**The torments of Afghanistan**

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July 26, 2021

As opposed to exciting phrases like ‘the world cup is up for grabs’ or ‘a multi-million dollar company with great potential is on sale’, the South Asian political environment is screaming about a whole country that is up for grabs, and that too before the watchful eyes of the United Nations. A country with a history of earthquakes, flooding and droughts is seeking new owners. The world’s largest producer of opium but still a unique strategic location, housed thousands of foreign guests for two-decades but just like the past, it is inviting fresh bidders. There is, however, one problem. All bidders intend to run the affairs of this land for their own peculiar reasons and interests. No one is ready to take responsibility for ensuring the country’s peace and stability. On the other hand, the panic-stricken political scientists with their fingers crossed are apprehensively waiting for a Republic to transform into an Emirate along with its government and everything that it entails.

[Over 3.93bn COVID-19 vaccine shots administered worldwide to date](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jul-2021/over-3-93bn-covid-19-vaccine-shots-administered-worldwide-to-date)

In the era of hybrid and fifth generation warfare, Afghanistan seemed to be existing in the Middle Ages where brute power or outside forces decided which area or city belonged to whom and for how long. In the face of an imminent not-so-desirable outcome of the ongoing power battles in Afghanistan, old promises are being renewed, plastic smiles are being exchanged and elderly horses are being brought out of the barn and placed on the ever intriguing Afghan chessboard. Except for a new-look, the visibly changed and diplomatically savvy Taliban, hardly anything is new.

It is like watching a video clip over and over again in the hope that perhaps the result of the horserace might change this time around. Just like the British and Soviets, the US has left the rugged terrains and the enigmatic people of Afghanistan, leaving behind a plethora of issues in the strategic, political, economic and social domains. From the internal strives to inter-tribal and ethnic feuds to questions on who rules Kabul to concerns expressed from China, the US, Russia, Pakistan and countries of the region to hopes of peace and stability in a war torn country–everything is a mirror image of the past.

[Spain’s 5th COVID-19 wave takes toll on hospitals, tourism](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jul-2021/spain-s-5th-covid-19-wave-takes-toll-on-hospitals-tourism)

From the trends and drivers of control; aspirations aiming at dominance to strategic, pride-related, image-bound endeavours to safeguarding one’s own vital interests by minimising material, psychological and emotional losses, nothing is new. Even the drive to fill the vacuum by extending offers of assistance and forming various regional blocks to look ‘responsible’ and ‘forthcoming’ remains as alluring as ever. So much so that the international community’s utter indifference towards the real issues facing the forty million people of Afghanistan has failed to exhibit any change.

The pictures taken during the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Doha in September 2020 and the ones taken in the same city in July 2021 tell a similar story. Former President George W. Bush’s mind on Washington’s previous standpoint is also unchanged. Bush has criticised the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and warned that civilians were being left to be ‘slaughtered’ by the Taliban. That it breaks his heart to note that ‘Afghan women and girls are going to suffer unspeakable harm’ speaks volumes about President Bush’s deep and sympathetic concerns but leaves it open for discussion as to how much more time the foreign troops should have stayed in Afghanistan and achieve what they apparently could not in the past excruciatingly painful twenty-years?

[Canada has enough vaccines to inoculate all eligible Canadians](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jul-2021/canada-has-enough-vaccines-to-inoculate-all-eligible-canadians)

Is there a method to the madness?

That all related and unrelated stakeholders seem to be in some kind of a rush to pull a rabbit out of a hat is clear from the last few weeks’ developments taking place in and around Afghanistan. For instance, the Five-Plus-One comprising the US, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have declared that terrorists and third-party forces must not be allowed to use Afghan territory to threaten or attack anyone. The Group has pledged to work together to end the Afghan conflict and feels that ‘the only path to a just and durable peace is through a negotiated political settlement that results in an inclusive political system and respects the fundamental rights of all Afghans’. It sounds familiar. One is hearing such intuitive statements made by familiar stakeholders for decades but hardly producing any results.

The most astonishing aspect of the emerging paradigm in Afghanistan is the sagacity and wisdom with which the Taliban are taking the international podium. Assuming the posture of professional diplomats and presenting carefully drafted statements on their future plans for interacting with the international community, they seem ready for dialogue, for talks and negotiations and in spite of the military gains and advances, they ‘strenuously favour a political settlement in the country’. However, being a victim of broken promises, they are not leaving the country’s future only to exhaustive table talks. Following Sun-Tzu’s centuries’ old military strategy and tactics, they are capturing territory after territory perhaps to take charge irrespective of the outcome of any present or future parleys. The Taliban’s bigger challenge does not lie in grabbing Kabul. The real challenge would be to obtain legitimacy, both at home and abroad, to their possible government and sustain their rule for a considerable period of time if and when Kabul falls to them.

[Captain Sarwar Shaheed being remembered on 73rd martyrdom anniversary today](https://nation.com.pk/27-Jul-2021/captain-sarwar-shaheed-being-remembered-on-73rd-martyrdom-anniversary-today)

Confronted with an ever more fluid environment, strategic planning, though important, has become more difficult. Hence, one needs to be extremely cautious to provide definitive answers to the ongoing Afghan conflict. For Pakistan that needs a fresh diplomatic profile, establishing a basic roadmap for a policy that may help it move forward towards a comparatively stable Afghanistan is advisable. The objective may be to change the disorder into a multilateral order by forging closer partnerships and building consensus through negotiations that entail concessions. The time has come that Islamabad’s ‘leverage’ and not ‘influence’ over the Taliban be carefully employed to achieve a real Afghan-owned, broad-based and Afghan-led or should we say the Taliban-led government in Kabul.