

President Trump’s Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, the Taliban have overwhelmingly grown in influence and their stature is being well recognized; exerting more pressure on Washington’s future orientation in Afghanistan. Amidst the backdrop of transitions taking place in Afghanistan’s political landscape, the foreseeable future has, ostensibly, rekindled the prospects of peace. Although peace process is gradually moving further, yet both sides are reluctant to compromise on each others’ terms. Since the assumption of power, President Trump’s approach to Afghanistan has been oscillating in consulting varying options to bring the Taliban to their terms rather to indulge, in true spirits, in a widely acknowledged political framework for peace. These chosen policy actions posit more challenges and less opportunities for peace in war-ridden Afghanistan. The emergent scenario requires a comprehensive, well-crafted and compromising structure to be devised, featured with inclusiveness of all stakes and issues involved in this prolonged conflict. Evaluating and analyzing President Trump’s strategic policy toward Afghanistan, this paper aims to explore the manifesting failures and grey areas of Trump’s Afghan strategy and also attempts to provide strategic foresight while considering the framework of endgame in Afghanistan.

Key Words: **Afghanistan, Taliban, Trump, Exit Strategy, Negotiated Settlement.**

Introduction

Afghanistan remains a country of strategic significance owing to geographical location as a gateway to resource-rich Central Asian landmass and Europe. Looking into the ebbs of the history, it reveals that Afghanistan has been embroiled in the quagmire of Great Power intrigues and remained contested as an undefeated land on the battlefield. In its heydays, after defeat of British Empire, later the Soviets decade of war fatigue, and now the US troops’ withdrawal is likely to happen physically. Conquering Afghanistan has remained something of a blind man’s dream but in each of the last three cases over the decades, causes differed. The resurgence of Taliban in post 9/11 and the military defeat of the US in Afghanistan accounts as one of the eye-opening aspects of contemporary history. Since the onset of war on terror in Afghanistan, the order Washington wanted to establish and impose over Afghanistan couldn’t be sustained. Following the Republican regime taking over Washington, it was a key challenge for

President Trump to manage this conflict and prevent Washington from an embarrassing endgame. After six months of intense contemplations and deliberations, he announced his much-awaited strategy for Afghanistan in August 2017. This renewed strategy was again, more or less, a pursuance of his predecessor's strategic agenda of prioritizing military presence resorting to a proposed political framework. Declaring his strategy for Afghanistan, in his August 2017 speech, "President Trump referred to a 'political settlement' as an outcome of an 'effective military effort,' but did not elaborate on what U.S. goals or conditions might be as part of this putative political process." Simulating the predecessors' policy of an extended military engagement, the US immediately witnessed a series of developments antithetical to its strategic interests in Afghanistan. This manifested in a climaxed environment of insurgency and exacerbating security situation to perpetual failure of Afghan National Security Forces to fulfil their designated goals. Marking this approach as flawed and starkly ineffective, President Trump agreed to enter into direct negotiations with the Taliban. With this paradigm shift, hopes were revitalized to achieve a meaningful outcome.

After 7 years of stalemate, US-Taliban preferred a negotiated endgame in Afghanistan. Thus far, progress has been gradually making way to consummate a successful task. However, the conditions which Washington aims to bargain with the Taliban as well as some aspects of seemingly progressive negotiations are rather murky and presage a chaotic future of Afghanistan. The ongoing political engagement with the Taliban although appearing decisive yet is tricky in their background, and would create a host of challenges that would be unfolded in post-withdrawal scenario. Even the conditional commitment of the Taliban ensuring to block the metastasizing of Al-Qaeda and the (IS) Islamic State raise some reservations.

How an armed ethnic group would confront these trans-national terrorist outfits and, meanwhile, face a plethora of internal economic and political challenges when it comes to assuming a share in post-conflict governance structures? And would the US support the post-conflict regime to fight against Al-Qaeda and the IS or would the Taliban acknowledge the US-led transnational counter-terrorism agenda? In the absence of any clear guidelines over a number of issues, ranging from the fears of intra-state ethnic rife and narcotics proliferation to a changing posture of Taliban, with the assumption of power that would surface in the aftermath of this endgame, hinges on how Trump administration manages this imbroglio.

According to Aaron O. Connel (2019), "A quick review of the president's changing Afghanistan policies reveals very little coherence and more than a few contradictions and confabulations." The intermittent variations initiating from an extended military engagement declaration to a conditional and tentative announcement of withdrawal plan muffled many aspects. As Cordesman (2018) argues: "The Trump administration largely ignored the critical civil dimension of

President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

the war and the need to give Afghanistan effective political and economic support."

As war continues, every new day adds to the miseries of the already wretched lives of Afghans. Although, the internal dynamics of Afghanistan are mostly responsible for this fiasco yet greater onus lies on Washington that has been providing justifications for their presence despite repeated failures. At present, the National Unity Government functions completely at the behest of Washington, it has become dysfunctional in various areas of governance and the writ of the government seems very fragile. Corruption is widespread, draining bulk of aid resources earmarked for reconstruction and rehabilitation. The security situation has deteriorated to such an extent that even Capital Kabul is unsafe from the vicious offensives of insurgent groups. Moreover, the complex interplay of various regional and extra-regional actors has complicated the scenario. Any further hawkishness or lack of pragmatism by President Trump could accelerate Taliban's acts of exploits on the ground and make Washington unable to deal with the situation.

Thus far, the peace process has been smoothly progressing and creeping ahead into consecutive phases led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for negotiation. However, the Taliban's stubborn mantra to withdraw the coalition troops seems unchanging which could likely land the peace talks into a deadlock. On the Taliban's side, logically strong justifications strengthening their unwavering resolve. They are not only confident militarily but their shrewd diplomacy has also shocked the international circles. Thus, they have the advantage for ultimate say to set conditions for an endgame rather bowing down to a solely US-fashioned arrangement for terminating the conflict. The US must not only acknowledge the efficacy of politically negotiable means of their strategy but persuade all friendly stake-holders to participate in a constructive political engagement.

In a nutshell, Trump's decision to stay with an extended military capacity was based on false strategic assumptions. If the troops' size are cut, which is another option under deliberation, this is relatively a more dangerous option. Training and assistance of Afghan National Security Forces has already been an inefficacious programme with greater numerical assistance. Resultantly, US would have to rely on aerial operations that would outrage the Taliban to carry-out more offensive operations on the ground in this war of attrition. The need of the hour is that Washington, on its part, must act with prudence and flexibility if it really wants a suitable ending. The US needs to dispel these fears that a total withdrawal plan could replicate the case of Vietnam and undermine the core structure of American strategic position in the world. If Washington's intransigence persists, it could result in more bloodshed and destruction on all sides.

A glimpse over trump's era and the US Afghan strategy

The 2016 was a crucial year for the world politics since elections in the heartland of superpower America were about to happen. These elections were not only important for the US people but also to the entire world, particularly for some of the major hotspots, including Afghanistan. Experts and scholars were speculating a major paradigm shift in the US approach to the world if Donald Trump, a Republican's candidate, defeated the former secretary of the state, Hillary Clinton, in the polls. Specifically on the Afghan frontier, Trump's agenda was contrary to successive regimes. This was being manifested in a number of Trump's tweets and public statements during the presidential electoral campaign which was quite unorthodox in his public dispositions. In 2012, Trump severely criticised President Obama's policy in Afghanistan and exhorted him to withdraw troops. He blatantly marked this policy of continued presence unfavourable and against the American interests. In March 2013, he tweeted that the US "should leave Afghanistan immediately." Adding to it, he said, "No more wasted lives". "If we have to go back in, we go in hard & quick. Rebuild the US first."

In the same year, he reappeared on the twitter to quote that "We have wasted an enormous amount of blood and treasure in Afghanistan. Their government has zero appreciation. Let's get out." At that time, the security situation in Afghanistan was precarious. A US government report on 1st February 2017 disclosed that "losses of Afghan security forces have climbed by 35 percent in 2016 compared with the previous year." The Taliban were continuously spreading their influence over vast swathes of Afghan territory. Kabul government was completely dependent upon Washington's potential assistance in military, political and financial aspects.

While assuming presidential power, it took President Donald Trump six months to contemplate upon devising a strategy for Afghanistan since he was sworn in the presidency on 20 January 2017. "When he finally announced a new Afghanistan policy in front of US troops at Fort Myer, Virginia in August 2017, he began by blaming his predecessor, who had dealt him 'a bad and very complex hand' by spending 'too much time, energy, money, and most importantly lives, trying to rebuild countries in our own image'." He completely disregarded his predecessors plan and branded it as "micro-mismanagement". It was speculated that the new US strategy would be in congruent with the statements and tweets Donald Trump provided over the years. However, Trump's announcement of Afghan strategy shockingly appeared as completely antithetical to his personal statements during the presidential campaign rhetoric. Citing the same logics as his predecessor, he undermined the option of a hasty withdrawal forecasting unpredictable consequences. Spending time on contemplation for crafting a way out for Afghanistan, it was clear that Donald Trump had been briefed and consulted a lot. Well, the people surrounding Trump succeeded to inculcate fears in him that any impulsive action to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan could deal a blow to Washington's strategic interests in Afghanistan in terms of paving

President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

the way for Al-Qaeda and the (IS-K) (an offshoot of ISIS in Afghanistan) to fill the void. Adhering to his close aides' advice, Trump also considered Pakistan responsible for the Taliban's resurgence and accused Islamabad of providing safe havens to terrorists. Krishna dev Calamur (2017) notes that President Trump said:

"He studied Afghanistan in great detail, and that after Friday's meeting with his national-security team at Camp David, Maryland, he arrived at three conclusions about US interests there: First, our nation must seek an honourable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made; second, the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable ... third, and finally, I concluded that the security threats we face in Afghanistan and the broader region are immense."

Alizada (2018) notes that "although it did not rule out diplomatic and political endeavours, Trump's strategy primarily focused on military power, including a troop surge, modernizing the Afghan air force, and intensifying drone attacks to achieve its objectives." What Trump opted after much deliberation had wider repercussions not only for the future of Afghanistan but also for the region. "Tested on its one year of implementation and realities on the ground, the Trump administration's South Asia strategy has revealed its inability to deliver in Afghanistan."

The saga of civilian death toll

First and foremost, as Connel (2019) comments that "[T]he renewed strategy relaxed the restrictions on airpower that Obama had put in place to limit Afghan civilian casualties and vowed to use all instruments of national power to create the conditions for a political process to achieve a lasting peace." The year 2018 witnessed an exorbitant increase, around 43 per cent, in aerial strikes as compared to 2017. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report (2018), "from January to September 2018, an estimated 2,798 civilians have killed and 5,252 others injured in attacks across the country." A number of suicide and non-suicide attacks were conducted in key places, including shrines, government infrastructure and offices of aid groups. More than half of the civilian casualties were caused by the Afghan Air Force. International forces were blamed for 45 percent of the casualties from aerial attacks. For the first time, "Nangarhar surpassed Kabul as the province with the most civilian casualties in the first nine months of 2018, more than double the number recorded during the same period in 2017." The alarming increase in civilian casualties in Nangarhar and some other hotspots was reflection of the afflictions the conflict incurs on Afghan populace.

The Afghan faced grave repercussions due to Trump's selected policy options. The enormous death toll despite a temporary ceasefire in the last year not only antagonized the local Afghans towards US-led coalition forces but also fuelled

support for Taliban. This phenomenon has reinforced the probabilities of Washington's failure not only on the military but also on the political front.

The latter year already witnessed spurt rise in air strikes as compared to 2017. Parallel to this, internal problems in Afghanistan turned from bad to worst. The dilemma of poverty has reached to high level where there seems no immediate solution. The Kabul government is suffering from internal power-sharing squabbles and thus the governance is monopolized by de-facto warlords.

Fledgling Afghan institutions

In the year of 2019, Afghanistan National Unity (ANU) government is completely at the mercy of US annual aid packages and handouts. President Trump's reversal from his past orientations on US policy toward Afghanistan also overlooked his emphasis on Afghanistan's impending governance and internal political issues. Among many, the US military presence in Afghanistan had one of the core strategic emphases that the country must not become a breeding ground for terrorists and insurgents. However, the US remains reluctant to frame any such inclusive arrangements like intelligence sharing and other support mechanisms. Except ensuring success to maintain the client regime in Kabul, the Trump-led US government neither provided any modus operandi for an effective governance model nor seemed interested to empower Afghanistan's paralyzed institutions like his predecessors. The Trump's strategy needed to be anchored in intense US political engagement with Afghan governance issues but that process needed to be tailored according to the aspirations of local political system.

Like failure of Trump's predecessors this was also President Trump that could neither empower the Kabul regime enough to meet sustained challenges nor strengthen its frail institutions. Afghanistan is the 172 least corrupt nation out of 175 countries, according to the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. A think-tank Global Witness (2019) reports: "Corruption deeply undermined the effectiveness of Afghan forces and the legitimacy of the government and is a major obstacle to any realistic path to stability. Corruption risks in Afghanistan hamper humanitarian aid from transferring where it needs to go, and called on the government of Afghanistan, donor agencies and humanitarian agencies to strengthen transparency and accountability in the humanitarian response to ensure fair, rapid and corruption-free humanitarian aid." Thomas, C. (2019) narrates that. in the intervening 17 years, the United States has suffered around 2,400 fatalities in Afghanistan and Congress has appropriated more than \$132 billion for reconstruction there. But this amount has been diverted into corruption and concentrated in the hands of powerful elites. Donald Trump's rhetoric and official commands have never been directed against the institutionalized corruption or incompetency of the Kabul regime. Neither the new strategy has any resolution to restructure Afghan institutions and refashion them to effectively utilize the cumulative assistance from US which was meant to empowering governance apparatus and institutional

President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

capacity. As Danish, J. (2016) states that "Since corruption consistently goes unpunished, Afghans feel betrayed by their leaders – and insurgents have in turn fed off from this widespread sense of disappointment." According to Ali (2018), "The number of Afghan security forces decreased by nearly 11 percent in the past year, the U.S. government's top watchdog on Afghanistan said on Tuesday, an indication of the difficulty Kabul will have in dealing with its precarious security situation." Global Witness (2017) reports that "If President Trump wants to turn Afghanistan around, there needs to be a real change in the way the US and the Afghan governments approach governance issues, putting them on par with military concerns and using levers of support and influence much more effectively."

Rampant insurgency

A well known Afghan political analyst and university professor Abdul Qahar Sarwari said that increasing militancy in Afghanistan clearly speaks of the failure of President Trump's strategy. Erlich, R. (2018) narrates that Insurgency has reached to an uncontrollable degree, every part of Afghanistan has been plagued with the insurgents' nefarious agenda. Making reference to Dr. Hakim Young, a medical doctor originally from Singapore, he said that has seen dramatic changes during his fourteen years of humanitarian work in Afghanistan. "Today, any government building could be attacked by insurgents, even the military and intelligence headquarters in Kabul." Violence is still perpetuating and posing fears and miseries to the lives of Afghans. The vested interests of different insurgent groups and warlords outweigh national loyalties and *disrupt* any peace building efforts in Afghanistan. Felbab-Brown (2018) writes that while "President Trump's decision for the U.S. to stay in the country with a somewhat enlarged military capacity is largely correct, the president's approach contains a critical and fundamental flaw: the down-graded importance of governance in Afghanistan. However, his de-emphasis on Afghan governance and political issues is deeply misguided and could be a fatal flaw in the strategy."

Narco-economy

Narco-economy, as a contributing yet salient factor to the conflict, has been thriving at a staggering pace; expanding and extending its reach to neighbouring countries and beyond. The ubiquitous drug trade is giving insurgents more power and ease to foil any effort that aims to change the status-quo. According to McCoy (2018), "Despite almost continuous combat since the invasion of October 2001 pacification efforts have failed to curtail the Taliban insurgency, largely because the US simply could not control the swelling surplus from the country's heroin trade." In November 2018, "the United Nations reported that the total area used for poppy cultivation in 2018 was 263,000 hectares, the second highest level recorded since monitoring began in 1994." With the establishment of drug labs, methamphetamine, opium and hashish remain

widely popular exported drugs and their production has increased overwhelmingly. The phenomenon of drug trafficking with a spill-over effect continues to posit a serious challenge to the region. Trumps' strategy has neither addressed means to counter drug-trafficking nor vowed to mitigate the drug production in the negotiations. Thus, drug economy is not only fortifying insurgent's network but also providing an impetus to pursue their ambitions. Hence, the efforts to maintain pacific environment inside Afghanistan has failed miserably.

The paradigm shift in Trump's approach to Afghanistan

Before analyzing what changes the Trump administration has incorporated in devising future plan of action in Afghanistan, it is pertinent to consider what drove Trump-led Washington to consider changes in previous policy. First and foremost, the Taliban's posture has grown increasingly offensive as they started to launch offensive within the stronghold of (ANU) Afghanistan Nationa Unity government, Kabul and adjacent districts.

In addition, Trump also followed the precedent of successive regimes in pressurizing Pakistan whom they believe to be strengthening the cross-border Taliban affiliates; the Haqqani's. This strategy has not worked for almost a decade as Pakistan continues to reiterate that it has been doing enough to curb these elements from its soil. Intimidating Pakistan not worked for Washington and therefore, it aimed to leverage Pakistan's seemingly-obvious influence over the Taliban. Apart from this, the rapidly exacerbating security situation, rising suicidal and non-suicidal explosive attacks and undermining confidence of Afghan National Security Forces, followed by a heavy death toll in a series of attacks, has compelled Washington to revisit its approach towards Taliban. Michael Kugelman, a South Asia specialist at the Woodrow Wilson Center (Ali I. & Landay J 11 July 2018), observed that "if there had meaningful progress in Afghanistan, a review would be unlikely." Thus, the failures of Trump's proposed strategy in Afghanistan within a few months has compelled Washington to ponder over seeking a paradigm shift.

In July 2018, the US administration held direct talks with the Taliban after seven years of stalemate, covertly in a hotel in Doha. Hopes were raised that this would lead to a change in the course of action from Washington. In pursuant to this, consecutive rounds of peace talks were held and still continue to be held.

Amid these talks, Donald Trump also made a tentative announcement to withdraw a half of the US troops from Afghanistan within a few months. Thus far, five rounds of talks have smoothly been progressing and have entered into sixth round. The momentum has been established that both sides are keen in moving towards building a consensus. The fifth round of talks although went too long (21 days) yet concluded without any major agreement. The impasse over conditioned withdrawal has dogged both parties. This insinuates that the situation is complex and could not be managed easily in a smooth progression in future. There could be many irritants that would disrupt both parties. Thus, the upcoming negotiations are

President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

going to be tough. Broader political engagement for building a futuristic scenario in Afghanistan would be agreeing upon a number of challenges including the conception of a theocratic state the Taliban want to establish on Afghan soil for insurgent and trans-national terrorist cartels.

Pertinent to mention here is that despite the Afghan Taliban's widening sphere of influence in the country and growing internationalization, the policy of intimidation as a tool to bring down Taliban US officials could derail any efforts towards reconciliation. Alizada (2018) says that Commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, has threatened the Taliban in the words: "[T]hey would be militarily vanquished if they chose not to reconcile." Such statements amid this reconciliation process could derail the momentum. There are more serious challenges to focus upon: devising a joint mechanism to eradicating the remnants of Al-Qaeda and IS-K, to restraining the aggravating insurgency from the country. Likewise, the spill-over effects of narcotics export to the expatriation and rehabilitation of Afghanistan; all these impending challenges in Afghanistan need a well-thought-out and concrete way for state-building. The Trump-led administration has been focusing merely on security-centric issues. This myopic approach is paving the way towards deadlock.

Washington's plan of action and taliban's resurgence

Donald Trump's flawed strategy has many facets to substantiate. Another way of looking at it is the Taliban's expanding profile/influence followed by its ability to launch offensives and occupying vast swathes of land inside Afghanistan. According to a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), reports Chughtai (2019) "as of 31 January 2018, 229 districts were under Afghan government control which is about 56.3 per cent of total Afghan districts." There are various substantial facts collected in this context. As Constable (2018) highlights that "The main conclusions of the report, written and primarily researched by Ashley Jackson, are that the Taliban sets the rules in 'vast swathes' of Afghan territory but is far more concerned with influencing people." The Taliban have meanwhile diversified their revenue streams, as Jones (2018) highlights that it includes, "[D]onations from state supporters, profits from drug trade, taxes on local populations and involvement in commercial businesses like timber and gem trades." Despite strong US military reactions, IS-K (an offshoot of ISIS), as argued by Wojcik (2019), it "maintains footholds in parts of Afghanistan, including Taliban's southern stronghold Helmand and provinces in the north Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pul and Farah in the west." Despite this, the United Nations envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad (18 December 2018), seems hopeful and says that "the prospect of a negotiated end to the war in Afghanistan is closer than it has ever been".

Current overtures and the way forward

It has become more obvious than ever that a military solution to wrap up the decade long conflict in Afghanistan or to kneel down Taliban has become impractical. Washington is also cognizant of this reality. Today's Afghanistan portrays a completely different picture than before. Afghanistan's internal dynamics of power structure has been changed and the troika of power has been shifted in favour of Taliban against whom this war had been waged 17 years ago. Taliban, today, holds their influence over massive swathes of the territory in Afghanistan, able to launch attack in every corner within the country and militarily confident enough to influence any future course of action which aims to draw a post-conflict scenario in Afghanistan. Their stubbornness has, thus, grown to such an extent that they are unwilling to negotiate any peace deal that neglect their core demands. As Olson (2018) argues that with Taliban's resurrection in Afghanistan, military applications as instruments of capitulation have become obsolete. Majority believe that the conflict in Afghanistan can end only through a political settlement. Even there is a broader consensus among the regional stakes and extra-regional actors that politically negotiated option is the only viable solution to peace in Afghanistan. A robust settlement between US and the Taliban followed by an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process incorporating all warring factions/groups of Afghanistan is being deemed as the ideal resort. On the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York with Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi (Express 2018) reiterated the Islamabad's support for a political solution to the Afghan war. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov opined the same in his opening remarks at the launch of talks in Moscow. As Olson (Chaudhry, 2018) argues that "the problems of Afghanistan can be solved solely by political means through the achievement of a national consensus with participation of all warring parties." On the eve of the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral Foreign Ministers meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (TOLO News, 2017) said that finding a political solution to the war in Afghanistan is one of the main goals of his country in the next year. The US also recognizes this position yet remains reluctant to offer political dispensation to Taliban. As Brown (2018) advises: "However, Washington needs to be clear that it will carefully and diligently monitor Afghan progress. It also needs to be explicit and clear to the Afghan government and politicians that U.S. support is not an open-ended *carte blanche*, but rather dependent on significant improvements in Afghan governance and political processes, not just military and economic contributions as President Trump emphasized." The consensus among the key stakeholders is explicit and it seems likely that the US wants to negotiate the peace deal but is reluctant to leave a vacuum behind. It might not be the ideal solution but nonetheless remains the only viable option to a peaceful end of the conflict. Integrating Taliban into the political process would not be an easy task especially, when they are dominating the military theatre in Afghanistan.

President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

The US remains eager in installing a client regime in Afghanistan wherein Washington could maintain its ingress. For Trump-led US to conclude the Afghan imbroglio, it must make efforts in promoting an effective government, able to meet the challenges of rehabilitation and to deal with de-facto warlords, insurgents and subversive elements challenging the state. In this regard, US would have to incentivize the Taliban to ensure a robust peace-making effort. A fragile peace could only produce negative consequences. The prospects for any form of future stability lies in amalgamating both civilian and war-fighting strategies.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion leads one to conclude that Washington's strategy for Afghanistan has got stuck in protecting US strategic interests. It requires a coherent re-structuring of modus-operandi for Afghanistan and, some flexibility and pragmatism, while negotiating the end game. To get out of this quagmire, the US strategic circles need to embrace the hard realities in terms of losing its clout in the probable post-conflict Afghanistan, where Taliban are likely to dominate. Amid these considerations, Washington is reluctant to act in haste. However, choices for Washington have been narrowed and it is clear that sooner or later, US-led coalition forces will have to exit.

Now, the nature of scenario in Afghanistan has been changing with the US diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. The developments over the months as well as nature of rhetoric between them are indicative of some seriousness on both sides. Yet, the major problem lies with the conditions both sides have put forward for withdrawal. Initially, US has made conditional exit plan and Taliban has clearly communicated the commitments that they would not let transnational terrorist cartels, Al-Qaeda and IS-K, to use Afghan territory. They even joined with opposition parties in Afghanistan to announce their agenda and garner support which manifests to uphold their commitments and willingness for negotiated settlement. But, the US remains in doldrums and stuck with its intransigent attitude amid fears of losing much. As Clausewitz argued (Cordsman 2018) in his classical writing – *On War*- that "War is partly inevitable, but can easily become a self-inflicted wound." It is right time for Washington to realize that military engagement affects its economy which has already been inflicted a massive trade deficit. In terms of the cost of the Afghan war on America's economy, there are varying estimates ranging from \$4 to 6 trillion. White House will have to make tough choices if it wants a safe exit and avoidance of further losses.

Seeking less-lucrative options in hand, Washington must fully acknowledge the efficacy of a well-negotiated settlement and seek ways to create a conducive environment accordingly. Meanwhile, all major states must consider and create avenues to dispel the perception of collapsing order of post-security situation and the challenge of intensifying insurgency or a likelihood of civil war. Taliban would also have to be flexible in ensuring smooth exit of the coalition forces from

Afghanistan. Parallel to this, a diehard Taliban position could create obstacles in the way to a negotiated settlement. While moving ahead, it has to keep a vigilant eye over the sabotage elements that favour the status quo and aim to disrupt any settlement. In order to facilitate that transition, what Kabul and Washington need to do is, change the composition of Afghan deep-state and ensure mainstreaming of Taliban (Mehmood, 2019). The fate of Afghanistan and its people is tied-up with the changing approach of the US strategic thinking. A sustained and lasting peace in Afghanistan requires a flexible approach both by the US and the Taliban. There is a famous Chinese proverb, "Who creates mess, creates mess." It was the US who stepped into this quagmire, continued the war and now, has to compromise its interests to let indigenous forces play their role.

With meaningful engagement, dedicated and sustained efforts, future of Afghanistan could be transformed from a chaotic jungle into a land of normalcy, although it will take some time to do so with strong political will on both sides.

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President Trump's Strategy in Afghanistan: The Way Forward to Normalcy

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Muhammad Nasrullah Mirza & Yasir Malik

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