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**Peace for Afghanistan**

Afghans are once again at the crossroads of their destiny. This time too, their ‘saviours’ are at the forefront deciding their fate. But with little viable choices at hand, they are still shuffling their cards.

Americans, fed up with this ‘forever’ war, are no doubt desperate to end their longest-running conflict and shift energies towards the potent challenges arising from China and Russia.

But the exit of headstrong Donald Trump – the architect of the US-Taliban deal – and the advent of Joe Biden – a supposed defender of human rights and democracy – has made the way out more complicated.

Another twist, which may further obfuscate the entire exercise, has come in the form of the new US administration’s decision to continue with the overly cordial gestures towards India in a bid to counter the rising global and regional influence of China.

Irrespective of all the rhetoric on the Afghan peace process, first of all one has to realise that the Taliban are not negotiating from a point of weakness, so any setup that would see their dominance compromised would not work for them, at least in the long run, unless the current scenario changes.

So, even in the off chance the Taliban are persuaded to extend rights to women and other liberties to the population at large, it would be naive to see such achievements through the rosy-coloured glasses of a champion of democracy. As the Taliban likely understand, if they back away from their brand of political Islam and cede territorial control, it would prove a death knell to their movement. So the Taliban would never risk going so far in implementing human rights that are palatable to the West, and which could embolden their rivals like the more radical Islamic State to chew into their support base.

Therefore, the success of an Afghan endgame, among a number of factors, would depend on how patiently the Biden Administration deals with the aggressive scrutiny of a Taliban-inclusive rule, especially in terms of the form of government, and women and minorities rights and public liberties. Biden would also have to be ready to brave fierce criticism from within his own ranks, as well as Western governments, media and human rights groups.

America’s Nato allies have expressed their willingness to stay in Afghanistan longer if the Americans remain too. Recently, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, at a meeting of Nato’s foreign ministers, said they could not afford the risk of the Taliban trying to gain power by military means. Biden has already expressed it would be “tough” for the US to meet the looming deadline.

This time around, it is unlikely the world is going to take its eyes off Afghanistan. So, it is high time the Taliban learned from their previous mistakes and looked forward instead of repeating their regressive and isolationist policies; enforcing regressive customs in the garb of religion would make it more difficult for the international community to digest them.

Another challenge for Afghan peace would be how far Biden yields to India’s demands over its influence in any future Afghan regime and limiting Pakistan’s role in the rebuilding of the war-ravaged country. Pakistan, which has been bearing the brunt of unrest in Afghanistan for decades, truly wants the Afghan peace process to go ahead. Peace in the region is vital to reap the maximum fruits of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in order to revive Pakistan’s struggling economy.

Moreover, it needs to be understood that no deal leading to the withdrawal of foreign troops can right away achieve the restoration of absolute peace in a country which has been torn apart by decades of unrest. The restoration of peace and stability would need to be a continuous process which may take years or maybe decades. The impending endgame would disappoint those who are looking for a quick fix to the Afghan conundrum.

International political and economic support to create an enabling environment for a new regime would be imperative to bring the war-battered country back on its feet. Repatriation and rehabilitation of hundreds of thousands of refugees, especially from Pakistan, and the clearing of mine-infested terrains and an end to the drugs trade would require long-term engagement.

The time is running out for Biden to salvage the deal agreed by his predecessor in February last year, as an adverse impact of Taliban’s Spring Offensive could draw intense criticism for the new US administration over a Taliban-inclusive arrangement. Such a situation could make it tougher for the US to follow through on an agreement.

The Biden Administration at the moment is reviewing Trump’s pact with the Taliban, which Biden recently termed “not a very solidly negotiated deal”. Biden might gamble on the pull-out deadline in order to secure more guarantees from insurgents about a future governance framework.

Despite all odds, a thaw in Indo-Pak relations can prove to be a milestone for lasting peace in South Asia that would complement peace efforts in Afghanistan. A recent media report claiming that the UAE is brokering a secret Pak-India peace roadmap is a glimmer of hope.

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