**A hotchpotch of terror**

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As the Taliban consolidate power in neighbouring Afghanistan, the international community is still grappling with the profound political change sweeping through the war-torn country. A central question for the world is: Did the US and its allies meet the primary objectives of the two-decade-long Afghanistan war?

After the traumatic 9/11 attacks, an enraged American president, George W Bush addressed his nation and expressed his concerns about Afghanistan in the following words: “The leadership of Al-Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan we see Al-Qaeda’s vision for the world. Afghanistan’s people have been brutalised, many are starving and many have fled.

“Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.The United States respects the people of Afghanistan – after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid – but we condemn the Taliban regime.”

President Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, while sending an additional contingent of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan also stated a few clear objectives like “to refocus on Al-Qaeda, to reverse the Taliban’s momentum, and train Afghan security forces to defend their own country”.

Fast forward to 2021, the Biden Administration decided to pullout the US military from the country. The decision was not only risky and hasty, but also inconsiderate on the part of the US commitments made to the people of Afghanistan. The US withdrawal paved the way for a surprisingly easy takeover of Kabul by the same group against whom the US and its allies had been fighting for nearly two decades.

With the US departure, the war-ravaged country is again at the mercy of the Taliban who, after demoralising the Afghan army, are cementing ties with other terror outfits. The terror threat is more likely to grow as hundreds and thousands of jihadis from various outfits have, for years, taken sanctuary in the country.

The Taliban takeover will provide a permissive environment for regional and global terror networks, including Al-Qaeda, to metastasise and spread out their subversive activities across the region. The Doha agreement was a face-saving deal for the US government. The US leadership, in a bid to restore the confidence and goodwill of the people, expressed satisfaction over the Taliban’s assurances to halt the group’s support for Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and ensure that Afghan land is not used for attacks against the US and its allies.

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad also declared that the Taliban were being receptive to US concerns, particularly regarding terrorism and Al-Qaeda. This is, however, a half-baked reality, and the Taliban’s actions continue to vindicate otherwise.

Contrary to America’s optimistic claims, the Taliban are yet to announce, in explicit terms, that they have abided by the commitments to “prevent their membership from interacting with or hosting Al-Qaeda figures,” and the latest report published by the US Defence Intelligence before leaving Afghanistan also states that “the Taliban continued to maintain its relationship with Al-Qaeda, providing safe haven to the terrorist group in Afghanistan.” It lends credence to the fact that the Biden Administration’s hasty withdrawal was a flawed political move, and it will have grave security implications for the country, its neighbours, region and beyond.

It will be increasingly credulous on the part of US policymakers if they believe that the commitments made in the Doha agreement will be complied with in true letter and spirit. The Taliban themselves are divided into various opposing factions with different priorities for the setting up of future government in the country. Even if some factions agree to forge lasting cooperation with the US and its allies against Al-Qaida and other terror outfits, the other factions might show signs of discord and splinter off from key Taliban ranks. It will give birth to a Middle East-like situation, where politically disillusioned Sunnis joined the ranks of Isis and further complicated the security landscape of the region.

In the past, the Taliban engaged themselves in professional diplomatic maneuverings with the West in Doha; carried out a disciplined military campaign to oust the US forces; and held sensible consultations with the previous Afghan government. It echoed a unanimous voice and gave a powerful impression of unity among the rank and file of the group. Now, since their objective has been achieved with the withdrawal of US forces, the Taliban leadership, it is feared, may engage in internecine strife for holding key political slots. Previously, even Al-Qaeda hailed the US-Taliban agreement as its victory because it did not require the Taliban to “publicly renounce Al-Qaeda” and accomplished the long goal of driving out the US forces from the Afghan territory.

Similarly, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an anti-Pakistan terror outfit, is also showing a steady resurgence in the wake of the Taliban seizure of power in Afghanistan. There are reports which estimate the group to be the second largest terror outfit after the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan, with nearly 6,000 insurgents.

When the Taliban took control of Kabul, they reportedly set Maulvi Faqir Muhammed, a TTP leader and close associate of Al-Qaeda’s leadership in Afghanistan, free. TTP’s chief Mufti Noor Wali and Faqir Muhammed have already vowed their allegiance to the Afghan Taliban. The tentacles of the TTP also go beyond Afghanistan to meet other regional terror outfits, like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). On the one hand, where the TTP has increased attacking Chinese citizens in Pakistan, the anti-China East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), has forged closer collaboration with Al-Qaeda, TTP and Afghan Taliban in the war-torn country.

With this hotchpotch of different regional terror outfits showing complex networks of working in Afghanistan, there remains little hope that the withdrawal of the US will herald an era of peace and prosperity in the country.

The terror outfits are emboldened with the Taliban victory over the US and its allies and will show an unprecedented resurgence, posing new threats to the security of the region and beyond. Afghan women and children will continue to become a victim of the Taliban’s barbarity. The US mission, even after the lapse of twenty years, appears to be back to square one.

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