**Of freedom fighters and the Afghan debacle**

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The Afghan freedom fighters could never have imagined that they would gain control of so many districts with such ease, and that, too, mostly around the provincial capitals of the country. After all, they are much smaller in numerical strength — just a few thousand — compared to that of the standing Afghan National Army (ANA) that boasts a strength of around two hundred thousand. Nevertheless, insurgent forces are now holding vast swathes of the country. The dictum that no foreign power can subdue for long the valiant Pashtun fighters has once again proved true.

Yet are these freedom fighters, who undeniably defeated the most modern and powerful army of the world, all Taliban per se? The confusion intentionally sown by the international news media about the Taliban, ISIS and Afghan freedom fighters needs to be addressed. The Pashtun freedom fighters have survived for centuries while ISIS, as well as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and other militant groups remain the fabrication of the western powers to suit their global interests. However, some groups are fighting for a common cause — winning freedom from foreign military occupation in this case — and may therefore rally under a single banner.

Now that foreign troops are pulling out of Afghanistan earlier than planned and the survival of the present government seems threatened, President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah flew to the US to meet President Joe Biden. During the meeting at the Oval Office, both Afghan leaders donned their best grovelling smiles to listen to what Biden had to say. Biden even called them ‘two old friends’. Recall how George W Bush said that he and General Pervez Musharraf were “tight” when Pakistan was roped in to assist the US in its ‘war on terror’. But what Biden advised —“Afghans are going to have to decide their own future” — must have disappointed the Afghan leaders. This was not what the duo had flown thousands of miles to hear.

When Joe Biden explained to Ashraf Ghani how winding down the Resolute Support Mission would mean transitioning to a new relationship with Afghanistan and Afghan forces, the statement reminded of George Orwell’s essay, ‘Politics And The English Language’. Orwell wrote that when certain hard and bitter realities were intended to appear less serious, suitable euphemisms were used to make them palatable for public consumption. Biden’s statement about ending the Resolute Support Mission and ‘Afghans are going to have to decide their own future’ essentially means accepting defeat.

The Americans are known for ditching those who helped them in their hour of need. President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah should worry about their own safety before it’s too late. How does Dubai sound?

However, some regional countries want American troops to stay in Afghanistan. These nations apprehend that the unrest caused by the armed power struggle that will invariably ensue once US troops depart from Afghanistan, will most likely spill over into neighbouring states. But the Americans have lost the nerve to continue fighting this forever war, after sinking $2.26 trillion; not to forget the loss of thousands of their soldiers. One out of five soldiers returning from Afghanistan suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD), according to a Rand Corporation report.

The mental health of many US military veterans and active duty soldiers has been impacted to such an extent that suicide has become common for these groups. Indeed, writing in the New York Times back in 2019, Carol Giacomo disclosed that more than 45,000 veterans and active duty service members had killed themselves over a six-year period. Although military personnel are trained to ‘shoot to kill’, most of them must have a conscience and a sense of self accountability within themselves. For instance, how could they kill innocent civilians by indiscriminate bombing and shooting as if on target practice? Spilling innocent blood whether in Afghanistan or Iraq must take its toll on the subconscious, hence the suicides.

According to the US-based Costs of War Project, which is run by a team of 50 legal scholars, legal experts, human rights practitioners and physicians, the US had to borrow so heavily to fund the war in Afghanistan that the interest alone totalled some $530 billion. Washington has also paid $296 billion in medical and other care for veterans. It will continue to pay both those expenses for years to come. The same report reveals that the Afghan government kept secret its own army’s death toll — ranging between 66,0000- 69,000 — to avoid undermining troop morale. Soldiers are now deserting ANA faster than ever imagined.

Those Afghans who spied for the US military are in dire straits. The Wall Street Journal, in its June 22 edition, quotes how a gentleman called Rehmat Khan had spied for the CIA and wanted to flee to the US. He claimed that he had spent almost a decade working for the agency in the remote border areas of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, he was unable to prove this and is therefore ineligible for a US visa. There are many Rehmats in Afghanistan. The Americans are known for ditching those who helped them in their hour of need. President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah should worry about their own safety before it’s too late. How does Dubai sound?

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