

Regional Implications of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Abstract

The US presence in Afghanistan that lasted for nearly two decades, has left behind a chaotic and challenging legacy that threatens the social, political and economic fabric of the entire region. The sudden fall of US backed Afghan government and the subsequent return of Taliban to power has greatly complicated the regional dynamics. Short and long-term implications of the ongoing developments in Afghanistan are both diverse and far-reaching and warrant immediate attention. The primary objectives of this study are to analyze the impact of withdrawal of US forces on the overall security landscape of the region, the resurgence of terrorist activities, and the stand out implications for all regional stakeholders. The paper utilizes the rational choice model to explain the US choice for exit and the subsequent implications for the region that were not part of the initial rational calculus.

Keywords: Afghanistan, WOT, USA, Withdrawal, Rational Actor Model, Pakistan, China, Iran.

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1. Introduction

The post-9/11 US War on Terror (WOT) in Afghanistan lasted for over two decades. The main objective of this war, as laid out at the start, was to eliminate the Al-Qaeda terrorist group that was accused of the attacks and the Taliban regime that facilitated the group. The impact of the war on Afghanistan was immense and far-reaching, as it led to the overthrow of the then in power Taliban regime that had been in power since 1996. Afghanistan also paid a heavy cost in terms of the human cost of war; the deaths of thousands of Afghan civilians, and the displacement of millions of people. Moreover, the country had been in a state of conflict for over four decades, and the war on terror has only exacerbated the situation. Consequently, poverty, institutional consolidation, corruption, and a lack of basic amenities remain key challenges.¹

In the geopolitical landscape of the region, the exit of US troops from Afghanistan is marked as a crucial turning point. The two-decades-long involvement of US forces in Afghanistan ended in 2021 after the U.S. and Taliban representatives reached a deal on February 29, 2020, in Doha, Qatar, to bring peace in Afghanistan known as Doha Agreement that left a significant impact on Afghanistan in particular and on the region in general. Pakistan played a significant role as a facilitator during peace negotiations between the US government and the Taliban keeping in view a stable Afghanistan that directly impacts Pakistan's security and stability.²

In spite of the years of negotiations between the US and Taliban officials in Doha, the subsequent US withdrawal from Afghanistan, however, was far from planned and coordinated and left behind a host of complex issues and challenges

¹ Rubin, Barnett R. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

² Curtis, L. I. S. A. "How The Doha Agreement Guaranteed US Failure in Afghanistan." Hoover Institution 2 (2021): 2021. https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/curtis_webready.pdf

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that impacted the security apparatus of all regional stakeholders. Primarily, scrolling through the history of Afghanistan, it is evident that the constant instability in the country inadvertently provided a safe haven to an array of terrorist outfits.

Pakistan, topographically adjacent to Afghanistan, has long grappled with the outcome of long-drawn instability in the neighboring country. In the past, Pakistan's security apparatus has constantly been challenged due to cross-border terrorist activities. The militant outfits exploited the volatile border regions of Afghanistan and carried out their nefarious activities in the neighboring Pakistan. The consequence of the withdrawal of US forces resulted in the resurgence of the Taliban and other extremist organizations in the region.³

The exit of US forces from Afghanistan, ousting of Afghan government and its replacement by Taliban government has had impacts for China. A peaceful Afghanistan is crucial for a successful Belt and Road Initiative. Project BRI is one of the most important developmental projects that has been undertaken in the last decade, in the developing countries of the global south. The project's success is now tied to the stability and security in Afghanistan, broader Middle East and South Asia.⁴ Iran, adjusted their sails in time. Since 2016 they have been engaging with the Taliban government and pragmatically moving towards building working relationships with their neighbor. While this approach has, by and large, worked, however, border issues remain a concern. A turbulent Afghanistan is worrisome for Iran as well. The extremist groups in Afghanistan have repeatedly targeted the Hazara Shia minorities in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran being a Shia majority is understandably apprehensive of the extremist Sunni majority in Afghanistan. In-

³ Zahid, Farhan. "Implications of the US Forces' Withdrawal on the Af-Pak Jihadist Landscape." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 3 (2021): 10-14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27040261>

⁴ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines and Abdul Sayed "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival under Afghanistan's New Rulers" *CTC at West Point August 2023, Volume 16, Issue 8.* <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>

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flux of migrants and terror threats are among the greatest issues Iran has to deal with.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan has thus complicated the security situation in the entire region. With the resurgence of terrorist outfits in Afghanistan, there is a risk of terrorism that threatens the security of all neighboring states. The regional powers, will have to re-align, not only with the new Taliban government but also among themselves. Resultantly, China, Iran and Pakistan have joined hands. Afghanistan is a land locked country and trade with it involves access through a neighboring country. The challenges of the evolving political and social landscape in Afghanistan, need to be addressed to achieve long lasting stability in South Asia.⁵

This research has employed Qualitative Content Analysis of secondary data including books, journals, news pieces, official statements, policy briefs and video content to examine the post-withdrawal of US forces' and its implications for regional actors by categorizing the data into codes, themes and patterns in order to have an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The qualitative content analysis will be carried out by employing a deductive approach of the rational choice theory framework. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the existing literature on the correlation between retreat of foreign troops and increase in terroristic violence in the abandoned region.

2. Afghanistan a Cockpit of Rival Powers

Owing to the globalized world order of the 21st century, the Afghan crisis was not confined to its borders and had political, economic, and social fallout for South Asia and the wider Middle East. The incident of the World Trade Centre, the subsequent war on terror, the resultant violence and political unrest in Pakistan and

⁵ Lee, Terence. "Reflecting on America's withdrawal from Afghanistan: The view from Southeast Asia." *Armed Forces & Society* (2022): 0095327X221102475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221102475>

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the broader Middle East, speak volumes about its impacts on the region. Despite the presence of foreign troops, continued foreign economic aid and state-building efforts, Afghanistan stayed in the zone of uncertainty, just as lasting peace and stability remained a distant reality.⁶

Afghanistan has long been home to unrest and instability. Even prior to the arrival of US forces, the country had witnessed a decade long civil war. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan left a weak and fragile state with various factions eyeing for power. Among other factors, a stable and strong government in Afghanistan could not be established at the time of Soviet departure due to the many differences and disputes among Mujahideen factions, who continued to fight among themselves. Against this backdrop, a new faction named Taliban, headed by Mullah Omer, emerged and took hold of the state apparatus. Taliban were mostly students of religious madrassas and seminaries across Afghanistan and Pakistan. The local population, which was fed up with the continued power struggle between different Afghan warlords, welcomed the Taliban with the hope that they could bring stability to the turbulent country.

3. US in Afghanistan: Assessment of the Failure

US forces' failure in Afghanistan⁷ is both complex and multifaceted. Some of the key highlights of the failure are:

- i. **Lack of clear objective:** The original goal of the US mission in Afghanistan was only to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban government that had provided them with a safe haven. However, over time, the mission expanded to include nation-building and the establishment of a

⁶ Afzal, Saima, Hamid Iqbal, and Mavara Inayat. "Terrorism and extremism as a non-traditional security threat post 9/11: Implications for Pakistan's security." *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3, no. 24 (2012): 194-203.

⁷ Herd, Graeme. "The Causes and the Consequences of Strategic Failure in Afghanistan." George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (2021). https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2021-08/Security%20Insights%2068_Herd_0.pdf

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so-called stable democratic regime in Afghanistan. This led to a lack of focus on the original mission and a diversion of resources and attention.⁸

- ii. **Insurgency:** The Taliban insurgency has been a persistent and resilient force in Afghanistan, with the ability to launch attacks, control territory, and command social control over the population. The Afghan government and security forces had continuously struggled to counter insurgency, despite overwhelming support from the US and its allies.
- iii. **Difficult terrain:** The terrain in Afghanistan is mostly mountainous and is incredibly difficult to access. The terrain therefore naturally supported guerrilla style insurgency and heavily facilitated the Taliban and caused immense problems for US and the then Afghan government counter-insurgency operations.
- iv. **Insufficient resources:** While the then Afghan government had support of the US, the resources that were necessary to counter and dismantle a very well coordinated Taliban insurgency, were either inadequate or simply not available. As a result, the US military and its allies often struggled to maintain security and control in many parts of the country.
- v. **Corruption and governance issues:** The Afghan government was plagued by corruption and poor governance, which undermined efforts to build stable institutions and win the support of the Afghan people.⁹
- vi. **Ineffective military strategy:** The U.S. military relied heavily on airpower and drone strikes, which led to high civilian casualties and eroded support for the US forces in the country.¹⁰

⁸Obama B. and Karzai H., 2013. Will the Afghanistan War Ever End? U.S. Withdrawal. Available www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDHmYgOETk4

⁹ Bak, Mathias. Corruption in Afghanistan and the role of development assistance. Transparency International., 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep20486.pdf>

¹⁰ Travis, Donald S. "Why the US military lost Afghanistan." *Armed Forces & Society* (2022): 0095327X221100584. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221100584>

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- vii. **Lack of cultural understanding:** The US military and its allies often lacked a deep understanding of Afghan culture and customs, making it difficult to build relationships with indigenous communities and win their hearts and minds.¹¹
- viii. **The resilience of the Taliban:** Taliban proved to be a resilient and tenacious adversary, making it difficult for the US military to achieve lasting gains on the battlefield.

The failure of the US in Afghanistan can thus be attributed to a combination of political, strategic, and cultural factors, which combined to make it difficult to achieve the objectives of the stated mission.

4. Theoretical Underpinnings

This article primarily relies on the rational choice theory to understand the complexity of US withdrawal and its subsequent implications for its neighboring countries. The theoretical framework takes actors, agency, rational calculus, and context into consideration to understand the behavior of states and other actors in the international system. According to rational choice theory, foreign policy decision and all policy decisions in general are a product of rational calculus. In other words, this article will operate under the assumption that the foreign policies of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and China are not determined, directed and structured but according to the rational actor model, states are rational and self-interested actors that make decisions based on a careful analysis of the costs and benefits of different options.¹²

¹¹ Mamdani, Mahmood. "Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism." *American anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 766-775. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.766>

¹² Chandrasekaran, R. (12 May 2012). "The triage commander: Gen. John Allen hastily transforming U.S. mission in Afghanistan". *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-triage-commander-gen-john-allen-hastily-transforming-us-mission-in-afghanistan/2012/05/12/gIQAzbtKU_story.html

5. Rational Choice Model in the Decision Making

Six steps are involved in the decision-making process¹³

- i. Explain the Problem
- ii. Define decision
- iii. Define relevant criteria
- iv. Identify substitutes
- v. Analyze the available alternatives
- vi. Compute the optimal decision

In a rational decision-making process, people are believed to be logical and practical and their decisions are assumed to be a product of rational calculus. In the case of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Rational Actor Model would suggest that the US government decided to withdraw its forces based on a careful assessment of the costs and benefits of continued involvement in the country. The US forces had been involved in Afghanistan for more than two decades, and the costs of the war were taking a toll, both in terms of financial resources and human lives.

A state must scrutinize every possible option to explain and analyze choice alternatives that violate the notion of rationality to maximize their utility or interests, as an integral part of the process of decision-making based on informed choices. Rational decision-makers should be good at new information that comes along while making their choices including economic interests, security concerns and domestic politics, as they need to update their estimates in response to new reliable information that contains significant evidence.

¹³ Paternoster, Ray, and Greg Pogarsky. "Rational choice, agency and thoughtfully reflective decision making: The short and long-term consequences of making good choices." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 25 (2009): 103-127. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-009-9065-y>

6. Regional Unitary Actions

After the retreat of the US forces from Afghanistan, the Actors (States) China, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan witnessed the rise and fall of several political, economic, social, and religious challenges. Afghanistan, for more than four decades, was striving for peace and stability as it has been the combat zone of continuous fightingsince 1979.¹⁴ Afghanistan has been and is still manipulated by different powers fortheir vested interests. All the external powers motivated by their vested interests tend to maneuver various developments in Afghanistan through different interest groups in Afghanistan with which they have developed a patron-client-like relationship.

The US had been involved in Afghanistan for over 20 years, and the cost of thewar had been significant in terms of financial resources and human lives. The US government likely assessed that it was not possible to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan, including defeating the Taliban and consolidating the country, and that the cost of continued involvement was too high. The rational actor model alsosuggests that the US calculated the potential risks and the consequences of withdrawal, including the potential for increased violence and instability in the region, the potential for the Taliban to regain power, and the potential for a humanitarian crisis. However, the decision to withdraw troops was likely based oncareful analysis of the costs and benefits, and the US likely concluded that, for US,the risks and consequences of withdrawal were outweighed by the costs of continued involvement.¹⁵ The table below identifies the six apparently rational steps involved in the decision-making process of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

¹⁴ Muzaffar, Muhammad, Zahid Yaseen, and Naila Afzal. "US Exit from Afghanistan: Impacts on Pakistan and India." *Journal of Political Studies* 28, no. 2 (2021). http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdf-files/5-v28_2_2021.pdf

¹⁵ Connah, Leoni. "US intervention in Afghanistan: Justifying the Unjustifiable?." *South Asia Research* 41, no. 1 (2021): 70-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728020964609>

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i.	Define the Problem	After the withdrawal, the Taliban find an alternative to fill the vacuum
ii.	Identify decision	Iran , China and Pakistan are now looking to achieve the following aims in Afghanistan i. Security ii. Political stability iii. Economic prosperity
iii.	Define some criteria	All neighboring countries want to play their regional role, they also want to enhance their regional influence
iv.	Identify alternatives	Trying to achieve the goals by employing soft and hard power
v.	Analyze the Available Alternatives	To give aid, by developments, and by making good relations with the Taliban
vi.	Compute the optimal decision	For China to secure BRI, for Iran and Pakistan, to create working relationship with the new government and remain safe from extremist groups in Afghanistan ¹⁶

Whether or not the decision to withdraw completely from Afghanistan was rational for USA's own strategic and policy interests, it did however create a host of problems for the abandoned Afghanistan and the neighboring countries. Some of the most standout fallouts of the withdrawal are as follow:

- i. **Instability and insecurity:** the withdrawal of foreign troops created a power vacuum for indigenous militants factions and militias, leading to insecurity and instability in the wider region.
- ii. **Shifting alliances:** haphazard withdrawal from conflict-ridden countries generally results in shifting alliances and fractured partnerships between different regional stakeholders. If a withdrawing country had been supporting

¹⁶ Soherwerdi, S. H. S., 2012. Withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan (Endgame): Issues and

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challenges for Pakistan. Journal of Political Studies, Vol: 19, pp.305-318

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one side of a conflict, the withdrawal could alter the balance of power and lead to new alliances or realignments among other regional actors. This could potentially breed new conflicts and tensions in the region. This is precisely what we are now witnessing in Afghanistan at the moment. The alliances forged during the US presence are either completely redundant or are now in the process of realignment. The alliances and the allegiances began to shift as soon as the US announced its departure plans.

- iii. **Increased regional competition:** Withdrawal, especially that of a super power from a conflict ridden country, could also lead to increased regional competition as other actors seek to fill the power vacuum left by the withdrawing power. This could result in a new wave of arms races, proxy conflicts, and other forms of competition among regional actors that could go on for years and sometimes even decades.¹⁷

Peace & Stability



Regional order



Hegemonic Stability

¹⁷ Muzaffar, Muhammad, Imran Khan, and Zahid Yaseen. "End Game or a New Great Game? Indo-Pakistan Rivalry and Post Withdrawal Afghanistan." *Asian Journal of International Peace & Security (AJIPS)* 3 (2019): 1-11. <http://ajips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2019-vol-03-end-game-or-a-new-great-game>

7. US Forces Withdrawal from Afghanistan & its Implications for the Region

Iran views the situation in Afghanistan with caution. Like Pakistan, it worked on maintaining working relationships with all governments in Afghanistan. Realizing that pragmatic relations are important for mutual existence, Iran has comfortably slipped in the new situation. However, while Iran is on excellent diplomatic terms with the new government, unrest in Afghanistan is an enduring thorn in the bed of roses. The extremist insurgencies in Afghanistan pose a constant threat to the Shia community at border and inside Afghanistan. Resultantly, smuggling, border skirmishes and migrants remain constant issues.

BRI is a project close to China's heart. The project is now entering into its second decade where huge infra-structure is to be built for regional connectivity. The project has lasting effects for the region. However, like all other countries, safety of investment and citizens is a major concern for China. A peaceful border and secure transit route within the landlocked Afghanistan is vital for the survival of BRI.

8. Pakistan's Interests in Afghanistan

Pakistan is the southeastern neighbor of Afghanistan. The common border between Afghanistan and Pakistan occupies a territory of 251.773 sq. m. Not only are the two countries neighbors but they also share deep historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic links. Despite having socio-religious commonality, Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan have had their fair share of ups and downs.

Taliban, owing to their ethnic make and religious bent, were always a natural strategic ally for Pakistan. While Pakistan was compelled to confront the Taliban due to American pressure after the 9/11 attacks, it never denounced the Taliban as terrorists. After the US departure and the subsequent Taliban takeover therefore, it has not been difficult for Pakistan to reproach their once natural ally. The end of the Afghanistan political crisis and social turmoil will in the long run have a

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positive impact on Pakistan, which currently is facing serious implications of the negative spillover of the Afghan crisis in the form of terrorism and political upheaval. Pakistan, right from the beginning, has been active in Afghanistan and always wanted a peaceful, friendly and stable neighbor. Pakistan's broad interests in Afghanistan after withdrawal are as follow:

10.1. Political and Strategic Interests

Pakistan always wants to see a strengthened and united Afghanistan, with a friendly government that gives Afghans, especially the majority Pashtuns, their due and just share in the power apparatus of the country. This ensures that immigrant influx from Afghanistan remains checked. This is also important since citizens on the two sides of borders share extended family bonds and natural feeling of empathy of their Afghan brethren.

10.2. Security Interests

In the words of former Pentagon analysts Anthony Cordesman, 'It is clear that Afghanistan's future will play an important role in defining Pakistan's security'. Militancy and insecurity in Afghanistan always had severe implications for Pakistan. With the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan's security concerns over terrorism and militancy have understandably heightened. The country shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, and any instability in Afghanistan could easily have spillover effects in Pakistan. Pakistan has already been dealing with cross-border attacks by militants based in Afghanistan, and the departure of the US military could exacerbate this problem. The growing cross-border terrorism and militancy are increasingly worsening the security situation in Pakistan. The security concerns for Pakistan are therefore very grave and serious.

10.3. Economic Interests

Afghanistan stands to offer Pakistan a spatial, social and economic bridge to Central Asia and beyond. On the other hand, Pakistan stands to offer the landlocked country of Afghanistan access to warm waters of the Arabian Sea. The two neighboring countries therefore have plenty of overlapping and interconnected economic interests. A peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan can be at the center of transit routes, power grids, and gas pipelines and serve its interest as a commercial powerhouse. Together with Pakistan, it can link up the vast fossil fuel resources of Central Asia with South Asia, one of the largest growing markets for energy resources. Central Asian States similarly can be a potential market for Pakistani goods. There is thus plenty of economic prospects at stake between the two neighbors.

11. Afghanistan Before and After Invasion

As far as the pre- and post-intervention of Afghanistan is concerned, it will perhaps not be wrong to suggest that Afghanistan's political system was not feeble and completely ineffective before the US intervention. It is true that due to its landlocked geographical location, Afghanistan does not have any sea routes thus it was never too active in international trade and shared shaky relations with the neighboring states at best. However, it must be pointed out that at the time of US invasion, the Taliban had only been in power for about 5 years and were still trying to consolidate that rule and implement the writ of the state. They did not have time to evolve as a mature political entity that could play a constructive role for regional development.

Following US invasion; Afghanistan's foreign relations were highly affected and were simply an extension of the US foreign policy. Meanwhile, the former Taliban rulers shifted their headquarters to neighboring states. The state's infrastructure and healthcare facilities were also highly affected. Trade nearly

vanished and foreign aid became the primary source of state income. The system under the US occupation was therefore fundamentally flawed and unstable and began to crumble as soon as they departed. There can never be any sustainable and meaningful development in a state that functions with foreign aid alone.

12. Pakistan's Perspective on USA Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Pakistan has expressed mixed sentiments about the US forces' exit from Afghanistan. On the one hand, Pakistan wanted the foreign troops to withdraw from its western neighbor country and hailed it as a move towards long-term peace and stability. On the other hand, Pakistan had serious concerns over not just the hasty mode of US withdrawal, but also the huge influx of Afghan refugees that were abandoned at Pakistan's doorsteps. Moreover, the hasty withdrawal was a blatant betrayal of USA's before the war pledges and war rhetoric that forced Pakistan to join the war on terror in the first place.

Pakistan, nevertheless, has expressed optimism that the withdrawal of foreign troops will in the long run help overcome the longstanding political and social instability in Afghanistan. For several years, the Taliban factions had been engaged in a long drawn insurgency in Afghanistan and the US retreat could now create a window of opportunity for peaceful settlement of outstanding disputes between various stakeholders in Afghanistan. At the same time however, Pakistan has expressed concerns over the power vacuum that has been created in Afghanistan and while it has been filled by the Taliban, it will take a long time to achieve meaningful political stability in the country. Additionally, the hasty US withdrawal appears to have emboldened the previously dormant Tehrik-e-Taliban terrorist faction that has taken advantage of the power vacuum in Afghanistan and has intensified its terrorist activity in Pakistan. Alarming, the rise of Al-Qaeda and Islamic state in the wake of US withdrawal is also a matter of great concern for the Pakistani security apparatus and society. Thus, where the US withdrawal has created opportunity for Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, there USA's

hasty and poorly planned exit has also created a number of problems for all regional stakeholders, including Pakistan.

13. Post-war Reconstruction in Afghanistan

The post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan is a complex, continuous and arduous process. The withdrawal of US troops after the two decades of military involvement has left behind significant challenges including political instability, security and an economic domino effect. Following the return of Taliban, many Afghans were forcefully displaced, which created an immense refugee problem, especially for Pakistan. The international community and humanitarian organizations in particular will have to play a major part in post-war reconstruction, humanitarian relief, infrastructure development, and protection of human rights including prioritizing issues such as health, security and education.

14. Terrorism before and after US Forces Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan had significant implications for the security of the country and the region. Terrorism has a long history in Afghanistan. However, it is worth pointing out that terrorism foremost manifested itself after the US decision to invade Afghanistan.

- i. **Before the US withdrawal**, the US-led coalition forces along with NATO and partner nations, maintained a substantial military presence in Afghanistan. This presence somewhat helped stabilize certain areas and importantly keep a check on terrorist groups and activities in the country.
- ii. **Counter-terrorism efforts:** the primary objective of the international coalition was to disrupt and degrade the capabilities of terrorist groups, primarily Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The counter-terrorism offensive strikes targeted their apex leadership, training bases and command and control system. While the groups were never completely dismantled, they were always on the run.

- iii. **Terrorism following the withdrawal of US troops:** The US-led coalition forces successfully removed the Taliban in 2001 and installed a new so-called Afghan democratic government in its place. In spite of Taliban forces initial defeat, they continued to launch attacks on Afghan security forces, the US backed Afghan government officials, civilians and international troops. The war in Afghanistan to date, is the longest traditional military occupation of U.S. in its history. It killed over 2,400 troops and injured over 20,000 with the estimated cost ranging between \$2 trillion to \$2.3 trillion.¹⁸ Following the U.S. forces' withdrawal, the Taliban rapidly regained control of Afghanistan, culminating in the fall of Kabul in August 2021.¹⁹ The resurgence of the Taliban has emboldened the previously dormant terrorist groups and factions and encourages radical extremists all over the world to converge in the politically fragile and vulnerable Afghanistan. Moreover, in the absence of foreign troops and active intelligence agencies, counter-terrorism operations have steadily declined, allowing the terrorist factions to reorganize, train and strategize attacks explicitly. Consequently, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian States are alarmed about the spillover of instability, refugee influx, and terrorism in their territories. The need of the hour is the minimum consensus between the Taliban, Afghan government and security forces, neighboring countries and international bodies to respond and adapt to the new reality of this decade.²⁰

15. Conclusion

The situation in Afghanistan remains volatile and uncertain as the sudden withdrawal of American troops has left behind a complex political and social mess

¹⁸ Peltier, Heidi. "The cost of debt-financed war: public debt and rising interest for Post-9/11 war spending." Costs of War Project (2020).

¹⁹ Barnett R. Rubin and Abubakar Siddique, "Resolving the Pakistan-Afghanistan Stalemate," USIP Special Report, October 1, 2006, www.usip.org (Accessed September 16, 2020).

²⁰ Mohan, C. R., (2012). "The American Interest, Beyond U.S. Withdrawal: India's Afghan Options" Foreign Affairs, July/August 2006, p.3

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in the country. This haphazard and poorly executed exit has significant implications for Pakistan and the wider region, as all neighboring countries and regional stakeholders will need to navigate a complex and uncertain situation in their relationship with Afghanistan, the United States and above all with each other. Arguably, Afghanistan has been a battleground, where regional and international actors have constantly competed for influence and power in the politically and socially fragile country. Afghanistan's neighbors have the tendency to lock horns when it comes to Afghanistan and in their tussle for dominance, all neighboring countries tend to suffer. However, this need not always be the case.

While all neighboring states have legitimate reasons to be wary of each other's involvement and investment in Afghanistan, they could also see each other's role in the country as an opportunity to improve relations with each other and work towards greater regional stability.

A stable and prosperous Afghanistan will in the long run benefit the entire region, especially Pakistan. Afghanistan not only shares its longest border with Pakistan, but also its majority Pashtoon identity. Cooperation between the two in particular, is therefore vital for the whole region.

Increased engagement between Pakistan and all other regional stakeholders on issues related to Afghanistan could also help to build trust and reduce tensions between the neighboring states.

Thus, while there are many outstanding reasons for disagreement, the Afghan crisis, offers a unique opportunity for the region to work together for peace and development. A stable and prosperous Afghanistan will in the long run benefit the entire region. Increased engagement between all regional players and activating regional cooperation organizations can put South Asia back on the track of development and peace.