

Pakistan's Afghan Dilemma

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Amidst foreign forces drawdown from Afghanistan, speculations are rife about likely US military bases in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, for counterterrorism operations after 9/11 2021, which Islamabad has been repeatedly denying. Such rumors or any reality will add more difficulties and have serious repercussions for Pakistan's security situation in post-withdrawal scenario.

The rumor mill started churning when General Kenneth McKenzie Jr, Commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) in a recent policy statement to US Senate revealed that [“a fraction of US forces will remain stationed nearby Afghanistan after the troops' fully withdraw from the country by September 11.”](#) This conjecture strengthened because of Islamabad's previous decision of handing over Shamsi Airbase to the US military for American drones. In 2008, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [housed drones at the Shamsi air base in Balochistan](#) to carry out strikes in Afghanistan against militant camps. The CIA was later forced to vacate the facility in 2011 when relations between the two states got strained after US helicopters attacked Pakistan's Salala check post, killing 24 Pakistan Army soldiers. Now, the situation is very different for Islamabad.

Washington, over the past few months, has reportedly exerted its diplomatic, intelligence and military pressure on Pakistan to secure arrangements similar to Shamsi Air Base, to which Islamabad is exhibiting strong reluctance. Afghan Taliban have also warned Pakistan against providing any bases to American forces. This precarious situation places Islamabad on a tightrope because of the spillover effect of Afghan turmoil. There are reports that TTP is reuniting and have started their activities in Pakistan's tribal districts. A recent [report by International Crisis Group](#) has also warned that an unravelling Afghanistan could not only embolden Pakistani militant groups, particularly the Pakistani Taliban, but also cause yet another massive influx of Afghan refugees.

With the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces nearing complete withdrawal, Afghan Taliban are fast gaining territories and capturing crucial areas that were previously under control of foreign troops or the Afghan National Army (ANA). All international

experts are anticipating the Afghan Taliban's return to power in Kabul within a few months but this time, the Taliban-led government may be invulnerable. It is the second time in history that a superpower is leaving Afghan soil after battling for years, ceding space to local resistance fighters to form their own government. This is a moment of great jubilation for many Afghans, reflected in their public statements and their diversified engagement with external stakeholders, i.e., India, US, China, Iran, Pakistan etc.

Not only are the Afghan Taliban gaining strength, other groups are also consolidating their position for any future political settlement in Kabul. This tussle, backed by different foreign influences for their vested interests, is pushing Afghanistan into turmoil. Even the Afghan Taliban are slipping away from Pakistan's influence. Taliban Spokesperson Suhail Shaheen recently said that, "[Pakistan is welcome to help the group arrive at a negotiated settlement but it cannot dictate to us or impose its views on us.](#)" Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs that "they (Taliban) were intelligent and had grown wise over time." He added that Taliban had changed after Doha talks.

There are strong anti-Pakistan sentiments that exist among certain Afghan factions that might be triggered if Islamabad opts to host any American military apparatus for counter-terrorism missions in the emerging situation. In May, the Afghan National Security Advisor went so far as to bluntly call Pakistan a "Brothel House" after which Islamabad stopped all engagement with him.

While the Taliban gave assurances and agreed under the Doha Accord of not allowing Afghan soil to be used against any country, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to abide by their commitment because TTP and the Islamic State (IS) are resurging. Afghanistan is likely to turn into a lawless breeding ground again that will reverse the two decade-long American efforts of permanently settling the Afghan mess.

Islamabad's present posturing towards the Afghan issue is fraught with dangers. If Islamabad stays reluctant about allowing Washington its bases for counterterrorism purposes, it leaves a gap for non-state actors to re-emerge and pose greater security challenges. Whereas, if Pakistan agrees to provide its bases to US military operatives, it will fuel hatred against the country among Afghan Taliban who are already not very happy

about Islamabad's past conduct. The ICG report cautions that "[should the Afghan peace process continue to sputter or altogether fail, Islamabad's relations with Kabul and Washington would sour.](#)"

Under such circumstances, Washington's demands for bases seems unwise and will create security problems for Islamabad. Instead, Pakistan should ask Washington for increased military cooperation, and substantially equip our military with advanced technology to meet the common objectives that the US wants to achieve by maintaining their presence in Afghanistan's neighborhood. Islamabad must also stay in contact with both Washington and Kabul to reach a final power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan. A policy of silently observing developments in the neighborhood will earn Islamabad nothing. The situation demands active engagement with all the major stakeholders in the Afghan peace process to turn it into a success.

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