because of a huge 'perception divergence' Pakistan and Afghanistan and also

between USA and USSR (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 109).

After the change of leadership in America, Brezhnev hoped for the development of Détente but soon found the new administration of Ronald Reagan do not wish to negotiate with the 'Evil Empire' (Garthoff, 1985, p. 1014). The UN General Secretary, Kurt Waldheim himself visited Pakistan, Afghanistan and Moscow in 1981. He found that "Brezhnev and Gromyko were more open to diplomacy and even to a prominent role for the UN." Despite Gromyko suggestion of a cautious pace, Moscow supported his efforts, accepted the induction of a special representative in the negotiations and ensured the actions of Afghan government in the same direction (Kalinovsky, 2011, p. 59). Brezhnev was, however, adamant on a political solution and was not hopeful about Pakistan holding bilateral talks with Afghanistan under the US and Chinese pressure (Harrison, 1995, pp. 75-77). This stance of the Secretary General was later on shared by Selig S. Harrison who considered Soviets serious in their desire for negotiations while blamed US for the lip services and non-seriousness in neutralizing diplomatic overtures as a psychological warfare tool which caused discomfort among the Soviet authorities (Saikal, 1984, p. 481).

The first discussion on Afghanistan between USA and USSR began at Moscow in 1981 (Matinuddin, 1991, p. 192) but Reagan adopted a rigid approach to the talks. Subsequently prospects for peace could be seen clearly after the death of Leonid Brezhnev in November 1982 because Yuri Andropov was critical of the war from the very beginning and it was believed that he would bring an end to the war but no major divorce of the past policies occurred. After the resumption of office, Andropov made it clear that USSR will not quit Afghanistan until and unless foreign intervention is stopped in Afghanistan (Collins, 2011, p. 158). Reagan on the other hand launched a ballistic missile defense under the 'Star War' which Andropov called as an

"unprecedented confrontation in the entire postwar history" (Garthoff, 1985).

Despite that further rounds of talks were held in April 1982 and June 1983 between Pakistan and Afghanistan through the UN middleman, Diego Cordovez (special representative of UN after Xavier Perez de Cuellar became UN General Secretary in 1981) because the former did not want to hold direct talks with Kabul as it will be an impression of recognizing the Karmal government. US Secretary of State George Shultz and Foreign Minister of the USSR, Edward Shevardnadze were also present on this occasion. Iranian diplomats did not participate in the talks for no representation of Mujahideen but were kept informed of the progress. Nevertheless, nothing substantial came out nor the roadmap for future talks was outlined. The only positive outcome was the four point proposal which included withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, nonintervention and noninterference in both Afghanistan and Pakistan which would be ensured through international guarantees of the superpowers, noninterference from super powers themselves, and honorable repatriation of the Afghan refugees (Dupree, 1984, p. 229; Harrison, 1995, pp. 390-391). Till this time Reagan remained adamant on confrontation but after 1983-84, a shift was seen in his stance in favor of dialogues and negotiations with the leaders of the evil empire for the strength of America. After his reelection he opted for both containment and peace through strength. (Garthoff, 1985, p. 1013).

After the death of Andropov, Konstantin Chernenkov became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU). He continued the same policy of his predecessors and no significant changes were witnessed in the Soviet policy. The Geneva talks remained halted (Kalinovsky, 2011, pp. 59-60) during this period which Cordovez tried to revive in April 1984. He after visiting Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan left the door open for future negotiations of interested

parties and institutionalized the process (Dupree, 1984, p. 230).

In the meantime the situation has drastically changed and the Afghan war has become Soviet liability. It was costing men and money and internal political and external diplomatic damage. Soviet society was hit hard by war hysteria and the overall moral and social fabric has got disturbed in the face of ethnic tension (Ro'i, 2022, pp. 279-80). The leadership of CPSU at this juncture fell to the hands of Mikhail Gorbachev who served as Secretary of ideological affairs under Chernenkov. Like previously, Gorbachev continued supporting the policies of his predecessors in Afghanistan for a military win till summer 1986 but after that year a change of policy of approach occurred. For not ending the war promptly, he outlines three reasons in his autobiography: 1) building a consensus among the Soviet leadership; 2) the most difficult task of coordination of actions with Afghan leadership and; 3) the conditional foremost withdrawal of other countries particularly Pakistan and Iran (Gorbachev, Gorbachev: On My Country and the World, 2000, pp. 197-98).

Gorbachev wanted to end the war as he thought that counter-revolution and imperialism has turned the war into a "bleeding wound" for Soviet Union (Ro'i, 2022, p. 110; Ewans, 2001, p. 162). Domestically he launched the policies of Perestroika (Economic Restructuring) for improving and stabilizing economy and Glasnost (Openness) for democratizing the society and for ensuring increased freedom (Kakar, 1995, p. 259). Gorbachev ensured not to pursue policies for antagonizing the west despite knowing the significance of the raw material of Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Third World countries for USA and European states. He expressed his desire to stop exploitation of these states but not to thwart mutual interests (Gorbachev, 1987, p. 178).

Both Gorbachev and Reagan held their first meeting in November 1985 where both

leaders showed flexibility on their stances and the former responded positively over the issue of forces withdrawal but complained about the attitude of State Department for considering the proposed agenda of agreements as premature (Shultz, 1993, p. 870). To provide stimulus for a political settlement, Gorbachev promised in July 1986 to withdraw six regiments by the end of the year and in October when these regiments returned, Gorbachev warmly greeted them and honored them with flattered words (Ro'i, 2022, p. 110). In Soviet Union these war veterans were known as Afgantsy who with the passage of time became bitter critics of Soviet leadership for the war in Afghanistan (Prakash, 1999, p. 697).

The effects of Perestroika and Glasnost were also visible in the Soviet Afghan policy. The politburo particularly Gorbachev asked the head of PDPA Afghan government, Babrak Karmal in Moscow to liberalize his policy and adopt conciliation by giving influence to the non-communists in his regime which he resisted along with the rejection of UN settlement (Cooper, 2012, pp. 62-63). Before that in March 1986, Karmal was instructed to share power with Dr. Muhammad Najibullah, the head of the secret agency Khidmat-e-Afghan Daulat (KHAD) because the Soviets view him as a potential candidate for uniting the party and for making peace with the various segments of the Afghan society. Karmal after the lapse of three days of his return from Moscow in November 1986 was asked to resign in favor of Dr. Najibullah (Kalinovsky, 2011, pp. 62-63).

Simultaneously Gorbachev informed about the Soviet intention of withdrawing its troops within one and a half to two years, thus, to turn the war to the Afghan government and asked him to pursue the national reconciliation policy more vigorously and include the conservative as well as the rebels in the government (Kakar, 1995, pp. 260-61). Gorbachev also informed the American Secretary of State, George Shultz about the withdrawal in April 1987 and also complained

that the US makes no reciprocating concessions and instead along with Pakistan violates the process. Subsequently at Washington Summit of December 1987, he announced withdrawal and in February 1988 he announced the timetable for withdrawal which would begin in May 1989 and would complete in February 1989 (Ro'i, 2022, p. 112). The US government on the other hand also showed flexibility and kept focusing on peace negotiations with Soviet Union for the reconstruction of Afghan political system and for asserting its own influence through a pro-US government in the post-war period (Cooper, 2012, p. 71).

Dr. Najibullah in accordance with Gorbachev's vision of conciliation policy invited the political groups for a dialogue to establish a coalition government which the Afghans have rejected for complete Soviet withdrawal, overthrow of the atheistic regime and the establishment of an Islamic government. The pro-Karmal followers when expressed discontents were punished while the pro-Tarakai Khalqis also did not follow him for a number of reasons. Still within the PDPA, Najibullah sought the support of individuals and groups for rallying behind him and successfully received support from Zahir Ofuq's splinter group, Sitami factions of SAZA and SZA (formerly SAFRA), the new KAJA (Young Workers of Afghanistan) faction of Sufi Shina and three other factions of peasants, religionists and business class (Kakar, 1995, pp. 262-63).

Dr. Najib paid highly publicized visits to mosques and began projecting himself as a staunch and devoted Muslim than the Ulema (Islamic Scholars) themselves. Under the Islamic Affairs Department, he appointed Ulema and Mullahs (Clerics) to important positions for weakening the Afghan Mujahideen. However, all such Ulema have lost public respect. He also changed ideological symbols and dropped 'Democratic' from the name of the country and only left Republic of Afghanistan. The name PDPA was changed for Watan (Homeland) Party and its constitution

was changed to give it an Islamic character. Another move of Dr. Najibullah was the induction of non-political figures in the cabinet, such as Dr. Muhammad Hassan Sharq as Prime Minister in 1988 and Pacha Gul Wafadar as Minister but it also failed. Besides, he also projected himself as anti-war and a peace lover by forgetting his track record as a brutal chief of KHAD who killed and imprisoned thousands of Afghans in the infamous Pul-e-Charkhi Prison at Kabul. This image of him coupled with his communist ideology (Azmatullah, 2015, pp. 45-47). All such moves on the part of Najibullah to prolong his rule failed because the Afghan resistance groups started making new alliances and alignments realignments were taking place against him. Gorbachev at this stage has courageously admitted the Soviet involvement as a mistake and he decided the exit of Soviet troops from Afghanistan (Gelman, 1990, p. 9).

Gorbachev's earlier announcement on February 8, 1988 for the beginning of withdrawal of troops on May 15, 1988 which he based the date on the assumption that the agreements would be signed no later than March 15, 1988, was a shrewd move. On one hand, he wanted he give the impression of providing a unique opportunity to the rival camp to cooperate and on the other hand outlined no concession to the Afghan Mujahideen regarding the Afghan right of self-determination. It only addressed the US concern of the withdrawal of troops and avoided the raising of Afghan self-determination question. Geneva talks were resumed in March 1988 and Kabul regime asked for ninth-month period for complete withdrawal while half the troops will leave Afghanistan in the first three months. It created apprehensions among the US officials as Soviet Union would continue supporting its lackeys while guarantee will be sought from US to abstain from supporting the Mujahideen. George Shultz asked for the continual of support to which Shevardnadze agreed and the ground was prepared for the agreement. The US

administration also bounded Pakistan to not insist on new government at Kabul and sign the accords which the later could not resist (Maley, 1989, pp. 16-17).

The four Geneva Accords were signed on April 14, 1988 which obligated Pakistan and Afghanistan for noninterference and nonintervention and that the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence must be respected by not supporting, training and financing favorites against each other. USSR and USA as Guarantors were obliged to refrain from supporting Afghanistan and Pakistan and not to intervene. Besides the date for withdrawal of half of the Soviet troops was fixed at August 15, 1988 and complete withdrawal within a period of nine months. USA, however, conditioned its support of Pakistan and Mujahideen with the withdrawal of Soviet troops (Maley, 1989, pp. 17-19).

Although most scholars do not view the war in Afghanistan as the major cause of Soviet collapse for having little impact on the internal institutions of USSR but in reality it was among the key causes along with systematic and leadership factors. The systemic explanation believed on the inevitability and unavoidability of the Soviet Union collapse because of endogenous central planning problems, economic crisis and ethnic issues, and exogenous structural issues of cold war for maintaining a large army and the widening economic disparity of communist and capitalist blocs. Leadership theories place hold responsible Mikhail Gorbachev and his associates like Eduard Shevardnadze for the collapse of Soviet Union. Such theorists believe that Soviet Union might have lasted longer and the transformation might not have taken place, had the leadership not pursued the policies of their personal choice and with the backing of non-political intellectual community (Prakash, 1999, pp. 694-95).

The withdrawal process of Soviet troops started on May 15, 1988. Many people

supported Geneva Accords with a hope for peace in Afghanistan and the dignified return of refugees to their homes but it did not happen in the end (Harrison, 1995, pp. 248-253). The withdrawal was completed on February 15, 1989 and Lieutenant-General Boris Gromov and his 40th army across the Friendship Bridge to Termez were not greeted by any member of the Politburo, the fact which they never forget. When asked about the result of the war, Boris Gromov replied that we were neither defeated nor had won the war because we were not there for a victory but for the protection of Afghan government from an outside attack (Kalinovsky, 2011, p. 92 & 37).

Nevertheless, the withdrawal decision of Gorbachev had several outcomes for Afghanistan and for USSR itself. Gorbachev's reforms idea was high jacked by the intelligentsia and within few years of the withdrawal he was replaced with Dictator Boris Yeltsin (Vijayachandran, 2013, p. 64). In Afghanistan the geopolitical situation changed also after the withdrawal. The Geneva Accords did not address the domestic Afghan conflict, the future of Dr. Najibullah and the form of the future government (Ahadi, 1994, p. 84). Pakistan broke the terms of the agreement and violated several of its provisions by continuing its support of the Mujahideen. On the other hand the Soviet Union continued backing the communist government of Najibullah which kept the Mujahideen on their back foot (Harrison, 1995, pp. 258-260) while the aspirations of PDPA members were discouraged for standing against him (Kalinovsky, 2011, p. 147). It neither left Afghanistan for Mujahideen nor agreed to the right of Afghan self-determination and tactfully and diplomatically omitted it from the text of Geneva Accord (Maley, 1989, p. 24).

Although the war fought in Afghanistan killed one million people and around seven million were displaced (Rubin, 2003, p. 1) but no responsibility of any kind was fixed in the Geneva Accords. The ground was even left open for further fighting and

infightings. The rule of PDPA under Najibullah was prolonged for few more years despite the hopes of many that it would soon in weeks and months. The major reason for this prolonging was the massive Soviet support of the regime which made it the only capable force to maintain law and order in the country. The Russian government record revealed that till October 1991, it had provided Afghanistan with a total debt of 4.7 billion rubles (Kalinovsky, 2011, p. 42).

American Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The Al-Qaeda attack on the twin towers of World Trade Centre in USA on September 11, 2001 was the deadliest in its entire history which compelled it to identify the attackers and unearth their Afghan-Pakistani bases and networks within the following hours and days (Malkasian, 2021, p. 61). US president, George W. Bush launched Operation Enduring Freedom within less than a month period for dealing with the new problem of global terrorism which was extremely successful in the initial phase for ousting Taliban in 2001 and for removing Saddam Hussain from power in 2003 (Powell, 2012, p. 207). The US overthrew the Taliban government in Afghanistan within two months which had close ties with Al-Qaeda (Coll, 2018, p. 69). It though succeeded in taking out governments in Afghanistan and Iraq but had no further clear directions or means, as a result of which the wars were turning into failures in the later phases and took years because the efforts of the surge forces started a reverse process. The policy makers had not relied on strategic planning, otherwise, the surge force would have been deployed from the very beginning (Powell, 2012, p. 207).

The total US expenditures for keeping 50,000 men and 400 planes with their equipment needs in Afghanistan during September 11 to November 8, 2001 were US \$1.48 billion. By April 2002, it reached to \$10.2 billion but after a month the amount for the war during the eight months reached to \$17 billion or over \$2 billion per month, out of

which \$3.7 billion was spent on security and intelligence, particularly to hunt bin Laden, while \$1.76 billion were spent on weapons that helped topple Taliban government and in chasing and dispersing Al-Qaeda (Griffin, 2003, pp. 364-65). The cost of war on terrorism was almost a trillion dollar with three thousand US soldiers death toll while ten times of that number wounded and even the higher percentage of toll of Afghan civilians took place (Obama, 2020, p. 313). A fissure existed in the national security team and by 2004 it had become completely dysfunctional. President Bush turned down the advice of Colin Powell for an entirely fresh national security team, after which he quit the US State Department in 2005 (Powell, 2012, p. 36).

President Barack Obama saw incoherence in US policy of Afghanistan which was narrow in terms of wiping out Al-Qaeda and broader in terms of making the country modern and democratic ally of the west. The US forces cleared the Taliban but could not ensure the establishment of a capable local governance structure on the ground that there existed Afghan lack of interest, overambitious approach or corruption despite the fact that the anti-corruption efforts were designed for winning over the Afghan people which failed as massive contracts were given to the shadiest businessmen of Kabul. At this moment, the White House and Pentagon were confronting each other over the question of the deployment of thirty thousand more troops. Finally Barack Obama has to concede what he opposed at the time of his election campaign; the sending of more troops for combat rather than bringing them back home after thinking over the alternatives of the collapse of Afghan government or the strengthening of major cities (Obama, 2020, pp. 320-25). He though announced the increase to 100,000 by mid-2010 but was confronted with the question that whether such an increased number of force would succeed in bringing peace to Afghanistan keeping in view the warring

history of the Afghan people (Carlisle, 2010, p. 149).

Since then a change was seen in the approach of Obama administration. The Americans looked for possibilities of engaging with the Taliban in dialogues despite the review of the experienced CIA analyst, Bruce Riedelin March 2009 that saw Taliban leadership neither reconcilable nor can be included in the deal (Clinton, 2015, p. 141). After the passing of few months, a surge or a traditional counter-insurgency doctrine was opted than an open-ended commitment. President Barack Obama decided the partial withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan on account of the long-lasting conflict. This decision also outlined that pace of the arrival of the soldiers will be accelerated and eighteen month time was specified for the start of coming home of the forces (Obama, 2020, p. 443).

Before arriving at this decision, Obama administration was closely observing the Taliban and their approach to the situation. For instance, some Taliban representatives and the aide of Mullah Omar visited Egypt to reach out the Americans in 2009 and then the same aide contacted German diplomat for a direct talks with the Americans (Clinton, 2015, pp. 145-46). The US administration then decided to end the combat operations in 2014 and to withdraw all the forces by 2016 (Report, 2021, p. 13). Subsequently, under the strategic partnership agreement signed between Barack Obama and Afghan President, Hamid Karzai 10,000 soldiers left Afghanistan by July 2011 while the 23,000 US troops left by the end of summer 2012. These 33,000 were those extra soldiers which Obama had sent for fighting the Taliban. The plan envisaged that the Afghan security forces will lead the combat operations while ISAF after 2013 will train and assist them and only will fight alongside them when needed. Complete removal of US troops except for trainers and advisors was decided by the end of 2014 in the agreement (Jahanzaib, 2015, p. 3).

But despite these overtures, the number of civilians killed in insurgent attacks and their overall killing remained much higher and the Afghan military and police units seemed helpless in protecting them because they were taking over responsibility for security and appeared unprepared to combat Taliban. The US troops remained aloof because it provided training and assistance only. They avoided any involvement in fight still 2014 because the US and its allies had declared it over in December 2014 (Posen, 2014, pp. 105-110). It was believed that Afghanistan National Security Force (ANSF) which was around 3,52,000 could tackle a dangerous situation if anyone challenges the writ of the state. ANSF was divided among the Afghan National Army numbering 146,339, Afghan National Police (ANP)-only border and civil order police and not the local police numbering 146,339 and the Afghan Air Force (AAF) numbering 6,172. The major question was, however, of allegiance of the army in the face of violence eruption after US withdrawal and the apprehensions were there in 2015 that the Afghan army may capture the presidency after the beginning of a civil war (Jahanzaib, 2015, pp. 7-9). Obama in July 2016 announced that he plans to maintain 8,400 force in Afghanistan till the end of his administration because Afghan forces were not as strong as they had to be (Thomas, 2021, p. 5). Further implications of US withdrawal included the escalation of Taliban threat that could be managed through serious efforts for dialogues, the resurgence of ethnic factor and the increased role of regional powers (Jahanzaib, 2015, p. 9).

Among these regional players, Pakistan is the key player in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Pakistanis play on both sides of the war, they greatly help USA but want the Taliban also. Pakistan wished to see a greater influence for Pashtuns among the Taliban as a backup plan. It would gain that influence by favoring violence and for this purpose the Taliban are kept at disposal. Pakistan may not always support the Taliban or their stance but

any such group that could threaten the Indian interest in south-eastern Afghanistan. Along with Pakistan, other regional stake holders and organizations were believed to play positive role for bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan and many people wanted purposeful negotiations for bringing peace to Afghanistan after the US withdrawal (Jahanzaib, 2015, pp. 10-11).

Although the Afghan government was ready to establish a ceasefire and start negotiations for bringing end to the war but the Taliban refused to hold direct talks with the government and extend legitimacy to it (Karakoç-Dora, 2021, p. 179). Instead the Taliban published an open letter addressing President Donald J. Trump asking him what the Afghan government could not demand to withdraw the US forces from Afghanistan. Trump who at first increased target and force level felt frustrated over the lack of military progress and ordered direct talks with Taliban without the Afghan government (Thomas, 2021, p. 5). The Taliban then entered into direct negotiations with US at Doha, Qatar in July 2018 after more than 18 years of hostilities in Afghanistan. The appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad in September 2018 as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation was a boost to the negotiations. He held a series of continuous meetings with Taliban leadership at Doha in consultation with the Afghan, Pakistan and other regional actors. Later in March 2019 he made an announcement that agreement has been drafted regarding counterterrorism and US withdrawal, after which the intra-Afghan dialogue for a complete ceasefire will take place. However, after few months the talks were suspended by Trump when an attack on US soldiers took place and were only resumed in December 2019. The situation to the agreement became favorable only when the reduction in violence took place in the second month of 2020 (Thomas, 2020, p. 2).

On February 29, 2020, the US-Taliban four parts agreement took place, in which the Taliban agreed for not sheltering terrorists

against the US and its allies while the US agreed to announce the schedule for withdrawal. The other two parts were related to the Taliban initiation of an intra-Afghan dialogue on March 10, 2020 and the observance of a complete ceasefire during the negotiations. The representatives of the US and Afghan governments signed similar 'Joint Declaration.' The US-Taliban agreement created hopes of an end to the 42 year war but many people rejected it as a shield for US and Taliban interests. The agreement was vague as well as the people were not consulted which provided an upper hand to the Taliban over the Afghan government. The Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada - supreme leader after the death of Mullah Mansoor - declared the deal as the "victory of the entire Muslim and Mujahid (Islamic Warrior) nation" (Abbas, 2023, p. 26).

The first round of dialogue ended on December 14, 2020 and then after a standstill the second round started in February 2021. The US administration asked President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah - Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, HCNR - to expedite the peace process and to negotiate with the Taliban on a new level. Zalmay Khalilzad wanted a new 'Bonn-style' conference for sidelining the intra-Afghan dialogue at Doha for meeting the conditional deadline of the withdrawal of US and other troops by May 2021 (Wasi, 2021, p. 164). According to the deal the Taliban released 1000 Afghan security personnel while Ashraf Ghani resisted the release the 5000 Taliban fighters which included high profile murderer and lawbreakers but later on under US pressure, he had to release the fighters which boosted the morale of Taliban. On the other hand, the American presidents, Trump and later Joe Biden only followed the timeline of withdrawal more vigorously instead of compelling Taliban for the success of intra-Afghan negotiations (Abbas, 2023, p. 27).

The US had already reduced its forces before the agreement and continued the same after the agreement. On Trump leaving office in

January 2021, about 2, 500 troops had been withdrawn. Joe Biden announced final withdrawal by May 1 which has to be completed in September 2021. He later announced the date of withdrawal at August 31, 2021 and the Taliban accused US for the break of agreement by extending the date but refrained from attacking the US forces. The ANSF crumbled at this point and the Taliban captured Afghanistan from President Ashraf Ghani in August 2021 (Thomas, 2021, pp. 6-8).

The whole episode of negotiations between USA and Taliban were suspected and the process was thought vague because of no consultation with the Afghans (Wasi, 2021, p. 164). After the deal, the US authorities handed over Afghanistan to the same forces it fought and took government from in 2001. Since then the US, NATO and ISAF forces consistently resisted the Taliban but when the decision of negotiations was taken, the whole struggle and sacrifices were ignored. Not only the apprehensions of the Afghan government were ignored, but it even did not wait for the success of the intra-Afghan dialogue insisted by Zalmay Khalilzad and his team (Abbas, 2023, p. 27).

US announced the Taliban as the only interlocutor in Afghanistan to the whole world through this agreement which disappointed Afghan government and the allies who considered Taliban as terrorists. The Americans left Afghanistan in haste and thus watershed its 20 years struggle (Karakoç-Dora, 2021, p. 179) without guaranteeing the security of the Afghan government and Afghan civilians who suffered from the 42 year war. It care little for the wastage of resources, the sacrifice of its own or allies soldiers. The Taliban even seized US weapons but could only use small arms and some vehicles (Thomas, 2021, pp. 8-10). The Americans left the people at the mercy of Taliban who fled the country to avoid the wrath of Taliban. Ashraf Ghani and his dignitaries also fled and left Afghanistan for Taliban to rule without resistance (Ullah, 2023, p. 26).

The US since the previous Taliban rule used the sufferings of women as a pretext in its official policy. The United Nations' Secretary General, Kofi Annan took position over the Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) of conflict resolution, reconstruction and lasting peace in Afghanistan. He saw no progress and development without women participation. Hamid Karzai paid a lip service in 2002 and expressed determination to address women sufferings but took no practical steps. Obama administration also highlighted the issue of Afghan women and particularly Hilary Clinton called Hamid Karzai to reverse the law passed against Hazara Shi'a women for taking permission from husbands on leaving their houses. The Afghan women felt frightened by Karzai deal with the Taliban and by the departure of US troops. Hilary Clinton clearly stated that it is unacceptable to trade the rights of Afghan women for buying peace (Clinton, 2015, p. 142). However, before and after the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, the Americans either forgot or ignored the women who were trying hard to maintain their previous position. The Americans left them at the mercy of the oppressive rule of Taliban who imposed new restrictions on them and banned them from jobs or getting education while punishments were announced for males of those women who do not wear hijab or drive cars (Thomas, 2023, p. 8).

Conclusion

The internal situation of Afghanistan since the times of the Afghan monarchy provided an opportunity to USSR, USA and other states to exploit in their own favor. In the struggle for influence, Afghans and Afghanistan suffered the most because they lost direction. The various external actors tried to impose their own ideologies on Afghanistan rather than to promote Afghan culture or the Afghan nation, for instance, Soviet Union tried to impose communist ideology and to 'Sovietize' the Afghans, Pakistan with the backing of US supported the Islamist groups for 'Islamizing'

the Afghans, Saudi Arabia and Arab states promoted Wahhabism to make Afghans adherents of 'Wahhabi' Islam while Iran favored Shi'ism and Persian Language for the Afghans to bring Afghans to Shi'a Islam and to 'Persianize' them.

USSR as the major contender for influence in Afghanistan during the cold war period controlled the Afghan state and politics but its efforts received a setback when the Afghans whether Islamists or ethnic-centrists challenged its superimposed communist rule and compelled it for negotiations. It ultimately had to value the Afghan ascendancy in the famous Geneva Accord of April 1988. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the Soviet Union did not left the rule in Afghanistan for the Mujahideen leaders nor had stopped supporting Najibullah government against the various factions but instead it frustrated the Mujahideen who started a civil war and thus helped in prolonging Najibullah's rule.

The other super power, US who joined the war in Afghanistan very late and supported Pakistan for providing assistance to the anti-Soviet forces but after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, its interest declined and left Afghanistan at the mercy of regional powers, Afghan Mujahideen and Taliban. The civil war brought resulted in Taliban capture of government and their strict Shari'ah law for ensuring peace. USA felt no threat till that point but after their harboring of Osama and Al-Qaeda, they were seen as a challenge to the American supremacy. The 9/11 provided an opportunity to topple Taliban government and to disperse Al-Qaeda.

America established the new government of Hamid Karzai and for protecting it and Afghanistan from Taliban recapture, the US, NATO and ISAF forces stationed there and entered into a non-ending war with the Taliban and terrorists. The war frustrated Obama administration which then decided to enter into negotiations with the Taliban. The subsequent governments of President Trump and President

Joe Biden also held negotiations with Taliban for quitting Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban agreement was concluded in haste because no guarantee for the security of the US-established Afghan government was sought. Besides, the morale of Taliban for recognizing them as the most powerful group than the Afghan government by America got boosted. US claims as champion of democracy also received a setback because reached agreement with fully equipped and field fighting group of Taliban. It entrusted the rule to them despite launching a war against them in the past, ousting them from power and fighting them for twenty long years. Furthermore, the fate of those Afghans who supported the Afghan government and the efforts of US became at stake. At the time of Taliban capture of Kabul, the Afghans had to flee their country in dismal for their lives while the Afghan women who were always part of the US official statements were left helpless. Even the US, NATO and ISAF forces had to vacate Afghanistan by leaving behind weapons and arsenals for the Taliban.

In a nutshell, US withdrawal strategy was more shameful than that of USSR. As Taliban claims to have defeated the superpower, therefore, there is no guarantee that they will not harbor terrorists in future. America or any other country cannot fight another prolonged war while limited war will be of no help. The only solution now left is to engage with the Taliban government instead of alienating or sanctioning them, for a purposeful intra-Afghan dialogue and to convince them for a broad-based setup that might include all sections of the Afghan society and this way peace could return to Afghanistan and to the region.

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