[US egress from Afghanistan](https://nation.com.pk/09-Jan-2019/us-egress-from-afghanistan%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

Imran Malik January 09, 2019 THE NATION

The US’ Afghan policy is in total disarray and consequently its Afghan Campaign has gone awry too. It suffers from a persistent mission creep, insufficient force levels, meek operational strategies, an uncertain strategic direction, an ambiguous desired end state and a chronic dearth of policy stewardship and coherence at the White House, State Department and Pentagon levels. There is no unity of command resulting in operational paralysis, indecision and rampant U-Turns in the conduct of its Afghan policy. President Trump now appears to be asserting himself (albeit unsuccessfully thus far), over the State Department and the Pentagon to bring this disastrous Afghan Campaign to a “sensible” closure.

President Trump intends to bid for re-election in 2020 and thus needs to declare victory and withdraw from Afghanistan, well in time. His latest conciliatory overtures towards Pakistan confirm this and clearly establish its centrality and inevitability to any US-led solution to this Afghan imbroglio.

The US has three options for dealing with the Afghan issue. One, a perpetuation of the current military and political situations within Afghanistan and in the region. Two, cut and run, leaving Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Pakistan Region (APR) and the Heart of Asia comprehensively destabilised. Three, leave in an organised manner with a stable, economically viable Afghanistan secure within a peaceful region.

The first option will persist till the three centers of power in the US Administration emphatically decide on either continuing or bringing to a closure their failed Afghan Campaign.

In the cut & run option the US lacks a well-defined exit strategy. None of the models it has in front of it inspire any confidence. Afghanistan can ill afford to undergo a Vietnam or a repeat of the humiliating Soviet departure from Afghanistan. In either instance, the TTA/HN will run riot toppling the NUG and smashing to smithereens the weakened ANDSF in no time. If the US ditches Afghanistan as it dumped and abandoned Pakistan in the post-Soviet withdrawal period, then the destabilisation and unrest will be endless. So, any impetuous US withdrawal from Afghanistan will remove the stabilising factor from it and send it and the APR into a fatal tailspin. The resultant power vacuum will invariably suck in China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and even peripheral India in a series of relentless ingresses, each seeking to secure its own national interests. Afghanistan, in the meanwhile, will implode as the TTA/HN makes the final push to snatch power from the isolated and weakened NUG. The NUG and ANDSF, the warlords and criminal groups and the various ethnicities and terrorist entities will all add to the mayhem. In this state of total chaos and confusion, with every one fighting every other one, Afghanistan might break up into myriad fiefdoms all vying for self- preservation, power and influence. Thereafter, the weaker ones might form unions on ethnic basis to forestall swamping by the more powerful ones. The literal balkanization of Afghanistan, on ethnic basis, would thus be consummated! It will also leave, for perhaps the first time, the US with minimal to negligible presence and control in mainland Asia starting from Syria, Turkey to Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, CARs, India on to Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines and onwards. (State Department’s worry!). It would be an ignominious defeat for the mighty US military and a great loss of face, power, prestige and clout globally, too. (Pentagon’s worry). US’ sphere of influence will be severely curtailed within Asia, leaving only the extremities of West and East Asia under its influence and diktat. A most unfavourable option to follow!

In the third option if the US wants to leave Afghanistan in an orderly, organised manner then a political settlement between the TTA/HN and the NUG is unavoidable. To that end they must first talk to one another and importantly bridge the vast gulf between their political philosophies and envisioned systems of governance. This is key to the success of the peace process. The TTA/HN desire the imposition of Islamic Sharia while the NUG prefers a western style parliamentary democracy. Unless these two mutually exclusive political philosophies and their adherents find some common ground there will be no peace, no elections and no egress for the US. Either both should agree to the current constitution in force or devise a new constitutional framework, a new system of elections, governance and government acceptable to both. A hybrid system of government/governance will thus emerge. This decision can only be arrived at by the Afghans themselves. Consequently, a Multiparty Coalition/National Government could be inducted to coincide with the withdrawal of at least 75 % of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. The remainder would be required for strategic balance and peace within the country. This Multiparty Coalition/National Government may rule for three years after which free and fair elections be held under the auspices of the UN. The party/parties returning to power may then form the government, amend the Constitution, if required, legally. In this case the US will be able to retain some semblance of influence in Afghanistan and the region at large.

A sensible closure of the Afghan Campaign is predicated upon a stable Afghanistan with a strong government, a viable economy and neutralised terrorist outfits. The US approach suffers from a fatal flaw currently - it seeks to pacify the TTA/HN only without tackling the plethora of terrorist outfits like IS, Al Qaeda, TTP, JuA, IMU etc, criminal gangs, drug mafias and so on. It does not plan a reconstruction of Afghanistan, either. A partial solution will be worse than no solution at all!

Regardless of the option the US chooses the TTA/HN will hedge its bets; it has not fought for seventeen years and more to finally share power. Rather, it will always move decisively to snatch and consolidate total power for itself at the first opportunity. Period.

Afghanistan’s future thus hangs in the balance! The competing interests of President Trump’s re-election bid, the compulsion for the US to secure its vital interests in Asia and the deep and silent moves of the TTA/HN to grab power will make for a fascinating finale to US’ Afghan Campaign - if at all!

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