

The United States Geo-Political Imperatives in Afghanistan (2001-2020)

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Abstract: *Global players have national interests and their foreign policy revolves around energy security, strategic economic interests and how to access mineral and energy reserves. Afghanistan strategic location provides access and proximity to the West Asia, the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia but peace and stability inside Afghanistan is a question of the day. Since 9/11 (2001) the United States engagement in Afghanistan was to defeat, disrupt and dismantle Al-Qaeda and Taliban. The two decades of the US engagement has not served the stated policy parameters and despite the costs the US wants to prolong its presence for serving the national interests. So the underlying policy lines are essential to be investigated hence the paper theme is what are the Geo-political imperatives of the United States in Afghanistan. Recently, the US- Taliban peace agreements have been concluded whereby the two sides agreed that all foreign forces would have to leave Afghanistan within a stipulated period of time whereas the US will have to withdraw from its military bases leaving control to the interim government. A ceasefire will come into effect only after withdrawal of foreign forces has begun. The United States have invested more than \$ 1 trillion in Afghanistan during the last more than nineteen years and has lost more than four thousand lives with thousands having been wounded. Washington would like to ensure that Afghanistan remains stable and that it does not become a safe haven for anti-US militants. The US wants an access to the natural resources of Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics and to contain China. These realities of the situation are making Afghanistan a very important determinant of the US foreign policy.*

Key Words: Foreign Policy, National Interests, Peace, Stability, Natural Resources.

Introduction

The American war in Afghanistan based on toppling Taliban and dismantling Al-Qaeda started immediately after 9/11 incident.¹ The US goal was to degrade the military capabilities of Taliban and building Afghan Army and Local Security Forces for controlling extremists and denying them any future sanctuary in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, international intervention since 2001 was driven by two factors; firstly the US wanted to flourish its strategic power with help of military force and secondly United Nations efforts emphasized for establishing less violent world.² George W Bush explaining the US short term policy contours in Afghanistan with Operation Enduring Freedom said that the US had identified the ‘enemy (as) a radical network of terrorists and every government that supported them ’and emphasized that their war on terror began with al-Qaeda, but it did not end there. It would not end until every terrorist group of global reach had been found, stopped and defeated”.³ The US military accentuated on counter-terrorism for initial couple of years and spent resources for dismantling Taliban.⁴

The contours of US engagement policy in Afghanistan have been described differently by various military officers and diplomats. Brig. Ghazanfar, former Director ISI, was of the view that US wanted War on Terror for global peace; to weaken Al-Qaeda by dismantling, disrupting and destroying its infrastructure and to destroy Al-Qaeda’s alleged safe-haven inside Pakistan.⁵ The US interest was to remove al-Qaeda and its accomplices and to give sufficient injuries to al-Qaeda.⁶ To Mohmand, this engagement was mainly that US wanted to have military presence in Afghanistan.⁷ Brig. Mahmud Shah observed that US engagement comprised political and economic aspects as well to build its institutions, to stabilize the society, to enable it’s government to run the State as per rule of law, to make it a financially viable, to liberate the people of Afghanistan from an authoritative regime of Taliban and War Lords to replace it with a democratic government.⁸

The US engagement policy in Afghanistan revolves around myriad factors as neutralization of the Afghan Taliban threat by military means, training and arming the Afghan National Army and the Police, strengthen the capacity of the Kabul government to govern effectively and help in economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the US is seeking global support for her policy in Afghanistan, economic and technological support for Afghanistan and the management of border related issues and spillover of militancy with Pakistan.⁹

For the first seven years of the Afghan war, George W. Bush followed his one-dimensional neo-con policy in Afghanistan. There were two main objectives, firstly, to chastise Taliban for not only their affiliation with Al-Qaeda but also for their refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden to the US, secondly, to raze Taliban regime for their complicity.¹⁰

Inside Afghanistan there was no national consensus for this intervention. Second, the U.S/NATO strategy in Afghanistan was that while through a high tech war they would topple the government of Taliban, the dirty work on the ground would be done by the forces of Northern Alliance, mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks. For the same reason, politically only elements belonging to the Northern Alliance or strongly opposed to the Taliban were co-opted by the U.S/NATO. The neutral Pashtuns who were not opposed to the Taliban but were not pro-Taliban either were sidelined in the new dispensation.

Resultantly four things happened. First, the forces of Northern Alliance effective in the Tajik-Uzbek-Hazarajat areas, turned out to be of no use in Pashtun areas—the hub of the Taliban. They simply could not fight with the Taliban on Pashtun ground. Eventually, while the elements belonging to Northern Alliance came to fill positions in the new dispensation or get top posts in the security services, it mostly fell to the lot of the U.S/NATO forces to do the fighting on the ground. Second, the Bonn Accord about the establishment of a new democratic order in Afghanistan acquired little ownership among the majority Pashtun ethnic group in Afghanistan. As a result, its political support base inside Afghanistan remained very narrow. Third, the Taliban who had just melted into the Pashtun areas in the face of a U.S/NATO assault regrouped and started giving tough resistance to the U.S/NATO forces in these areas. Fourth, in this situation, a legitimate international military intervention sanctioned by the UN came to be seen as a purely foreign occupation by a large number of Afghans since mostly it was a war not between Afghans but between the Afghans and the U.S/NATO forces. The building of the Afghan National Army to fight the Taliban against this background became extremely difficult. That difficulty persists to this day.

Accumulatively, the three challenges of reconstruction, reconciliation and restoration of peace and stability could not be addressed timely. These challenges remain to haunt Afghanistan with no clear signs of solution.

Regardless of speculation at the time of US intervention in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, today, Washington's main interest is that the Bonn political institutions survive and get strengthened, there is some stability in the country and Afghanistan is able to deny space to extremist militant elements which pose threat of terrorist acts in the West. Within this framework, the US supports reconciliation and some accommodation with Afghan Taliban to help stability in the country.¹¹ It is likely to maintain residual military presence which is also the need of Kabul government given the weaknesses of the Afghan National Army.

Recently, the Trump administration has signed an agreement with the Taliban which will be followed by intra-Afghan dialogue.

The US has geo-political imperatives in Afghanistan. The US objectives in Afghanistan can be seen in the context of competition among different world orders in the Asian regions. The Western-Liberal world order led by the US wants to establish its influence and dominance in Central Asia and limit the Slavic and Sino world orders increasing access in the region.

This research analyzes the United States geo-political imperatives in Afghanistan which necessitates the US presence in Afghanistan in order to contain China, access to natural resources of Central Asian Republics (CARs). These imperatives are then given theoretical framework under 'Offensive Realism' in the later part of this research paper.

The United States Geo-Political Imperatives in Afghanistan

1.1. To Access Natural Resources of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Balochistan

The US invasion of Afghanistan has been connected with underlying contours also by diplomats and defence officials as according to them firstly, the policy was to have a watch over Pakistan nuclear assets, secondly, to contain China, and thirdly to monitor Central Asian Republics.¹² The US intends to gain a firm foothold in the region for CARs. It intends to check the advancing influence of China in the region. It aims to build up India in Afghanistan for the same objectives. It intends to keep Pakistan away from Afghanistan being an ally of China.¹³ to have access to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) in order to exploit oil and gas resources of Caspian Sea, to encircle China based on China Containment Policy; to intimidate Iran into submission; to retain military bases in Afghanistan from where Pakistan's nuclear proliferation could be observed and checked,¹⁴ to involve the regional countries, as Pakistan was involved to

provide logistic support and assisted US with bases inside Pakistan and to instigate neighboring countries to destabilize Pakistan.¹⁵

Azam Khan, opined that the under lying policy of US engagement and America's main motives were Central Asia-focussed oil and gas-led Great Game. The Afghan war was a clear manifestation of America's concern over the growing influence of China in the Central Asian Republics. The security of East Asia is shifted, US is still hegemon, is also being gradually balanced by the rapid rise of China which is using its phenomenal economic, political and military influence as a major factor of regional and global stability.¹⁶

The major worry for the US currently is the rapid growing resurgence of Islam, particularly the militant extremist ideology which they preach. As a leader of the western world, the US perceives this as grave threat to the western culture and belief leading to a clash of civilizations. We can see what is happening presently in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria etc. The US is looking for excuses to attack these countries and bring about a regime change of its liking.¹⁷

By contemplating these contours of the US engagement in Afghanistan, it is clear that under lying policy options were catered for access to oil and gas rich region. Recently, global players have their national interests and then foreign policy revolve around energy security and strategic economic interests. Their focus remains on how to access strategic minerals and energy resources. The United States interests in Afghanistan are linked to the same very parameters as to secure trade, energy access and dominance from Central Asia to India and allow Indian access to the Central Asian energy market. It focuses to prevent the emergence of an Islamic super state connecting between Pakistan and Central Asia.¹⁸

The US has core objectives in Central Asia stretched from undermining terrorism and Islamic extremism strengthening regional economies, to have access to energy resources. Furthermore, the US wants autonomy of the region by preventing Moscow and Beijing to have dominancy over the region. The Central Asian Republics abound in natural resources as CARs have grown their economies steadily by using returns from their natural resources. Their increasing GDP growth rate is an indicator of it. Amongst CARs, Turkmenistan with a GDP growth rate of 9.9 % is at number 4 while Tajikistan with a GDP growth of 6 % is at number 46 in world ranking. Oil

and gas reserves of CARs are 3rd largest in the world. Details of the oil and gas production in 2011 are as under¹⁹:-

| Country | Oil Reserve Ranking | Oil Production (bbl/day) | Gas Reserve Ranking | Gas Production (m3) |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Kazakhstan | 11 | 30,000,000,000 | 14 | 2,407,000,000,000 |
| Turkmenistan | 44 | 600,000,000 | 6 | 7,504,000,000,000 |
| Uzbekistan | 47 | 594,000,000 | 19 | 1,841,000,000,000 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 81 | 40,000,000 | 90 | 5,663,000,000 |
| Tajikistan | 88 | 12,000,000 | 91 | 5,663,000,000 |

Source: CIA World Fact Book 2014.

Besides oil and gas, CARs are also enriched with mineral reserves. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan produce 20% of the world's uranium ore.²⁰ CARs also have large reserves of coal. Kyrgyzstan has eight largest goldmines in the world and Tajikistan has large prospect for export of aluminum. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the largest producers of hydroelectricity. Their estimated potential is 40,000 MW and 26,000 MW respectively. CARs are also strong in agriculture sector. Their two chief crops are Wheat and Cotton. Besides these two main crops, CARs also produce a variety of foodstuffs which are barley, corn, grapes, potatoes, rice, sugar beets, pears, apples, dates and melons etc.

CARs have an immense import and export potential because of oil, gas, agriculture sector and mineral resources. Details of their imports and exports are given below:-

| Country | Import Ranking | Imports | Export Ranking | Exports |
|--------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Kazakhstan | 55 | \$ 52,030,000,000 | 43 | \$ 87,230,000,000 |
| Turkmenistan | 92 | \$ 12,480,000,000 | 75 | \$ 17,130,000,000 |
| Uzbekistan | 90 | \$ 12,640,000,000 | 80 | \$ 14,910,000,000 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 127 | \$ 5,082,000,000 | 143 | \$ 1,881,000,000 |
| Tajikistan | 138 | \$ 4,121,000,000 | 154 | \$ 1,163,000,000 |

Source: CIA World Fact Book 2014.

Currently, the very manifestation of regime changing UN resolution and direct, indirect attack on those countries having rich deposits of energy and mineral is indication that international players can do everything to occupy these reserves. Its best example is Balochistan where USA, China, Russia, India and Afghanistan are engrossed to grab its gold, gas and copper. Even the west is grappling to penetrate its tentacles to these reserves directly without taking Pakistan as an important player in this regard. Balochistan consists of three deep sea ports and capable to generate revenue from transit trade, exploration, extraction and untapped resources exploitation. In 2007, US \$ 100 billion worth reserves of copper and gold were explored in Saindak and Recodik in Chaghai district.

Escobar holds the view that Washington has its own strategy where it takes Gwadar as the new Dubai whereby China will take it as port as well as a base in order to pass gas through long pipeline to China.²¹ Gwadar and Makran deep seaports are geographically vital linkages between South Asia, Central Asia and the Gulf. In this background Iran and India are uncomfortable because Gwadar Port would take Indian built Chabahar port to the background. Gwadar Port facilitates by providing the cheapest and shortest route for CARs in order to channel transit trade. As far as sponsor group in Afghanistan are contemplated, the British intelligence is providing secret support to Balochistan separatists, ten British MPs were involved in a closed door session Senate Committee on defence for British covert service to Baloch separatists in Iran and Southern Afghanistan has been reported.²² Afghanistan is creating problems inside Pakistan by allegedly supporting Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) through global and regional intelligent agencies.

The US is deeply interested and indulged in Balochistan in order to establish an independent Balochistan for having foothold inside Pakistan and above all in the region so that to have access to natural resources, making strategic naval base, to contain Iran, Russia and China. Furthermore, to strengthen economy through Gwadar, Chabahar and Makran Ports (if Balochistan-Sistan is merged) by diminishing defence expenditure.²³

1.2. To Contain China

What determines US foreign policies concerning Asia or South East Asia is China. The US is apprehensive about Chinese enhanced leverage in Afghanistan, CARs and Pakistan as well as in African and European markets, the Chinese increased terms with Russia. China is an important country in the region and could play an important role in the development of Afghanistan. US has realized this and in the recent meeting between Afghan Taliban and Afghan Government beside Pakistan China and US delegates were also present.²⁴

The US long term strategic and economic plans are threatened by China's military and economic rise in the region. The main objective of US pivot to South East Asia is containment of China which is the rising power in the region and a prospective world power in times to come. The more nightmarish for Pentagon is the Russia-China naval exercise in Yellow Sea between the Korean Peninsula and East Coast of China.²⁵ Consequently the US has established a new military intelligence agency the Defence Clandestine Service (DCS) for enhancing its leverage in the region.²⁶ Furthermore, to enable the prospect of weakening China through destabilising her Xinxiang region.²⁷ The objective being to counter China by encircling her through local client states and attempt to build India as a counter weight.²⁸ The US wants to maintain a stable balance of power in Asia in the light of China's growing power in the region. It is also to reassure the US allies that their concerns will be taken into account.²⁹

It ensures its presence in Afghanistan which serves as a springboard to reach the mineral rich Central Asian Republics. It has made India strategic partner because of the influence it has in Afghanistan. It does not want India-Pakistan to be friendly due to China factor and intends to build up India as an anti-China power. It intends to make use of Afghanistan's enmity for Pakistan. But this US policy is doomed to fail on account of Pakistan's geo-strategic advantage in the region. As the Pak- China Economic Corridor becomes functional Afghanistan will have to improve its relations with Pakistan out of sheer necessity.³⁰ The US wants to contain China's expanding influence in Asia. It does not want China to build the "Economic Corridor" through Pakistan which will give access to the Chinese to Gwadar Port and hence to the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the oil rich Gulf States.

The main aspects of the policy is to build up India both economically and as a military power to oppose China and Japan, on the one side and economically contain China in the region. US has re-evaluated its policy under the environments where Soviet Union is no longer a major threat to US but rising power of China in South East Asia could challenge US interests. Although this situation is changing with President Putin's pro-active policy in the Middle East, yet the threat from China still exists.³¹ Despite its engagement in the Pacific the US will abandon Afghanistan. However it has to do so under international compulsions and will encourage India to fill the vacuum.³²

2. Theoretical Framework

Offensive realism is the sub-division of neo-realism theory expounded by John J. Mearshiemer in the tragedy of great power politics, where he stated that international system is anarchic where states always coaxed to maximize their relative powers at the cost of other states. This theory is descriptive because it dealt with past events as well as prescriptive as it head on future related foreign policy options. In the comity of nations, the maximization of power is the only way possible to escape state failure, consequently it is the primary aim of any state. Mearsheimer, (2001), believes that becoming global hegemon is near impossible so that great power would always wrestle for power. Brandon, (2009), has described the theory as below:

THREE TENETS OF OFFENSIVE REALISM

1. Goal is to maximize share of world power.
2. Ultimate aim is to become the hegemon.
3. Since global hegemony is impossible, the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition.

For power maximization states are ready to offense.³³ The United States is a regional hegemon according to Mearshiemer, she is trying to become global hegemon which is impossible³⁴ so there is perpetual struggle for power. In this pursuit of power struggle and to become a global hegemon which cannot be short of offensive mode as war, turmoil, blood shedding and civilian casualties. According to Mearshiemer the regional hegemon is not oblivion of the aspiring hegemon of other regions and keep watch on them. As buck passing strategy, which signifies that regional hegemon remained sidelined and let the local powers to observe the

aspiring hegemon and when the need arises then militarily invades the region in order to curb the peer competitors. There is no satiation in power struggle.

This research tried to explain the US intervention in Afghanistan in the context of Offensive Realism. The US invasion is fulfilling the three major tenets of Offensive Realism:

The US invasion of Afghanistan gives her:

1. Power maximization by Military operations in Afghanistan and her rehabilitation later on and status of a regional hegemon in South Asian and Central Asian regions.
2. More share in the World Power cake.
3. Since global hegemony is impossible, it's better to be a hegemon in more regions for a leading world power

The US invaded Afghanistan after 9/11 in order to use pre-emptive power mode, to use force before imminent threat happened to the national interests.³⁵ The US is militarily engaged in a minor state, Afghanistan. The 9/11 was pre-text for the US to invade Afghanistan, because Afghanistan was not directly connected to that incident. The contours of US military engagement policy was to defeat, disrupt and dismantle Al-Qaeda. The operational mode of policy remained in constant state of flux, encircled not only Al-Qaeda but also Taliban in its ambit. Then Obama strategy emphasized on reinvigoration of military engagement but simultaneously came to the reconciliation and talks with the Taliban. It seems that the Afghan war is now all about American politics. Obama could have certainly made the peace move two years ago. He could have averted the violence, bloodshed and displacement in Afghanistan produced by the surge, as well as the huge cost involved in the exercise. The strategy of reconciliation has been with no fruitful outcome so the US is to exit from Afghanistan, leaving behind nine military bases.³⁶ NATO will remain in Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif in order to serve the US underlying objectives, to control Iran and China from those bases. The US is also on alarm from Russia and China as stake holders in Afghanistan. As the US has realized this threat and perhaps this can be one of the reasons for its draw down from Afghanistan soil and to be shifted towards Asia Pacific to have access to Thailand, China, Malaysia and Singapore. If contemplated about the remaining troops, then majority of the troops will be of France and UK who are closest ally of US. Australia and Canadian are in lower number now. In Kabul there will be a self-protected system so that in emergency they could protect themselves by using air and will have fortress or cottage like dwellings.³⁷

By analyzing the US engagement in Afghanistan's turmoil, it is stretched to the John Mearshiemer's Theory of Offensive Realism from the very nature of offense being inflicted by the US in order to maximize her power, to reach the status of global hegemon. The minor state Afghanistan has been destabilized in security and political aspects. Afghanistan's security situation, which has been upset by the US military engagement for more than one reason, by rising insurgency, weak central control, corruption, poor law and order situation and hatred and acrimony against the foreign occupation. No doubt, Afghanistan as a minor state has no concern with hegemon status or to maximize power, the more it seeks is to focus on its Boundary defense, refugees issue and how to exploit the natural resources. The US according to Mearshiemer is in struggle to become global hegemon and that is impossible because geography and water are main obstacles in this regard. The US in the past has remained offshore balancer in Europe and North East Asia by deploying troops there and developed logistical infrastructure to ensure the US bases there.³⁸ The US is using buck passing and offshore balancer strategies against China, Russia, and Iran on Afghanistan ground. The US engagement in the region is not only Afghan centric but also focuses on South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia. In fact, after exit strategy from Afghanistan, the US pivot will be in East Asia – Pacific to contain China. The US also seeks Pakistan – India amity while building up India against China. In Central Asia, the US seeks to increase its leverage while blocking Russia and China.

The US does not want China to reap the benefits of economic and political stability of the region when it did not invest in any endeavor or made any contribution to peace making.

If an agreement emerges on an interim government of which the Taliban are a part, then perhaps there would be cause for optimism. And whether that arrangement would be allowed to run its course and whether all parties would play by the rules are important questions.

If an environment is created to facilitate the creation and launching of a multi-ethnic interim government, an important milestone would have been crossed.

The US will have to play hard ball in making this happen—by pressuring the Kabul government to go along with such an arrangement. The interim government would perhaps accept the deployment of a small US counterinsurgency force to take care of any splinter group or Daesh making inroads into the security structures of the transitional government. The US wants

presence in order to contain China leverage both in Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics for strategic purposes.

Conclusion:

The US engagement in Afghanistan is a long war that served no purpose. American media is with the feeling that Afghanistan invasion was an irrational decision because in spite of huge expenditure to economy there is no apparent omen of victory. Washington concedes that US invasion has just intensified extremism, militancy and Taliban's momentum in this region. America is the ultimate sufferer in the shape of lives, money and civil liberties. It has tarnished our (Washington) promise to stand for dignity and grace of human.

But was it an honest mistake? Did President Bush and Vice President Cheney declare war because they genuinely believed it was the best way to guarantee the safety of American people? Or did they do it in a premeditated attempt to seize greater political and economic power? These are questions that history will answer. For now, at least, one thing is clear. The US invaded Afghanistan on the pretext of 9/11 by waging an unrelated "war on terror" which is now generally considered as the 'wrong war.' No other nation has done greater damage to its own global prestige and credibility than the US because of its misdirected policies and misplaced priorities. The offenses of the US have perturbed the security of Afghanistan with uprising in insurgency, Taliban and warlords are fighting with their own agendas in order to strengthen their power holds.

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