**Afghanistan: Aman ka Rasta**

Shahrukh Hasan

Saturday, Nov 20, 2021

For two decades, Afghanistan was an arena where various powers, led by the US forces, jostled for control. But history and time was against them – the history of the Afghan people who have never been subjugated, and the cutting edge of time that never favours foreign invaders.

The US, undaunted by the breaking up of the former Soviet Union following their Afghan misadventure, attempted to do what no one had ever done before – conquer Afghanistan. During these 20 long years, all the stakeholders – the Taliban, the Afghan government propped up by the coalition forces, the US, Pakistan, China, Russia and India – played out the end game on their political and military chess boards according to their own understanding and reading of how the game would eventually pan out. With hindsight, only Pakistan can claim to have read the situation right.

The Pakistan political and military leadership would doubtless have counselled the US government and military leadership about how they foresaw events unfolding. The actions taken by the US and Pakistan leadership were based on their respective reading of the ground reality, as well as what would happen post-US withdrawal. This divergence of views and the resultant strategy adopted by both was the real cause for the suspicions and allegations that bedeviled the relationship between the two countries prior to, and post, withdrawal. The US was under the impression that they had trained and equipped the Afghan forces well enough to withstand the Taliban onslaught and hold their forces at bay for long enough to convince them to agree to a negotiated settlement. The lack of fight shown by the Afghan forces and the speed with which they capitulated was therefore stunning.

Now that the Taliban have taken over Afghanistan and formed the government, at least the danger of a bloody civil war has been averted. There is, however, still a great deal of concern on how inconclusive the government will be in terms of representation of various ethnic groups as well as rights of women. The Taliban government faces a crippling economic crisis and lack of recognition impedes the flow of international assistance.

An unstable Afghanistan does not bode well for the entire region. For the US, it represents one of its most dismal failures. For Pakistan, there is a more direct impact in terms of security and economic opportunity. China looks to a stable if not thriving Afghanistan to further its own political and economic ambitions. While all the stakeholders may have had different perspectives before the withdrawal, there should be unanimity of views on the need for peace, stability and economic growth of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: For the people of Afghanistan, it is imperative that peace, a return to normalcy, and economic growth and development be restored. For the Taliban government, it is important that the world recognises its legitimacy and provides the technical and financial assistance needed to rebuild the country. The Taliban would be keen that they should not be typecast and seen through the prism of preconceived perceptions. They look to the world, and particularly to Pakistan, for recognition and assistance.

Pakistan: It can be legitimately claimed by Pakistan that it foresaw how events would unfold in Afghanistan better than anyone else. It made all the right calls and all its decisions stand vindicated. However, instead of this foresight being acknowledged, it is being scapegoated and being held responsible for post-US withdrawal problems by Western countries, particularly the US.

For Pakistan, it is therefore important that its position be fairly and forcefully articulated and that the Western world, particularly the US and to a certain extent the people of Afghanistan, be made to see the unfairness of such accusations. Going forward, Pakistan would like to consolidate its relationship with the government of Afghanistan and be recognised by the Afghans as their greatest ally, and ensure that Pakistan’s technical, diplomatic and other help is instrumental in the rebuilding of the country.

The United States: By rights, the US should be assigned primary responsibility for the sorry state of affairs in Afghanistan. It invaded Afghanistan on dubious pretensions, waged war against its people for 20 years and then abruptly withdrew – leaving a devastated country facing civil war.

Naturally, the United States administration and military leadership would welcome a dispensation and narrative that does not lay the entire blame at their doorstep and instead makes the case that continued engagement with the US is critical; this can render tremendous financial, technical and global political support to the struggling people and government of Afghanistan. US assistance and partnership in the rebuilding of Afghanistan would minimise the rancour that the Afghans may legitimately feel towards it.

China: For China, Afghanistan provides crucial access to the Central Asian Republics for its BRI projects. Additionally, as the emerging global power that is seen by many as rivaling the US, China would be keen to be seen as a country ever ready to help regional allies. Therefore, China would like to see a stable Afghanistan and would be more than willing to play a front-line role – not just for the optics of a diplomatic offensive but for the real gains of land access to the Central Asian Republics provided by a stable Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s internal security and economic development represents a convergence of interests for all. The way forward for everyone therefore would be to look beyond the blame game, forget the recriminations of the past, and collaborate – because what is good for Afghanistan is good for everyone.

The need of the hour is to build confidence, disseminate hope and let Afghanistan know that all these countries – Pakistan, the United States, China and perhaps the EU – are able and willing to put their differences aside and be partners in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. On their part, the Taliban must allay the apprehensions and concerns of the rest of the world not just by words but through actions. Pakistan is ideally placed to initiate and lead this rapprochement and rebuilding.

The writer is the managing editor of Jang Group. He can be reached at shasan@janggroup.com.pk