[**Playing with empire**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649465/playing-with-empire)

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MORE than six weeks since the longest war in US history ended in almost surreal circumstances with the re-establishment of the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’, Washington’s political and military establishment remains embroiled in a war of words both with itself and those who ostensibly ‘aided and abetted’ America’s ‘defeat’ at the hands of the Taliban.

Our own political mainstream is up in arms at the proposed tabling of a legislative bill by 22 Republican senators that explicitly calls for accountability of Pakistan’s role in the 20-year war. But the concurrent testimonies of top US generals and the US secretary of defence in congressional hearings about the Afghan debacle make clear that it is internal contradictions which primarily afflict the declining American Empire.

But first let me put on record what American officialdom is unwilling to acknowledge: Washington’s 20-year war in Afghanistan was certainly not a grand act of futility. A significant chunk of what the independent Costs of War project at Brown University has estimated was an official daily outlay of $290 million on the war in Afghanistan found its way back into the American economy via private defence contractors. The latter’s special relationship with the Pentagon afforded them all sorts of profitable adventures both in the name of ‘counterterrorism’ and ‘reconstruction’. Moral of the story: war generates profits for some, even if it means devastation for others.

The State Department and the White House certainly claimed to have other objectives in Afghanistan, including the hackneyed one of ‘nation building’. It is these ‘other’ long-term goals of the war that did not come to fruition, but it is important to bear in mind that this failure was a long time in the making.

A war-making machine earned the US lots of money.

This is where Pakistan comes into the mix. From 2001, the Musharraf regime was given billions of dollars in military aid by the Bush administration under the guise of the so-called Coalition Support Funds. After George W. Bush and Musharraf both departed the scene in 2008, Washington’s posture shifted. Under the Obama administration, the Kerry-Lugar bill ostensibly shifted aid to Pakistan away from military and into civilian hands, even as our establishment was roundly chastised for patronising the Haqqani Network.

Yet everything shifted again after Donald Trump and Imran Khan became the front men of the love-hate US-Pakistan relationship. In the interim, there was Raymond Davis, the infamous Hussain Haqqani ‘memo’ and many other similar confrontations. In any case, by 2016 the Pentagon intensified the air war even as it decided to bring an end to the physical occupation and started to engage the Taliban — and Pakistan — for a final settlement.

The ‘peace process’ which culminated in the Doha agreement of February 2020 sealed the fate of the US-backed government and cleared the way for the Taliban to retake Afghanistan. The end may have come as a shock for many lay observers, but this week’s testimonies of Pentagon officials make clear that they neither expected the Ghani regime nor the Afghan National Army to survive for all that long.

So herein lies the rub: a declining empire spent 20 years selling the world the story that it was engaged in a principled fight against ‘extremists’, whilst in fact perpetuating a war-making machine that earned plenty of Americans — and a certain segment of the ‘natives’ — a lot of money. Meanwhile, the ‘principled’ war was fought with the support of ‘allies’ that, it was known all along, had close links to the ‘enemy’.

Parallel to all of this, the financialised international economy that is undergirded by the US dollar as global reserve currency and headquartered in Wall Street continued to generate spectacular profits for American and multinational capitalists in ever more unsustainable ways, ultimately tanking with the financial crash of 2007-8. Yet neither the scions of global finance nor the war-making profiteers in and around the Pentagon were willing to call time on policies that continue to keep this teetering empire afloat. Now having withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Pentagon is already invoking the ‘national security’ threat posed by nebulous entities like Al Qaeda and IS, setting the stage for a new albeit less overt phase of imperial assertion.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s own national security apparatus continues to want to play all sides in a complex and dangerous game. For seven decades our ethnic peripheries and working masses have borne the brunt of our trysts with Washington, Beijing and Riyadh, alongside the religious militants we valorise as ‘strategic assets’. We make a fuss when the big boys blame us for their failings, but we refuse to extricate ourselves from imperial umbrellas, make peace in our neighbourhood or give up the profits of our own perennial wars.

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