**Afghan quagmire**

B Y TOUQlR H USSAIN | 10/3/2019

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| EIGHTEEN years ago, the United States invaded Afghanistan to drive out the Afghan Taliban, but is now seeking their help to get out of the country itself.The US-Taliban talks may have been suspended but are bound to resume as there is no alternative to a negotiated end to the war. Nevertheless, the end of the war will do little to bring peace to Afghanistan.It will solve America`s problem; but Afghanistan and Pakistan will have to solve theirs.Afghanistan and Pakistan have had a tortuous shared history that has left a complicated legacy of divided ethnicity across a disputed border.Each has responded by becoming friendly with the other`s enemies. They will face much greater challenges as intra-Afghan talks start, which they must sooner or later. The Taliban and Kabul will not only be talking but also Eghting, hence presenting a challenge to both countries that cannot be resolved through strategies deñning their past interaction.We have made mistakes in Afghanistan and paid for them. I hope we are not going to make another one by persisting with our traditional support for the Taliban in this new conflict that will be so different. On the one hand, the US and Afghanistan will be more dependent on Pakistan to manage the Taliban threat. On the other, Pakistan will have less leverage with the Taliban as the latter, with the US drawdown, would feel stronger and be less amenable to Pakistan`s influence.Pakistan`s biggest challenge will be to prevent the Taliban from calling upon their old and new allies like the foreign and Pakistani jihadists to join the battle in a replay of the conflict of the 1990s. This conflict will loom large over Pakistan`s tentative struggle against militant organisations and its efforts to stabilise the economy and strengthen democracy amid continued pressures from an assertive and dominant India.Finding a sound strategy to deal with this conflict should be at the centre of Pakistan`s priorities. How to view post-drawdown Afghanistan and treat the Taliban accordingly has to be at the heart of this strategy.Will we see Afghanistan as a threat or an opportunity? If we see it as a threat we will keep treating the Taliban as an asset and risk becoming an accessory to their ambitions for power.If the Taliban return to power they will have reverse strategic depth in Pakistan, inciting radicalisation of sections of our society. A disempowered Taliban on the other hand might tear away at Pakistan`s tribal areas amid the chaos of an unfinishedwar that will cause a spillover of refugees, drugs and extremism into Pakistan.Treating Afghanistan as a threat is thus not a policy option. If the Taliban win, that is bad; if they lose that is worse.The Afghan Taliban are not the national resistance movement that some of us believe. They just happen to be a major player in one of the eternal struggles for power in Afghanistan. There are conflicts within the conflict in that country, and Pakistan should not be a party to them.We need to treat Afghanistan as an opportunity, in that its stabilisation would enhance our own stability, and look upon the Taliban as a challenge not an asset.In that case, Pakistan would have no option but to work with the elected government in Kabul to strengthen its negotiating hand and force the Taliban into a powersharing arrangement. Kabul too should realise that if it wants Pakistan`s help it must seek friendly relations with Islamabad.Pakistan cannot bring peace to Afghanistan but it can certainly block it.Pakistanis strategically vitalbecause ofits location at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Russia, China, India and Iran. It could benefit from its location by serving as a corridor fortrade and energy.But that would not happen without Afghanistan`s stabilisation and improved PakistanIndia relations.Afghanistan`s stabilisation may well be the only leverage Pakistan will have with India; given the prospects of transit rights to Central Asia and access to pipelines, Pakistan`s value as an economic partner will rise inducing India to seek Islamabad`s friendship. Hopefully, the possibility of friendly ties with Pakistan would provide India with an incentive to solve the Kashmir dispute.Pakistan`s foreign policy will have to find a balance between addressing the country`s external security challenges and meeting its development needs at home. No issue impacts Pakistan`s internal and external challenges as much as peace and the stability of Afghanistan; and there is no greater obstacle to Afghanistan`s stabilisation than the Taliban. No country has as much leverage with them as Pakistan, which must play its cards well. The writer, a former ambassador, is adjunct faculty Georgetown and Syracuse University |  |