



## **From Stalemate towards Settlement: Afghan Peace Process**

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### **Abstract**

*United States and Taliban's complicated relations date back to 9/11, when Taliban had provided refuge to alleged attackers of the terrific attacks. After that, series of atrocities committed by both sides and then finally in 2013, an effort was made to have informal presence of Taliban in Qatar, but the idea rejected by Karzai government. After that, two meetings were held in Urumqi and Murree, these meeting were between the representatives of Afghan government and Taliban, United States attended the meeting as an observer. The peace process halted after the news of death of Mullah Omar just the day before second round of Murree progress, because his death triggered uncertainty in the peace process. The peace process was renewed in 2018 when United States shared table with Taliban, the peace process was moving relatively smooth until the recent meeting which was scheduled in Qatar on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> January 2019. It was canceled by Taliban leaders over the disagreement on the agenda of that meeting. Taliban have some demands, including the withdrawal of foreign troops, release of Taliban prisoners, change of constitution, to remove the name of Taliban leaders from UNSC list and the permission to have political presence in Qatar. United States now wants to get rid of Afghanistan and to make the peace process Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, to which Taliban are reluctant. The continued efforts of US and the current uncertain situation are apparently leading to no possible consensus among the adversaries in near future. It seems that this continued uncertainty will ultimately lead to chaos in Afghanistan, because of diversity and war-prone nature of the country.*

**Keywords:** Urumqi, Murree process, Qatar office, Mullah Omar.

### **1 Introduction**

United States and Taliban's intricated relations date back to the attack on twin towers. The terrific attacks changed the global order as the sole superpower of the unipolar world was attacked by the non-state actors. The events of September 11 mark the end of the unipolar

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moment, when the US was the sole superpower and debates raged over what kind of world order and power structure could be characterized and emerge from this moment.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to many of the main interpretations, the likely effects of the September 11 terrorist bombings will be to usher in an era where United States foreign policy is more multilateral than before, an era that indicates both the essential interconnectedness of world politics and the fact that the United States can neither act as world policeman nor retreat into isolationism.<sup>3</sup>

The Clash of Civilizations by Samuel P. Huntington had predicted the clash between the west and Islam and the war on terror in Afghanistan was the first theatre of that prediction, then Iraq and list goes on. Although, terrorism and the non-states actors are not the new phenomenon for the world, but these attacks were symbolic and definitely exposed the vulnerability of the superpower against any potential threat from even small-scaled terrorist organizations. The vivid demonstration of American vulnerability has changed atmospheres and values.<sup>4</sup> So, the United States of America demonstrated her military strength by waging a war against terrorism on the land of Afghanistan; where the alleged attackers had taken refuge. The Bush administration called on Taliban to handover Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders and to close its training camps or to be prepared for consequences. Taliban refused to hand over their guest; Bin Laden and called for *Jihad* against United States as previously done against USSR with the help of US. As, United States of America was military might and Taliban were not militarily advance enough to compete militarily advanced and powerful country so, soon, it appeared that they are losing the battle as they left Kabul in November 2001 after which Northern Alliance took the control of the city. In May, 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, the US defense secretary, claims that most of Afghanistan is now secure and that US-led forces had moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities.<sup>5</sup>

After apparently kicking out non-state actors in Afghanistan, United States took the responsibility of democratization of Afghan society and for this purpose, new constitution was introduced, Hamid Karzai was appointed as the new president of Afghanistan and United States and Afghanistan declared each other as the strategic partners for the long-term security, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan. After the elections, resurgence of terror attacks was evident, the number of suicide attacks quintuples from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006, while remotely detonated bombings more than double, to 1,677.<sup>6</sup> At the NATO summit, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer sets a target of 2008 for the Afghan National Army to begin to take control of security. He said that “I would hope that by 2008 we will have made considerable progress, with

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<sup>2</sup>Steve Smith, “The end of the unipolar moment: September 11 and the future of world order”, *social science research council university of Wales*, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/smith.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Eliot A. Cohen, “A strange war”, *The national interest*, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019 <https://nationalinterest.org/article/a-strange-war-579..>

<sup>5</sup>Council on regional relations, “The U.S. war in Afghanistan 1999 – 2018”, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

a more stable political architecture in place, and with a strong interface between NATO and the civilian agencies and effective, trusted Afghan security forces gradually taking control."<sup>7</sup>

In May 2006, after a spate of Taliban suicide bombings and other attacks, Operation Mount Thrust was launched, deploying more than 10,000 Afghan and coalition forces in the south.<sup>8</sup>In August 2006, NATO troops took over military operations in southern Afghanistan from the US-led coalition. In September, it launched the largest attack in its 57-year history.<sup>9</sup>In 2007, Taliban key leader, Mullah Dad Ullah, was killed in a joint operation by Afghan security forces, American forces and NATO troops in Helmand Province, Governor Asadullah Khaled of the neighboring Kandahar Province.<sup>10</sup>In 2009, Obama took office and he sent 17,000 more troops in Afghanistan. Following is the text of Barack Obama's speech on Iraq and Afghanistan, as prepared for delivery and provided by his campaign, he said that, "We could have deployed the full force of American power to hunt down and destroy Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and all of the terrorists responsible for 9/11, while supporting real security in Afghanistan."<sup>11</sup>

U.S. Marines launched a major offensive in southern Afghanistan, representing a major test for the U.S. military's new counterinsurgency strategy, the offensive, involving four thousand Marines was launched in response to a growing Taliban insurgency in the country's southern provinces, especially Helmand Province.<sup>12</sup> The operation focused on restoring government services, bolstering local police forces, and protecting civilians from Taliban incursion.<sup>13</sup>

In 2010, an imposter claimed to be Mullah Akhtar Mansour, met top people from the British forces, Americans and Hamid Karzai twice, he was just a shopkeeper, it indicates the failure of Americans, British and Afghan agencies. In 2011, Osama Bin Laden was killed by American forces, in Abbottabad, Pakistan. President Obama outlined a plan to withdraw thirty-three thousand troops by the summer of 2012—the surge troops sent in December 2009—including ten thousand by the end of 2011.<sup>14</sup>In, 2011, Obama confirmed that the U.S. is holding preliminary peace talks with the Taliban leadership.<sup>15</sup>Meanwhile in 2011, an imposter, who was a suicide bomber, claimed to be the Taliban leader, went to Kabul to see president Burhan-ud-din

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<sup>7</sup>NATO, "Speech by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the 42nd Munich Conference on Security Policy", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s060204a.htm>.

<sup>8</sup>Declan Walsh, "US-led troops launch largest assault on Taliban since 2001", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/15/usa.afghanistan>.

<sup>9</sup>Aljazeera, Timeline: Taliban in Afghanistan, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2009/03/2009389217640837.html>.

<sup>10</sup>Taimoor Shah and Carlotta Gall, "Key Taliban Leader Is Killed in Afghanistan in Joint Operation", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/14/world/asia/14afghan>.

<sup>11</sup>The New York Times, "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Council on regional relations, "The U.S. war in Afghanistan 1999 – 2018", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019 <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>CNN Wire Staff, "Obama announces Afghanistan troop withdrawal plan", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/06/22/afghanistan.troops.drawdown/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup>Toby Harnden, "US steps up face-to-face peace talks with Taliban", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8519535/US-steps-up-face-to-face-peace-talks-with-Taliban.html>.

Rabbani and said we want to negotiate peace, he blew himself and killed the president in September 2011, he had hidden his bomb in turban because, nobody checks the turban, it's a matter of respect. After these kinds of events, American decided to have an informal presence of Taliban in Qatar, so that they can address the right people.

## **2 Past efforts to engage Taliban**

United States tried to engage Taliban in Qatar in 2012, where they had informal presence to have direct words with US officials, a step that could help pave the way for direct peace talks to end a decade of war in Afghanistan, the statement was welcomed by the White House as a concrete signal that U.S.-led efforts to inject momentum into Afghan peace talks are gaining traction.<sup>16</sup> When the Qatar (blessed by Washington) allowed Taliban to have their political presence in Doha, they displayed their own flags, started it calling Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, had their own insignia, so such things really bothered Karzai at home, he took it as insult and expressed his anger in a way that it is like the parallel afghan government operating in Qatar, so this office was closed without any progress in negotiations.

Later on, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was arrested by Pakistan on United States pressure, released in October last year was suspected to have shared the table with Hamid Karzai. Diplomats have claimed at least one of Mr. Karzai's brothers held talks with the Taliban's number two at a private house near Kandahar in January 2010.<sup>17</sup> Rahim Ullah Yousafzai denied the fact that he ever wanted to negotiate by quoting an incident that, "Omar Daudzai (former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, now he is with Zalmay Khalilzad) said, once a Pakistani, invited me to meet Mullah Baradar in Qatar and in a safe house in Islamabad, I also invited Salah-ud-din Rabbani; the foreign minister of Afghanistan and the son of Burhan-ud-din Rabbani, Baradar, despite the custody, did not want to look at the two Afghan leaders who came to meet him through the Pakistani government, Mullah Baradar after release remained in Pakistan, he is still in Quetta, has two wives, one in Karachi and other in Quetta and he is in Quetta these days and still refusing to go to Kabul and talk to Afghan government."<sup>18</sup>

In past only two face to face meetings are held between Taliban and Afghan government in the presence of United States and Pakistan. The only two engagements were in Urumqi (Xinjiang, China) and Murree in May and July 2015, respectively. Urumqi meeting was the first face to face meeting. The Afghan intelligence chief, member of country's peace council; Masum Stanekzai and others were there from Afghan side and from Taliban side, there were Mullah Razaq, Mullah Jalil, American observers attended the meeting as observers and there was no breakthrough.<sup>19</sup> The Urumqi meeting was hosted by China but facilitated by Pakistan. Pakistan facilitated this meeting because the Taliban leaders who were present at the meeting in Urumqi

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<sup>16</sup>Dion Nissenbaum, Habib Khan Totakhil and Julian E. Barnes, "Taliban Agree to Open Office for Peace Talk's, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203462304577138431516260746>.

<sup>17</sup>Dean Nelson in Delhi and Ben Farmer, Hamid Karzai held secret talks with Mullah Baradar in Afghanistan, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7457861/Hamid-Karzai-held-secret-talks-with-Mullah-Baradar-in-Afghanistan.html>.

<sup>18</sup>Rahim ullah Yousafzai, Interview by Mariam Javed Asghar, Personal interview, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

<sup>19</sup>The Economic Times, Afghan Taliban leaders meet secretly in China: Report, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/article show/47413160](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/article/show/47413160).

were pro-Pakistan. Mullah Abbas is the Taliban envoy to Pakistan, Mullah Akhtar Jalil is also very close to Pakistan and Ibrahim Haqqani is the uncle of Salah-ud-din Haqqani in Haqqani network and lives in Islamabad. So, it was not difficult to get them to the table or to persuade them meet Afghan government representatives. There is a controversy that whether these meeting were sanctioned by Mullah Akhtar Mansour or Rahbar Shura (The highest decision-making body of Taliban)? This controversy arose because there were no Rahbari Shura members at the meeting and the participants from Taliban side had no great influence in hierarchy. The Taliban were quick to disavow the meeting, posting an official statement on their Web site rejecting “rumors” that a “delegation of Islamic Emirate met with representatives of Kabul administration’s fake peace council in Urumqi city of China.”<sup>20</sup>

Second meeting was held in Murree, this was Hikmet Khalil Karzai, deputy foreign minister of Afghanistan came along with a delegation and on Taliban side they had, Mullah Abbas Sher Muhammad Mansour, Ibrahim Haqqani (he was from Haqqani network, but Americans had met him earlier), Yahya Haqqani (financer of Haqqani network, last named asked to leave after US objection as sanctioned Haqqani network members).<sup>21</sup> Observers from United States and China also attended these direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government which is by the way called as the “puppet of United States” by Taliban. The presence of Haqqani and Americans under the same roof was an interesting thing as Haqqani Network is declared as terrorist group by United States of America, so, if they were tolerating them that means they can bear Haqqani as party to the peace efforts in Afghanistan from Taliban side. “The Americans met the people from Haqqani network like Ibrahim Haqqani earlier in Islamabad, much earlier than this meeting and Alice wells; the senior state department official, said, United States has no objection to talk to Haqqanis even if they are declared terrorists, we’re willing to negotiate with Haqqani network as the part of Taliban group, we are not interested in setting up military base in Afghanistan and we can also persuade the Afghan government relations to Taliban regarding the Afghan constitution all these things were said at the close door of meeting.”<sup>22</sup>

The news of the death of the Mullah Omar was leaked just one day before the second round of Murree process. Although, Mullah Omar died two years ago but his death kept secret and it was Akhtar Mansour who was running the show. It was failure at the part of all security agencies of the countries involved in peace process that they did not know about the death of Mullah Omar. After the revelation, the peace process fell prey to uncertainty that who will be the leader of Taliban to carry on the process. So, since July 2015 in Murree, there had been no formal contact between the Afghan government and Taliban but Taliban stayed in touch with Americans as they are doing it now .In current peace process, two out of five Taliban leaders who were detained in Guantanamo bay, are taking part in peace process. Muhammad Fazil; Taliban’s army chief, captured in Mazar Sharif by Dostum and given to Americans for money, and Khaikhwa who was captured by Pakistan in Chaman and handed over to Americans, the

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<sup>20</sup>Barnett Rubin, What Could Mullah Mohammad Omar's Death Mean for the Taliban Talks? accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-could-mullah-mohammad-omars-death-mean-for-the-taliban-talks>.

<sup>21</sup>The Economic Times, Afghan Taliban leaders meet secretly in China: Report, Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/article show/47413160](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/article/show/47413160).

<sup>22</sup>Rahim ullah Yousafzai, Interview by Mariam Javed Asghar, Personal interview, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

other three are still in Qatar, Noorullah Noori, Muhammad Nabi Omari, Abdul Haq wasiq (deputy intelligence chief of Taliban), look at the importance of all these, the Democrats were criticized by the Republicans at that time over the exchange but they did so because they wanted their soldier; Bew Bergdahl. Americans never forget their soldiers or the citizens, they try to secure them and go after whoever killed them as they killed Bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011.

### **3 Middle-Eastern Politics and Peace Process**

5 important Taliban leaders, held in Guantanamo bay were released in exchange of this one American soldier, Bew Bergdahl, the freed US soldier is facing inquiries even now. In contrast, the freed Taliban leaders were hailed as heroes and have given honor by making them Taliban representatives while sharing table with United States of America. Then the exchange took place to the good offices in Qatar. Qatar is so important in terms of the Afghan Peace process, it always punches above its weight and that's why Saudis and UAE people are always jealous of Qatar. KSA along with UAE Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar one year ago, so, how can they bear the fact that Qatar is providing platform to the conflicting adversaries to share table to talk about their concerns and reservations regarding each other.

Taliban most of the times trusted Qatar rather than any other country, they had reservations regarding Saudi Arabia, as Saudis want Taliban to disassociate from Al-Qaeda, as the leader of Al-Qaeda; Bin Laden, was their enemy. Saudis did not support Taliban in their fighting and even de-recognized the Taliban regime after 9/11, albeit Saudi Arabia was one out of three countries who had recognized the Taliban regime. Rahim Ullah Yousafzai quoted the incident after which Saudis and Taliban took the different roads, he said that, "and to the very well-known snub by mullah Omar to Saudi prince; Turki, head of the Saudi intelligence happened in Kandahar, and the way, nobody snubs, especially when they are giving money to everybody, the delegations didn't take tea, the lunch was ready and they refused to take lunch just left (custom of Taliban) for Kandahar airport had their own aircraft, that was the end of Saudi engagement with Taliban who were then in power, and soon after that Saudi de-recognized the Taliban government."<sup>23</sup>

### **4 Current Afghan Peace Process**

After series of attack in 2018, Taliban announced ceasefire in June last year in the end of holy month Ramadan, the ceasefire lasted for three days, during which, Taliban appeared on roads and took pictures with the people while clearly sending a message to Washington that they are ready to share the table. Russia took initiative in November last year, in Moscow, called 12 countries including, India, Iran, Afghanistan and also invited Taliban representatives. US tried to downgrade the summit by sending only ambassador, Afghan sent high peace conference member (called it as private entity and that they are not representing the government of Afghanistan), Indian sent former diplomats, but that was for the first time when India and Taliban were sitting together.

Previously, Taliban were engaged with Afghan government when one look into the history; Urumqi and Murree process but in the current peace process, Taliban has a rigid stance

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

that they will not sit with Afghan government, they just want to talk to United States. The U.S. envoy for South Asia met with Taliban officials in July 2018, to discuss ways to lay the groundwork for peace talks to end 17 years long war.<sup>24</sup> Later on, Alice Wells was replaced by Zalmay Khalilzaad; current United States special Afghan peace envoy who met with Taliban in Qatar, in July, September and October last year in three rounds of negotiations. Khalilzaad again met Taliban in United Arab Emirate in December last year, despite the unfriendly relations with UAE, Taliban came to attend the meeting that was the positive aspect of that sitting. The parties to the conflict had a plan to see each other in Saudi Arabia but Taliban rejected that idea and the venue was shifted to Qatar. They decided to meet on 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2019 but after that they denied to share the table over disagreement on the agenda for the meeting. Zalmay Khalilzaad is on his trip to different countries including Pakistan, UAE and China to seek help in peace process after the setback.

The basic issues which are discussed and the demands of Taliban are, the withdrawal of the foreign troops from the land of Afghanistan and this concern was addressed by Trump last year in December. It was reported that President Donald Trump told the Pentagon to prepare for the withdrawal of 7,000 American military personnel from Afghanistan, which would reduce the U.S. presence in the country by half.<sup>25</sup> Taliban wanted the immediate withdrawal but now they are bit flexible and saying for time table of withdraw, in real life it cannot be happened immediately, but there has to be time table, we don't know, may be of one year or two year, but it is opened for discussion and it is being discussed right now. United States asked for ceasefire and this demand was denied by Taliban, US just wanted to be an observer of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned negotiations but Taliban are not ready to sit with Afghan government. It is also said that, is US wants to have two or three military bases in Afghanistan temporarily to oversee the implementation of any peace accord.

Second, they have been asking for the opening of the formal Taliban office in Qatar, the one which was aborted by Karzai in 2013, they want this office back. And third, want the removal of Taliban name from the UNSC blacklist, they want the release of Taliban prisoners from all American-controlled jails; one is Guantanamo, second is Bagram airbase (biggest airbase in whole region, built by Soviets and expanded by Americans). So, then there are Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government in biggest Afghan prison; Pul-e-Charkhi and other Afghan prisons. Apart from these four demands, Taliban want the Afghan government to do away with the security agreement with Americans. Karzai refused to have a security agreement on the first day after coming to power, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014, Ashraf Ghani signed this agreement. Taliban also want amendments in constitution, they want constitution to be more Islamic, more Sharia compliant.

## **5 Challenges**

Trump has won the elections by raising the slogan, "America first", so for his face saving he has to callback American forces at home. This desire is driving him to fold the conflicts and negotiations immediately but Taliban are main hindrance in the fulfillment of his desire. America

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<sup>24</sup>Jessica Donati, U.S. Envoy, "Taliban Officials Meet to Discuss Afghan Peace Talks", accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-envoy-taliban-officials-meet-to-discuss-afghan-peace-talks-1532547118>.

<sup>25</sup>Ayesha Tanzeem, "US Envoy in Kabul to Advance Afghan Peace Efforts", accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019 <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-envoy-in-kabul-to-advance-afghan-peace-efforts/4743910.html>.

wants Taliban and Afghan government to join the table but Taliban are reluctant to do this but they ultimately have to do this because the question of Afghanistan can only be resolved by mutual cooperation; the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process. Moreover, Taliban have control of the rural areas, urban areas are still in the influence of the sitting Afghan government and have large number of population than the areas occupied by Taliban. Taliban want to have the companions back which are detained in Afghan jails; mainly in Pul-Charkhi and Bagram base, these prisoners cannot be brought out of the jail without the interference or help of the Afghan government. Taliban also have some reservations over the constitution of Afghanistan and these can be addressed only through the platform of parliament. Taliban have Arbakli and people are complaining about their excess in Afghanistan. Karzai had opposed Ghani because his more pro-American acceptance to create militias. So, whether, they are disarmed or inducted in Afghan force, this thing can't be done without talking with Afghan government because they are one of the important parties. The appointment of very hardliner people, former NDS chiefs Amrullah Saleh, Asadullah Khalid as interior, defense minister; both are anti-Taliban and anti-Pakistan, these will not allow any concessions to Taliban, so the situation is getting tougher with every passing day.

## **6 Conclusion**

Afghanistan has remained the pitch for wars throughout the history, mainly because of its cultural diversity. The cultural diversity is a very positive thing but it did not go well in case of Afghanistan but remained the major cause of separated interests in the country. The devastation of 17 years' war and the United States' hurriedness to leave the country as soon as possible may leave Afghanistan in chaos same as of 1991. The continued peace talks and the setback in the process along with reluctance of Taliban to join hands with Kabul regime have created great difficulties for Americans. It is possible that after the departure of the United States from Afghanistan, the country may face civil war again, that would ultimately disturb Pakistani border side specially FATA areas, which have recently reconstructed and rehabilitated after military operations against terrorism in this area.

The problem which Pakistan will face is that Taliban have found new friends such as Qatar, China, Russia and even Indonesia, so the worth of Pakistan would ultimately decrease. If American troops leave Afghanistan, struggling economy along with military would collapse. The armed forces of Afghanistan which was organized by United States will not get the proper or even regular pays from the renter country and the absence of sufficient budget will ultimately lead to collapse of the army and those who are trained just to fight will not pick flowers to sale but would definitely choose the gun to fight and they would ultimately fall prey to the non-state actors such as ISIS. The international community and the locals of Afghanistan should cooperate together in order to have peace and stability in the region.