Post-US Withdrawal Challenges to the Security of Newly Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

US decision to fully withdraw from Afghanistan under Doha Accord has significantly altered the geo-strategic environment of the whole region. This withdrawal directly resulted in re-rise of Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These developments have had a direct bearing on regional states, most notably Pakistan, which partnered with US in War on Terrorism post 9/11. Pakistan's border region with Afghanistan and particularly Newly Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly FATA), have been most affected due to strategic shifts in Afghanistan. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to explain the ways in which US withdrawal and subsequent developments in Afghanistan have created enabling environment for security threats (resurgence of terrorism) in NMDs. The study is an attempt to provide insights into the localized developments of Pakistan-Afghanistan border region for broader policy options for the state.

Keywords: NMDs, United States, Afghanistan, US' Withdrawal**.**

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1. Introduction

The US War on Terrorism in Afghanistan represents one of the most significant military engagements of the 21st century. The so-called war on terror that followed the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks resulted in further complicating the geopolitical dynamic of the region.

The roots of conflict in Afghanistan are linked to Soviet involvement, first through a propped-up government and then direct military intervention. The result was a protracted insurgency by non-state elements mainly Mujahedeen that later turned into Taliban movement and Al-Qaeda. When Taliban rose to power in 1990s, Al-Qaeda found refuge in Afghanistan from where they launched terrorist attacks against the US and her Western allies. The 9/11 incident, planned and executed by Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan forced US to launch military action against Al-Qaeda and their supporters in Afghanistan in October 2001.[1]

Initially US achieved significant military success that resulted in the removal of Taliban government and rise of US backed government led by Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan. The US, however, faced major insurgency by Taliban, caused by multiple internal and external factors. As opposed to US expectations, this conflict transformed into a protracted asymmetric guerrilla insurgency with complex tribal and ethnic alliances in Afghanistan and beyond.

Soon after ousting the Taliban regime, US objective shifted towards nation-building.[2] However, this goal met with a lot of challenges that included ethnic

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[1] Conor Keane, *US Nation Building in Afghanistan* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).
[2] Conor Keane, *US Nation Building in Afghanistan*.

rivalries, rampant corruption in the Afghanistan government and weak institutions that could not effectively manage the state affairs. Despite pumping in hundreds of billions of dollars each year in military operations and developmental projects, US remained unsuccessful in achieving both goals, namely eliminating insurgency and Afghan nation-building.

2. Methodology

The study involves a qualitative research design aimed at understanding important socio-political and security dynamics of NMDs that are directly linked to extremism and terrorism in the region. Qualitative key informant interviews were conducted from a sample of stakeholders mainly the local political party leaderships (2), researchers (2), tribal leaders (2) and civil society members (4). These interviews were then classified for thematic content analysis for the purpose of this research. This research is then further analysed in light of literature available on the subject.

3. Conceptualizing Security

As a concept, security has greatly evolved over the last few decades. It is an important concept in the study of academic disciplines and it remains an important issue for states as well. It has evolved from its roots in 'traditional' form that focuses on state-centric threats to relatively more recent non-traditional security issues that also include human security issues.[3] For the purpose of this research, operationalization of the concept is essential to make a case for the research findings of this paper.

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[3] Amitav Acharya, "Human Security: East Versus West," *Global Governance* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–308.

4. Traditional Security Paradigm

The traditional security paradigm is fundamentally a state-centric idea which primarily focuses on securing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state from mainly external military threats. This approach to security emerged after World War II and early years of the Cold War.[4] It closely relates to the realist perspective on international relations in which states are the primary actors and basic unit of analysis including affairs of security. The focus of security studies has shifted towards the study of military capabilities of states, their deterrence strategies and alliances etc. The Cold War stand-off between two major powers, that are US and USSR has been cited as an example of this approach.

The end of Cold War, however, marked the shift in the evolution of security studies. Ascendance of unipolar world order and emergence of new spectrum of threats have necessitated the emergence of a security approach in international relations.

5. Non-Traditional Security

The post-Cold War era witnessed the rise of non-traditional security challenges that transcended traditional state boundaries and military domains.[5] These challenges encompassed a diverse range of issues, including terrorism, cyber threats, transnational crime, environmental degradation, and pandemics. Unlike traditional security threats, which are often characterized by clear military

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[4] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 42.
[5] Roland Paris, "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?" *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 87–102

dimensions and state actors, non-traditional threats are complex, interconnected, and often originate from non-state actors or diffused sources.

For instance, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks highlighted the vulnerability of states to asymmetric threats posed by non-state actors. The proliferation of information and communication technologies facilitated the emergence of cyber threats, ranging from hacking and espionage to disruptive cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, processes and institutions. Similarly, environmental challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity emerged as significant security concerns, with implications for human well-being, economic stability, and geopolitical sensitivities.

6. Human Security Paradigm

Amidst the growing recognition of non-traditional security challenges, the concept of human security gained prominence as an alternative paradigm that prioritized the protection of individuals and communities from a broad spectrum of threats.[6]

In contrast to state-centric approach of traditional security paradigm, human security deals with threats to individuals from seven major elements: Economic security, food security, environmental security, personal security, health security, community security and political security. It not only deals with physical security of an individual but also the dignity of an individual as the foremost goal of state policy. The human security approach understands the overlapping nature of security threats. It demands a holistic approach and response to these threats that

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[6] UNDP, *Human Development Report*: *New Dimensions of Human Security* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25.

incorporate military, economy, development, and political and diplomatic initiatives to protect human lives and dignity.

This evolution from traditional security to non-traditional and ultimately to human security approach in security studies has ramifications for governance, policy making and establishing linkages at national and global levels.[7] However, this shift requires abandoning narrow selfish national interests to collective good for which collective action is required. It also means states have to re-consider their existing strategies to adapt to the changing nature of threats and vulnerabilities in contemporary times.[8]

The evolution of security from traditional to non-traditional and human-centric paradigms reflects the dynamic nature of global politics and the evolving nature of threats in the 21st century. While traditional security concerns remain relevant, the emergence of non-traditional challenges underscores the need for a more inclusive and holistic approach to security that prioritizes the well-being and dignity of individuals and communities. By embracing the principles of human security and fostering international cooperation, the international community can build a more resilient and secure world for future generations.

7. US War on Terrorism and Impact on Pakistan's Newly Merged Districts

The US war on terrorism in Afghanistan, launched in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, has had profound and multifaceted impact on Pakistan's tribal regions that border Afghanistan. This impact spans political, socio-

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[7] Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 79.
[8] John Gerard Ruggie, "Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations," *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (1993): 139–174.

economic, and security dimension, reshaping the dynamics of the region and significantly influencing Pakistan's internal landscape. In a broader context of security as mentioned earlier in this article, this multifaceted impact generated local insecurities ranging from birth and growth of terrorism, sectarianism, ethnic conflicts, increased poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Human security issues then lead to extremism and terrorism in Pakistan broadly and the tribal regions specifically.[9]

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan marked a significant turning point in the region's geopolitics.[10] The primary objective was to dismantle Al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban regime, which had provided sanctuary to terrorist and extremist organizations. Pakistan, a key ally in the global war against terrorism, became a crucial partner for the US due to its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and its historical ties with various Afghan factions.[11] However, the complexities of the Afghan conflict and Pakistan's own internal dynamics soon intertwined, leading to far-reaching consequences for the tribal regions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

US war on terrorism had a significant spillover impact on Pakistan's border regions most notably the tribal region.[12] Over the course of the war, US military pressure forced the Taliban and their allies to take refuge and re-energize

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[9] Ahmed Ali Naqvi, "Human Security and Extremism in Pakistan," in *Revisiting Pakistan's National Security Dilemma*, ed. Iram Khalid (Al-Abbas International, April 1, 2016).

[10] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001.

[11] Christine C. Fair, "The Militant Challenge in Pakistan's Tribal Regions," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005): 147-162.

[12] Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "Washington's Phantom War: The Effects of the U.S. Drone Program in Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (2010): 112-127.

themselves in the Pakistan's Afghanistan border region known for its geography and tough mountain terrain.[13]

The influx of militants from Western Afghanistan also had great impact on the region. It not only caused tribal feuds, but also culminated in sectarian conflicts and helped intensified militancy in the region. This situation made the bordering districts the hotbed for armed factions of varying types, resulting in security nightmare for the state and its institutions.

Adding fuel to fire, US drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan that gradually increased from 2008 and peaked in 2011, further fuelled anti-US and anti-government sentiments among locals, providing the militants much needed space to recruit more militants and funding. Drone strikes targeted militant leaders across various outfits, however, they also resulted in unintended civilian casualties, creating anger in the region and perpetuating a cycle of violence and terrorism.

Furthermore, the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan following the US invasion compounded the socio-economic challenges facing the tribal areas. Already marginalized and underdeveloped, the region struggled to accommodate the influx of refugees, straining limited resources and infrastructure.[14] The presence of millions of Afghan refugees not only increased poverty and unemployment but also heightened social tensions and competition for resources, complicating existing grievances and instability.

Particularly noteworthy impact of US war in Afghanistan is on the political landscape of the Pakistan's tribal region. The State support to US war in

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[13]Seth G. Jones et al, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Rand Corporation, 2008).
[14] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Pakistan Fact Sheet: Afghan Refugees*, 2023.

Afghanistan and poor law and order situation in the region, led to major popular unrest for a number of different reasons. Furthermore, the militarization of the tribal regions has led to criticism within the tribal region. Displacement of local population, collateral damage and impacts on businesses has led to significant resentment among the local population. This has proven to alienate local communities as it fuels grievances and drives many into the arms of militant groups, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence.[15]

8. Post-US Withdrawal Developments and Impact on Security of NMDs

There are two major developments in the region that have had an impact on the security of NMDs.

First, US withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent developments; the most notable among them is the rise of the Taliban regime. Each of these developments has multifaceted impact on the region.

Secondly, the developments in Pakistan that are either related to US withdrawal or independent of it, have also impacted the security of NMDs. The discussion below is based on all these variables that affect the security of the region.

9. Rise of Taliban Regime in Afghanistan

As discussed earlier, US withdrawal has had a significant impact on socio-economic, political and security landscape of the region. It has not only emboldened militant operations from Afghanistan, but has also created a sense of

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[15] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Pakistan Fact Sheet: Afghan Refugees*, 2023.

insecurity among the locals of the region. Formerly subdued by concerted military efforts, these militants have seized upon the power vacuum left by the retreating US forces to intensify their attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians. The US withdrawal has also provided them the opportunity to get united as there is one threat left, namely the State of Pakistan.[16] The absence of a robust international presence has emboldened these groups, allowing them to regroup, rearm, and expand their operations with impunity.

Moreover, the collapse of the US-backed government in Afghanistan has shattered the hopes of many individuals, organizations, and civil society actors who had long yearned for an end to the cycle of violence and instability plaguing the region for which they had long held the Taliban and their ideology responsible.[17] The US-led intervention had been seen as a beacon of hope, promising to quell extremist forces and pave the way for a lasting peace settlement. However, the rapid unravelling of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban to power have dashed these aspirations, leaving many disillusioned and despairing of the prospects for peace.

Furthermore, the resurgence of the Taliban has posed a formidable challenge to Pakistan's efforts to secure its border with Afghanistan. The Taliban's staunch opposition to border fencing initiatives, coupled with their presence in control of key border crossings, has severely hampered Pakistan's ability to manage its frontier effectively.[18] This has not only facilitated the free movement of militants and weapons across the border but has also emboldened insurgent groups to launch cross-border attacks with impunity. The porous nature of the border has

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[16] Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban," *Combating Terrorism Center* 14, no. 4 (April/May 2021).

[17] Youth Community Leader, Interview by the Author.

[18] Amina Khan and Christian Wagner, "The changing character of the Durand Line," *Strategic Studies* 33, no. 2 (2013): 19-32.

exacerbated security concerns within the newly merged districts, exposing them to the risk of infiltration and destabilization.

In addition to these direct consequences of the US withdrawal and the Taliban's resurgence, there are also broader geopolitical ramifications that have reverberated across the region. The Taliban's return to power has emboldened other extremist groups and actors, fuelling sectarian tensions and exacerbating existing fault lines within the Pakistani society.

10. Economic Challenges

Unsurprisingly, US withdrawal from Afghanistan has adversely affected the economy of Pakistan in general and that of border tribal region in particular due to various interconnected factors. Though US support gradually diminished in the middle of 2010 after the expiry of Kerry-Lugar Bill, US administration under Donald Trump ended all military support to Pakistan in 2018 and since then there has been no major change in US policy. With dwindling support from the US, Pakistan's military and economic capabilities have been severely constrained, limiting its capacity to effectively counter terrorism, strengthen law enforcement, and implement much-needed developmental projects in the region. The shortfall in funding has forced Pakistan to re-allocate resources, diverting vital funds away from critical security initiatives and socio-economic development programs, thereby compromising the security and well-being of residents in NMDs.

Furthermore, the implementation of border fencing and increased restrictions on illegal trade along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has introduced new challenges for the local economy of NMDs. While these measures were intended to enhance border security and curb the flow of militants and contraband, they have inadvertently disrupted informal traditional trade routes and economic

activities essential for the livelihood of local communities who primarily relied on this informal economy since the creation of Pakistan and even before that. The tightening of border controls has impeded cross-border commerce, leading to job losses, reduced employment opportunities, and a decline in the availability of affordable goods. This economic downturn has further exacerbated socio-economic disparities and heightened tensions within the region, posing additional challenges to efforts aimed at promoting peace and stability.

Since US war began in 2001, the erstwhile FATA has seen hundreds of non-governmental organizations, both national and global, working for the welfare of the people. They catered to two types of people, those that migrated due to war in Afghanistan, and local communities affected by militant activity or military operations in the region. In addition to humanitarian work, they also generated limited but important economic activity creating local jobs, and providing essential services that the government was unable to do so.[19] However, since US withdrawal many of such organizations and NGOs have ceased these vital operations due to little to no interest of the donors in this region. Consequently, it has adversely impacted that livelihood of many people along with the process of positive social change in the society.

Moreover, the convergence of global and Pakistan's internal economic crises has compounded economic insecurity in NMDs. The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with structural deficiencies and policy missteps, has precipitated a sharp downturn in Pakistan's economy, exacerbating poverty, unemployment, and social inequality across the region. Historic high inflation has also constrained people's purchasing power, sliding millions below the poverty line. The economic distress gripping the country has reverberated throughout the

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[19] UNDP Official, Interview by the Author.

NMDs, exacerbating socio-economic grievances and amplifying vulnerabilities to extremist ideologies and recruitment tactics. The inability of the government to address these economic challenges has effectively eroded public confidence in state institutions and fuelled resentment against perceived injustices and inequalities, further destabilizing the region and undermining efforts to promote lasting peace and prosperity.

11. Political Crisis in Pakistan

The repercussions of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan have compounded existing security challenges in NMDs as internal political crises and numerous approaches to unsuccessful negotiations with militant organizations further undermine state control and exacerbate vulnerabilities within the region. The fractious nature of the political landscape has hindered effective governance and impeded efforts to implement cohesive security strategies, leaving the region vulnerable to exploitation by militant groups and other non-state actors.

Furthermore, the absence of a unified approach to negotiations with different militant organizations coupled with lack of seriousness and erratic behaviour of these terrorist organizations has sowed discord and confusion, weakening the state's ability to assert control and enforce security measures in the region. The lack of a coherent strategy thus far has allowed militant groups to exploit divisions among political parties and exploit local grievances to further their own agendas, undermining efforts to establish peace and stability in NMDs. In the absence of clear guidelines and consistent policies, the state's authority is undermined, creating a vacuum that militant organizations are quick to exploit. One such example is commitment to providing Rs. 100 billion for uplifting the region's development which could never materialize mainly due to internal political crisis

and divisions over the source of this funding that is the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award.[20]

Moreover, the failure to adopt a uniform approach to negotiations has the potential to erode trust between the state and local communities, which further complicates efforts to address security challenges in the region. Communities that feel marginalized or neglected by the state may be more susceptible to recruitment by militant groups, exacerbating tensions and perpetuating cycles of violence and instability. The absence of effective governance and inclusive decision-making processes has alienated segments of the population thereby potentially creating fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take hold and thrive.

12. Ex-FATA Merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Ex-FATA was historically an autonomous region under the Federal Government Authority governed by a special law called the Frontier Crimes Regulation, commonly known as FCR. However, there have been calls by many to end this special status. There were multiple proposals about its future including merging the territory with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, dividing it between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan or making it a new province.[21] Ultimately the decision was taken in 2018 to merge FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through constitutional amendment.

This merger has triggered a series of complex challenges, reshaping the socio-political landscape and exacerbating existing tensions within the region.

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[20] Aisha Younus, Tasawar Hussain, and Shehryar Khan, "Understanding the Revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan since FATA's Merger," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 5 (2023): 768-796.
[21] Aisha Younus, Tasawar Hussain, and Shehryar Khan, "Understanding the Revival of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan since FATA's Merger," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 5 (2023): 768-796.

Firstly, the merger has elicited opposition from the Afghan government, which views the move as a challenge to its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The Afghan Taliban, too, have expressed reservations, citing territorial claims and historical grievances. This opposition from Afghan quarters has added a layer of complexity to the security situation in the NMDs, as it fuels cross-border tensions and complicates efforts to establish durable peace and stability generally.

Moreover, nationalist elements within Pakistan have also voiced criticism of the merger, viewing it as a unilateral decision imposed on the tribal areas without due consideration for their cultural and ethnic identities. The opposition to the merger reflects deep-seated grievances and identity-based concerns that continue to shape the security dynamics of the NMDs, complicating efforts to forge consensus and unity among diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Merger has had significant implications for the governance structure of the NMDs, disrupting traditional administrative norms and social hierarchies embedded in the previous governance model. While the previous governance model was rooted in local customs and traditions, the merger has introduced new administrative frameworks and governance structures, triggering resistance from conservative elements within the society. This resistance reflects broader anxieties about cultural preservation and identity erosion in the face of state-led modernization efforts, highlighting the complex interplay between state policy and societal norms in shaping the security landscape of the NMDs.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have reshaped the security dynamics of NMDs, fuelling cross-border tensions, internal dissent, and identity-based grievances. Addressing these challenges will require a holistic approach that acknowledges the region's complex history, cultural diversity, and socio-political dynamics. By fostering

inclusive governance, promoting dialogue and reconciliation, and addressing underlying grievances, Pakistan can work towards a more stable and secure future for the residents of the NMDs. The return of refugees to NMDs in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has unleashed a myriad of complexities, reshaped the security landscape and exacerbated existing tensions within the region. While the repatriation of refugees has been hailed as a positive step towards addressing humanitarian concerns and fostering reconciliation, it has also engendered new challenges and frictions, both domestically and internationally.

13. Return/Repatriation of Refugees

Pakistan decided to return the refugees from anywhere, back to their states in 2023. In 2023 Pakistan decided to repatriate the refugees back to their homeland. For establishing security, maintaining law and order, ending smuggling and protecting economic interests of the local population, the return of refugees has been considered as a positive step. It has also engendered new challenges and frictions, both domestically and internationally.

Firstly, the return of refugees has strained relations with the Afghan government, which perceives the influx of returnees as a reaction to its perceived lack of cooperation in countering extremism and terrorism. This perception has further strained the already fragile bilateral relations, fuelling cross-border tensions and complicating efforts to establish trust and cooperation between the two countries.

Moreover, the return of refugees has had profound implications for the local population of the NMDs, many of whom share deep historical, cultural, and tribal ties with the returnees. For centuries, these communities have coexisted and

intermingled, sharing common customs, traditions, and social bonds.[22] The return of refugees, has reignited these connections, revitalizing cultural exchanges and fostering a sense of solidarity and kinship among diverse ethnic and tribal groups.

Additionally, the return of refugees has posed significant economic challenges for the NMDs, as the businesses and enterprises established by returnees were often a vital source of employment and economic activity. Many returnees had invested in local businesses, creating livelihood opportunities for both themselves and the local population. However, the sudden influx of returnees has disrupted these economic networks, leading to job losses, reduced income opportunities, and heightened competition for limited resources. This economic crisis has disturbed existing socio-economic realities and heightened tensions within the region, as communities struggle to adapt to changing realities and navigate uncertain futures.

14. Conclusion

US withdrawal from Afghanistan mirrors the events that transpired in 2001 when they invaded the country in the first place. Both the haphazard invasion and the hasty withdrawal two decades later were clearly motivated by political interests and policy impulses rather than calculated strategic decisions. It is perhaps owing to this lack of vision and forethought that the US misadventures adversely affected the geo-political and socio-economic fabric of the region. Pakistan's NMDs that at one point were on the frontline of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and later US-led war on terror, faced the brunt of incursions by two superpowers that lasted for

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[22] Ibraheem Bahiss, "Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability," *International Crisis Group*, November 13, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistans-mass-deportation-afghans-poses-risks-regional-stability.

nearly half a century. Viewed in this light, the plight of NMDs is not only understandable but also deserving of global empathy.

Additionally, US withdrawal was accompanied by a decisive takeover by the Taliban who had been sidelined for more than two decades. The vacuum created by US' hasty withdrawal and Taliban's swift return to power has compounded the problems for NMDs that yet again find itself on the frontline of this decades old tussle for power in the region. This historical context is necessary to understand the complexity and fragility of the geo-political and socio-economic realities of the NMDs and its local population. The State of Pakistan along with all other concerned entities including other states and civil societies must acknowledge these realities and find viable options and pathways for the future of this wounded region.