**Indestructible Afghan spirit**

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A quiet storm is brewing in our front yard and it is one that will impact the future configuration of the entire region. The Americans are committed to leaving Afghanistan by September 11, some twenty years after their blustering re-entry to the region. They will leave behind a power vacuum and nature abhors a vacuum of any kind. The question on everyone’s lips is, who will step in and fill the void? There are just two contenders: the Afghan government and the home-grown Taliban.

An Afghanistan in turmoil does not suit the region’s neighbours. The Afghans themselves have suffered immensely during the past four decades. This began with the Saur Revolution in April 1978 that saw the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) stage a pro-communist coup and assassinate President Mohammed Daoud Khan and overthrow his government. Then came the decade-long bloody Soviet occupation, whose retreat was followed by another 10 years of infighting and civil war. All of which brings us to back to the last twenty years of foreign military occupation. Enough blood has been spilt to turn all Afghan rivers red. Yet these resilient people somehow find a way to maintain carry on while maintaining their sanity.

You have to take a deep dive into their history to understand the psyche, composition, traditions and the evolution of Afghan society. Not an easy task, as I discovered firsthand! The perception of Afghanistan as a rugged, inhospitable terrain inhabited by barbarians is a misleading western construct that ignores the rich cultural and historical tapestries of the Afghan people. Their recognition as a farming and herding community dates back 50,000 years. Traces of Indus Valley civilisation during the Bronze Age have been found along the Amu Darya (formerly the Oxus river) in northwestern Afghanistan. Historians believe that the Zoroastrian faith was founded in the Afghan city of Balkh; it remains one of the world’s oldest and continuously practiced religions.

You have to dive deep into their history to understand the Afghan psyche and societal evolution. The perception of an inhospitable terrain inhabited by barbarians is a misleading western construct that ignores rich cultural and historical tapestries

Afghanistan has always been a tribal society; organising itself as local kingdoms connected by culture and trade with immediate neighbours as well as neighbouring countries. Its earliest inhabitants can be traced back to the Indo-European tribes known as Aryans, Persians, Tajiks and Uzbeks. They all settled there and grew in numbers. This is reflected in Afghanistan’s present day fault lines. The Pakhtuns, partially descended from the Aryans, the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Iranian Hazaras all have internecine feuds that fuel divisions in today’s Afghanistan.

However, what most outsiders fail to understand is that whatever the level of conflict amongst themselves – if an external threat appears on the horizon, Afghans unify. They weld themselves into an iron-clad shield and face the challenge as one. This is something that history confirms. In 550 BC, Cyrus II of Persia took over Kabul Valley and then Darius the Great invaded in 516 BC. Iranians dominated the region and the Aryans drifted east, some moving across the Hindu Kush to ancient India. The next onslaught came from the west in the form of Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The Seleucid Empire, named after one of his celebrated generals, was defeated in the east by Chandragupta Muarya, establishing the Buddhist Muaryan Empire in ancient India.

Uzbek Buddhist King Kanisha came next in 120 AD, followed by the Huns and Hephthalites (White Huns) from the north and northwest in 440 AD. Originally called Ariana, Afghanistan became the epicentre of Buddhist culture. From 643 AD onwards, the Arabs and Turks moved in and conversion to Islam started. Despite the litany of conquests listed above, the Afghans resisted them for centuries to secure their freedom and independence. Nimatullah, who compiled a Persian history of the Afghans – Makhzan-i-Afghani – during his time as a chronicler at the court of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, offers an unexpected twist. He traces their history to an Israelite named Afghana, who led the construction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He, along with other Israelites, were taken by Boktnassar during King Solomon and settled around Ghor, Ghazni, Kabul, Kandahar and around Sulaiman Mountain Range south of the Hindu Kush. According to popular folklore, Qais Abdur Rashid, the legendary founding father of the Pashtuns, travelled from Ghor to Medina to receive blessings from the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] and fought alongside him in the Battle for Makkah. Our beloved Prophet [PBUH] himself conferred upon Qais and his people the title of “Pashtun”. He then returned to Afghanistan and expedited the spread of Islam.

Mahmud Ghazanvi, the first independent ruler of the Turkic dynasty of the Ghaznavids, at the beginning of the second millennium, started the eastward move into India conducting raids, accumulating wealth and brought back slaves. According to historians, the Hindu Kush mountain range was named after the Indian slaves who perished due to the treacherous weather. This was the gateway to India and the Mughals, Pathans, Persians and other rulers all made their way there. With them, the Pashtuns moved to the northwest and all over India; my ancestors among them.

Over the centuries, the fiercely independent Afghans kept winning and losing their freedom at the hands of the Mongols, Mughals, Persians until the British and the Sikhs entered the equation from 1800 AD onwards. Yet none could conquer the land or the people and all had to exit, exhausted by their attempts to subdue the Afghans’ indestructible spirit, more often than not with a bloody nose. The Soviets, despite their butchery, were drained to the extent that their empire broke up. The US has finally come to the conclusion that it will never succeed in Afghanistan; but only after wasting trillions of dollars and spilling untold blood.

The importance of Afghanistan as the gateway between East and West cannot be understated. It is therefore time to adopt a different approach via discussions and negotiations that benefits all parties. I believe the Afghans are also ready to have a new beginning after four decades of destruction and bloodletting. The 21st century is the “Asian Century”. Thus, all neighbours and nearby countries need to join in the effort to create a stable environment in Afghanistan so progress can benefit the entire region.

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