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**Afghanistan deja vu**

There is a strong feeling of deja vu about Afghanistan in the air. The environment, despite the passage of two decades, is eerily reminiscent of the disorder of the early nineties when a power vacuum led to a civil war in all its visceral ramifications ending with the domination of a new Taliban phenomenon over the enervated Northern Alliance and the rest of the warlords.

What are the parallels that foretell such a scenario? These include a precipitate withdrawal by a global power after losing its game in the fray, an international community undecided about a mechanism to sustain the post-conflict Afghan economy, and a cast of internal power brokers willing to play Russian roulette.

What is the cause celebre of optimism then? There are pointers that things might be different this time around in Afghanistan. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan reassured his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib of America’s intent to keep supporting the Afghan government and the people through financial and security support. Words like ‘inclusive’ and ‘durable peace’ were used in the official statement after the telephone call between the two NSAs – a fact all too reminiscent of similar platitudes in the past.

The counterfactual to this bonhomie of hope is the historical Afghan reality of winning peace through wars. Another hope dampener is the unclear commitments of the international aid community and a yet nonexistent compact between the regional powers about Afghan peace.

The trouble is that the Afghan government needs money and guns while the US needs ground bases for its listening post and counterterrorism needs. Does that counterterrorism need include a reengagement with the trillion-dollar war in Afghanistan? US President Joe Biden’s vociferous advocacy for a winding down of the costly nation-building project in Afghanistan, captured in Obama’s limpid prose in his autobiography, ‘The Promised Land’, indicates clearly the present US administration’s policy thrust. If there was any doubt it was laid to rest by the US president’s statement on April 14 that the war in Afghanistan was never a multi-generational undertaking. The same sentiments were echoed in the US secretary of state’s statement on April 18 – “the partnership is changing but the partnership is enduring.”

What has led to a US withdrawal is a combination of factors including a reappraisal of the national security threats profile according to which competition with China relegates counterterrorism to a lower order threat. The statement by the Afghan Taliban ironically has come fast in the wake of the US NSA’s statement terming the US decision to seek bases in the neighbouring countries as “the mistake of the century”. When the Taliban in the Afghan fray believe that they have a better chance to force the issue through the bullet instead of the ballot ,would they be amenable to a political solution? Do the US and the international community have an appetite for a new war in Afghanistan, risking lives and money? The focus on the Indo-pacific and the China fixation say otherwise.

Another important issue is the Afghan willingness to reach a consensus through an intra-Afghan dialogue. Will that dialogue yield any consensus about the Afghan interim government or will the Taliban wait out the peacemakers till the Americans leave, and then force the issue through brute force? What leverage do regional countries like Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia have on the Afghan factions’ ability to forge a consensus on the future constitutional scheme of political power sharing in Afghanistan? What is the possibility of ideal power-sharing arrangement and what are the potential spoilers to peace? What is the role of the international community and regional powers to shore up the Afghan economy which is aid dependent and suffering what physicians call the war economy cirrhosis?

What does the above portend for Afghan peace? In simple terms, the US departure appears final and interests in Afghan peace are peripheral to its vital national interests. The main dramatis personae in the final Afghan peace denouement would henceforth be the regional countries directly impacted by the Afghan conflict. These countries in order of impact include Pakistan, Central Asian States, Iran, China, India and Russia.

Various commentators on the Afghan situation opine that Afghan society has changed and that it would not be easy for the Taliban to defeat rivals like heretofore. To some extent, it is true because the Afghan Taliban have a broadened outlook due to better exposure to the outside world. Afghan society has also developed more resilience compared to the 1990s when the Taliban filled a vacuum left by warring factions.

The Taliban are also expected to encounter tough resistance by Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, and Hazara ethnicities led by experienced leaders like Dostum, Muhaqqiq, Salahuddin, Rabbani, and Karim Khalili. In Afghanistan’s 34 provinces and provincial capitals, the Ashraf Ghani government is in control of 65 percent of the population with the over 300,000 strong Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. The above makes for a strong opposition but the coalition of the expediency featuring IS, Al Qaeda and TTP on the side of Taliban tip the scales in favour of the Taliban.

If the intra-Afghan dialogue about future power sharing and constitutional agreement amongst Afghans does not succeed, the Taliban are likely to triumph in a protracted civil war. Pakistan and the regional countries have to prepare themselves for such a destabilizing scenario. Regional countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, India and Russia need to form an alliance for Afghan peace sans which the voyage of Afghan peace is bound in shallows and miseries.

The involvement of the international community in the economic sustenance of a war-torn Afghan economy is essential both as a sustenance necessity as well as leverage over any future government in Kabul to adhere to the human rights concerns of the international community. The US meanwhile needs to clearly articulate its future engagement strategy in Afghanistan to clear the mist surrounding its future interests in Afghanistan. Only that clarity would convince the regional countries to help the US with its counterterrorism and basing needs in the region, all in the interest of peace.

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