[**Abject surrender**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642331/abject-surrender)

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HUMILIATING retreats are not new to the US, as from Vietnam and Iraq. But its Afghan retreat faces the constant glare of the social media age where instant images sent globally magnify its humiliation. Why should the US fight if Afghans won’t, [President Joe Biden asks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1641142). But the aim to pin most blame on Afghan corruption and lack of spine falls flat. The US has stayed much longer in much richer states in East Asia and the Gulf (where it has bases) as even their much stronger armies may lose to their foes if it leaves. Afghan corruption is a fact, but corruption is also a fact in all poor states. To expect one of the most poor, exploited and divided nations to have clean and lean governance is odd. While blame still accrues to the weak Ashraf Ghani regime, more decisive blame lies elsewhere with stronger states.

So there is its eastern neighbour acting as an idle bystander. But many ask if the Afghan Taliban would have beaten the weak Afghan army without our support. Others are so blinded by their dislike for India that they don’t mind seeing obscurantists imposed on Afghans. Even though educated and from modern sectors, they praise the Taliban, when clearly, 21st-century ‘foes’ like Ghani are better than 17th-century ‘allies’ like the Taliban. Can the Taliban run a modern state? Naya Taliban may fail more badly than naya Pakistan. We pin terrorism in Pakistan on the Ghani-Modi nexus. But Ghani ironically had still jailed dozens of TTP men, who were freed after the Taliban won. Terrorism fell once we conducted military operations in ex-Fata some years ago. It spiked recently with the Ghani regime collapsing as we saw in Karachi, Bahawalnagar and Gwadar. If terrorists find refuge near the border and Afghan Taliban don’t act, terrorism may spike more.

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We still need the US for FATF and IMF issues, although the US no longer needs us to exit or get Taliban into a deal. The West may not see a role for us in moderating the Taliban now given our past mixed help. Some hope China will invest more in Pakistan to exploit Afghan minerals. But China’s poor run with CPEC and terrorist attacks on it may make it think twice. Finally, big currents of autocracy and extremism will reach us from all sides now, as we, a hybrid autocracy already, are now encircled by Sunni and Shia autocracies in the west, a Hindu extremist regime in the east and an atheist autocracy in the northeast.

The US failure in Afghanistan was long in the making.

Yet the most blame lies with US imperialism. The Afghan surrender was not only of the Ghani regime to the Taliban. It was more an abject surrender before obscurantism by world powers that market freedom loudly. The US failure was long in the making: using Islamists against Soviets along with us; unwisely occupying Afghanistan after 9/11 in its zeal to punish Al Qaeda; failing to eradicate the Taliban and develop Afghan capacity; doing much abuse; negotiating poorly in Doha and finally failing to even defend Kabul and manage the exit well.

Afghans deserved a better regime sans US occupation. Yet, despite its failures and US presence, the Ghani one was much better than the Taliban for Afghans, us and the world. It had problems, but all 21st-century ones, that humanity still hasn’t ended like corruption. Replacing and trying to solve 21st-century problems with 17th-century barbarism that the world ended long ago makes no sense. Afghans changed much after the Taliban lost in 2001, with more freedom and education. So even the ‘new’ Taliban may find Afghans, especially women, youth and the diaspora, no longer willing to squeeze into their matchbox-sized imagination for the future. To run the new Afghanistan, they must fill many key posts with those against their regressive views, with likely friction. The Taliban won violently even if with little war. It was no peaceful transfer as some say. The risks of abuses against women and minorities, major displacement, terrorist safe havens and more civil war remain. Already numerous abuse reports are emerging.

The Taliban posed as an anti-US, anti-terrorism group to disarm Russia, China and Iran. But can they honour their pledges now? They may try surviving via drug and trade income and ties with Pakistan, Russia, Iran and China. But it won’t be easy without Western aid. Having failed their aspirations again, the West owes it to the Afghan to link the legitimacy the Taliban desire to: i) an inclusive, tolerant interim set-up, ii) free polls under the UN in six to 12 months, iii) UN monitoring of abuse of women’s and other rights, iv) arms ban in public areas, and v) eliminating terrorists. Pakistan must support these demands. Or else we and the world may find that Afghanistan’s ability to cause global reverberations, despite its impoverished and isolated status, remains intact.

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