**The Afghan Imbroglio**

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The sudden fall of Afghanistan in the hands of the Taliban has come as a surprise, even for the US. The US administration expected the three-hundred-thousand Afghan Army, which it had trained and equipped with all kinds of weapons to resist the onslaught of the Taliban while the dialogue for political reconciliation continued. This was also envisaged in the US-Taliban peace deal.

However, I have a sneaking feeling that the US never wanted peace returning to Afghanistan after it had realised the impossibility of its total military victory against the Taliban. The peace deal was only meant to ensure the unscathed exit of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. The pre-mature pull out without the conclusion of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution to the conflict did not happen as an impulsive reaction to the situation.

The US probably had decided to use the volatile situation in Afghanistan to sabotage the CPEC as a part of its strategy to contain China. It concluded that the chances of the success of the dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan government were very slim and the continued confrontation in Afghanistan would serve their purpose to check the burgeoning influence of China in the region. That plan has also fallen apart with the abject surrender of the Afghan forces and the collapse of the Afghan government.

However, the US and its allies will never give up their efforts to keep Afghanistan boiling. They are pretending to vie for a political settlement in Afghanistan: the formation of an inclusive government that guarantees the rights of women and minorities as well as the readiness of the Taliban to ensure the Afghan territory is not used for acts of terrorism.

Ahmed Massoud, leader of National Resistance Front Afghanistan, has announced a resistance against the Taliban and also sought US help in this regard. In an opinion piece for The Washington Post, he wrote, “I write from the Panjshir Valley today, ready to follow in my father’s footsteps, with Mujahideen fighters who are prepared to once again take on the Taliban. We have stores of ammunition and arms that we have patiently collected since my father’s time, because we knew this day might come.”

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Massoud is the son of Ahmed Shah Massoud, who fought against the Taliban in the past and was killed on September 9, 2001, by Al-Qaeda assassins.

The US and its allies may not openly extend any help to the anti-Taliban forces, but they would very much prefer their clandestine support against the Taliban. The possibility of such a scenario re-emerging is very much there as Afghanistan is a country of multiple ethnic and cultural entities with tribal characteristics.

Though the Taliban have announced the end of the war in Afghanistan and promised to form an inclusive government that protects the rights of women and minorities as per Islamic principles. But, translating them into concrete actions would indeed be an arduous task. Particularly, the formation of an inclusive government would be the most difficult and convoluted undertaking for them. Given the resistance announced by Massoud, this task looks even more problematic.

India has made an investment of more than $3 billion in Afghanistan for infrastructural projects, such as roads, dams, laying transmission lines, solar panels in remote areas, telecom networks and substations besides the technical and technological support. Those investments now appear in jeopardy as India has no rapport with the Taliban. They consider India an enemy for her support to the Northern Alliance when they were fighting against it. India has already been involved in scuttling efforts for peace in Afghanistan as a strategic ally of the US. The US-India nexus to sabotage CPEC is a well-known reality. It could again be the likely partner of the US in fomenting internal strife in Afghanistan. The former prime minister of Afghanistan and Hezb-e-Islami chief, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in an interview with Radio Pakistan, warned India to refrain from using Afghan soil against Pakistan. He remarked, “Hostile agencies of foreign countries are busy instigating the Afghan people to revolt.”

Because of the foregoing possibilities, the Taliban and other political leaders must act prudently and join hands to thwart the conspiracies designed to prolong the armed conflict. A collective effort is needed to convince Massoud to join the new political setup. All regional countries must also play their role in ensuring that Afghanistan does not relapse into factional fighting.

The Taliban, who now control almost all of Afghanistan except Panjshir, need to be more flexible in accommodating other stakeholders. It is indeed a great test for them. The global community is also expecting them to fulfil their promises. Their failure to do so may create difficulties. They must realise that the recognition of their regime by the global community and its support for rebuilding the devastated infrastructure and keeping the country economically viable, is imperative.

It is gratifying to note that almost all regional countries, including Pakistan and the OIC, are more than willing to support peace efforts in Afghanistan and extend assistance for rebuilding. It is a now-or-never opportunity for peace in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has seen unprecedented turmoil over the last four decades, leading to the displacement of millions of Afghans and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. The Taliban and other political leaders owe it to their people to restore peace in the country.

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