

READING THE AF-PAK NARRATIVE, FROM THE US DISENGAGEMENT TO RUSSIAN RE-ENGAGEMENT

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<p>Article history:</p> <p><i>Received:</i> 28 April 2017</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> 4 November 2017</p>	<p>Abstract: The US has prolonged its stay in Afghanistan with the security situation remaining far from improving. The indefatigable demand for resources to maintain counter-insurgency operations was a major debate in 2016 US Presidential elections with a demand for an earlier withdrawal from America's trillion dollars plus war effort. Russians having sensed the weakening of the US influence warmed up to the idea of new Afghan situation involving Taliban and their masters, the Pakistan army. Russia had experienced vulnerabilities of Islamisation in Central Asia and Caucasus, and the ISIS brand radicalisation added to the fear of political destabilisation of Central Asian states. The Islamic State showed up in Afghanistan and Pakistan as ISIS-Khorasan branch. Russia needed Pakistan as an ally to fight Daesh's presence on its southern periphery. However, there remained many intertwined security challenges that complicate the South Asian geopolitics, especially, the Af-Pak region. Russia's Taliban policy might be the hitherto unused leverage that it might be using in order to strike balance all along the shatter belt.</p>
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Introduction

The trilateral summit held in December 2016 in Moscow dwelling upon the security situation in Afghanistan expressed heightened concern from the stake holders working with the Kabul government. The US got riled over the perfervid camaraderie shown by Islamabad and Beijing to Moscow's overture. The initiative was in consonance with the Russia's stated policy to counter ISIS in Levante and prohibit its choleric rise all along its periphery. This CIS-Eurasian periphery also delineated as 'shatterbelt' by political geographers represents a vast expanse of Turko-Arab Muslim tribes.¹ The major threat from the Islamic State (ISIS) to Afghanistan was recognized when the organization signalled new franchise, Velayat Khorasan (Khorasan province, or ISIS-KP) focussing on Afghanistan. The consequences of Syrian conflict affected the prospects of peace and stability in Afghanistan. It was the same set

of state interests that fought against each other in the Cold war found themselves now pitted against one another in Syria. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, the Euro-Atlantic West have been supporting wide range of rebels in Syria ranging from Free Syrian Army to the ISIS-Al-Qaeda infested Al-Nusra front. Cold war witnessed the same side supporting Mujahideens led by Haft-e Shura, the resistance council based in Peshawar that included Hizb-I Islami (notably, Hekmatyar) factions and Jamat-I Islami (Rabbani-led) among the prominent ones.

The US remained brazenly exposed in Syria where the Obama administration and the EU fully backed Turkey and Saudi Arabia for material support to the ISIS and other anti-Syrian government militia in hope of getting Assad regime removed. Turkey provided them offer of citizenship in lieu of their recruitment in Daesh for fighting in Syria and Iraq.² Russia remained defiant to these designs and provided logistics to Syrian government and the necessary

¹ Cohen, S.B. *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

² Azad, S. *Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations*. Lexington Books, 2017.

air power for destroying the oil economy of these anti-Syrian government groups. The US-led West and the Russian interests clashed in Syria that led to a stalemate in the Syrian situation. The Trump administration seemed to step aside Obama's Middle East policies lent hope for a cooperative solution made a shocking U-turn with raining down 59 cruise missiles on Sharyat Airbase operated by Syrian Government.³ The US wheeling around with the obsession of regime change has led to unending spiral of conflict in Levante and that has affected its long-term engagements, such as, in Afghanistan. Afghanistan compared to Syria represented a stark contrast where Russia had actually approved of the US's effort to eliminate Al-Qaeda-Taliban regime in the aftermath of the 9/11. In fact, Afghanistan was the only place where the US and Russia agreed more than anywhere else. The NATO forces relied heavily on the Russian controlled Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to connect with Afghan deployments for major source of supplies and later as a returning route for the 2014 drawdown. The change of regime in the US after the Democrats lost the Presidential race raised speculation for a total withdrawal from Afghanistan. But, then Trump administration made another U-turn by using the MOAB non-nuclear bomb on IS-location in Nangerhar in April 2017. Former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai criticized the use of such weapons and shamed the US for using Afghan soil as testing ground of its weapons inventory.⁴ This raised the speculation whether the US President Trump intended to bring home the troops that were sent abroad under the major macro-securitization paradigm. The US hadn't abandoned its priorities in Afghanistan post-2014 with the necessary air support provided to Afghan forces staging ground operations. However, the interest kept diminishing due to intransigent situation where Taliban raised battle costs with ever rising wave of violence in the north and the south. This coupled with

the marked deterioration of the US-Pakistan relations made the US presence in Afghanistan a dimensionless affair. Amid these doldrums, Russian overtures to Pakistan with reference to Afghan situation raised a few eyebrows among the stake holders.

The Russians had a long history of distrust and apathy towards Pakistan since the Cold war period, when Pakistan became a member of CENTO, a Cold war military block. South Asian geopolitics had Indo-Soviet friendship as a big determining factor for India had been purchasing Russian arms since the Soviet times and the legacy of strategic ties were the widest of frameworks between the two countries ranging from joint production of advance weapons to military exchanges. Russia's engagement in South Asia largely marked with the Indo-Soviet friendship that served as beacon to Nehruvian era of Non-Aligned Movement. The Soviets valued India's support against the perennial hostility of the West and reciprocally, India was the benefactor of Soviet permanent membership at the UN, where any attempt to internationalize the Kashmir issue was vetoed by the Soviet Union on numerous occasions. The Russians have valued Indian factor in Afghan geopolitics as the latter has a great goodwill among common Afghans, who saw India as their second home. Russia worked with India and Iran in thwarting Taliban in 1990s when there was serious threat to the minorities in northern Afghanistan and their further incursions into the neighbouring Central Asian republics. Russia has been particularly wary of narco-terrorism that could potentially destabilize the CIS states. The jihadist elements used opium cultivation for garnering resources to fund terror training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both, Russia and India saw narco-terror and militant Islam as threat to regional stability and shared great deal of common understanding about the future of Afghanistan. Iran's concerns for Shia Hazaras persecuted by Taliban made it a common cause with the two. The US-led West supported the rise of Taliban after the fall of Rabbani government that soon turned into a phenomenon of Sunni religious extremism and narco-terrorism later termed as the Talibanization of the Af-Pak region.⁵

³ Mercouris, A. BREAKING: Bombed Syrian Sharyat Air Base «Back in Operation» // *The Duran*, 2017.

⁴ Ex-President Karzai «Vehemently» Condemns US Dropping MOAB Bomb in Afghanistan // *Sputniknews.com*, 2017.

⁵ Rashid, A. The Taliban: Exporting Extremism // *Foreign Affairs*, 1999, Vol. 78, No. 6, pp. 22-35.

The efforts to recognize Taliban as a legitimate force in political participation that could outmanoeuvre ISIS appeared a new thinking by Russia, China and Pakistan exploring a common ground vis-à-vis the US. Taliban without Talibanization remained an important caveat to such an alliance that hadn't so far explained the Russian policy overtures. India and Iran haven't abandoned their concerns on Talibanization as their interests remain unchanged. The new narrative didn't distract from the manifold complexities of Taliban movement, which had been a multi-headed and multi-interest amorphous coalition of fighters. Taliban hadn't been proved to be another pawn in the US-Russian war along the Eurasian periphery. The Russians came out open about their contacts with Taliban only to brief their intention of inclusivity of the process. Taliban had been operating through their Doha, Qatar office since 2013 and depended on their patrons in the Middle East, who coincidentally happened to be the primary funders of ISIS in Levante. The US maintained liaison with the Taliban leaders released from Guantanamo Bay prison and pushed for amicable solution between the Karzai government and the ranks of Taliban. But, Taliban who befooled the Americans by sending the fake interlocutors appeared to be very slimy stuff who could even now walk out at any stage negotiation jeopardizing the Moscow initiative.⁶ Negotiations with Taliban could possibly work out as Pakistan sought to weaken the threat from Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP); a group that operated across Durand line after being pushed by military Operations of Pak army. The sympathizers of TTP, the Deobandi cleric of Pakistan openly declared allegiance to Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the Caliph of ISIS.⁷ Russia might have to undertake a lot of hair-splitting decisions on Taliban groups as Pakistan regularly shifted the red lines between the 'good' and the 'bad' Taliban, based on transformation of conflict in the Af-Pak buffer around Durand line.

The duality of macro- and micro-management of conflict in Afghanistan could strain Russia beyond its economic capability and

geopolitical willingness. The April 2017 attack by Taliban on 209 Shaheen corps headquarters in Balkh costed lives of almost 160 troops out of which nearly 100 were from Takhar and Badakhshan alone, which indicated that mostly they were Tajiks.⁸ The growing suspicion about an insider attack could potentially lead to mistrust and ethnic discontent in armed forces that would be catastrophic for Afghanistan; as sensing the unhappiness both the Army chief and Defence Minister promptly resigned. Russia had Tajiks and Uzbeks from northern Alliance as traditional partners in post-Najibullah Afghanistan. Russia would be risking apathy and anger of its erstwhile protagonists, notably, the Tajiks and Uzbeks, who would see these attacks as threat to their political existence. Ismail Khan, one of the most seasoned leader and former mujahedeen commander hailing from Herat cautioned as early as of January 2017 that if Moscow conferences meant the re-empowerment of Taliban, then it would be used as a pawn between the Great Power rivalries turning Afghanistan into another battlefield like Aleppo, in Syria. The Russians would be inclined to use Taliban as a deterrent force against the US military presence that countered the Russian security interest in the Middle East.⁹

The paper set out with the aim of making an assessment of Russian pragmatism in Afghan situation and the possible implications for the South Asian geopolitics. Russian presence in South Asia allowed balance of great power interest in the region. Russia's quest for strategic objectives in Afghanistan could be a unilateral approach partially shared by Pakistan, who would use it as an opportunity for seeking bargains vis-à-vis India. The paper looks into comparative situations of Russian engagement during cold war period and now in a different matrix. Russia and the US both have major realignments towards India and Pakistan, which has transformed South Asian security complex. The paper in the end argues that Russia has difficult choices in supporting Taliban and pitting South Asia against Middle East crisis could turn out to be a faux pas for Russia.

⁶ Gul, A. Afghan Taliban Declines to Support Moscow-Backed Peace Talks // *VOA News*, 2017.

⁷ Syed, J. and oth. Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

⁸ Ahmadi, N. Almost 100 Fallen Soldiers Are from Badakhshan and Takhar Alone // *Tolo News*, 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

The US goals post-2014

The US had announced withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan by 2014, but not before securing at least a handful of operational bases that could still sustain formidable military presence in the country. The surge and a drawdown were announced by Obama administration in 2009 as a part of stabilizing the situation. However, the expectations were belied due to continued low-intensity conflict in the south and the east of Afghanistan. The US got dismayed with the fact that the EU under NATO framework had not been forthcoming enough as combat force and this largely was responsible for the military fatalities being largely American.¹⁰ Before demitting the White House, Obama administration decided to maintain troop level at around 9.000 as a pause to steady reduction that would have seen only 5.000 US troops by 2017. The figures of 2015-16 indicated the troop combat mortality reduced substantially with the reduction in deployment but the extra-ordinary rise in civilian casualties indicated the threat to governance. The years of 2015 and 2016 could be considered worse in terms of loss of Afghan lives as nearly 3500 civilian lives were lost in each year with the children being one third of them. Almost 60.000 civilians have died in Afghanistan since the 2009 surge.¹¹ This signified the lack of any improvement in security situation given the persistent resistance by Taliban and sparsely distributed security framework contributed to more casualties of Afghan forces. The NATO allies committed to Afghan cause operate under a framework defined by Operation Resolute Support.¹² The goals remained elusive as the ground situation worsened steadily since drawdown. But, the Afghan conflict appeared to be an extra-territorial affair given the fact that cross-border operations gained focus in the aftermath of withdrawal. The US presence carried geopolitical significance that restrained Taliban to re-arm and re-group on a massive scale just like in 1990's for major assault.

¹⁰ Afghanistan On Obama's Agenda At NATO Summit // *All Things Considered*, 2010.

¹¹ Jazeera Al. Afghan Civilian Casualties at Record High in 2016: UN, 2017.

¹² Carati, A. No Easy Way Out: Origins of NATO's Difficulties in Afghanistan // *Contemp. Secur. Policy*, 2015, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 200-218.

The triadic arrangement of US-Afghanistan-Pakistan initiative failed due to lack of trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the one hand between Pakistan and the US on the other. The latter set of relations nose-dived to nadir in 2011 when nearly 25 Pakistani troops were killed by the US airstrike on Durand line.¹³ The rise of Daesh proved that the avowed goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al-Qaeda remained elusive as ever in 2017 as well. The new strategy unveiled in 2009 clearly articulated that the "future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbour, Pakistan" and the toponymal identity of Af-Pak emerged.¹⁴ The US-Pak relations have been nettled by the US's changing priorities in South Asia. The cost of staying in Afghanistan was the key consideration as Pakistan remained supportive of Taliban (Quetta Shura) and the Haqqani network as its strategic assets. The problem further complicated with growing uncertainties over funding and training of Afghan security forces as the European Union found itself pre-occupied with Brexit, Ukraine crisis and the influx of Middle East refugees. The US needed Pakistan's goodwill at all cost to survive post-2014 security scenario. But, the US prorogued Pakistan's geopolitical goals on Kashmir issue and hastened latter's bandwagon with China to make up for the loss of strategic advantage. The US, India and the Afghan government made a common cause against Pakistan's support of terror groups detrimental to their security interests. The lack of strategy for larger regional solution to deal with Afghan crisis had been the missing element in the Obama administration and the newly arrived Trump administration as well. The US has been more fascinated with one-on-one dealing with the adversary. And, so long Al-Qaeda and Taliban remained a visible threat it suited the design of scaling up the assault. But, the political solution kept evading due to inadequate thinking about several coaxial bilateral issues that impeded any progress. The dealings with Iran on nuclear issue and the larger crisis in

¹³ Schaffer, T.C. Pakistan and the United States: A More Turbulent Ride? // *Asia Policy*, 2017, No. 23, pp. 49-56.

¹⁴ Office of the Press Secretary. Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan / The White House, 2009.

the Middle East has prohibited the formation of any fruitful venture against the resistance forces despite having common interest. The objective of integrating the moderate Taliban planned with the Middle East countries, esp., Qatar didn't work out. And, the Central Asian countries valued only for the logistical support for most of the part in the Operation Enduring Freedom reneged with no economic opportunity visible with the US presence in Afghanistan. The preoccupation of NATO-Russia relations with Ukraine crisis impacted negatively on any long term cooperation for stabilizing Afghanistan.

The US decision to hold out olive branch to Taliban in 2011 received setback with the untimely demise of Richard Holbrooke, the first Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP). The SRAP framework had integrated experts and diplomats from NATO countries, who were also engaged in Afghanistan under the UN mandate. Talks with Taliban had minimalist outcome for both sides as Taliban were able to open political office in Doha in June 2013, whereas the US were able to secure Sergeant Bergdahl from Taliban captivity in May 2014.¹⁵ President Karzai grew impatient with the US over the possible compromise of Afghan national interest while talking to the Taliban that further vitiated conditions for peace talks. Civilian deaths in airstrikes became point of acute criticism of the US presence in Afghanistan and it led to significant difficulty of signing the strategic pact as drawdown deadline approached. The Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement between Afghanistan and the US was signed in September 2014 that provided 9 bases in Afghanistan and entry-exit points for the US troops for Afghanistan. The US's frustration with Taliban brought new stages to War on Terror and one significant change was the Drone Warfare. The strategy of holding out the leadership so as to decapitate the resistance movement had a degree of success amid flurry of assault that Taliban regularly launched every year as summer offensive. According to one estimate the US drones killed almost 50 top leaders of Al Qaeda and Taliban in Af-Pak

¹⁵ Grossman, M. Talking to the Taliban 2010-2011: A Reflection // *Prism a J. Cent. Complex Oper.*, 2013, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 21.

region, but it took lives of no less than 500 civilians as collateral damage.¹⁶ The strategic objective of keeping the leadership issue alive and harass them from strategizing is one of the important goals of drone strikes. But, drone strikes one such that killed Mullah Mansur in May 2016 led to further deterioration of the US-Pak relations as these strategic assets were used by Pakistan against the Indian presence in Afghanistan.¹⁷

The US held the premise that once Al-Qaeda is defeated then Afghanistan's mineral wealth and its location for energy transit routes could be exploited for offloading the financial burden due to prolonged war. The mineral resources wealth was chanted by western media as some asteroidean discovery that awaited 21st century gold rush would turn the course of war-funding.¹⁸ The mining and mineral activity demanded security in countryside, where Taliban threatened any investment. The US welcomed Chinese and Indian initiative to invest in Afghan economy. The work on Ainak copper (China) and Hajigak iron mines (India) has been albeit slow, demonstrated possibilities of regional solution to Afghan situation. But, the Chinese investments in Afghanistan area based on arterial extension to its investments in Central Asia and Pakistan, whereas the Indian investments could be seen as the US-Afghan government preference to balance the Sino-Pak influence. The problem of connectivity is linked to security that renders Durand line as a failed border with increasing clash between Afghan and Pak security forces.

Engaging Pakistan and the Indian question

Russia inherited Afghan neighbourhood since the formation of USSR. The interaction between the two states was referred to as the Great Game during 19th-20th centuries. The present context of engagement could be traced back to the times when the Basmachi

¹⁶ Byman, D. Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice // *Foreign Affairs*, 2013, Vol. 92, No. 4, pp. 32-43.

¹⁷ Boone, J.; Rasmussen, S.E. US Drone Strike in Pakistan Kills Taliban Leader Mullah Mansoor / *Guard*, 2016.

¹⁸ Simpson, S. Afghanistan's Buried Riches // *Sci. Am.*, 2011, Vol. 305, No. 4, pp. 58-64.

revolt in Central Asian Republics had strong connection with the Afghan ethnoscape. The Russian experience in nation building during Soviet times played a great part in strategizing involvement in Afghanistan. The khans, maliks and the clergy were alienated due to the attraction of Soviet power among the poor peasants. The economic dimension was important in weaning away support from Basmachi leaders in early 1920s and 30s. The warlords (Basmachi leaders) were denied resources to reemploy the jigits (surrendered soldiers).¹⁹ This approach couldn't be followed in the 1978 Afghan case, where the nationalist forces themselves were the beneficiary of Soviet aid and assistance and the common Afghans easily slipped into the hands of cross-border clergy-politicians, who gave a call for holy war. The West's aid to mujahidin proved decisive in the failure of Soviet approach towards Afghan crisis. And, it was for long an established conclusion that in order to isolate the insurgency, economic sops were to be strongly embedded in any counter-insurgency move. The post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan also adhered to the similar path as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan worked in tandem with ISAF in order to gain trust of the commoners and weaken the support base of Al-Qaeda and Taliban. There has been very little economic component of Russian assistance, which could be partly explained with the fact that Russia has a long legacy of Soviet aid to Afghanistan in 1950s and 60s and perhaps the debacle of 1980s has weighed heavy on the policy formulators restricting and candid overture to Afghanistan.

One of the fundamental differences from the previous involvement is the collective approach of Russia with China on post-9/11 Afghanistan and its neighbouring region. This was not the case in 1980s when China was actually opposing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. The Chinese were giving training to mujahideen in handling automatic weapons in Miramshah, Pakistan during the cold war period. Pakistan served as the "beachhead of subversion" that hurt the Soviets in 80s, and the training of terrorists and material

support remained the same during the days of Saur revolution.²⁰ Russian foreign minister Shevardnadze had approached the US Secretary of State George Schultz for an inclusive Afghan Interim Government, which was promptly rejected. The US rejected any attempt of withdrawal from Afghanistan with the issue of interim government.²¹ He then approached Pakistan and met Benazir Bhutto, who was helpless against the hubris of ISI and the army witnessing imminent Soviet withdrawal.²² The Soviets found internationally isolated took a sudden plunge into micro-management of the conflict with various warlords and the Najibullah government. Its success was visible when the shock landed upon Pakistan's ISI and army after the failed Jalalabad attack. The West too soon realized their underestimation of the Soviet neighbourhood across Afghanistan.²³ The failure of mujahideen to present an alternative provided an opportunity for the Russians to exploit insecurity of warlords and soon some of them were coveting the Russian arms just in case the mistrust grew to a sudden extent. The Pashtun dominance at the behest of Pakistan made Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras wary of possible sharing of power. The commanders were influenced by the dictates of external power that was willing to support them militarily. Russians chose the payback time with support to Northern Alliance partners, who effectively prevented any consolidation of power by Pakistan-based Sunni Pashtun parties. This upped the ante with the advent of full-fledged militia supported by Pakistan and the West, namely, the Taliban. Russians succeeded in the mission once tipped by then Foreign Minister, George Shevardnadze, the 'Afghanisation of the conflict' in Afghanistan.²⁴

Russia secured solid footstep in

¹⁹ Haugen, A. *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2003.

²⁰ Ilyinskii, M.M. *Afghanistan: Onward March of the Revolution*. Sterling Publishers, 1982.

²¹ Khalilzad, Z. *Prospects for the Afghan Interim Government*. Rand, 1991.

²² Kux, D. *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

²³ Khalilzad, Z. *Prospects for the Afghan Interim Government*. Rand, 1991.

²⁴ Relations, S. for H. of A.F. *SHAFR Newsletter*. Society for Historian of American Foreign Relations, 2002.

Afghanistan, when the West came forward with a request for armament supplies and manpower support apart from the logistics for supply routes. The 2010 NATO summit paved for Russia supplying MI-17 helicopters to not only Afghan forces but also for NATO operations. There was also proposal for training of anti-narcotic troops that guard Tajik-Afghan border.²⁵ Russia permitted the use of Northern Distribution Network (NDN) as part of understanding reached between NATO and Russia in the aftermath of blockade by Pakistan in 2011. The transportation and evacuation largely remained dependent on Central Asian Republics, which then later went through the Russian territories. Russia's NDN framework has a rich legacy of its past experience of maintaining military supplies to Afghanistan during 80's. Russia views Afghanistan as a source of religious terrorism and narco-terrorism. The Uzbek and Kyrgyz bases of Karshi Khanabad and Manas were the precursor to the NDN route that came later in 2011 as strong alternative. Russia's NDN offer to US-led NATO was essentially an important instrument of improving ties with the Obama administration. The main purpose of Russia was to enable NATO accomplish its task and then wind up its presence in the region. Russia never aimed to feed NDN towards the consolidation of the US position in Central Asia.²⁶ Russia has been looking to consolidate the Afghan-Central Asia border through organizational framework of CSTO and SCO. The same framework is shared by the NDN approach. But, China has been very specific in denying logistics to NATO in this regard. Russia is motivated to negotiate with the US realising the difficulties of NATO and the perpetual risks of failure in Afghanistan.²⁷ The Central Asian States have been the vital link for NDN infrastructure. The Tajik border crossing

at Nizhny Panj-Sher Khan has been used by the US for bringing in supplies from Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan route. China has been building 5,253 meter long tunnel on Dushanbe-Khujand-Chanok Highway, which makes it an all-weather road for logistics.²⁸

Russia considered the Afghan security forces incapable of handling Taliban on their own. This might prolong the US stay in Afghanistan and at the same required attention from Russia that ensured stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, himself an Afghan war veteran, said that the failure of the West to improve the political climate of Afghanistan might prompt Russia to act unilaterally in the interest of Central Asian Republics, who were threatened by Taliban offensive in the north, esp., Kunduz, Mazar-I Sharif region.²⁹ The foremost fear was the use of ISIS in staging coup or a regime change in Central Asian republics. The ISIS felt encouraged when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) declared allegiance to Abu-Bakr Baghdadi, the self-prophesised Amir of the Islamic State. The Central Asian republics has large out migrating population that works in Turkey and Middle East, where radicalisation is rampant.³⁰ These migration routes were exploited by Islamic State for channelizing of the funds and the jihaadis. Kyrgyzstan has witnessed maximum instances of Daesh network activities among all the Central Asian republics. The ISIS released its first video footage in July 2015 in Kyrgyzstan quoting Quran and Kyrgyz proverbs.³¹ The Daesh has been very particular in exploiting the ethnic cleavages to create mistrust among communities within Central Asian republics that shook the state authorities from slumber. The Tajik authorities took special

²⁵ Smith, G. Russian Troops to Return to Afghanistan as Gorbachev Warns NATO Victory Impossible // *Mailonline*, 2010.

²⁶ Kuchins, A.C.; Sanderson, T.M. Russia's Conflicting Security, Political, and Economic Interests in Afghanistan and the NDN // *North. Distrib. Netw. Afghanistan Geopolit. Challenges Oppor.*, 2010. Pp. 2-7.

²⁷ Laruelle, M. *Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan*. Jamestown Foundation, 2009.

²⁸ Vinson, M. Chinese-Built Tunnel Projects in Tajikistan Could Bolster KKT Route of NATO's NDN // *Eurasia Dly. Monit.*, 2012, Vol. 9, No. 142, pp. 6-9.

²⁹ Carbonnel, A. de. NATO 2014 Afghan Pullout Premature: Russian Envoy // *Reuters*, 2011.

³⁰ Dyer, A.M.; Legiec, A.; Rękawek, K. Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia, 2015.

³¹ Clark, L. *Islamic State Activities in Central Asia: Developments and Implications* / ExPatt Patterson Sch. Mag. Foreign Aff, 2015.

note those returning jihadis, who maintained cross-border links with dissidents in northern Afghanistan, viz., the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.³² The Islamic State not only threatened Central Asian countries but also the Chinese province of Xinjiang, where some 300 Uyghurs joined ISIS war in Syria and Iraq.³³ There has been long standing concern about Uyghur separatists finding safe havens in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, who might find support from Daesh for control over Greater Central Asia.³⁴

The rise of ISIL (Khorasan Branch) gave alarm for immediate action against the possible spread of Daesh Taqfiri operatives into Central Asian republics, who had already witnessed the sporadic rise of religious militancy at the dawn of 20th century. Russia's Orthodox Church underlined Putin's war against the Taqfiri militants as the holy war that not only saves the Christian minorities of Levante but also salvages the miserable Muslim minorities suffering at the hands of ISIS (Daesh). The October 2015 Russian offensive on behalf of Syrian government almost coincided with the American failure to maintain support for Afghan forces that were battling in Kunduz. This symbolized the Russian capability to replace the Western agenda of GWOT with more inclusive approach towards the Islamic State's terror and devastation in the Muslim world. The West remained until 2017 defiant in allowing space to the Russian strategy. And, the refugee crisis, lone wolf attacks in European capitals finally made them realize the mess they had created for themselves in the hubris of isolating Russia with ever deepening urge of procrastinate the need for comprehensive action in Levante. Russian administration working with Iran, China and Turkey finally proved to be the nemesis for Taqfiri militants. There was firm acknowledgement of Putin's leadership skills in turning the tide against Islamic State

³² Lemon, E.J. Daesh and Tajikistan: The Regime's (In) Security Policy // *RUSI J*, 2015, Vol. 160, No. 5, pp. 68-76.

³³ Propper, E. The Islamic State: The Danger that China Would Rather not Name / Yoram, S. Einav, O. Islam. State How Viable Is It, 2016.

³⁴ Mukhamedov, R. Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan under Careful Government Supervision // *Cent. Asia-Caucasus Anal*, 2004, Vol. 28.

so far as the Middle East is concerned. But, the West behaved in an unsure manner on cooperation with Russia in areas of similar concern; Afghanistan being the next important one.

Russia's Afghanistan policy considered Taliban as a party to peace-building in Afghanistan, but it remained inadequate for sequestering Taliban's support to separatist movements in Central Asia. The Uyghur militancy against increasing control of their economy, culture and polity by Chinese government found support from Taliban. The risks in these chance occurrences emanated from the fact that Taliban has been providing shelter to Uyghur separatists, just as many terror groups found safe heavens in Afghanistan.³⁵ Russia's soft pedaling towards Taliban might create a complex situation if Taliban were ever come to power in Afghanistan. This became cynosure of even Sino-Pak relations as over 200 Taliban and Uyghur militants were arrested near border in prior to 9/11, which indicated the potency of this factor.³⁶

Engaging Pakistan and the Indian question

The Russian military delegation arrived at Miran Shah in March 2017 at the invitation of Pakistan army for first-hand information about various operations and measures undertaken to salvage the North and the South Waziristan from Taliban insurgency. This was a hitherto unknown gesture by Pakistan towards Russia in handling the Af-Pak narrative. Russian naval warship Severmorsk participated in the International Naval exercise 'Aman', hosted by Pakistan in February 2017. Pakistan has also received Mi-35 ground attack helicopters from Russian in 2015 and in 2016 there was joint special-forces coordination exercise named 'Druzba 2016'.³⁷ A new chapter in Pakistan-Russia relations began, and the Russians condescendingly acknowledged the 'good' Taliban as legitimate

³⁵ Khamraev, F. "The Xinjiang Factor" and Central Asian Security // *Cent. Asia Caucasus*, 2003, Vol. 23, No. 5, p. 115.

³⁶ Wie, Davis E; Van, Azizian R. Islam, Oil, and Geopolitics: Central Asia after September 11. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

³⁷ Russian Military Delegation Visits North, South Waziristan - Pakistan // Dawn, 2017.

political force in Afghan solution. The 'redlines' enshrined in the Afghanistan Constitution and endorsed by India and the US plus the Afghan government were rejected by Taliban. The Afghan Constitution is pivot to the fundamental principle of inclusiveness for ethnic, sectarian Islamic and gender groups. It would be a challenge for Russia and Pakistan to bring Taliban around these principles towards lasting peace in the region.

Russia found goals amenable with Pakistan after it disclosed relations with Taliban in December 2016. Both were sharing intelligence over counter-offensive against the ISIS (Daesh-Khorasan).³⁸ Russia didn't clarify how it would handle the Daesh presence in Pakistan as Daesh formed an important linkage between Arab Sunni Wahabi seminaries entrenched in tribal areas and their role in Afghanistan remained important counter-insurgency tool for Pakistan army. The Russian understanding about Daesh appeared partial with more concern towards prevention of its spread in Central Asia. But, it needed to factor in the fact that the spread of extremism and radicalism remains channelled through south Afghanistan. The Daesh successfully recruited Uyghurs supporters of Turkestan party and East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) moving through Turkish territory into Syria and Iraq, who also maintained close links with Taliban and Al-Qaeda.³⁹ The ISIS was welcomed in Pakistan by Tehrik-e-Khalifa Wa Jihad pledged allegiance to ISIS and declared South Asia as goal for Daesh-Khorasan. The ISIS spread pamphlets in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The first recruit for ISIS came from Tehrik i Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Jundullah army was another group that sought allegiance to ISIS. The Central Asian recruits to ISIS had mainly come from Hizb ul Tahrir, who were lodged in North Waziristan and later moved to Achin district of Nagerhar.⁴⁰ The Islamic State has found patrons deep in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Organisations such as

Lashkar-I Jhangwi, Jamat ul Ahrar and other splinter groups, who are actively engaged in cross-border operations in Kashmir also remain in contact with the Islamic State operatives in Pakistan.⁴¹ The arrest of female IS-affiliate in April 2017 from Lahore exposed the gravity of situation as she was a medical student among dozens of other female students who went missing.⁴² The educated youth getting attracted to Daesh's ideology in Lahore confirmed that it was no longer a peripheral phenomenon confined to Tribal agencies. The Home Department of Pakistani province of Punjab sent a report on "Recruitment of Pakistani boys and Afghan refugees by Daesh", a fact repeatedly denied by Federal Home Ministry of Pakistan.⁴³ Pakistan would be reluctant to cooperate with Russia against Islamic State amid the state of denial. Russia would have to really scourge hard for a justification in turning blind eye towards the strategic assets of ISI and Pak army, while working for an inclusive solution for Afghanistan. Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir issue was a major obstacle in reaching out to the Russians during the cold war period. In the aftermath of Uri attack Russia supported India's right to retaliate through surgical strike. The Russian ambassador to India Kadakin even welcomed the move.⁴⁴ Pakistan often tried hard-selling to the international stakeholders in Afghanistan, but Russia avoided the temptation of linking the Afghan solution with the Kashmir situation. The present engagement with Pakistan could be seen as pragmatic approach both sensed by Russia and Pakistan, who have found the US detrimental to their geopolitical interests; China remained pivotal to this facilitation.

India's concern with Afghanistan is mainly harboured upon cutting the strategic depth for Pakistani terror groups, who maintain jihadi interests in Kashmir. This was timely encashed

³⁸ Sharifi, N. Russia's New Game in Afghanistan // *Al Jazeera*, 2017.

³⁹ Mohammad, J. European Intelligence Services in the Face of «Islamic State» Cells, 2017.

⁴⁰ Azami, D. The Islamic State in South and Central Asia // *Survival*, 2016, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 131-158.

⁴¹ Mann, Z.N. The Rise of Islamic State (IS): A Threat to Pakistan.

⁴² Tanveer, R. Female Militant Arrested in Lahore found to be IS-affiliate Who Went Missing // *Express Tribune*, 2017.

⁴³ Hussain, A.; Fazl, S. Punjab Government Claims ISIS Recruiting Youngsters // *Aaj News*, 2016.

⁴⁴ TNN. Russia Backs Surgical Strikes, Says India Has the Right to Defend Itself // *The Times of India*, 2016.

with 9/11 providing an opportunity for India to align its cross-border terror concerns with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). India found ample support from the US and reciprocated with soft power diplomacy for sequestering Taliban from mainstream Afghan politics. The 'red lines' marked by Hillary Clinton and espoused by Indian establishment clearly forbade liquidation of Afghanistan Constitution and the Universal Human Rights that remain unacceptable for Taliban fighters.⁴⁵ India has been shirking from inducing any armed presence in Afghanistan save when security is needed by Indian diplomatic missions or personnel engaged in development and reconstruction work at sites. Besides, India has been providing logistics, hardware and training to Afghanistan Security Forces in its Military Training Academy.

India has had good relations with Afghan monarchy since the days of Amanullah Khan. In the aftermath of the Third Anglo-Afghan war, there was great empathy for India's struggle for independence. The Indian revolutionaries were welcomed by Habibullah Khan and later his successor Amanullah Khan witnessed the First Provisional Government of India established at Kabul in December 1915 with Raja Mahendra Pratap as President and Barkatullah as Prime Minister.⁴⁶ India had good relations with Daoud as Prime Minister and later as President of Afghanistan. This has been mainly due to his nationalistic agenda of Pashtunistan that had moral support from India on historic and strategic grounds. He said in an interview given to Indian journalist Kuldeep Nayyar in April 1974 that self-determination is the only way for NWFP (now, KP) Pashtuns and Balochis. And, expected India to side with Afghanistan on this issue.⁴⁷ The post-Saur revolution Afghan government maintained smooth ties with

India. The 1988 visit of President Najibullah established firm footing for the support to PDPA regime, when the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi cautioned on the victory of extremist forces of fundamentalist nature.⁴⁸ The Afghan nobility who sided with the PDPA regime sensed the days of Najibullah regime are numbered and therefore chose India to be a destination for safe stay. Thus, Afghan has been home to many Afghans who escaped the harsh regime of Taliban in the aftermath of the fall of PDPA regime.⁴⁹ The Indian role in rebuilding Afghan airlines Ariana and providing radar logistics to anti-Taliban regime at Kabul proved sustained interest in the region. In fact, together with India and Iran, Russia had gained sizeable credibility to its action in Afghanistan. This was significant as Pakistan-backed Taliban remained a potent threat to Rabbani regime, whom Russia, India and Iran abhorred.⁵⁰ India found Taliban as facilitator to Pakistan's military objectives in the South Asian region. The Taliban guaranteed the swapping of Harkat-ul Mujahidin militants in exchange of the safe return of the Indian Airlines passengers in 1999.⁵¹ The presence of militant training camps in eastern Afghanistan coupled with the presence of Al-Qaeda led multi-national jihadi force raised the threat potential for Indian security.⁵² These training areas were located in Kunar and Nangerhar province of Afghanistan, but they also had cross-border continuum places such as, Quetta, Mansehra, Shamshattu, Parachinar and other areas in the FATA territories of Pakistan.⁵³

India saw Pakistan as vital connect to its security challenges and the situation of conflict in Afghanistan. Therefore, India putatively became the first country to sign the strategic

⁴⁵ Hudson, V.M.; Leidl, P.; Hunt, S. *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

⁴⁶ Stolte, C. 'Enough of the Great Napoleons!' Raja Mahendra Pratap's Pan-Asian projects (1929-1939) // *Mod. Asian Stud.*, 2012, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 403-423.

⁴⁷ Daoud, M. President and Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud's Interview with a Correspondent of the Daily Statesman of New Delhi, India / *Afghan Digit. Libr.*, 1974.

⁴⁸ Cronin, R.P. Afghanistan in 1988: Year of Decision // *Asian Surv.*, 1989, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 207-215.

⁴⁹ Bentz, A.S. Afghan Refugees in Indo-Afghan Relations // *Cambridge Rev. Int. Aff.*, 2013, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 374-391.

⁵⁰ Rashid, A. The Taliban: Exporting Extremism // *Foreign Affairs*, 1999, Vol. 78, No. 6, pp. 22-35.

⁵¹ Madsen, W. Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Bush Oil Team, 2002.

⁵² Rashid, A. Afghanistan: Ending the Policy Quagmire // *J. Int. Aff.*, 54, 2001, No. 2, pp. 395.

⁵³ Jones, S.G. Pakistan's Dangerous Game // *Survival*, 2007, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 15-32.

partnership agreement with the post-9/11 government of Afghanistan in October 2011. Afghanistan has been repeatedly pummelled by the Haqqani network and Quetta Shura terrorists, who serve Pakistan's military interest by raising the costs of securing peace in Afghanistan. India has tried to fill the gap by financially assisting Afghan government in training and funding of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).⁵⁴ India has been looking at Afghanistan from not only strategic point of view, but also from the perspective of state institutions that covalent to the ethos of Indian state too. India decided to support the construction of new Parliament for Wolesi and Meshrano Jirga, the apex bodies of the Afghan government. It has provided logistics for Finance and External Affairs Ministry and training of personnel. These have induced strong inter-governmental bond between the Parliamentary institutions of the two states. Russia has had an understanding with the Indian establishment over the need to preserve these institutions as they act as buffer to fissiparous tendencies across Central Asian republics. The predicament lies in the growing unease with the US at other points of conflagration, notably, the Levante. This has put Afghanistan in juxtaposition to the Middle East crisis. India as such does not act into the Middle East situation, but Indian diaspora in Gulf countries is the largest presence abroad. Their presence in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE make a complex situation, where these countries have in fact supported and funded the DAESH against the Assad regime. Thus, Russia and India have a few unknown variables that have crept into their relationship. However, India and Russia are on same page so far as confronting the DAESH is concerned because of their possible use as proxies by the hostile states for subversion; India is wary of Pakistan, just as Russia is wary of the US-led camp.

Conclusion

Taliban as a legitimate political movement could not be dissociated from its ontology. The movement was raised of migrant Afghans, who were for larger part of their life remained in

⁵⁴ Hanauer, L.; Chalk, P. India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan. RAND Corporation, 2012.

Khyber Pakhtunwa and Tribal agencies; lived and educated in the madrasas run mostly by the Jamat-I Islami of Pakistan. Therefore, the cross-border legitimacy of Taliban movement lent entirely a different framework than what could have been an indigenous resistance movement. If Taliban's claim of power sharing could be acceded to the formation of government in Afghanistan, then their right to political interference in Pakistan had even more solid basis. As the moment, originated in Pakistan and still remained fed and fostered on Pakistani soil. It acquired support from the local Pashtuns living in Tribal agencies and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Based on this premise, it would too presumptuous to believe if Taliban would ever recognize the Durand line; a line that would cut them off from their strategic support base. Taliban would hardly be amenable to most of the Afghan political groups. Their Pathun identity polarized the non-Pashtun due to atrocious behaviour in 90s against Hazaras and other minorities. The most putative shared interest of Russia, China and Pakistan in the South Asian region since 9/11 was the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan soon the Taliban and Al-Qaeda threat was over. Although, Russia often underscored the incomplete work left by the West leaving a strategic void, which needed be filled through collective security arrangement unlike the US's unilateral approach. The current National Unity Government of Afghanistan (NUGA) hardly found wisdom in Russia's approach having already declared that any peace talks could only be on Afghan soil. The Afghan owned process could only be the legitimate source of any initiative irrespective of the initiator whether the talks were held at Moscow or Doha (the Taliban Headquarters) or in Islamabad.

Russia might not be having a preference for Taliban style of politics, but then it might just be the case of situation where Taliban's strategic goal of pushing the US out of Afghanistan gained prime importance for the Russian strategy of handling the US hegemony. Russia would not like to play partisan role at a time when haven't had preference for any faction or ruling group in Afghanistan. This was certainly a case when it tried hard to bargain with the US and Pakistan for saving the then

Najibullah government before leaving in 1979 and even later as it supported Northern Alliance against Taliban, who threatened security of the Central Asian states. The US has been miffed by the new rapprochement as it had consistently been in denial mode for roundtable talks initiated by Moscow. The latest round proposed by Moscow on April 14, 2017 was another instance where all Afghan neighbours were been invited and the US has rejected this initiative. One of the bigger challenges for Russia was been to seek a regional integrated framework for Afghanistan security and to avoid bipartisan dealings amongst the largely influential powers. This allowed Russia to co-opt Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, China and India for an over-arching dialogue. Russia had also engaged European powers, especially Germany for its Afghanistan mission.

The former Afghanistan president Mr. Hamid Karzai had criticised the US presence in Afghanistan having delivered no goods and the Afghan soil being used as testing ground for the US arms industry. The National Unity government would be vulnerable to defections and internal break-down if Karzai's view ever gained currency among Afghan policymakers. Already, the Ghani government had been criticized of not performing in a decisive manner against the corrupt officials in the countryside. The ineffective governance might be the immediate issue around which dissatisfaction among common Afghans might grow allowing the willing-to-break-away elements opening upto Taliban's growing presence. The spring offensive of 2017 declared by Taliban indicated their replenished cadres and military inventory. The High Peace Council who couldn't ever achieve any significant whilst its effort to negotiate with Taliban only paved way for strengthening of the Quetta Shura. An important strategy deployed by the US in consonance with the Ghani government had been the drone strikes against the leadership of Taliban. The killing of Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor in 2016 had setback for Taliban offensive against the Aghan govt forces. The Af-Pak region could be construed as another theatre of Great Power politics, where the US and Russia might reach the deadend just as in Levante. The support to Taliban and the US constantly weaning out their

leadership might become a never ending spiral leading to deterioration of security situation in Af-Pak region as whole.

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АНАЛИЗИРУЯ СИТУАЦИЮ ВОКРУГ «АФПАК»: ОТ СНИЖЕНИЯ АКТИВНОСТИ США К РОСТУ ВКЛЮЧЕННОСТИ РОССИИ

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<p>Информация о статье: Поступила в редакцию: 28 апреля 2017 Принята к печати: 4 ноября 2017</p>	<p>Аннотация: США приняли решение о продлении срока пребывания своего контингента в Афганистане, в то время как ситуация в сфере безопасности в стране не улучшается. Нескончаемый спрос на ресурсы, необходимые для поддержания военных операций против повстанцев, стал главным предметом дискуссий во время предвыборной гонки США в 2016 году, когда звучали призывы ко скорейшему выводу контингента США из Афганистана, чтобы сохранить более трех триллионов долларов. В России, в связи с осознанием ослабления роли США в регионе, возросли опасения относительно ситуации в Афганистане после вывода войск США, учитывая активность движения Талибан и его спонсоров в Пакистане. Россия уже ощутила на себе все тяжелые последствия исламизации в Центральной Азии и на Кавказе, деятельности ИГИЛ, всего, что ведет к дестабилизации ситуации в государствах центральноазиатского региона. Находящиеся в Афганистане и Пакистане боевики ИГИЛ относятся к ответвлению Хорасан. Пакистан же необходим России для оказания сопротивления присутствию ИГИЛ на южных рубежах страны. Однако геополитическая ситуация в регионе осложняется целым рядом взаимосвязанных проблем безопасности, одним из которых является так называемый «АфПак». До настоящего времени политика России в отношении движения Талибан могла представлять собой некий неиспользованный инструмент для установления баланса сил на протяжении всего «пояса нестабильности».</p>
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<p>Ключевые слова: Россия; Талибан, геополитика, Ближний Восток; ИГИЛ; Сирия</p>	

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