[Shifting trends around Afghanistan](https://nation.com.pk/14-Jan-2019/shifting-trends-around-afghanistan" \t "_new)

Muhammad Tahir Iqbal January 14, 2019 the nation

Afghanistan is the pivot – an axis around which political, economic and strategic moves of the regional countries rotate, and then America’s relation with neighbouring countries, too, hinges upon their reaction towards the disruptive Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan entered its 18th year in October last – but no worthwhile laurel as such can be inscribed on the US-led NATO forces’ winning board. Gen. Austin Scott Miller, the newly appointed American general who took charge of the Resolute Support Operation in September, has conceded that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won militarily.

This is turning out to be the most unpopular adventure of the US abroad. A great number of American public and the politicians are on one page – withdrawal of troops. Let alone talking of President Trump’s recent proclamation of curtailing the troop-numbers, even those antithetical to him also favour him for that. Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts democrat who plans to contest 2020 election against Donald Trump, supports withdrawing American troops from military engagements in Syria and Afghanistan. So much so that she adds, “I think that everybody who keeps saying, ‘no, no, no, we can’t do that (withdraw troops),’ in the defence establishment needs to explain what they think winning in those wars [looks] like and where the metrics are.”

There are the reasons – it’s the longest ever war the US has ever gone into; and alongside, the cost matters – cost in the form of human lives and then the amount spent.

After 17 years in this war, 2372 American military men and 1720 civilian contractors have died, and over 20,000 troops have been wounded.

The amount spent goes into trillions of dollars. The Pentagon last year estimated that the war would cost the US taxpayers $45 billion in 2018 alone. From 2010 to 2012, when the U.S. had as many as 100,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, the price for American taxpayers surpassed $100 billion each year.

This provides the rationale as to why the US President Donald Trump seeks withdrawal of troops. In his first Cabinet meeting of the year, he said, “Russia used to be Soviet Union. Afghanistan made it Russia, because they went bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan.”

Now in the backdrop of emerging political realities in the region, the territorial trends and dimensions are changing with fresh partnerships. In this whirligig, Afghanistan still occupies the central stage. America sounds het-up, posing to axe numbers on the ground. Other players, meanwhile, have bobbed up finding the vacuum.

In the days of yore, Pakistan and America were close allies while India felt comfortable with the Soviet Union. The US-Pakistan’s cooperation caught new heights of friendship when the Red Army’s 40th division barged into Afghanistan in December 1979. What erupted later was the nine year long conflict where Islamabad and Moscow stood on opposite sides.

Now the drifts have taken different routes – the erstwhile foes like Islamabad and Moscow are inching close. Similarly, India (an ally of the Soviet Union in bygone days) and the US are making strategic ties stronger and stronger.

Amidst this diplomatic permutation, Russia is striving hard to reassert itself so as to reclaim its lustre lost deep into the deep furrows of Cold War.

The previous roles are also shifting. In past, the US supported the group of Afghan extremists to scuttle the plans of the Soviet Union. And now the charge is upon Russia.

Of late, there have been allegations, though unsubstantiated yet persistent, within Pentagon circles that Russia has been destabilising the atmosphere in Afghanistan by backing the Afghan Taliban. In an interview to BBC titled, “Is Russia arming the Afghan Taliban”, the US commander alleged Russia of giving weapons to the Taliban. In another report “The Kremlin’s comeback” published in Washington Post, the co-writers dwell upon how Russia has cultivated ties with the Taliban in a bid to settle a score with the US.

This allegation of patting the Taliban is shared by both – Pakistan and Russia – thereby making an impression of the confluence of common objective which is the ouster of the US-led forces from the region that they deem are damaging the polity of regional locale.

Moreover, Moscow is also concerned about the rise of Islamic State’s Khorasan chapter. This terrorist group with transnational extremist agenda stokes Moscow’s fears of using Afghanistan to launch attacks into Russia’s Central Asian periphery. For Islamabad, the looming threat assumes bigger reality since the group has claimed to have killed 146 people in Baluchistan on July 6 last, the second deadliest act of terrorism in Pakistan.

Bilateral ties between Pakistan and Russia take wholesome routes as the latter sells Mi-35M attack helicopters to the former, signs a military cooperation pact to train Pakistani officers, and holds joint training exercises.

The ripples of Chinese presence are also reasonably palpable in this changing scenario, given the volatile situation in Afghanistan. Just on the heels of 9/11, China’s involvement in Afghanistan was limited to resource extraction, including a $3 billion agreement to develop the Mes Aynak copper mine. But in the wake of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel in Afghanistan in 2015, China started taking part with greater zeal. Pledges as to foreign aid in Afghanistan were made. It also began series of diplomatic efforts to engage regional actors so as to bring coveted peace in Afghanistan.

China carries two core concerns as far as Afghanistan is concerned. First, the actualisation of its ‘one belt, one road programme’ stipulates tranquility in the region. Disruption in Afghanistan may affect the plan, and also keeps a potential tendency to vitiate the air in Pakistan where CPEC is traversing through. To gain a strengthening position, China has also invited Afghanistan to be a part of CPEC. Second, Uighur militants do have the capacity to use Afghan territory to plot attacks in Xinjiang province of China. For this purpose, China seems interested in making military presence on Wahkan corridor.

Saudia Arabia and UAE are already exerting their influence in the region, but Iran never admitted to having contacts with the Taliban. Recently, Iran has also confirmed that the Taliban visited Tehran for a second round of talks, aiming to discuss the post occupation situation.

In these shifting trends, Taliban has also undergone huge transformation from standing aloof to getting engaged in talks with all the regional state actors plus the major stake holders in the game. Taking part in peace conferences in Qatar, UAE or elsewhere can be taken as efforts to elevate their profile by positioning as a serious political reality of Afghanistan. That is why the Taliban’s spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid has said that any future relations between the Taliban and the United States should be based on “sound diplomatic and economic principle”.

Let’s hope that the changing trends on this part of the world bring ease to Afghanistan which stands ravaged for last 39 years by the great games of world superpowers. Much depends on the intention of the US which has all along this period been a major decision maker in this context.

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