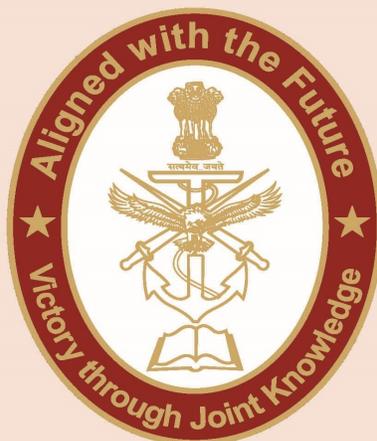


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US DRAW DOWN FROM ASIA: PARADIGMS OF STRATEGIC SHIFTS

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The importance of the West and Central Asia lies in their energy resources which is the single most undeniable driver of the world economy in all its manifestations. Accordingly, this region has been the centre of gravity of geo political rivalry amongst the world powers ever since the oil was found in other wise barren deserts of the Middle East and mountains & steppes of Central Asia. The Western world lead by the Britain initially, and US later have been dominating the West Asia and North Africa in the post world war two era. Whereas, it was Russia who have been controlling the Central Asian oil resources till their federation disintegrated in early 90s, throwing open the region to US and her allies to fill up the strategic space.

The US and her allies have resorted to military intervention in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and known to have politico-military complicity in initiating Arab spring in recent times. The movement, though indigenous in nature, is known to be linked to geo politics of oil and gas in the Afro –Asian region to facilitate installation of pro western world regimes. The Syrian crisis is also a off shoot of the Arab spring and linked to US interests of facilitating oil supply to her European allies from her regional partners, as opposed to Iranian gas who is a close ally of the current Syrian ruling dispensation and enjoys patronage of Russia.

The Russian military intervention in Crimea and later in Syria in Sep 2015 has changed the complexion of the power play and with that Russia has also become a reference point, besides US in the region for any political activity. It has a significant impact on US designs to resolve Syrian crisis. While the US and Russia have been on the same page as regards to neutralizing the ISIS, Russia also stands committed to support the Syrian president alongside Iran. The Syrian rebels who are striving for regime change in Syria on behest of US are on back foot and unlikely to succeed given the ground situation as it stands today. Realizing the futility of continuation of US indulgence in a highly complicated situation mired in political intrigues in the aftermath of neutralizing of the ISIS, the US probably is looking for a different approach.

On other hand, despite 17 years of US intervention in Afghanistan, it does not seem to be yielding the desired results. The US sponsored Afghanistan government doesn't even control the half of the country as on date. There seem to be no light on other side of the tunnel in the face of the Taliban dominance through brute coercion and covert support of few of the regional and as well as global players for their vested interests. The US campaign appeared to be reaching a state of diminishing returns when hyphenated with the changed scenario of reduction of their dependency on Asian resources for oil and gas. The Obama administration, accordingly, had indicated the intentions of US draw down from the Afghanistan which was halted by the Trump apparently to create conditions to pull out from position of strength. The decision of the US president to reduce their military signatures both in Syria as well as Afghanistan needs analysis of tenets of US designs in the Asian landscape.

The 'raison de etre' of the politico-military presence of the US in the West and Central Asia has been her quest for unchallenged and full control of energy resources, the main denominator of the geo political dominance of the world. In order to ensure supremacy of the Western world lead by the US, the regional nations have been subjected to military interventions and regime changes wherever there were indications of resistance and indications of nonconformity to US/ Western interests.

The US chose to befriend Saudi Arab ,the biggest producer of the oil and gas as their main supplier and thereby creating a mechanism to influence the world market. They also contracted Saudi Arab and their allies to sell the oil in dollars which became the currency for energy trade. It has been through such energy control regime that the US dollar stands as the major currency of international trade and commerce generating revenue with every financial transaction indirectly. **Hence, it is a compulsion without compromise for**

the US to perpetuate the primacy of dollar so as to maintain their financial prowess as the world super power.

To do that, the US has been manipulating of the oil production and its sale, thereby using oil as a strategic weapon against her rivals and opponents both for economic as well as political purposes. **It is being done by patronizing oil producing countries who would do their bidding in return of security of their mineral assets, protection of ruling class and subjugation of their regional rivals both in economic as well as military domains.** The US has ensured this self serving mandate by using substantial military force in the areas of potential rebellion, or resistance to their dictates.

As a result, the US is directly involved in regional religious sectarian divide and has been perpetuating interests of Sunni dispensation lead by the Saudi Arab as against their rival Shia countries lead by Iran. The recent pull out of the US from the Iranian nuclear deal is part of this strategic matrix. This is primarily to ensure security of her regional allies Saudi Arab and Israel in face of emerging threat from nuclear calculus of Iran. In that, the US is looking at complete denuclearization of Iran along with rolling back her missile programme as they see Iran as a potential threat to US interests once they move out of the West Asia.

Overall, **the US interest lies in unhindered oil supply, continuation of dollar as the currency of energy trade and control over production and pricing of the oil thereby retain dictatorial leverages over world economic structures and processes.** While the present US politico-military format is well established and meeting all the requirements, the new factor happens to be the indigenous oil production within US which seem to have prompted them to shift gears and change their format of domination of the geo politics of oil and gas. **There seem to be a paradigm shift from military centric control mechanism to economic driven leverages to continue to perpetuate the stated US interests.** The US military with its capabilities of global outreach would continue to play its coercive role whenever and wherever required. In the new scheme everything remains same except US military signatures may be reduced in their areas of interests.

The US has huge reserves of shale gas which was difficult to extract earlier due to non effectiveness of vertical extraction methods against horizontally aligned layers of sub surface rocks. Off late the US has evolved technologies to extract the shale gas, thereby reducing imports. As per one of the reports the prices of natural gas in US has come down to one fourth of what it was a decade ago. The potential of these reserves is large enough to make US as an exporter of oil and gas in times to come. Such an energy adequacy situation facilitates the US to impact the production and prices

thereby ensure continuation of the dollar as the currency of oil market. In fact the degree of control would increase as the entire mechanism would be driven by added strength of their own production and not purely contingent on their energy rich friendly nations in the West Asia.

Apropos, US with their indigenous energy buoyancy do not have compulsion to depend entirely on Saudi Arab and other countries for their energy needs. Hence, there is a case of change of strategy and option of gradual draw down from their existing physical presence. **Besides these factors, there is a strong public opinion in the US to reduce their military signatures world over looking at the avoidable American money and casualties.** This sentiment has been reflective in the political manifestos of the political parties in the recent times. The US president probably has taken a call based on these fundamentals which is a continuum of the previous administration also. **The president Trump has recently stated that the 'US won't be policeman of the world' and he has plans to move out US troops from Syria and Afghanistan.**

Let's face a fact that the US has been a stabilizing factor in most of the conflict zones across the world in general, and in the energy rich Asian region in particular. With the impending draw down, there would obviously be changes in the strategic balance in the region impacting almost everyone in some way or other. **To start with the oil market would be more vulnerable to the push and pull of the market forces with US being one of the stake holders as a supplier of the oil, albeit on their own terms and conditions.**

The regional sectarian divide may get further widened with Russian patronage to Iran and their political influence both in the Syrian as well as CAR regions. The European countries are the most affected party due to Syrian crisis. There are more than 4.5 million refugees from Syria who are sapping their economies, besides impacting on their cultural milieu. Hence, early reconciliation in the Syria is in their interests. Whereas, **with US pull out from the Syrian theatre, the ISIS may well re emerge creating instability impacting on security environment conducive for return of the refugees to their home lands.** The US president is believe to have told Turkish president to handle the ISIS afflictions, if any, once they withdraw. The president of Turkey is reported to have agreed to this proposal.

With full freedom to Turkey, she may play a spoil sport with their stated antipathy to Kurdish people who have been in the fore front in fight against the ISIS. Turkey perceives them as the anti nationals bent upon carving out a separate state for themselves in Turkish southern flank. In case turkey goes after the Kurds who constitute substantial part of Syrian rebel outfit SDF, they may well consider diluting their ante against the Syrian government forces. As

a result, the Syrian rebels, with reduced support may well be prompted to agree to negotiated settlement under UN charter earlier under pressure of both US as well as Russia.

The Russia is likely to occupy the strategic space being vacated by the US and accordingly they would have a fair influence in the energy matrix in the region. In that, the Europeans may have to realign their political equations with the Russia and West Asian countries including Syria and Iran so as to ensure smooth inflow of energy supplies. **In consequence, looking at the ground realities, the European nations have been pressing for early resolution of the Syrian imbroglio, and continue to be part of Iranian nuclear deal and supporting Iran as against US stance on the issue.**

On Afghanistan front, it appears that the US seems to be ready to compromise on Taliban joining the institutions of governance, although under certain terms and conditions. There have been official interactions between the US and Taliban representatives which is a positive sign. The US in her bid for including Taliban in peace process is talking in terms of rehabilitation, job security and other incentives for the insurgents as per media reports. The Russia and China are already in touch with the Taliban separately to bring about reconciliation in Afghanistan. Partial pull out of the US troops may help in some move forward in Afghanistan as it is presumed to be one of the conditions of the Taliban.

While it may take time for Afghanistan situation to get resolved, it would benefit all the stake holders. The Russia would have an opportunity to spread her influence from Mediterranean to Indian Ocean, a long cherished desire since czarist era. China will get a boost to her BRI scheme as regards to her economic expansion to Eurasia and Africa. Pakistan would have rich political dividends looking at their long standing complicity and support to Taliban. The likely success of CPEC which was seem to be on back foot due to security situation in Afghanistan would benefit Pakistan economically. As a consequence, it is expected that Pakistan would get further emboldened in her anti India rhetoric in the changed scenario.

India is unlikely to be impacted due to US pull out from Syria, whereas Taliban in power in Afghanistan may have some negative connotations due to their Pakistani connect. The ongoing development schemes may be impacted in case the new political dispensation takes a skewed view and try to replace it with China or other alternatives. It would be in the Indian interests to reach out to the duly elected new government irrespective of its format and composition on the basis of traditional friendship with the afghan people so as to dilute the negative narratives, i over a period of time.

India, as on date, is not part of ongoing talks except informal participation in one of the meetings under the aegis of Russia. Inclusivity of India in the reconciliation mechanism is a must being a major stake holder in the region. India is one of the major trade partner of Afghanistan and despite insurgency India has carried out large number of development projects benefitting locals. **Chabahar port, constructed by India, has been another landmark strategic connectivity project designed specially for Afghanistan for their trade and access to the Indian Ocean.** Accordingly, the diplomatic channels need be activated to get India on board in this process, lest we miss out on strategic advantage we enjoy with visible developmental foot prints and good equation with US, Russia and Afghan government.

The US draw down would surely impact on the strategic matrix both at the global and regional levels which would warrant recalibrating the political equations where required. The India is reasonably sanitized with her policy of being non aligned by aligning with everyone across the world and her politico-economic leverages. However, this narrative has to be pursued in the light of whatever adjustments are warranted in the changed scenario. While India may be able to handle the economic repercussions, she needs to upgrade her military capabilities by creating structures beyond present defensive doctrine to take care of enhanced threat and concomitant inimical contingencies over land, air, sea, space and cyber domain. Time is at premium in current diplomatic flux which is high on unpredictability and we, accordingly, need to be more than pro active in getting our act together.

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