**The Milieu of Turmoil in Afghanistan**

[Malik Muhammad Ashraf](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/malik-muhammad-ashraf/)

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All efforts by the regional and international stakeholders for peace in Afghanistan seem to be going down the drain as fighting between Afghan forces and the Taliban intensifies. As I write these lines, the Taliban have reportedly captured five provincial headquarters including Shebergan, capital of Jawzan province, home town of the war-lord Abdul Rashid Dostum. Before the new round of hostilities, Taliban mostly controlled the rural areas of the country. In view of the evolving situation, the US warplanes have bombed Taliban positions in Shebergan.

There is also a deadlock in the talks between Taliban and the Afghan government. The hopes for a break-through are dying fast. The Taliban reportedly are demanding lion’s share in the future political set-up and have also come up with another condition that President Ghani should resign if the government wants talks to be resumed. In all probability that would not be acceptable to the Afghan government.

The Taliban, intoxicated by their military gains, seem to be more adamant in continuing the talks, and perhaps are looking for a complete military victory. The situation is so volatile that the US and the UK have advised their citizens to leave Afghanistan.

The worsening situation in Afghanistan is, undoubtedly, causing anxiety for all the regional countries as well as global stakeholders, including Pakistan, which have been making relentless efforts to facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue for finding an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution to the conflict. There are strong portents suggesting that Afghanistan was fast moving towards an un-ending factional war, which could have very serious consequences not only for the people of Afghanistan, but also the countries having geographical proximity with it. This prospect gains substance from the fact that the US and its allies have reiterated their continued support to the Afghan government in the post-withdrawal era. They would try to their utmost efforts to prevent Taliban from taking over the country. In case the Taliban gain the control of the country, they have threatened not to recognize their government.

In both the scenarios, the people of Afghanistan would suffer the most.

It would also be difficult for the regional countries, particularly Pakistan, to recognize the Taliban government. Pakistan has made it clear that it would only recognize the government elected by the Afghan people. The Taliban, even if they score military victory, would find it very difficult in the absence of international recognition and support to run the affairs of the country and maintain peace besides having enormous difficulties in the context of economic sustainability of the country.

In case of a relapse of factional fighting in Afghanistan, there is a strong likelihood of the militant and terrorist entities on the Afghan soil joining hands with the Taliban. This could give way to the resurgence of terrorist activities in the region, and Pakistan could become the target of more retaliatory attacks by the TTP, in addition to bearing the burden of more Afghan refugees pouring into the country.

In the both the scenarios, the people of Afghanistan would suffer the most. They have already paid a heavy price due to the continued conflict in Afghanistan. According to conservative estimates, during the last 20 years of war, 47,600 Afghan civilians have lost their lives due to cross-fire, improvised explosive devices, assassinations, bombings and night raids into the houses of suspected insurgents.

The Afghan military and police, who have fought alongside the US, are estimated to have lost between 66,000 and 69,000 soldiers. The number of rebels killed, including Taliban fighters, is estimated to be 84,191. According to the UN sources at least 2.7 million of Afghanistan’s population has been forced to flee due to the war, becoming refugees in neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and beyond. An additional four million are internally displaced.

It is because of the horrible scenario that is unfolding in Afghanistan, the regional countries including Pakistan are continuing with their efforts to save the situation. But the dilemma is that there are some regional players such as India who do not want to see peace returning to Pakistan. Peace in Afghanistan means successful implementation of CPEC due to the envisaged connectivity. It is an eye-sore for India and it has been making overt and covert efforts to sabotage it. Volatile situation in Afghanistan is feasible for India to achieve the latter’s objectives.

The Afghan government is also responsible for the evolving situation. Pakistan admittedly has played a vital role in facilitating peace deal between the US and the Taliban and the beginning of intra-Afghan dialogue. It remains relevant to peace efforts even in the post-withdrawal period. But the dilemma is that the Afghan government continues to be suspicious of the role played by Pakistan and persists with its blame-game, notwithstanding the fact that the entire world appreciates what Pakistan has done in this regard. Pakistani civilian and military leaders in their interaction with their Afghan counterparts have repeatedly reiterated that Pakistan had no favourites and would accept any government elected by the people of Afghanistan.

It is needless to emphasize that Pakistan has the biggest stake in peace in Afghanistan which is vital for peace on its own soil and elimination of the scourge of terrorism. Peace in Afghanistan is also vital for regional connectivity promised by the implementation of CPEC, which is a transformational project for shared regional prosperity. It is a life-line for Pakistan. Why would Pakistan not want peace in Pakistan? Thinking otherwise belies the logic. The ambience of mistrust between Pakistan and the Afghan government must end to allow the former to focus unruffled attention on facilitating the peace process.

The Taliban and the Afghan government must realize that in case of a civil war, it would ultimately be Afghans who would be dying or becoming refuges. They owe to the Afghan people to restore peace in the country. It is a now or never opportunity for them to do so. History will never forgive them if they fritter away this chance.

*The writer is a retired diplomat, and a visiting professor at Riphah International University, Islamabad.*