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**Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

The euphoria created in the aftermath of the Taliban-US peace deal seems to be dying down before it could even be implemented. The ruthless attacks of the Taliban in the last few days and the counter-strikes by America indicate that the ominous shadows of war will not subside anytime soon. It seems the hapless Afghans will continue to suffer because of the recalcitrance of the extremists and political machinations of the Afghan government.

The recent statement of President Donald Trump questioning the deployment of the US troops for so long has created a spectre of chaos. Trump made it very clear that the sole superpower could not prop up the Kabul government forever, questioning how long Washington could keep its troops there. Every line of his statement is very meaningful. He told reporters on Friday that countries have to take care of themselves. "You can only hold someone's hand for so long." It seems Washington does not want to be interested in Afghan affairs any longer and President Trump has a dogged determination to live up to his electoral promise of bringing back the troops from Afghanistan to appease his voters. He did not hide his intention and said, "We can't be there for the next 20 years. We've been there for 20 years and we've been protecting the country but we can't be there for the next – eventually, they're going to have to protect themselves."

It is ironic that the US first destroys the state infrastructure in a third world country and then leaves the mess to be be cleared by its people. It is not only Afghanistan where the state apparatus was dismantled after a foreign intervention but Iraq, Libya and Syria also suffered because of this external interference. When the US got involved in Afghan affairs after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Afghans had some sort of state apparatus. The country had a functioning army and other organs of state. But the blanket support of the West and the US for the mujahideen led to the destruction of this state apparatus. The long civil war weakened its organs, pushing the country towards the fratricide that remains unabated even today.

The specter of intensity in this internecine war is haunting the Afghans now. There is a strong possibility that the country will descend into chaos once the US troops leave the the war-torn state. Afghanistan is brimming with sectarian, ethnic and religious fault lines which are exploited by regional powers and neighbouring states. In the past, this exploitation not only led to several bloodbaths but also spawned the Taliban movement that established a brutal theocracy, affecting not only the Afghans but Pakistanis and other nations as well.

The cloistered group of militants offered refuge to all types of militants whose sole aim was to create a medieval global Islamic empire – but in the process they lost even the tiny caliphate that they had set up after earning the ire of the international community.The Taliban still consider themselves the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. They seem to have a dogged determination to restore their emirates which flies in the face of their claims that they want an inclusive government in the conflict-ridden country. There is no indication that they have given up subscribing to their retrogressive views. Many believe that, despite all promises of having transformed or changed, the Taliban are still hardline in its approach towards women, education and democracy. They still seem to be planning to take over the country by force. And this is something even President Trump believes could happen after the withdrawal of the US troops.

So, what might happen if the Taliban attempt to seize power? It will certainly push the country towards a fierce civil war, dragging many states into it. The northerners and liberal Afghans would never tolerate a Taliban-led government. They would go to any extent to battle it. For the people in the north, the Taliban are seeking to subjugate other ethnic entities of the country, especially the Tajik and Uzbek. The Shiite Hazara and other sects view it as a radical Sunni group. For the liberal Afghans the Taliban should be consigned to the relics of history. They might fiercely defend the gains that the women and other marginalised sections of society may have made under occupation. Pakhtun nationalists dub the Taliban as stooges of foreign powers that are bent on destroying their own country. Therefore, any move to capture power on the part of the Taliban would fiercely be resisted. Ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities have bitter memories of the Taliban's rule. For them even the possibility of the Taliban's rule poses an existential threat.

This means that a new political, sectarian and ethnic alignment could be made in case of a Taliban attempt to take over over the state. The northern allies and non-Pakhtun would look to New Delhi and other regional powers for help while the Taliban would bank on Islamabad and Arab states. But any civil unrest in the neighbouring country poses a number of challenges for Islamabad, which is likely to witness an influx of migrants. The previous policy regarding the Taliban in the 1990s boomeranged on Pakistan.

One of the ways to prevent more proxy battles in Afghanistan is pragmatism. All factions in the war-torn country should rise above their petty interests, forging unity in their ranks. They should invest all their energies in making this deal a success. Inflexibility on the part of the Afghan government and other stakeholders will only ignite the old animosities that harmed Afghans in unimaginable ways. The Taliban must realise that they cannot take over the country by force. Even if they capture an area, they cannot hold onto it in the absence of air power, which they lack.

The Afghan government and its Western allies can defeat any capture of territories with the help of superior air power. The Taliban had occupied Kunduz and some other parts of the country in recent years but had to withdraw after the US used air strikes. This means that neither can the Afghan government claim a lasting victory nor can the Taliban restore the old Emirates in present-day Afghanistan. The only solution lies in holding fair and transparent elections and renouncing violence. Washington must help achieve these two objectives before it departs from the country it destroyed. Its current withdrawal plan without a concrete mechanism to thwart a possible civil war will only push the region towards a conflagration.

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