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**Regional concerns**

It was the late 80s when the Soviet Union pulled back its troops from Afghanistan. Today, a similar situation is being witnessed as the long-stretched ‘war on terror’ comes to an end as the US withdraws its forces from Afghanistan.

The Taliban have started to reclaim major areas of northern Afghanistan. Also Panjwai, a key district in the southern province of Kandahar fell to the Taliban just two days after the US forces left Bagram air base which is close to Kabul. Having lack of ammunition supply, the Afghan forces are left with no option but to flee; hundreds of them have already fled to Tajikistan as the Taliban march towards the north.

The majority of the districts have been recaptured by the Taliban without any fight, and the writ of the Afghan government is shrinking day by day. This startling situation and the withdrawal of US forces has raised concerns among the countries in the region. Meanwhile, President Ashraf Ghani is losing grip as Afghan forces are crumbling across the country.

So far, the Biden Administration has not bothered to talk with Prime Minister Imran Khan on the recent major developments, which will definitely have severe effects in Pakistan. In the past, the Taliban penetrated and influenced the northern borders of Pakistan and were the key reason for instability here.

Recently, there was a national security discussion in parliament regarding the changing atmosphere in the north. The common response from all across the country was to not provide any base to the Americans, and avoid being a party in the current scenario as Pakistan with a weak economy cannot afford to engage in a direct conflict with the Taliban.

It is not just Pakistan but other stakeholders of this region like China and Russia are also closely monitoring the situation; so far, they have not come up with a clear stance. US intelligence predicts the fall of Kabul in six months post US withdrawal. Ghani’s visit to the US was not fruitful as the Biden Administration is not keen to lend further support to the fragile Afghan government; it seems the Americans were already conducting backdoor diplomacy with the Taliban and silently agreed to their takeover. If not, then what was the point of calling back troops at this stage, knowing that the Taliban have gathered control in most parts of the country. After the Taliban take over Afghanistan, there are possibilities that the country might turn into a safe haven for terror outfits from across the world, making this region more hostile and increasing tensions along the Pak-Afghan border.

The Taliban are anti-democratic and will try to place hurdles in the democratic process in Pakistan for which the stakeholders in Pakistan must gear up and keep our own house in order so that external forces do not get a chance to spoil the hard-earned peace. Ironically, Prime Minister Imran Khan as usual remained absent from the national security meeting, sending out a wrong message.

Pakistan has lost thousands of innocent lives, including soldiers and political leaders like Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto during the ‘war on terror’. The situation is very sensitive, hence every step must be taken with collective discussion and wisdom. The Pak-Afghan border fencing will decrease the influx of terror but there is still a lot to be done as there are many like-minded groups and parties in Pakistan that have a soft corner for the Taliban. The unfolding events are making it obvious that sooner or later Kabul will fall to the hands of the Taliban. Therefore, it is important for Pakistan to engage with the US so that the aftereffects of the withdrawal are nominal.

The international powers need to revisit their Afghan policy and put in sincere efforts for stability in Afghanistan other than the use of force. In the past, the gigantic Soviet and the powerful Nato could not bring permanent stability and change in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan needs a solid foreign policy which should be in its own interest as the country will be facing the repercussions of any instability in Afghanistan.

The writer is a columnist and social activist.

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