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**For lasting peace**

It is said that a clever general in the face of a defeat declares victory and retreats. President Biden’s decision announced on April 14 to complete the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 is actually an indirect admission of the failure of Washington’s Afghanistan policy.

American leaders and spokesmen are trying to convince the world that the US retreat from Afghanistan is taking place following the achievement of the objectives of its military invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. This assertion is far from the truth which is much more complicated.

Encouraged by the easy defeat of the Taliban government in 2001 following the US invasion of Afghanistan and swayed by the hubris of the neo-conservatives, the Bush administration embarked upon the task of nation-building in Afghanistan going far beyond the objective of defeating Al Qaeda. As announced by Bush in April, 2002, the original aims of the US invasion of Afghanistan were threefold: to defeat and dismantle Al Qaeda; to impose a government of Washington’s choice on the Afghan people in place of the Taliban government; and to rebuild Afghanistan with a stable government and as “a better place in which to live” according to American lights.

The US has achieved considerable success in defeating and degrading Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, the government that the US is leaving behind in Kabul is far from stable because of the growing Taliban insurgency. The Taliban, who now control almost half of the territory of Afghanistan, are likely to expand the area under their control as the US and Nato military withdrawal from the country proceeds. The possibility that the Taliban may defeat the US-installed Afghan government and bring most, if not all, of the Afghan territory under their control after the completion of the US military withdrawal cannot be ruled out. If the latest reports coming from Afghanistan are to be believed, the process of the gradual erosion of the authority of the present Afghan government may already have begun. Further, because of the conservative and tribal character of the Afghan society, American efforts to impose on Afghanistan Western cultural preferences and values have fallen short of their goal.

The US military retreat from Afghanistan is not surprising. The government that the US established in Afghanistan under the Bonn Agreement of December, 2001 alienated not only the Taliban but also most of the Pashtuns who constitute about half of the population of the country. Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British ambassador to Afghanistan from 2007 to 2009 in his book, ‘Cables from Kabul’, recognized “that the Bonn settlement that had followed (the Taliban defeat) had been a victors’ peace from which the vanquished had been excluded; and that the constitution resulting from that settlement could last as long as the West was prepared to stay in Afghanistan to prop up the present disposition.”

The US for a long time also committed the strategic blunder of placing reliance on its military might rather than negotiations with the Taliban and a political settlement through an intra-Afghan dialogue to ensure durable peace in the country. This proved to be a colossal mistake entailing the death of over 2400 American soldiers and the cost of more than $1 trillion in its 20-year war effort in Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban agreement of February, 2020, which envisaged the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, virtually acknowledged the failure of the unrealistic and heavily militarized American policy previously pursued in Afghanistan. There were only two conditions attached with the complete US military withdrawal: the Taliban would engage with the Afghan government in a dialogue for a peace settlement and would not allow Al Qaeda or any other terrorist organization to use Afghan soil for terrorist activities against the US and its allies. The intra-Afghan dialogue has made little progress. Meanwhile, the Taliban’s attacks against the Afghan government and other targets have continued.

It is noteworthy that two American presidents have supported the decision to withdraw the American forces from Afghanistan within this year. President Trump set the deadline of May 1, 2021 for this purpose. President Biden has merely extended the deadline by a few months for the sake of an orderly withdrawal. This shows that there is broad political support for this purpose in the US despite the opposition of the American security establishment. The important question now is what kind of Afghanistan the Americans will leave behind them: a peaceful and stable Afghanistan or an unstable Afghanistan in the grip of a bloody civil war.

The interest of the people of Afghanistan, its neighbors and the international community obviously lies in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. A civil war in Afghanistan will have disastrous consequences for the people of Afghanistan who have already suffered enough over the past four decades. The civil war may also allow international terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS to entrench themselves in Afghanistan. Further, it may suck in Afghanistan’s neighbors thus endangering regional peace and connectivity. Pakistan, which would directly suffer from the adverse consequences of a civil war in Afghanistan, should play a lead role in encouraging an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process.

However, keeping in view Afghanistan’s history and the proclivity of the Afghan protagonists to reach for the gun instead of focusing on the goal of a political settlement through dialogue, the possibility of a full-blown civil war in the aftermath of the American military withdrawal cannot be ruled out. Such a turn of events will not only prolong the sufferings of the Afghan people but would also endanger regional peace and progress, especially if Afghanistan’s neighbors get sucked into the Afghan civil war. It is imperative therefore that while encouraging a peace settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, Afghanistan’s neighbors, especially Pakistan and Iran, must coordinate their Afghanistan policies and refrain from interference in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.

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