

# 16 Years of US Presence in Afghanistan: Objectives, Strategies and Emerging Scenario\*

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On October 8, 2017, the US invasion of Afghanistan entered the 17<sup>th</sup> year and nobody knows how long it will last. This is already the longest war in the US history and arguably the costliest.

Right now, yet another surge in US troops ordered this time by President Donald Trump is taking place after the earlier failed surges undertaken by the Bush and Obama administrations. This is a mini-surge compared to the ones in the past, but still US troops' strength recently rose to 14,000 from 8,900 and may go up further. As the US is asking Nato allies to contribute more troops, the numbers could rise above 20,000 as 15 countries have agreed to the request. Also, the airpower being put into the battle has increased and the airstrikes have risen dramatically in recent months.

The fighting and reconstruction costs to the US in Afghanistan have been estimated at more than \$1 trillion. The US commitments in support of the beleaguered Afghan government could well go into the 2020s.

## **Post-9/11 US Military Intervention**

The US military intervention in Afghanistan since October 2001, later aided by other NATO member countries, has been partially successful as severe losses were inflicted on al-Qaeda and Taliban were removed from power. Osama bin Laden and many other top al-Qaeda figures were killed or captured and the group found the Af-Pak region increasingly inhospitable. It has been unable to launch big attacks against Western interests and another 9/11 is unlikely. Still al-Qaeda showed its resilience by surviving with severely depleted strength in Af-Pak region and gained

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foothold in Middle East and Africa. Its new leader Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri is alive and hiding somewhere in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has tried to remain relevant by occasionally issuing statements to comment on major happenings in the world.

The decline of al-Qaeda's opened the doors for the Islamic State (IS), which is far more radical and ruthless. Though the IS has been on the retreat after losing territory and fighters, it hasn't been totally defeated. In fact, al-Qaeda has survived while the IS has suffered fatal blows. It is unclear what shape militancy and terrorism will take in future given the rise of a terrorist outfit like the IS from the womb of al-Qaeda. In fact, the war against terrorism could be perpetual leaving the world unsafe for years.

Though the Taliban were defeated within eight to nine weeks, the group managed to survive and is now the strongest ever since losing power. It gained strength in northern, western and central Afghanistan where they were traditionally weak. Taliban remain predominantly Pashtun, but there are now a growing number of Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen Taliban as well operating mostly in northern Afghanistan.

The circumstances forced Taliban to declare that Afghanistan's territory won't be used against any other country if they come into power again. It is a major change from the past when Taliban harbored bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members along with Chechens and militants from other countries. More changes in Taliban outlook could also occur keeping in view their pronouncements after losing power in 2001. They have pledged to safeguard national assets and not to attack projects of public welfare, abstain from using religious police as in the past to force compliance with the strict Taliban edicts, allow the media, including television, to work and even promote women rights, including girls' education on the basis of Islamic teachings. One will have to wait if Taliban really mean what they are saying.

Post-2001, Taliban gradually regrouped and became so powerful over the years that they are now being courted and offered peace talks and a share in power if they give up fighting. These are the same Taliban who were once demonized and shunned. There is now almost near consensus that Taliban cannot be defeated and there can be no peace without making a deal with them.

### **Military Stalemate**

Though there has been a military stalemate in Afghanistan for the last many years, the US has taken long to concede this fact. For the first time

before the onset of the summer of 2017, US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson admitted that there is indeed a stalemate on the Afghan battlefield. Throughout the traditional summer fighting season, both sides unsuccessfully tried to break the stalemate. Intense fighting and stiffening of positions meant there was no real chance of starting a peace process.

The reasons for stalemate were quite a few. The post-2014 security, political and economic transition in Afghanistan took its toll. The drawdown of the NATO forces by December 2014 meant henceforth there won't be any major offensive against the Taliban. A military victory against the Taliban was being ruled out as this couldn't be achieved with the much larger 150,000-strong US-led coalition forces. It was obvious that the Taliban had been underestimated and the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) overestimated.

As the burden of fighting post-December 2014 was transferred to the Afghan forces, they suffered record casualties and desertions continued to remain high. The Afghan Special Forces continued to grow in numbers and occasionally did well in emergencies, but this couldn't be said about the regular forces. The coalition forces mostly fought a defensive war while the Taliban remained on the offensive.

Taliban too suffered heavy casualties, but still managed to attract fresh recruitment. The US military commanders noted that the losses being suffered by the Afghan government forces were unsustainable in the long term. The same comment could be made about the Taliban. However, one is unsure about the sustainability factor as both sides have been fighting for more than three years post-2014 and willing to fight on despite high levels of casualties with Afghans dying on both sides.

The Afghan casualty figures during 2017 were the highest in the war over the past 16 years. An average of 31 Afghan soldiers and policemen plus nine civilians were getting killed daily. The violence caused deaths of 6,000 security personnel and 3,500 civilians in 2016. Only 14 American service members were killed in 2016 and seven in 2017. The US was able to curtail the number of its casualties so there was no adverse public opinion at home that could have happened if more body bags came from Afghanistan.

### **Focus on War Instead of Peace**

Despite the broad consensus that there is no military solution in Afghanistan, all sides continue to focus on war than peace. Taliban

announced new the new Spring/Summer offensive in early 2017 while the Afghan forces too launched operations in certain vulnerable areas. On top of it, the new US policy for Afghanistan and South Asia announced by President Trump on August 21, 2017 was declaration of a new round of war that has no end in sight.

Already, the US is redrawing boundaries of the so-called Green Zone in Kabul (as was the case in Baghdad) to secure US-NATO forces installations, embassies, the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and the UN. This would increase congestion and traffic jams in the already congested Afghan capital having a population exceeding five million and leave the Afghan civilians to their fate. This could mean preparations for a long war. Resultantly, Taliban would strive to plan and execute more attacks and the IS too would continue its assaults.

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Afghanistan in the recent past and failed to accomplish goals. It is said about Trump that one should watch what he does, not what he says. He promised many things during his presidential election campaign, including the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, but went back on promises once he was installed as President. In his urge to succeed where his predecessors failed, he is making a determined effort to defeat the Taliban. It seems that until the end of his first term in office, he won't withdraw US troops

from Afghanistan as this would amount to conceding defeat.

For the record though, the US has seldom won a war. It has in the past intervened in about 100 countries. The US has been fighting for half of the time during past 30 years and has spent \$14 trillion. The wars were launched by both Republican and Democratic administrations.

There is a growing belief among US strategic community that the Afghan government would collapse when NATO forces fully withdraw. The US and its allies cannot allow this to happen. Many believe it is a pragmatic, low-cost policy to keep the level of NATO troops at 20,000 or so for some years and continue military and economic assistance to the

Afghan government to keep it in power. As the US hasn't declared the Afghan Taliban movement a terrorist organization, it would at the same time try to make a peace deal with it after first weakening and dividing the group.

The Afghan unity government, uncertain of its future, is keen to have foreign forces in Afghanistan for as long as possible. President Ashraf Ghani has been arguing that Afghanistan needs continued support as it is fighting war on its soil on behalf of the world against the 21 armed groups having international links.

There is also the looming threat posed by IS, or Daesh. Some Afghan officials have been claiming that the IS has about 25,000 fighters in more than a dozen provinces. They believe more could come to Afghanistan now that the IS has been defeated in Iraq and Syria. The Russian estimate that 6,000 fighters are associated with the IS in Afghanistan. Russia has been justifying its contacts with the Afghan Taliban by arguing they could jointly fight the IS. This also means Moscow doesn't trust the Afghan government to put up much of a fight against the IS. Also, Russia may have concerns about the US commitment to fight the IS in Afghanistan considering the allegations by many Afghans, including former President Hamid Karzai that the Americans are sponsoring Daesh in their country. Such a likelihood appears strange as the IS has been undertaking terrorist attacks against the Afghan government, which is being propped up by the US.

It should be kept in mind that there is lot more support in the US for Trump's Af-Pak policy than his other policies. Trump has reaffirmed long-term US commitment to Afghanistan. It is likely that the US military and economic support for the Afghan government would continue for a number of years, at least until the end of Trump's first term as President. Pakistan ought to take Trump seriously as he is hawkish and can act unexpectedly.

His aides have been saying that Trump thinks out of the box. His new Afghan strategy has heavy input from retired generals, including Secretary Defense James Mattis, Chief of Staff John F Kelly and his National Security Advisor H R McMaster who all served in Afghanistan and saw firsthand how challenging it was to succeed on the battlefield against the Taliban.

General John Nicholson, who had never met Trump and was reportedly being fired from his job by the President for failing to win the

war in Afghanistan, has been entrusted the onerous responsibility to implement his orders and lead his forces to victory.

### **Will there be victory for any side?**

The question uppermost in every mind is whether victory for the US or the Taliban is possible?

If the past is any guide, there is no real chance for the US or Taliban to gain a decisive military victory. However, the Taliban momentum could be slowed down. The use of intensive airpower could stop Taliban from making further gains. Taliban don't have anti-aircraft missiles that would have made a difference as the Afghan mujahideen did when supplied with Stinger missiles by the US and the Blowpipe by the UK to target Soviet and Afghan air force during the 1980s. Taliban have managed to use captured US weapons with some effect. Afghan officials, on the other hand, are waiting in anticipation for the feared American B-52 bombers to return to action to inflict losses on the Taliban.

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use of force by the US-led coalition forces would cause the Taliban to react with more attacks, particularly suicide bombings. Any weakening of Taliban could lead to splintering in their ranks, though it is unlikely to lead to peace. Presently, Taliban aren't ready for peace talks with Afghan government. The Taliban leadership is concerned that joining

the peace process would cause division in its rank and file because Taliban fighters generally oppose peace talks and no agreement could be implemented without their consent.

For the Taliban, the Afghan government as a partner for peace is not acceptable, for the time being at least. Taliban consider President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Dr Abdullah's national unity government as divided and powerless and, therefore, unable to deliver on its promises. Taliban were critical of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar's peace deal with the government so it cannot serve as a model for them. Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami didn't have the kind of military strength that Taliban possess and, therefore, it would be far more difficult for the Afghan government and its biggest supporter, the US, to accept Taliban

demands having far-reaching consequences. Taliban want to talk to the US as they consider it the real power in Afghanistan. The US also has to accept that it is a major party to the conflict and needs to be actively involved in the peace process. On its part, the Afghan government has been arguing that it wants to talk to Pakistan as it believes Islamabad controls Taliban. This is a wrong approach as Pakistan's influence on Taliban isn't decisive enough to make them agree to something that isn't in their interests. Besides, Taliban are no pushovers.

Another problem is the fact that the Afghan unity government is united only in name. The decision-making is affected often due to Ghani-Abdullah differences. Their tussle could intensify in the election for Parliament scheduled for July 2018, as they would want their supporters to win, and more so in the 2019 presidential polls in which they may contest against each other again.

One more hurdle to peace is the presence of unauthorized gunmen in northern Afghanistan. Politicians and warlords control gunmen who collect illegal taxes, demand extortions, settle scores, fight each other and commit human rights abuses. Former Kunduz Governor Omar Sapi said there were 3,000 cops only in Kunduz province compared to about 4,000 unauthorized gunmen in just two districts - Khanabad and Imam Sahib - out of six.

Then there are the civilian contractors, private security companies and the Afghan Local Police, the village militias also known as *arbakis*, who have been accused of committing human rights violations and creating problems for the Afghan government. Precise figures about their strength aren't available, though one previous estimate about private contractors was 27,000. President Karzai during his rule had opposed the creation of the village militias and closed down the private security firms. Ghani has a more tolerant policy in this regard as he has been unconditionally supportive of US measures in the security domain. Though the deployment of Blackwater in Afghanistan for now is off the agenda, its owner Eric Prince has continued to lobby for a role to take over security duties in place of regular US forces.

### **Positives in post-Taliban Period**

The talk about Afghanistan is normally about the negative things while the positives in post-Taliban Afghanistan are often ignored.

It is forgotten that the Afghan unity government, despite differences in its ranks, survived the NATO drawdown post-2014. The

disunity is evident with 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President General Abdul Rasheed Dostum forced into self-exile in Turkey to avoid facing charges of ordering torture and rape of a political opponent. Another stark reminder of the disunity in the government is the formation of a new three-party opposition alliance formed by Dostum's Junbush-i-Islami, Jamiat-i-Islami led by Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani and the Shia Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqqiq even though they are part of the ruling coalition. As the US mediated between Ghani and Abdullah to persuade them to form the unity government, it would make sure that it continues to survive because there is widespread feeling that the alternative would be chaos leading even to civil war.

Another positive is democracy taking roots even though the use of money, strong-arm tactics and rigging is common. Five elections, including three for president and two for parliament, have been held. Though there are no political parties in Parliament as polls are held on non-party basis, political groups have coalesced around personalities or common interest platforms. Afghanistan has a vocal civil society and a robust and fairly independent media.

The Parliament has been asserting itself. The MPs have rejected decrees issued by Karzai and Ghani and even removed ministers through no-trust moves.

There are more Afghan children, including girls, in school than ever and educational institutions up to the university level have come up in record numbers in major urban centers.

The life expectancy increased by at least 10 percent due to availability of healthcare closer to population centers. The quality of life is improving with greater availability of electricity, water, roads and means of communication. The growth of mobile phones and internet has been remarkable.

The unprecedented foreign assistance spurred development activities and created large number of jobs not only for Afghans but also for foreigners, including about 100,000 Pakistanis.

Ghani has made efforts to make landlocked Afghanistan a commercial hub through regional connectivity. He also reduced dependence on Pakistan primarily due to the poor Pak-Afghan relations. There has been a drop in trade with Pakistan from \$2.4 billion in 2012 to less than \$1 billion now (2017), even though one major reason is the drawdown of NATO forces that were heavily dependent on supplies from Pakistan.



## **Too Many Negatives**

Afghan politics is mostly ethnic-based and has been a source of polarization on the basis of ethnicity and language.

Donors complain that corruption is rampant and governance issues remain unresolved. The record foreign assistance and lack of oversight fuelled corruption. Though the government has blamed foreigners for corruption, it hasn't done enough to tackle the problem. Ghani's earlier enthusiasm to fight corruption when he reopened the nearly \$1 billion Kabul Bank scandal is gone despite pressure from donors to do something about it.

The poppy cultivation has spread to almost all parts of the country and opium is being refined into heroin at makeshift factories that benefit both warlords and militants. The narcotics trade is valued at more than \$3 billion as Afghanistan produces more than 90 percent of the opium in the world.

The unemployment rate is high and yet there is shortage of skilled manpower. Desperate Afghans, mostly educated and able to pay human smugglers, constituted the second highest number of illegal migrants after the Syrians trying to reach Europe risking everything in the high seas in search of greener pastures. It could mean many Afghans are losing hope in their war-torn country's future.

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The government hasn't been able to hold the elections for Parliament that were due nearly three years ago. There is still uncertainty that the polls would be held as scheduled in July 2018 due to insecurity, lack of electoral reforms, absence of voters' lists and no firm commitment by international donors to provide the required funds. A further postponement of the elections would fuel uncertainty and prompt the opposition to bring the shaky unity government under pressure to quit.

## **Afghan Economy**

Afghanistan's economy is now worth more than \$20 billion. Foreign aid has played a key role in reviving the economy. The country's main products remain fresh and dry fruits, carpets and precious stones.

The government has tried to turn the informal economy into formal and imposed certain taxes. It is facing resistance as there was no tax culture in the country in the past. The government imposed 10 percent tax on mobile phones, but efforts to introduce VAT failed. It recently increased airline overflight rates to add to its meagre revenue.

Afghanistan's growth rate is going down and the value of its currency, Afghani, has plummeted. The annual revenues rose from \$130 million in 2002 to \$2.1 billion in 2016. It is still roughly half of the \$4 billion needed every year for the upkeep of the Afghan security forces. This money is mostly provided by the US, which would continue funding Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. So much is Afghanistan's dependence on the US military assistance that President Ghani recently told the US media that his security forces would not last beyond six months if the American funding is stopped.

Though international assistance to Afghanistan is declining, it has been assured sustained funding until 2020 as donors have pledged \$15.2 billion. The future beyond 2020 is unclear as the international aid is likely to be curtailed further.

### **Role of Outside Powers**

One of the major causes of the never-ending Afghan conflict is foreign interference in Afghanistan's affairs and the willingness of Afghans to play in the hands of foreigners.

Both the erstwhile Soviet Union and the US invaded Afghanistan to bring regime change. The former kept its troops there for nearly 10 years without success while the latter is struggling even after the passage of 16 years to defeat the Taliban. Both learnt the hard way that deploying troops in Afghanistan is very costly in terms of human and material losses.

For Russia, major concerns are the presence of IS, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Chechen and other militants in Afghanistan, security of Central Asian states and narcotics coming from the war-ravaged country.

The US is worried that its military intervention in Afghanistan should not fail. It aims at sustaining the beleaguered Afghan government in power and preventing al-Qaeda, Daesh, Afghan Taliban and other militant groups from gaining ground. Its other objectives include keeping an eye on Iran, Pakistan and China and exploiting energy resources in Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea.

The US is seeking deliverables from Pakistan by keeping it under pressure through suspension of security assistance, increase in drone strikes and frequent allegations of sheltering terrorists. The most important US demand is that Pakistan should take effective action against Haqqani network, which has been declared terrorist by the UN. This is one major issue that can further derail Pak-US relations. By rejecting US allegations that it isn't doing enough, Pakistan has made it clear it won't do more than necessary in the war against terrorism as making Afghanistan peaceful and stable has to be a shared responsibility of all stakeholders.

Iran isn't mentioned often even though it has developed contacts with Taliban and has been accused of assisting them to harm the US and fight the IS. This alliance could be temporary for short-term goals as the two don't have much in common except their enmity of the US. Iran has particular interest in western Afghanistan near its borders. It has long-standing dispute with Afghanistan on the share of river waters, though this isn't talked about much. Iran is concerned about the growing IS presence in Afghanistan. This is a major reason for backing Taliban to jointly tackle the threat. It is also interested in increased Afghan transit trade through Iran and development of the Indian-funded Chabahar seaport to enable Afghanistan to use it for its exports and imports.

For China, an unstable Afghanistan would become a safe haven for militants, particularly for groups such as the China-focused, Uighur-led East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and IMU, IS, etc. It is keen to assist the Afghan government to be able to extend its writ to ungoverned places where the terrorists could find refuge. However, it hasn't ended its contacts with Taliban and is hoping to persuade them to join the peace process. China has also started mediating between Afghanistan and Pakistan and is willing to extend China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by sponsoring mutually beneficial hydel-generation and communication projects across the Pak-Afghan border. China has also invested in Afghanistan's mineral deposits and could invest more if there is improvement in the security situation.

The Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan are concerned about the impact of the Afghan conflict on their societies. They consider terrorism and drugs originating from Afghanistan as a major threat and want to keep out Afghan refugees.

Turkey has had an abiding interest in Afghanistan, particularly in the Uzbeks and Turkmen who are of Turkish origin. It has been allowing Uzbek warlord Dostum to live in self-exile in Turkey. Besides, dissident

Taliban leaders Agha Jan Mutassim and Abdur Rahman Pazwak are also living in Turkey.

Among Arab countries, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continue to take interest in Afghanistan. Qatar's influence on Taliban is under-estimated. Taliban are grateful to Qatar for hosting their Political Commission and are more likely to listen to Doha's advice than others. Saudi Arabia has distanced itself from Taliban for having harboured bin Laden and refusing to dissociate from al-Qaeda. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have moved closer to the Afghan government owing to their estrangement with Taliban.

India has made a major effort to win influence in Afghanistan through its \$3 billion assistance for reconstruction and development activities. Its strategic ties with the Afghan government in the security sector have put Pakistan under pressure. New Delhi is wary of Taliban and is concerned that return of Taliban to power would provide Kashmiri and Pakistani fighters a base in Afghanistan to destabilize India, particularly Kashmir. Though India won't deploy troops in Afghanistan, it is ready to answer Trump's call to increase development assistance to the war-shattered country. Besides big and high-profile projects, India has also funded small development projects of \$1m each to a village or town based on the community's priority.

Pakistan's role in Afghanistan has been visible and one of the oldest. It has suffered the consequences of the negative fallout of the Afghan conflict. It is still hosting more than 2.5 million Afghan refugees and is blamed for the instability in Afghanistan even though it has been rendered unstable by the Afghanistan-based Pakistani Taliban militants

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and Baloch separatists. Pakistan considers India's growing influence in Afghanistan and the security ties between Kabul and New Delhi as a major threat. Pakistan would want the Afghan government to be neutral instead of being pro-India and to continue to gain access to Central

Asia via Afghanistan. In context of India's role in Afghanistan, Islamabad and Kabul have incompatible views. Pakistan believes India's role is destabilizing while Afghanistan argues that it is a stabilizing factor.

### **Taliban**

The Afghan Taliban movement has faced internal differences and suffered a minor split, but it has by and large remained intact under the command

of one supreme leader and top decision-making Rahbari Shura (leadership council). Taliban are resurgent despite suffering heavy casualties and the loss of two supreme leaders, Mulla Mohammad Omar and Mulla Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor. It is believed Taliban are at the peak of their power after being defeated in 2001 by the invading US forces and their Afghan allies from the erstwhile Northern Alliance. Avoiding defeat at the hands of the far more superior US-led coalition forces over the past 17 years is an achievement.

Though the present Taliban supreme leader Shaikh Haibatullah Akhundzada has no real military background and is considered weak, he is a unifying figure unlike the late Mulla Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor who was divisive. Being a religious scholar and teacher to many Taliban members, he has been able to woo back prominent dissidents such as Abdul Qayyum Zakir, Mulla Baz Mohammad, Mulla Abdul Razzaq, etc to the fold. He got help in this task from his two much younger deputies - Mulla Mohammad Yaqoob, the eldest son of late Mulla Omar, and the Haqqani network head Sirajuddin Haqqani. Though he is dependent in military matters on Sadar Ibrahim, Sirajuddin Haqqani, Mulla Gul Agha, Mulla Abdul Mannan and other top commanders, there is no doubt about his commitment to the Taliban cause. One example given by his followers is that he allowed his son to carry out a suicide bombing to set a personal example of sacrifice.

Authority has been delegated to the Taliban field commanders to plan their operations and do fund-raising. Though they seek guidance from the Rahbari Shura, the commanders are fairly autonomous in making decisions in keeping with local needs in their areas of operations. This suits them as logistics issues and the risks in using satellite and other phones to contact Rahbari Shura could hamper decision-making in the field.

The splinter Taliban faction led by Mulla Mohammad Rasool is small and has become more or less irrelevant. As Mulla Rasool is in Pakistani custody, his group is leaderless and directionless. It lost some leading members to the mainstream Taliban group headed by Haibatullah Akhundzada while others including Mulla Mannan Niazi and Mulla Nangyal have reportedly established contacts with the Afghan government. Its fighters aren't fighting the US or Afghan forces, though in Herat the followers of Mulla Nangyal are engaged in fighting the Haibatullah Akhundzada's men.

Taliban are primarily an armed group and they see the Afghan conflict in military rather than political terms. Taliban aren't convinced

yet that they could achieve their objectives through political means. This could be one of the reasons for refusing to enter dialogue with the Afghan government. With chances of peace talks almost non-existent, there is every possibility that fighting would intensify in the coming months, particularly in the spring and summer when warm weather has traditionally been known as the fighting season in Afghanistan.

### **Trump's Way**

Trump's new policy for Afghanistan and South Asia laid stress on seeking a military victory over the Taliban, but without undertaking nation-building in a country destroyed by nearly four decades of war. Though he left the door open for an eventual peace deal with the Taliban, it won't be pursued until an effective military effort to weaken and defeat the militants is put to test. It would have been better if the political option was tried in the beginning rather than in the end after exhausting the military effort to weaken and force Taliban to agree to negotiate peace with the Afghan government.

Trump's decision to abandon nation-building is a wrong approach as winning the hearts and minds is important to achieve victory in the war against terrorism. It is also debatable that the military effort would defeat or weaken Taliban to the extent that they would seek peace on US terms. In fact, there would be no need for peace talks once the Taliban are defeated.

The US military authorities have been arguing that foreign assistance would give the Afghan forces compelling battlefield advantage against Taliban. They say Afghanistan won't be abandoned to again become a safe haven for militants posing threat to the US and other countries.

At a time when the US and Afghan forces have intensified military action, primarily airstrikes, and attacks by Taliban and the ISIS are on the rise, there isn't much hope of peace. The Russian peace initiative didn't take off because the US refused to become part of it. Bilateral moves by Afghanistan and Pakistan have no chance of success due to their deep mistrust. The Kabul Process launched by the Afghan government being one-sided cannot achieve a breakthrough. China has more goodwill and credibility than others in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and its efforts to mediate between the two countries and work for peace in Afghanistan have better chances of success. However, no peace initiative in Afghanistan can succeed unless the US is fully on board.

The revival of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) after almost a year long gap and its 6<sup>th</sup> meeting in Muscat, Oman on October 17, 2017 raised hopes about its peacemaking potential, but it has yet to meet again due to lack of interest by the Afghan and the US governments. China and Pakistan, the two other members of the QCG, still want to use this platform for facilitating peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban. In absence of any other credible peacemaking forum, the QCG is the only platform that could be used to promote the Afghan peace process.