**Afghan policy conundrum**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-09-01

THE last American soldier left Kabul on Tuesday, bringing to an end the two-decade-long occupation of Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban have already taken control of the war-battered country and most likely a new political set-up will take shape in the next few days. The seismic changes in Afghanistan over the last few months have jolted geopolitics in the region.

Despite the Taliban`s control over almost the entire country the situation in Afghanistan is still fluid. There is deep anxiety in the region and beyond over the return of Taliban rule. More than any other country, it is Pakistan that should be most concerned. But there seems to be little understanding in the government about how to deal with the shif ting sands across the Durand Line. The confused messaging on the Afghan situation will inevitably land us in dire straits.

It begins with the prime minister whose thoughtless remarks often cause diplomatic embarrassment. Last week, in a speech he implicitly called for recognition of the Taliban government against our stated policy of not going solo on the issue. One wonders whose policy that is anyway.

His premature assertion about the legitimacy of Taliban rule before the group has even formed a government has raised questions about our contradictory position. Not surprisingly, the statement has added to the confusion in our foreign policy that has become a hallmark of the PTI government.

The disarray has never been so pronounced.

It`s a free-for-all with ministers airing their own views on a sensitive foreign policy issue, often contradicting each other. The swift victory of the Taliban has generated euphoria and a sense of triumphalism among many of them. Some are even offering unsolicited advice to the Taliban on what the group should or shouldn`t do. It`s getting more and more bizarre.

Interestingly, the Taliban leadership appears more circumspect about their victory than our `warrior` ministers. There is a mad race to claim credit for the change in Afghanistan to the point of embarrassment. In the lead is none other than our ubiquitous foreign minister whose penchant for appearingon TV channels several times a day and holding f requent press conferences is disconcerting.

Discretion that is the essence of diplomacy is in short supply here. It`s a lethal mix of populism and mediocrity that defines our current approach to foreign policy. The evolving situation in Afghanistan has further highlighted our impetuousness in dealing with issues that require a more cautious and nuanced approach. There seems to be little grasp of the changing regional dynamics and its impending f allout.

There is some logic to speaking less when engaged in sensitive diplomatic negotiations. Every public utterance has some connotation that could adversely affect the environment. Unfortunately, that common sense is missing even among those who are expected to be professionally more astute.

Some off-the-cuff remarks by the national security adviser in recent media interviews have triggered unnecessary controversy. Surely there is always a danger of being misquoted and misrepresented and that is the reason for being more cautious in media interactions. Public retraction and clarifications make things worse.

It`s certainly the most serious challenge f aced by Pakistan on the national security and foreign policy front in recent times. But there seems to be a complete disconnect between the situation on the ground and our narrative. There seems to be no coherent strategy to deal with the emerging situation in Afghanistan and on how to reset our relations with global and regional powers in the midst of fast-changing geopolitics. The dramatic change in Afghanistan could open a window of opportunity but any misstep could also create serious problems for Pakistan.

There is a need to tread a cautious path. Indeed, the Taliban have virtually full control over Afghanistan and we must continue to interact with them. But we should not make any hasty decision to recognise the new Afghan government. We must wait for things to settle down there before taking a collective decision on the issue with other regional countries. There are some valid concerns about militant organisations operating f rom Afghanistanthat need to be raised with the Taliban. But that can be done more discreetly.

More importantly, we must treat Afghanistan as an independent state and refrain from taking any action or issuing statements that could be construed as interference in the country`s internal matters. It should be left to the Afghans to support the kind of government they want. Some of the remarks made by federal ministers do not help in removing that impression.

Surely stability in Afghanistan is extremely important for Pakistan`s national security. But we must also learn from history and not become a party to any power struggle in Afghanistan. We have paid a heavy price for our recklessness in the past. There is still a tendency to take the Taliban for granted. It would be a grave mistake to do so and could harm our future relationship with the new dispensation.

What is most important is to develop a national consensus on our policy on Afghanistan. But there has not been any such effort by the government.

Ironically, it is the military which has taken the responsibility of briefing political leaders on developments. There has not been any debate in parliament on this critical national security and foreign policy issue. It would have been much better had the PTI leadership focused more on policy instead of spending time on media projections.

The end of America`s 20-year war and the return of Taliban rule present new and more serious challenges for Pakistan, which has been a front-line state in the wars in Afghanistan over the last four decades.The countryhas borne heavy costs of the conflict spilling over into its territory.

It requires not only a clear policy direction but also skilful diplomacy to deal with the challenges.

More importantly, much depends on how we communicate our policy to the outside world.

Unfortunately, it has been a diplomatic disaster so f ar with confusing messaging.  The writeris the author of No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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