



Identifying Pakistan's Geo-Strategic Significance: Security Challenges Insights

Ayesha Rana Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations
National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Rawalpindi Email:
ayesha.rana@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

Pakistan is situated in the neighborhood of great powers such as Russia and China. The US has been involved in the region remotely, whereas earlier back in the eighties and in 2001 it was physically involved its forces to fight the war against terrorism. Geographically, Pakistan is located in an important position concerning these powers and at the doorway to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and Central Asia, from Iran to Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan. After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the politics of oil with Pakistan at the center started with greater leverage in terms of its influence on the shipment of oil.

Thus, owing to its strategic location, Pakistan has great potential of becoming a transit economy. Afghanistan is a land-locked country, which is dependent on Pakistan and Iran for transit trade. We cannot overlook the two-dimensional impact of the geographical location; it has advantages as well as poses significant challenges. To transform these challenges into opportunities and protect its national interests, Pakistan needs to review its foreign policy and engagement with the international community. Although, financial constraints place stringent limits on options that Pakistan can exercise, yet a proactive and pragmatic foreign policy can pay greater dividends. In this regard, the focus of the current government is generally in the right direction.

However, as part of a comprehensive solution, it must be ensured that strategic stability must not be compromised. For instance, we need to have a tranquil western border and any peace process with India should be done on a reciprocal basis. For economic development, the CPEC Project, which is part of the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) project, provides a unique opportunity, albeit due to the advantages of Pakistan's geo-strategic location. While ensuring to safeguard Pakistan's strategic interests, maximum benefit is gained from the CPEC. Since the Indo-US strategic partnership is ominous and Pakistan's tilt towards China is growing, there is a need to review our relations with the US. Towards this end, a careful balance needs to be worked out. Towards this end, for the US-Taliban peace deal, Pakistan played the vital role of a facilitator, without compromising its national interests. Pakistan has always maintained that there is no military solution to the Afghan imbroglio and only a political solution has to be negotiated between the stakeholders. There is a need to examine that

despite being placed at a geo-strategic and geo-economically advantageous location, why Pakistan has not been able to garner optimum strategic benefits and has faced more challenges.

Keywords: Geostrategic Importance, Taliban, War on Terror, US and NATO Forces, Security Challenges, Strategic Stability

Introduction

“While history has been unkind with Pakistan, its geography has been its greatest benefit.” - Stephen P. Cohen-

Since independence, Pakistan has faced multitudes of external and internal threats. A careful analysis reveals Pakistan’s geostrategic location has imposed more security challenges as compared to the benefits it has gained. While external threat mainly emanated from its eastern neighbor India that has grown significantly in its character, intensity, and levels. On the other hand, signing Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the US in 1954, and the US-led alliances that Pakistan joined in the 50s and 60s, like SEATO, CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), RCD (Regional Cooperation for Development), alliance with the US against Soviet invasion in 80s and joining GWOT since 2001, posed its challenges and opportunities.

On the internal front, weak state institutions, lack of political maturity, illiteracy, and exponential population growth, religious and ethnic diversity are the main reasons that hampered Pakistan’s path to prosperity. Pakistan, therefore, continues to remain embroiled in internal as well as external security challenges. “The past two decades have been extremely turbulent for Pakistan and it has endured the major burden of the spill-over effect of the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan, resulting in huge costs to its economy and loss of over 40,000 lives” (Malik, 2016). Pakistan was already dealing with the earlier spillover of Afghan refugees, an outcome of the Afghan war in the 1980s. Pakistan was still engulfed in the consequences of the first Afghan war with the change in the very fabric of the society. Such was the situation that 9/11 happened. The region came to the limelight once again as the forces created by the US in the first Afghan engagement, to fight the Soviets—the Taliban were outrightly blamed for the 9/11 attacks.

Though Pakistan’s decision to join the war against terrorism largely served to protect its strategic interests, however, Pakistan had to pay a huge price for joining this alliance (Ahmar, 2003). For instance, India promptly offered its backing for a global alliance, whereas Pakistan decided to join the US-led war against terrorism both against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda due to a few obvious reasons, first, having no other choice, second, economic incentives offered, third, the necessity of saving its strategic assets, and lastly, saving the Kashmir policy from complete extinction. Pakistan had always been concerned and considered the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan is a grave

threat to its national security (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009) because it undermines Pakistan’s security and economic interests in South and Central Asia. Furthermore, the “Strategic Partnership Pact” between India and Afghanistan of October 2011 had increased Pakistan’s concerns manifold (Dawn, May 2, 2012). In this context, Pakistan remained concerned over the post-US Afghanistan—the specter of a hotspot of infighting. With its large Pashtun population, Pakistan could not remain oblivious to the sinister developments in Afghanistan that cross its national interests. Thus, being part of the Afghan solution was Pakistan’s strategic compulsion and not a choice.

On the other hand, Pakistan’s involvement in GWOT has “planted the seeds of religious intolerance and a pervasive gun culture that did not exist previously. The war in Afghanistan for the last four decades has caused deep effects on Pakistani society” (Hussain, 2016). While the Afghan conflict has wider security implications for the region, the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have also adversely impacted the security and stability of the entire region. In the Middle East, the severe sectarian divide which has also engulfed Syria has serious effects on the region and this instability has also attracted the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As the Middle East crumbles under the totalitarian monarchs, dictatorial regimes and sectarian strife, the decades-old Saudi-Iran proxy war in Pakistan has also stoked the present instability. For Pakistan, it is becoming harder to seek its preferences and even harder to maintain neutrality in the Middle East. On its eastern front, Pakistan is confronted with a larger and hostile neighbor India, with a history of major wars and a legacy of unresolved issues, mainly Kashmir. The present Modi-led BJP government has aggressively pursued to militarily coerce, malign, and isolate Pakistan at regional and global levels. Pakistan requires a reality check on its foreign policy and wisely plays its cards according to the changing dynamics of the region. A foreign policy that can maximize the advantage of Pakistan’s geostrategic location (Figure1) despite this challenging setting. This article seeks to analyze in-depth the importance of Pakistan’s geographic location in the region and its implications on its security.

Figure 1



Geostrategic Security Challenges

During the past forty years, this region has been a center for great power politics. Whether it was the US's containment policy of the USSR, or keeping up with the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan's role remained critical. Confronting such global issues as energy crises and terrorism, Pakistan's security policies have always been dictated by its geostrategic location. Over the last several decades, the changing American interests in Pakistan, that suit its national interest, have been ominously significant. During the "Cold War" the US had aggressively pursued the policy of containment of the former Soviet Union and during that era, Pakistan remained part of the US alliance. However, soon after the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union in 1989, when the US had successfully achieved its long-cherished objective, the US abandoned Afghanistan, rife with intense civil war, and also left Pakistan on its own.

In the following years till to date, the US strategic interests in Pakistan's remained peripheral, on the other hand, the Indo-US strategic partnership began to grow. Post 9/11 the situation brought Pakistan into the limelight once again, to the security interests of the US and its Western allies. As a partner of the US and its allies, Pakistan was declared a non-NATO Ally. However, the US relationship with Pakistan remained restricted to seeking cooperation in Afghanistan. With the end of the Cold War, in a gradual shift of its strategic orientation, to contain and counter China, the US started to build strategic ties with India and focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

US War on Terror

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US government held Osama bin Laden responsible for the attacks a very close and key ally in the 1980's war against the former USSR. The Taliban were sheltering him in Afghanistan on refusing to hand him over to the US, they launched a series of aerial attacks on the areas under the Taliban control in Afghanistan. They also started supporting the Northern Alliance which has always been pro India, both militarily and financially to defeat the Taliban. The Taliban government in Kabul collapsed in just three months, after the 9/11 attacks, resulting in the displacement of most of the Taliban forces to the South and along the border with Pakistan (Lodhi, 2014). After the 1999 military coup, General Pervez Musharraf has forced the reversal Pakistan's policy and joined the US-led war on terror. The primary reason for that was to avoid the US action and sanctions against Pakistan on the one hand whereas on the other, to curtail the way of the US-Indian alliance. Pakistan provided headquarters for the US war against terror, and facilitated the transportation of supplies, over the following decade (Lodhi, 2014). Hamid Karzai was designated as the President of the interim government in 2001. The US and the UK were enjoined by several NATO alliance forces to combat insurgency outbreaks in Afghanistan; France, Germany, and Italy were perceptible for supplying the most troops. The fighting continued for all these years, and the Taliban resistance movement continued to fight the occupation forces. The result was the loss of thousands of innocent lives, labeled as

collateral by US/NATO forces, besides the death of soldiers and fighters belonging to all sides, and the concomitant destruction of Afghanistan.

President Obama took office in January 2009, and to fulfill his election campaign manifesto, announced to quickly end the futile wars and bring home the American soldiers. However, on the behest of the Pentagon, in December 2010, the US military headed for a final troop surge and propelled an additional 30,000 US troops. The surge in military operations led to more bloodshed, but this US strategy also failed to achieve even semblance of desired objectives. In a visible sign of war-weariness, in 2014 the US again planned to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and to shift control to Afghan security forces. Ironically the second term of President Obama and his successor's tenure also passed, with only a marginal reduction in the troops in US / NATO troops Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda regrouped along the border in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (henceforth, KP), Baluchistan, and the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which was merged into the KP province in May 2018 as a result of the 25th Constitutional Amendment. In 2002, Pakistan's military forces were deployed in the parts of the erstwhile FATA in pursuit of al-Qaeda operatives. Since independence, the FATA was amongst the marginalized parts of Pakistan administered through laws of the colonial era prohibiting the operation of political parties. Then Pakistan's constitutional order and liberties did not extend to this region, and political parties were prohibited from operating in FATA. In the year 2007, diverse Pakistani rouge, criminal, and fugitive elements infused into some of the banned radical religious groups resulting in a single militant outfit, viz. the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, led by Baitullah Mehsud. With its base in border areas of KP, the FATA, and parts of Baluchistan, this militant group, TTP, and its affiliated organizations are considered responsible for most of the ferocious terrorist attacks during the last fifteen years, throughout Pakistan, that besides the military, also targeted thousands of civilians. Islamabad showed readiness for negotiations with the Taliban and had renounced sizable areas of the FATA under their control. Still, by the end of the year 2007, unrest spread to the settled areas of Pakistan too.

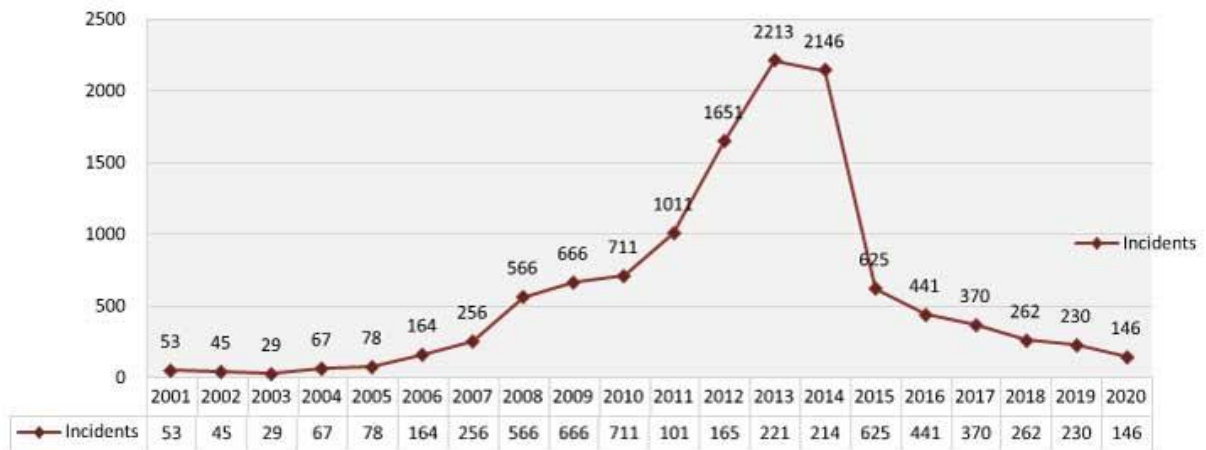
In 1988, a Dir-based Sufi Muhammad a religious cleric founded Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) to enforce Islamic Shariah laws in Malakand division, Hazara, and Kohistan and had launched a civil disobedience movement in 1994. After the post 9/11 US invasion of Afghanistan, is a rabidly anti-American cleric, Sufi Muhammad gained more prominence, with a significant increase of his followers. In 2001 Sufi Muhammad was jailed for illegally sending over 10,000 unarmed followers into Afghanistan to fight against US / NATO forces. Meanwhile, Mullah Fazlullah took over the leadership of TNSM and gained prominence with his fiery radio speeches against the Pakistani government and military. Islamist militant Mullah Fazlullah, who later became Sufi Muhammad's son-in-law was the TNSM leader and hence, became the leader of TTP Swat in 2007. He instigated Islamist insurgencies in 2007 and 2009 in Malakand Division as militants from his group led gruesome killings, took the power of

the Swat valley, situated not that far from Islamabad, the capital. Fazlullah and TNSM closely worked with the Mehsud's TTP, concisely packed down by the Pakistan military forces though, by the end of 2008, they had strong control of Swat again (Lodhi, 2014). In February 2009, the Pakistan military forces, under the direction of Sufi Mohammed, declared a ceasefire and allowed TNSM to implement the Sharia law. However, the expansion of the militants continued and reached other areas such as Buner. Meanwhile, the local media aired enflaming proclamations from the militants like Sufi Mohammad, displaying the horrible actions of the Pakistani Taliban towards the people of the areas under their control (Pakistan & Afghanistan, n.d.).

After the failure of the dialogue process which could not achieve a ceasefire between the TTP Shura and the government, the Pakistan Army started an extensive military operation in North Waziristan. These terrorists kept on targeting security forces as well as civilian installations, including the Karachi airport and killing innocent people and then heroically announcing the responsibility. The military attacks that have been successfully carried out on terrorist sanctuaries in North Waziristan, allowed to test the military capacity, civilian resolve, as well as the government's ability to accomplish the humanitarian fallout and the operation's critical aftermath. There was confusion in the TTP ranks. "Some important players in the Tehreek-e-Taliban movement had been executed. These raids also established the belief that many foreign nationals were participating in terrorist attacks against the state and people of Pakistan. Among those killed or captured there were Chechens and Uzbeks. The most basic question that arises here is what were the foreign nationals doing thousands of miles from their homes, in the tribal badlands of Pakistan?(Pakistan & Afghanistan, n.d.). The answer is preserved in actions taken in the 1970s and 1980s, which was the Jihadi war against the then Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. "Considering the external environment which was fluid as well as internal backlash faced by Pakistan due to joining GWOT, it, therefore, dealt the situation by tougher border management, reinforcing its internal lines of defense, and taking decisive steps to contain militancy within its borders through military operations(Pakistan & Afghanistan, n.d.).

Despite a considerable decrease in terrorist activities in Pakistan, (figure 3), Pakistan will also have to take measures to mitigate the negative fallout of Afghanistan's various transitions, i.e., a fresh influx of refugees, spillover of violence, or a security vacuum taking hold in the neighborhood, which could compromise its efforts to defeat militancy, and heighten the threat to its security.

Figure 3



Source: Global Terrorism Database & Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

Destruction Caused Due to War in Afghanistan and fall-out on Pakistan

There has been a rise in the opium trade for the past decade with many of the traders and cultivators being part of the former Afghan regime under President Hamid Karzai. Corruption is rampant in Afghan society and the government seems helpless to control the issue effectively. According to a report by the UN, since 2006 insurgency has been on the rise with the Taliban able to garner more support from the disillusioned Afghans and with the growth of anti-American sentiments. The number of people killed since the reinvigoration of insurgency in 2006 is staggering and from 2010 more than 10,000 people have been killed in suicide attacks and IED-related incidents. The WikiLeaks of July 2010 revealed that allied forces have killed hundreds of innocent civilians in unreported incidents. The use of “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB) and the kind of destruction it has inflicted on the general population, is horrendous. The use of such weapons by the US forces shows its frustration due to their engagement in a protracted war, with no chances of winning.

The drone strikes in Pakistan have caused colossal collateral damage, indiscriminately killing civilians alongside the terrorists. Statistics revealed that out of all drone attacks, the high-value targets killed were only around three percent which shows extensive collateral damage caused by these drone strikes (Ashraf, 2010). In this context, the UN had also been critical of utilizing drones as a weapon of choice in Pakistan’s tribal areas and termed them as an illegal, counterproductive, and grave violation of human rights. Talking to journalists in Islamabad the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), Navi Pillay said, “I see indiscriminate killing and injuring of innocent people as a clear violation of human rights”. However, consequent to our strong protests and larger presence of the Pakistan military in the erstwhile FATA area of Pakistan, since 2014 there is a remarkable reduction in the use of drone attacks by the US.

Prospective US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

As predicted by Pakistani experts, the outcome of the US complete withdrawal might result in overrunning the whole of Afghanistan by the Taliban pushing Afghanistan to a pre-9/11 situation, rife with civil war. For Pakistan, it is not only about the stability in settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA region but also the question of peace in Baluchistan is largely linked to a stable Afghanistan (Aftab, 2014). So, Pakistan's geographical proximity does not allow it to remain aloof. The war in Afghanistan for the last four decades and in the wake of these wars, the indirect Saudi, Iranian and Indian involvement has huge fall out on Pakistan, which is highly challenging to maintain security and stability. The anticipated deteriorated security situation has the potential of adverse impact on Pakistan's security as well as economy. Pakistan's importance for the peace process in Afghanistan, thus, cannot be denied.

Pakistan-US security relations are passing through stressful times and a defining course, cleavages have been more apparent than ever. Earlier the US desired Pakistan's help to bring down the Taliban regime and remove Al-Qaeda presence from Afghanistan and bring the culprits of 9/11 to justice. For Pakistan the US partnership was primarily imperative for access to the US military hardware, alleviating economic vows, and supporting an amicable resolution of the Kashmir issue (Ahmed, 2010). Therefore, both countries have been seeking cooperation to address their core strategic interests in the mutually beneficial partnership. As a result, the desired objective of the US to exterminate terrorism in the region has not been achieved so far. On the contrary, the void between the US demands and expectations from Pakistan and our willingness to comply has been ever-expanding between Pakistan and the US. Thus, the consistent euphuism- 'do more', the US mantra for Pakistan, continued to reverberate throughout the last two decades. With the change in global and regional geopolitical and geo-economics, and the ensuing world order, the Indo-US strategic alliance becoming stronger, to address its vulnerabilities in the South Asian region, Pakistan had to lean towards China (Ahmed, 2010).

Despite the present strain, it will still be useful if Pakistan and the US converge their strategic interests. Both countries could chalk out a plan of action for maintaining peace and stability in the anticipated post-US Afghanistan, impeding the flow of Islamic State IS into Afghanistan, nuclear non-proliferation, Indo-Pakistan engagement, and strategic stability in South Asia could be key areas to work on. Apart from that US could continue to help Pakistan in its economic growth, infrastructure development, and support in technical, commercial, and trade-related ventures. Simultaneously, both countries must also address the pending areas of divergence which include the US intent to give India a greater role in the region against China and the US opposition to the Chinese CPEC project and other development projects like oil and gas pipelines from Iran and CARs, etc.

The Eastern Border of Pakistan: Security Situation

Post 9/11 war against terrorism, India has been focused on a military-based solution for the conflict in Kashmir and has been deliberately trying to link the Kashmir dispute to terrorism and shift focus from Afghanistan to cross border terrorism in Kashmir. Likewise, India has also attempted to link Pakistan's support for the freedom movement in Kashmir to terrorist activities both in Afghanistan and Indian Occupied Kashmir (Mazari, 2001). Pakistan's expectations that becoming a key US ally in the GWOT would be helpful to bring a meaningful solution to the Kashmir conflict remained proved to be wishful thinking. Though global concern on the Kashmir issue remained intact, there is no evidence to support that the US and international community favors the Pakistani perspective over the Indian narrative.

There have been constant setbacks for Pakistan on its standpoint on Kashmir as India has been somewhat successful in garnering support against Pakistan as an alleged perpetrator of terrorism-related violence in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan's efforts to use its leverage as a US ally to resolve the Kashmir conflict have not been successful. However, the international community which is more concerned with the Pakistan-India nuclear race has pressed both countries to initiate CBMs on the nuclear front post-2001-02 escalation. As a result, on June 20, 2004, both countries "agreed to extend a nuclear testing ban and to set up a hotline between their foreign secretaries aimed at preventing misunderstandings that might lead to a nuclear war" (Kanwal, 2012). For the time being prospects of meaningful measures to resolve the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means appear to be a bleak idea because of the various incidents that have further dented the India-Pakistan relations in the last fifteen years.

With Uri and Pulwama attacks, alleged to be perpetrated by Kashmiri freedom fighters, military tensions between the two nuclear neighbors touched new heights. To punish Pakistan for its alleged involvement in the 14 February 2019 Pulwama attack, that left 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers dead, on 26 February 2019, the Indian Airforce crossed the Line of Control and launched airstrikes against Pakistan's territory at Balakot. Since the airstrikes failed to cause any damage, Pakistan's response was measured. To keep the conflict limited, PAF deliberately avoided the destruction of Indian military targets, and the bombs fell in the vicinity. However, the chasing Indian aircraft were effectively engaged, which resulted in the shooting down of an Indian MiG-21 aircraft with debris falling inside the territory of Azad Kashmir, and its pilot captured. The other aircraft, a SU-30 that PAF claimed to have shot down, fell within Indian Held Kashmir. An Indian helicopter was also shot down as a fratricide. With tensions running high between the two nuclear powers, key international players jumped in to defuse the crisis that had the potential to escalate.

In the same spirit, as a demonstration of an act of good faith, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan immediately announced handing over the captured Indian pilot. However, New Delhi showed little interest in settling their differences any further and continued with its belligerent posture against Pakistan. On August 5, 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370, which 35A the constitutional basis that connects

Kashmir's complex relationship with India. Since then, the Kashmir valley remains under repressive Indian military control and lockdown. These repressive measures have turned Jammu and Kashmir into a no-go area. It is worth considering that there are around 900,000 police, security, and military personnel in Indian occupied Kashmir. It is the most militarized region in the world.

Figure: 2



Indiscriminate firing across the line of control (Figure 2) by India is a regular feature. Civilians residing close to the border on Pakistan's side incur heavy losses in terms of life and property. On the other hand, Pakistani forces are very careful in responding to Indian firing because of the presence of civilians in the bordering areas. The mayhem that has been created by the Modi government due to the changes in the constitutional status of Kashmir has also been linked to Pakistan and labeling it as a perpetrator of the strong reaction in the population. Despite erecting electric fencing of the entire Line of Control (LoC) by India and also the presence of a huge number of forces whenever there is unrest in the valley the blame is put on Pakistan. On the western side of the border of Pakistan since the launch of the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, the situation has been volatile. To analyze the security situation on this front, it is imperative to study the US war on terror.

Indian Involvement in Afghanistan

To destabilize and marginalize Pakistan, Indian activities in Afghanistan remained a serious national security concern over the last two decades. In terms of funding, training, subversion of anti-Pakistan elements, Indian involvement in Afghanistan had massively increased in the post-9/11 period, much to the detriment of Pakistan. Taking advantage of its strategic ties with the US and the Afghan government, Indian Intelligence (RAW) and Afghan Intelligence (NDS) Agencies have been jointly working against Pakistan for the last 20 years.

Having failed to wow the Taliban through discrete contacts, India in alliance with other inimical forces is likely to continue extending support to all anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, including warlords, ISIS, TTP, and other hostile elements. While India has changed to the constitutional status of Kashmir, with the complete valley under virtual lockdown and India unwilling to even discuss the issue bilaterally. To respond effectively to an uncertain situation in the neighborhood and the fallout of fast-evolving dynamics in the wider region, Pakistan must secure itself at home. Only by establishing peace within, will the country be able to manage any instability that might be fueled from outside (Lodhi, 2014). All security-related initiatives can only be carried and sustained based on economic strength.

Conclusion

Since the geopolitical importance of our region is changing fast, there is the optimism of seeing the greater role of Pakistan. It is generally believed that Afghanistan is facing more or less the same situation of post-Soviet withdrawal of the late 80s and it persisted in the decade of the 90s. In post-Soviet withdrawal, all the bordering countries had their divergent interests, which they pursued vigorously. The Soviet Union was defeated and disintegrated. China neither had the clout nor were its interests at stake, and Central Asian Republics (CARs) were newly independent and unable to play any meaningful role. Yet the CARs supported the Northern Alliance due to ethnic linkages.

On the other hand, Pakistan has been trying hard all the time to bring all the leaders of different groups together and be a part of an unwavering Afghan government. These efforts failed as each group had its stronghold in the country. By the late 90s Taliban were able to capture maximum cities along with Kabul. It is generally believed that one who controlled Kabul will rule the country. Pakistan accepted the then Taliban government along with UAE and Saudi Arabia. Post 9/11 twenty years of GWOT in Afghanistan as the anticipated complete US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, might cause the situation to be very much similar to post-Soviet withdrawal. The only difference might be that due to the current geopolitical situation, mainly the US rivalry with Russia and China, there is a convergence of interest. Also, due to the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) of China along with Russia, Central Asian Republics, Iran and Pakistan have long been wishing peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's concerns and role as a major neighboring country, thus, cannot be ignored for the greater peace and security in the region.

The part of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process has always been vital and extensively been appreciated as instrumental in sealing the US-Afghan Taliban deal of February 29, 2020–The Doha Accord as Pakistan facilitated talks amid the Taliban and the US for the following reasons. First, it would allow the withdrawal of US/NATO forces from Afghanistan, giving hope for peace in Afghanistan as peace in Afghanistan is vital for Pakistan's security as fighting a two-front war remains a security dilemma. Second, with more than three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan for the last four decades has always remained a burden and security challenge. Third, the US selected Afghan

government was sans Pashtun representation, who are the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan and mainstay of the Taliban. With more than double the size of its Pashtun population, than Afghanistan, disillusioned Pashtun Afghans, pose an internal security challenge for Pakistan. Fourth, the dividend of peace in Afghanistan will be in the shape of the opening of economic activities, trade, and oil and gas pipelines among the regional countries. Also, peace in Afghanistan would allow the ambitious Chinese mega development project, One Belt, One Road Initiative, and CPEC to become a reality and do not reflect any change in the strategic approach of Pakistan. Instead, it testifies Pakistan's long-standing position advocating a politically negotiated settlement amid the Taliban and the other Afghan stakeholders, a viable step towards peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan has always been urging the Taliban to have a coalition government with a fair representation of all the factions, and protection of rights of women and minorities.

Therefore, the best possible outcome is a peace process among the stakeholders in Afghan peace, including the Taliban and other refractory splinter groups aimed at national reconciliation. Pakistan has been playing a positive role due to its influence over some Taliban groups and the contiguity of Afghanistan. Confidence-building measures to improve prospects of peace are only possible through "reconciliation" and a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Pakistan's endeavor to establish good relations with Afghanistan has faced several impediments. Despite the setbacks, Pakistan is cognizant of the underlining imperatives of cordial relations with Afghanistan to tackle ubiquitous terrorism, trade linkages with the Central Asian States, and to avoid the spillover effects of violence from the Pak-Afghan border. Continuous unrest in Afghanistan would bring in other terrorist organizations as the presence of ISIS has reportedly been documented in the war-ravaged country. Further, the possibility of a 90s like civil war cannot be ruled out which would again push the country into a very difficult situation. Therefore, the legitimacy of the government after the anticipated US withdrawal from Afghanistan largely rests upon its ability to bring in national reconciliation by bringing in key warring factions into the peace process. Pakistan must keep in mind that the embarrassed US and a frustrated India will not sit idle. What they have not achieved militarily as well as spending billions of dollars might try the same through fueling in the fight among the Afghan stakeholders.

On the other hand, Pakistan's 20 years of cooperation with the US on Afghanistan did not generate any substantial support for its standpoint on the Indian-held Kashmir. It necessitates an exhaustive examination to explore how efficiently Pakistan used these factors and to what extent they have influenced the country. Nonetheless, Pakistan's strategic doctrine seems to have continued unaffected in the process mostly for the geopolitical and strategic challenges facing the country have still not been resolved. Yet, these challenges have become more complicated after India revoked the special status of India-held Kashmir on Aug 5, 2019, which was granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution. Pakistan tried hard to raise the issue before the international community and on the relevant platforms—particularly concentrating on

4450 | Ayesha Rana Identifying Pakistan's Geo-Strategic Significance: Security Challenges Insights

human rights abuses in occupied Kashmir. These efforts produced results, and the international media and took the atrocities in Kashmir earnestly. Still, Pakistan has not been capable to muster enough political and diplomatic sustenance to force India to review its brutal practices in Kashmir and demonstrates a willingness to work with Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir issue. China supported Pakistan's stance at the UN Security Council but that was not enough to pressurize India. However, a real setback was experienced when the Muslim bloc led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE obstructed all Pakistani efforts to use the Organization of the Islamic Conference platform for Kashmir. It showed that the religious bond is relevant in international relations only when coupled with a strong economy.

Maintaining equilibrium in its relationship with China and the US is another challenge for Pakistan. All these efforts need out-of-the-box thinking and courageous leadership. A rational approach would be to maintain focus on economic uplift, strive for political stability, and bring an end to insurgency and terrorism as key agenda for the domestic front. Pakistan's geostrategic position is very important should which enables it to be a reliable peace broker not only in Afghanistan but also in West Asia where Pakistan is considered as an important pillar of Middle Eastern security architecture. The leadership in Pakistan needs to take decisions to maximize the benefits of being located at such an important position in the region. We need a foreign policy that is not subjugated by any foreign influence and is in the total national interest of the country.

References

- Aftab, S. (2014). "The 2014 ISAF Pull out from Afghanistan." "Afghan Foreign Minister in India," Dawn, (May 2, 2012).
- Ahmar, M. (2003). 9/11 and the changing paradigm of conflict resolution. *IPRI Journal*, 111(4), 1-20.
- Ahmed, N. (2010). Pakistan-US relations: Threats and responses. In (ed.). Kidwai, S. US policy towards the Muslim World: Focus on the post-9/11 period (pp. 230). Maryland: University of America Press.
- Ashraf, A. (2010). US drone strikes in Pakistan: Increasing trends, questionable legitimacy, and the issue of tacit cooperation. *Pakistan Journal of International Relations*, 2(1), 26-30.
- Cohen, S. P. (2004). *The idea of Pakistan*. Brookings Institution Press.
- "Drone Raids Violate Human Rights," Dawn, June 8, 2012.
- Ganguly, S., & Howenstein, N. (2009). India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Affairs*, 63(1), 127-140.
- Hussain, S. A. (2014, July 7). "Pakistan paying for fallout Soviets' Afghan invasion in 1979 lingers today". *The Blade*.
- Kanwal, G. (2012, September 24). India's military modernization: Plans and strategic underpinnings," *National Bureau of Asian Research*.

Lodhi, M. (2014, June 25). "Dealing with the Regional Uncertainty." Retrieved from <https://www.pressreader.com/pakistan/the-pak-banker/20140625/281698317832912> (Accessed May 25, 2018).

Malik, S. (2016, February 4). "Pakistan's security challenges and problems in the next decade" E-International Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/04/pakistans-security-challenges-and-problems-in-the-next-decade/> (Accessed June 9, 2017).

Mazari, M., S. (2001, November 10). "Indo-Pak Relations after 9/11," Newslines. "Pakistan and Afghanistan," Institute of the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/pakistan-and-afghanistan>