

Prolonged US Afghan War and its Partnership with India: A Pakistani Perspective

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Introduction

In September 2019, US President Donald Trump cancelled the year-long peace talks with Taliban insurgents, indicating that the war in Afghanistan is far from over. Ostensibly, the talks were called off as a result of a Taliban attack on a US troops' convoy.¹ However, a detailed study of Afghan policies of three successive US Administrations reflect that at no time during the course of the conflict did their strategies yield desired results. In fact, the conflict was only accentuated as a result. It is ironic that President, George. W. Bush in his September 20, 2001, speech insisted that his nation prepare for a long war, one they had never experienced, before the war had even started. President Bush's failed Afghan strategy forced his successor, President Barack Obama to send the maximum number of foreign troops on Afghan soil. However, that policy only increased war casualties and chaos was transferred to Pakistan through drone attacks across the Durand Line. Although President Donald Trump pledged during his election campaign that he would bring an end to America's longest war, his complex August 2017 Afghanistan strategy also indicates that the US is only going to announce timelines for troop withdrawal on the basis of conditions on the ground. Ironically, the conditions on the ground are subject to US Generals directing the Afghan forces against the Taliban, even as Afghan insurgents are at the peak of their control over Afghan territory since 2001.²

In addition to outlining his country's plans to deal with the Taliban and Terrorist threat, President Trump's

August 2017 Afghanistan centric South Asia strategy explained the role of Pakistan and India in 'war on terror'. The new plan criticised Pakistan for its alleged harbouring of extremists and differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban, even though the country has excoriated terrorism on the ground and also banned almost all extremist organisations.³ The US strategy, however, praises and encourages India's role in Afghanistan and in the wider Asia Pacific. Whilst encouraging and applauding India, the current US strategy undertook the additional measure of completely cutting-off security aid to Pakistan.⁴ The US invaded Afghanistan to eliminate terrorism, however, the US engagement has led to the escalation of violence and increased terrorism in the region.⁵

The US assigning blame to Pakistan for its failures in Afghanistan corresponds with India's efforts to isolate Pakistan on its so called 'state sponsor of terror' narrative. That coupled with other converging strategic interests in the overall wider Asia Pacific region compelled the US and India to strike a strategic partnership.⁶ Under the partnership, India has been able to form bilateral anti-terrorism mechanisms with the US. Both nations have also been sharing significant military technology including surveillance planes and armed drones, and have also been conducting bilateral counter-terrorism military exercises.⁷ Most significantly, during their joint communiqués the Indo-US leadership has consistently been blaming Pakistan for supporting terror activities.⁸ Moreover, the Indo-US strategic partnership remains instrumental in building India's nuclear as well as conventional capabilities, which in turn puts pressure on Pakistan to engage in an arms race with a country which is far stronger economically.

Pakistan, on its part, has undertaken serious efforts to broker a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict because peace in Afghanistan is necessary to ensure peace and prosperity in Pakistan. Initially, Islamabad offered its air bases to the US to hunt al-Qaeda terrorists and those Taliban elements that were not willing to negotiate.⁹ Simultaneously, Pakistan fought against those extremist elements who ultimately turned against the state as a result of the country aligning its policies with the US in Afghanistan. Pakistan successfully dismantled terrorist organisations fighting against the state, mainly the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and also banned all extremist organisations. Since 2014, Pakistan has made major shifts in its Afghan policy, whereby it plans to reduce and eventually abandon its dependence on Afghanistan.¹⁰

In view of the foregoing discussion, this paper first briefly examines the Afghanistan strategies of three US Presidents namely, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, to illustrate that none of their plans helped gain substantial control of the insurgency in Afghanistan. Secondly, the paper highlights how the US has blamed Pakistan for its failures in Afghanistan, and how India has capitalised on this by attempting to isolate Pakistan on the basis of declaring it a ‘state sponsor of terror’. In this regard, the close Indo-US cooperation with respect to counter-terrorism under a burgeoning strategic partnership is discussed in detail. The paper also explains the current Pakistani position on the extremist narrative and Afghanistan and proposes recommendations for the future.

Prolonging the Afghan War

In geostrategic terms, the ‘containment of communism’ was the prime policy of the US during the cold war era, and South Asia being a buffer between the former Soviet

territories of Central Asia and socialist China, provided an effective spatial space. Keeping this in view, a special waiver was bestowed upon Pakistan to include it in the defence treaties of South East Asian Treaty Organisation and Central Treaty Organisation.¹¹ Until the first invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union in the year 1979, the US was passively involved in the geopolitics of and around South Asia. Later on, during the 1980s the US-Pakistan collaboration was not only instrumental in dismantling the Soviet Union, but was also influential in the creation of the Taliban.¹² However, a decade later the US itself embarked on the invasion of Afghanistan to oust the same Taliban who had helped it dismantle the Soviet Union. This was the first time the US actually involved itself in the geopolitics of South Asia, in the name of the ‘war on terror’.¹³

President George W. Bush’s Foundation for an Unending War

Following the September 11, 2001(9/11) attacks on the US by al-Qaeda terrorists, the US invaded Afghanistan in an attempt to neutralise the Taliban government in the country. The US contended that the Islamic Emirate was harbouring and sheltering the leadership of al-Qaeda. On September 18, 2001, US President George W. Bush signed into law a joint resolution authorising the use of force against those responsible for attacking the US.¹⁴ On September 20, 2001, while addressing a joint session of Congress and the American People, President Bush gave an ultimatum to the Taliban regime to hand over the al-Qaeda leadership. However, his call came after he had already secured authorisation for the use of force. During the same address, President Bush outlined the course and future prospects of the concept of “war on terror” by adding, “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until

every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated... Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime”¹⁵ On October 7, 2001, The US military, with British support, began a bombing campaign against Taliban forces, officially launching “Operation Enduring Freedom”.¹⁶

The Taliban unraveled rapidly, and lost control over Kabul in November 2001 and surrendered Kandahar the following month.¹⁷ Meanwhile, On December 5, 2001, the United Nations (UN) invited various Afghan factions to sign the Bonn Agreement, endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1383.¹⁸ The agreement installed Hamid Karzai as interim administration head, and formed an international peacekeeping force to maintain security in Kabul. The Bonn Agreement was followed by UNSCR 1386 on December 20, 2001, which established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).¹⁹ On April 17, 2002, during a speech at the Virginia Military Institute, President Bush called for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. “By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall.”²⁰ The US Congress appropriated over \$38 billion in humanitarian and

reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2009. On May 1, 2003, US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld during a briefing with reporters in Kabul, declared an end to major combat. Rumsfeld said, “We have concluded that we are at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction and activities.”²¹ At that time there were almost 8000 US troops stationed in Afghanistan. The numbers increased rapidly by August 2003, when the NATO assumed control of ISAF. The troop level increased to around 65,000 representing 42 countries, including all 28 NATO member states.²²

In October 2004, Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected head of Afghanistan. During Karzai’s May 2005 visit to the US a joint declaration was issued with President Bush declaring both countries strategic partners.²³ An agreement was also signed between the two leaders that called for Washington to “help organise, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces as Afghanistan develops the capacity to undertake this responsibility.”²⁴

However, in the summer of 2006 violence abruptly resurged in Afghanistan. Clashes between militants and the US led Afghan government forces intensified; the number of suicide attacks quintupled from 27 in 2005, to 139 in 2006, while remotely detonated bombings more than doubled, to 1,677.²⁵ In November 2006, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer set a target for the Afghan National Army to begin to take control of security by the year 2008. Scheffer said, “I would hope that by 2008 we will have made considerable progress, with a more stable political architecture in place, and with a strong interface between NATO and the civilian agencies and effective, trusted Afghan security forces

gradually taking control.”²⁶ While rifts between NATO member states started emerging over commitments in Afghanistan and attacks on Non-Governmental Organisations and aid workers surging during 2008, US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates criticised NATO countries and said, “Our progress in Afghanistan is real but it is fragile. At this time, many allies are unwilling to share the risks, commit the resources, and follow through on collective commitments to this mission and to each other. As a result, we risk allowing what has been achieved in Afghanistan to slip away.”²⁷

Despite dismantling the Taliban government very quickly at the outset of the campaign, the US during President Bush’s era was unable to prevent the insurgents from reassembling. The Taliban regrouped and increased their attacks during the year 2006-7 due to a weak and comprehensive US strategy which, in turn, resulted in an upsurge in the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama’s Afghanistan policy of Troop Surge

With the resurgence of the Taliban insurgency across Afghanistan, in 2009, the new US President, Barack Obama ordered 17,000 extra US troops to be sent to Afghanistan. President Obama said, “the increase was necessary to stabilise a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires.”²⁸ In March 2009, the Obama Administration outlined a new strategy for Afghanistan that linked for the first time its progress to Pakistan. The bottom line of the strategy was to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.²⁹ In December 2009, President Obama again announced a major escalation of

the US mission. In a nationally televised speech, the President committed an additional 30,000 forces to the fight, in addition to the 68,000 troops already in Afghanistan. Obama said, “These forces will increase our ability to train competent Afghan Security Forces, and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight. And they will help create the conditions for the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans.”³⁰ For the first time in the eight-year war effort, a time frame was put on the US military presence, as Obama set July 2011 as the start of a troop drawdown. But the president did not detail how long a full drawdown would take.³¹

In November 2010, NATO member countries signed a declaration agreeing to hand over full responsibility for security in Afghanistan to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. Meanwhile, under-pressure from Democratic lawmakers, President Obama announced the decision to reduce 33,000 troops by the summer of 2012.³² He also confirmed that the US was holding preliminary peace talks with the Taliban leadership. In January 2012, the Taliban opened their political office in Qatar to conduct peace talks with the US.³³ However, only two months later, the insurgent group announced the cancellation of negotiations, accusing Washington of renegeing on promises to take meaningful steps towards a prisoner swap.³⁴

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced the plan to conclude combat missions by mid-2013 and shift to a primarily security assistance role in Afghanistan.³⁵ In June 2013, Afghan forces assumed the responsibility of Afghanistan’s security and US led ISAF’s mission was restricted to training and special counter-terror operations.

On May 27, 2014, President Obama announced a timetable for withdrawing the bulk of US forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.³⁶ He said, “the US will leave 9,800 troops in Afghanistan through much of next year and backed away from ending America’s longest war until at least his final year in office.”³⁷ However, the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford recommended keeping at least 10,000 troops through 2017 to help train Afghan forces and conduct counter-terrorism operations against Taliban insurgents and Al Qaeda-linked militants.³⁸

In September 2014, US Secretary of State, John Kerry brokered a deal between the newly elected Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and his chief opponent Abdullah Abdullah and established a new post of Chief Executive of Afghanistan.³⁹ While the government was busy in the electoral process, and Ghani and Abdullah tussled over appointments on senior security posts, the Taliban were making significant gains.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the Obama Administration struck a new Bilateral Security Agreement with the new government in Kabul. The deal permitted US and NATO troops to stay in Afghanistan until the end of 2024 and beyond.⁴¹

President Obama adopted the strategy of deploying the maximum number of troops in Afghanistan and envisaged bringing an end to the insurgency by the year 2016. However, not only did the conflict increase inside Afghanistan during his era but the US drones started targeting areas across the border and increased pressure on Pakistan by accusing it of sheltering terrorists. Obama’s strategy resulted in a sharp increase in the number of terrorist organisations operating across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border which was disclosed later on by President Trump in his 2017 Afghanistan strategy. Interestingly, in early 2015, reports were also indicating

the emergence of Daesh (Islamic State Khorasan Province) across Afghanistan.⁴²

President Donald Trump's Ambiguous Afghanistan Strategy

President Obama left the Oval office unable to fulfill his promise of a complete troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Donald Trump, who had pledged during his election campaign to bring an end to America's longest war assumed office. However, the situation in Afghanistan during the year 2016-17, deteriorated further. The Taliban contested five provincial capitals⁴³, carried out some of the largest terrorist attacks in the capital city of Kabul, and conducted offensives across all 34 provinces of the country. As a result, the Afghan Army and Police Forces suffered some 15,000 casualties in the course of 12 months, with civilians suffering more than 5,000 casualties- the highest levels ever recorded.⁴⁴ Keeping the situation in view, the new administration in Washington intended to increase the number of boots on the ground. Gen John Nicholson, Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan, requested a few thousand more US troops during congressional hearings earlier in 2017.⁴⁵ In April 2017, a few months before announcing one of its most ambiguous and complex Afghanistan strategies, the Trump Administration dropped one of the largest non-nuclear bombs on a tunnel complex used by Daesh in eastern Afghanistan.⁴⁶ It was the first time such a weapon had been used in battle.

In August 2017, President Trump announced his Afghanistan strategy.⁴⁷ The plan was unique in that it did not disclose timelines for troop withdrawal, or dates of commencement and culmination of operations. It was aimed at increasing military, political, economic and diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to make them accept the path of negotiations as a weak party.⁴⁸ During the

announcement of the strategy, President Trump severely criticised Pakistan for harbouring the Taliban and playing a double game.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, he encouraged India to take an active part in Afghan affairs.⁵⁰ President Trump also indicated the presence of more than 20 terrorist groups across the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.⁵¹

The US implemented actions targeting Pakistan. It cancelled all economic and military aid to the country in early 2018.⁵² In August 2018, Washington closed the door to the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme for Pakistani officers in the United States.⁵³ Despite this action no tangible impact was achieved in Afghanistan.

The announced strategy was dealt with a strong reaction from the Taliban. In October 2017 alone, hundreds of Afghans were killed in various attacks, mostly on security installations; and the insurgent group was also able to expand its influence over some strategic areas across the country.⁵⁴ The Taliban's growing strength led the insurgent group to reject the Afghan President's offer of peace "without any pre-condition" in early 2018.⁵⁵ In August 2018, the insurgent group attacked the strategically located Ghazni city and gained control over parts of the city, while rejecting President Ghani's three-month ceasefire offer.⁵⁶

Under pressure from growing Taliban influence, the US commenced direct talks with the Taliban in September 2018. The talks continued for over a year amid rising violence and terror incidents. The US and Taliban representatives remained engaged for at least nine rounds of talks during which the Taliban key demand remained the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in order for them to strike a ceasefire with Afghan government forces and start an intra-

Afghan dialogue. On the other hand, the US asked for guarantees from the Taliban that Afghanistan would not be used by any terrorist group, including al Qaeda and Daesh to carry out attacks on the US and its allies. According to the US and Taliban representatives a draft agreement was finalised after their ninth round of talks when President Trump called off negotiations after a Taliban attack on US troops in Kabul.⁵⁷ Even during the course of peace talks there appeared clear disagreements over troop withdrawal between the US State Department and the Pentagon, and between the White House and the Afghan government, and also between President Trump and his European partners.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, it's hard to conclude whether the disagreements were due to lack of communication and will to cooperate or the US intentionally adopted them to confuse the insurgents under the announced ambiguous August 2017 Afghanistan strategy.

By and large, the primary cause of the US' Afghanistan invasion was to fight and eradicate terrorism. However, the current situation on the ground illustrates an upsurge and escalation in violence and terror. The current state of deteriorating Afghan affairs clearly reflects that the ISAF mission in the country is far from over. Which means, the extended presence of the US' military bases in the region, in turn, increased militant activity and regional instability. That also adds to the apprehensions of regional powers, especially Pakistan.

Pakistan and its Afghan Strategy

Pakistan was one of the three countries that recognised the Islamic Emirate established by the Taliban during the 1990s. The post 9/11 US war on terror demanded Pakistan to take a U-turn from its pro-Taliban to an anti-Taliban policy. Pakistan's decision to direct its policies to provide air bases and sea route to American logistics

turned a large segment of its population living along the Durand Line against the state. The country fell into the scourge of civil war across its north-western frontier.

While Pakistan was busy dealing with miscreants, the US blamed Pakistan for differentiating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Taliban. The Pakistani leadership denied adopting any such policy, however, Islamabad recognised the fact that once the military operation was over, Afghanistan would require a new government and reconstruction efforts, for which the inclusion of Taliban leadership would be necessary.⁵⁹ Pakistan thus urged the US to distinguish between the Taliban that wanted to strike a peace deal and those who wanted to continue fighting.

Pakistan dealt with two sets of major concerns vis-à-vis the war on terror. Even as the US blamed it for providing terrorists sanctuaries, Islamabad remained committed to helping US led international forces in their fight inside Afghanistan. At the same time, it also resisted militants within its own territory. The civil war peaked during the year 2008-9, when the militants reached Swat district and threatened to take over Islamabad.⁶⁰ However, the country’s armed forces were successful in driving the militants out of Swat and its adjacent areas by 2010-11. By 2014, the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was restricted to the tribal regions of north and south Waziristan. In 2014, following the Army Public School, Peshawar massacre by the TTP, Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarab-i-Azab in Waziristan.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the Pakistani government announced the National Action Plan (NAP) under which special courts were established to try and punish terrorists, and the state started to ban all extremist organisations.⁶² Pakistan has recently succeeded in clearing the tribal belt- including south and north Waziristan- from extremists and has constitutionally merged the tribal areas with the Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa province.⁶³ The country has banned all extremist organisations including the TPP, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jandulla, Jamaat-ud-Dawa etc.⁶⁴ The majority of the outlawed militants of these terrorist groups are believed to have fled to Afghanistan and joined the ranks of ISKP (Daesh).⁶⁵ Pakistan has started to fence the Durand Line and set observation posts along the border with Afghanistan in order to halt the prospects of any future attack or reunion of those terrorists in its territory.⁶⁶

Pakistan has also been cooperating with the Afghan government and regional countries for a peaceful solution of the Afghan conflict. The country is a member of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group⁶⁷ and also represents the Heart of Asia -- Istanbul Process.⁶⁸ Interestingly, it has always been Pakistan's official stance to support and encourage an Afghan-led and Afghan owned peace process, which is also insisted on by the Afghan government.⁶⁹ Most recently, Pakistan, China and Afghanistan have also established a trilateral mechanism to facilitate the Afghan peace process and reconstruction efforts.⁷⁰

Despite severely criticising Pakistan in its August 2017 Afghanistan strategy and completely halting military assistance, the US has consistently sought Pakistan's assistance whenever talks have stalled with the Taliban⁷¹. The US has repeatedly called on Pakistan for assistance despite Pakistan's insistence that its influence over the Taliban has dwindled over the years.⁷² This decline in influence has occurred primarily due to the efforts made by Pakistan, in the recent past, to change its policy to curb extremism at home and reduce and halt any kind of dependence on Afghanistan.⁷³ In addition, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban further declined after Pakistan was put under tight checks and intense observation from international institutions and regimes

vis-a-vis terror financing and sponsoring including the FATF. The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan remains the sole concern for Pakistan. As there are reports that members of terrorist groups declared outlawed in Pakistan including Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Jandullah have joined Daesh in Afghanistan, which may regroup and carry out attacks from across the border.⁷⁴ Moreover, Islamabad's concerns regarding India's support to anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan aggravates Pakistan's threat perception further.

India's Partnership with the US and its Afghan Policy

New-Delhi has been struggling to isolate Islamabad internationally by tagging it as a state sponsor of terror.⁷⁵ India's accusations come despite Pakistan's efforts in curbing terrorism at home and transforming its Afghan policy. India contends that Pakistan has been using guerilla fighters trained and fought in Afghanistan against Indian troops in Kashmir.⁷⁶ This narrative also corresponds well with the US' account of 'Pakistan's differentiation between good and bad Taliban'. This US' suspicion on Pakistan, in turn, has encouraged a greater Indian role in Afghanistan, which also caused deterioration in Pak-US relations.⁷⁷ Islamabad, has long contended that the greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan allows New-Delhi to help fuel anti-Pakistan segments in Kabul. Those anti-Pakistan entities, in turn, carry out various illegal activities, including terrorist attacks from across the porous Durand Line.⁷⁸

Nonetheless, the Indo-US harmony of thought vis-à-vis the 'war on terror' coupled with other converging interests in the Asia Pacific region has compelled them to strike a strategic partnership.⁷⁹ The Indo-US nuclear deal was forged despite Pakistan being a key ally in the US War against Terror and committed both its resources

and suffered losses in support of the US policies in Afghanistan. The Indo-US cooperation in Afghanistan was manifested during the inaugural India-US Strategic Dialogue in 2009, where President Barack Obama and then Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh called for eliminating terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁸⁰ In 2010, the Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative (CCI) was signed between the two countries to forge a close and effective cooperation on counterterrorism, information-sharing, and capacity-building. The CCI has included several projects for enhancing joint counterterrorism capabilities through the sharing of advanced techniques, best practices, and investigative skills. The joint statement issued during Manmohan Singh's 2010 US visit said, "President Obama appreciated India's enormous contribution to Afghanistan's development and welcomed enhanced Indian assistance that will help Afghanistan achieve self-sufficiency. They reiterated that success in Afghanistan and regional and global security require elimination of safe havens and infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Condemning terrorism in all its forms, the two sides agreed that all terrorist networks, including Lashkar e-Taiba, must be defeated and called for Pakistan to bring to justice the perpetrators of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks"⁸¹

In 2014, the US created a Homeland Security working group under the bilateral High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) with the aim of facilitating joint access to counterterrorism-related technology.⁸² In 2016, the annual Yudh Abhyas military exercise between India and the US was focused on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in mountainous regions.

In August 2016, both countries signed the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA). The agreement governs the use of each other's land, air and naval bases for repair

and resupply. In December 2016, the US embassy and consulates in India outlined a fact sheet endorsing the defence relations of both countries; and finalised India's designation as a "Major Defence Partner".⁸³

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's June 2017, visit to Washington was his fifth visit to the US since becoming PM of India in 2014. After the Modi-Trump meeting, both sides released a joint statement entitled 'United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership'. The statement emphasised profound cooperation on counterterrorism, with the two leaders "stressing that terrorism is a global scourge that must be fought and terrorist safe havens rooted out in every part of the world."⁸⁴ The Trump Administration also approved a long pending Indian demand that the US sell it unmanned surveillance drones. The deal is the first such purchase by a country that is not a member of the NATO alliance.⁸⁵ In August 2017, President Trump in his Afghanistan centric South Asia strategy glorified India's role in the war-torn country and in the larger Asia Pacific region, while criticising Pakistan.

As far as India's Afghan policy is concerned, New-Delhi continues its support for Kabul which is fueled by its hostility towards both Islamabad and the Taliban. India recognised and availed the opportunity to destabilise Pakistan using Afghan soil, resulting in Islamabad restricting New-Delhi's land access to Afghanistan.⁸⁶ For pursuance of its vital interests in Afghanistan, India has been using both sea and air routes. Moreover, India has been emboldened further by the US' continuous encouragement to play an active role in Afghanistan, especially in its fight against the Taliban.⁸⁷ In April 2018, India pledged to finance the delivery of four attack helicopters from Belarus to Afghanistan which were being used against the Taliban in the 2018 Spring Offensive session.⁸⁸

India's strategic agreement⁸⁹ with the Afghan government, and its support to Kabul both militarily and economically⁹⁰, has led President Ghani and the Kabul Administration to support the Indian narrative vis-à-vis Pakistan.⁹¹ Reports also suggest that Afghan forces orchestrating cross border attacks on Pakistani troops fencing the Durand Line.⁹² The Afghan government's explicit support to India was evidenced when Kabul did not condemn PM Modi's illegal annexation of Kashmir on August 5, 2019. Interestingly, Ghani accused Pakistan of wrong policies to counter terror during his recent election campaign speeches. Ironically the allegations overlook Pakistan's efforts to engage with regional countries including China, Russia and Iran to find a peaceful Afghan settlement.

Conclusion:

The US presence in Afghanistan has proven to be detrimental for Pakistan. The spread of terrorism and civil war into Pakistan has caused the country billions of dollars and thousands of lives. Despite the fact that Pakistan sided with the US in its war on terror and went against a large section of its population living along the Durand Line, Washington struck a strategic partnership with Pakistan's arch rival India and blamed Pakistan for having double standards vis-a-vis countering terrorists. Not only did the US leadership adopt the Indian narrative blaming Pakistan for terror related instability in the region, the Afghan leadership too has been pointing fingers at Islamabad. This is not surprising given the economic influence New-Delhi wields over the Afghan government. Nonetheless, Pakistan has adopted a very prudent strategy to curb extremism at home even as it is trying to relinquish any kind of dependence on Afghanistan. However, the rise of Daesh in Afghanistan and the allegiance of defected members of formerly Pakistan based extremist groups to it remain a real

challenge facing the country. Although India, the US and Afghanistan have designated Daesh as a terrorist group, its rivalry against the Taliban and threat it poses to Pakistan makes Daesh a strategic asset for them. The free hand India enjoys in Afghanistan may also allow the country to help the defected members of the TTP and other extremist organisations to reunite and orchestrate attacks against Pakistan.

It is also interesting that countries like Iran and Russia have long accused the US of transporting and training Daesh elements in Afghanistan. The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan is thus a threat for Russia, Iran and China alike. Pakistan could benefit by undertaking efforts to form a separate anti-Daesh camp. It is also important for the country to complete the fencing along the Durand Line to halt any kind of adventurism from Afghanistan. Finally, Pakistan must revisit its relationship with the US. The US has much to lose as a result of severing its relations with Pakistan. Since much of its defence needs are being fulfilled by China, Pakistan has the option to cut the sea access for the maintenance of US logistics in Afghanistan, until the US addresses Pakistani concerns.

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