**Discouraging portents**

**[Malik Muhammad Ashraf](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/malik-muhammad-ashraf)**

July 09, 2021

As the US and NATO troops are on their way out of Afghanistan, portents with regards to peace returning to that war-ravaged country in the post withdrawal period are not encouraging to say the least. The country is poised to drift into factional fighting and probably a civil war with no agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government with regards to the political future of the country.

The Taliban have reportedly captured many northern districts; over 1000 Afghan troops have fled into Tajikistan and the Afghan government is considering launching a counter-offensive against the Taliban. There are also reports of government troops surrendering to the Taliban. The Taliban are inching closer to the provincial capitals in their southern stronghold of Kandahar and Helmend.

The Taliban, inebriated by their successes against the Afghan troops, are probably mulling the prospect of a complete victory and taking charge of the affairs of the country for enforcing Shariah instead of discussing a power-sharing arrangement with the Afghan government. The Afghan government also seems inclined to fight it out with the Taliban till the last man.

[PIA announces to operate special flights for Najaf](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jul-2021/pia-announces-to-operate-two-special-flights-for-doha)

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his governing partner and reconciliation envoy Abdullah Abdullah recently visited the US and met President Biden who told them, “Afghans are going to have to decide their future, what they want. We are going to stick with you and we are going to do our best to see to it you have the tools you need.” What kind of tools will the US give to the Afghan government is not yet clear. However, the prospects of the Afghan government holding against the Taliban in case no reconciliation takes place look very bleak even if the US continues to extend support to it. If the US could not defeat the Taliban with all its military might and presence of thousands of troops on Afghan soil, how could it help the Afghan government to resist their onslaught for long?

It is indeed a very worrying situation not only for the people of Afghanistan who have borne the brunt of the conflict for the last four decades but also neighbouring countries of Afghanistan who also have been affected by the spillover of the situation in Afghanistan. About 241,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan conflict with more than 71,000 civilians. If there is no settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government more Afghans will be killed. The people of Afghanistan deserve and need peace and the leadership of the Taliban and the Afghan government owe it to them.

[Qureshi, Blinken discuss bilateral relations over phone call](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jul-2021/us-to-continue-cooperation-with-pakistan-on-afghan-peace-process-blinken)

The continued fighting in Afghanistan will not only lead to more Afghan casualties but will also cause an exodus of the Afghan people to neighbouring countries who will have to cope with it, more so Pakistan which has already been hosting 2.8 million documented and undocumented Afghan refugees, making it the second-largest refugee population in the world after the Syrians in Turkey. Pakistan has worked so hard in facilitating the peace deal between the Taliban and the US as well as the intra-Afghan dialogue to find an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation in that country.

Peace in Afghanistan is also pivotal to regional connectivity and shared economic prosperity for which there exists enormous potential. Therefore all regional countries need peace in Afghanistan to eliminate terrorism as well as ushering in a new era of cooperative economic development. After the US leaving Afghanistan in a lurch, regional countries have a greater responsibility to play a role for reconciliation in that country before things get out of hand. Prime Minister Imran Khan, while addressing a ceremony to inaugurate the Gwadar Free Zone II on July 5, rightly said, “We all need peace and stability to prevail in Afghanistan. I spoke to the Iranian President and I told him that Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries should push for a political settlement in Afghanistan. Civil war will hurt Afghanistan the most and it will also have an effect on the neighbouring countries.”

[PNS to visit Naval Base Portsmouth on July 18](https://nation.com.pk/09-Jul-2021/pns-to-visit-naval-base-portsmouth-on-july-18)

That would indeed be an excruciating undertaking in the permeating circumstances. The Taliban seem adamant on an Islamic system of governance in the country and would not settle on anything less than that in a negotiated settlement. The Afghan government and its western supporters abhor the prospect of Taliban having their way. But it is worth trying it in the interest of peace and security in the region. In my considered view, regional countries, instead of mediating for an agreed political arrangement between the Taliban and the Afghan government must try to make them agree on holding general elections under the auspices of the UN and leave it to the party winning the franchise of the Afghan masses to promulgate the system of governance that it wants to enforce. This will leave no room for any stakeholder to begrudge the outcome of the decision of the masses and settle the issue once for all.

In the backdrop of the peace deal between the US and the Taliban it was basically the responsibility of the Afghan government and the Taliban to restore normalcy in the country. Unfortunately, while the regional countries including Pakistan are striving hard to see the return of normalcy in Afghanistan and a settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government, there are certain elements which are out to spoil the chances of peace in the country. India is playing the role of a spoiler by providing support to terrorist outfits in Afghanistan and forging a nexus with the TTP, ISKP and NDS. A stable Afghan-Pakistan border is against her interests. A corrupt Afghan leadership is also thwarting chances of peace in the country. Selected elite in Afghan government and NDS is clinging to power even at the cost of peace. The Afghan government has no credibility as under it the country has seen unparalleled violence and instability. The inflexibility shown by the Taliban and their refusal to suspend the hostilities is also a hindering factor.

[Syed Zahoor Agha takes oath as 25th Balochistan governor](https://nation.com.pk/09-Jul-2021/imran-ismail-take-oath-as-33rd-sindh-governor-on)

For the Afghans it is an historic opportunity to end the conflict which has led to destruction of infrastructure as well as loss of thousands of Afghan lives. Pakistan and regional countries have been and will continue to support the Taliban and Afghan government in hammering out a solution and also help them rebuild the country after the US forces complete their exit. Grabbing this opportunity would not only lead to a win-win situation for all the Afghans but also the countries of the region, paving the way for shared regional prosperity and peace. History will never forgive them if they fail to come up to the expectations of their people and the countries in their geographical proximity.