**Afghanistan and the region**

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President Biden’s announcement to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 has drawn extreme reactions ranging from surprise to dismay. While the US administration itself is against the withdrawal, many political and military analysts are also against the decision. They fear that the vacuum created by this withdrawal will lead to a struggle for power and control, seriously affecting the country’s stability and wellbeing of the people. Additionally, it will also have serious implications for regional stability in general and for Pakistan in particular.

The US, along with its allies, failed to bring peace in the country despite staying there for almost two decades. Similarly, despite receiving huge sums of money, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could not be trained and equipped to effectively handle the country’s security requirements. During these two decades, the Taliban remained a force to be reckoned with and controlled large parts of Afghan territory. An assessment of the situation indicates that the US was forced to negotiate with her sworn enemy, the Taliban, and withdraw on their terms without being able to reach a comprehensive peace deal. After two decades of occupation by the strongest military coalition and with an expenditure of huge financial resources, the sole superpower along with its allies has faced defeat from the Taliban, a rag-tag fighting force with limited resources and no advanced weaponry.

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US’ decision of sudden withdrawal without achieving comprehensive peace or even conditions conducive for peace, is extremely irresponsible. The hurried departure also suggests that US is not likely to provide the promised financial support to run even routine government affairs, and reconstruction and rebuilding of the destroyed country. Like the past, the US will not accept its failure and for face saving, will blame others, the easiest being Pakistan. The Afghan ruling leadership has also failed to effectively use foreign financial and other support to create workable systems and build forces capable of effectively tackling security challenges. They however, are endeavouring to continue to hang on to power regardless of the cost it may entail for the Afghan people. The Afghan leadership, following in US footsteps, also finds it convenient to blame Pakistan for their internal failures and inability to effectively utilise the resources provided by the coalition.

Afghan peace and stability faces multiple challenges. The Afghan leadership’s endeavours to remain in power are possibly the biggest hurdle in reaching a consensus solution. The Taliban, emboldened by the US decision to withdraw forces, have hardened their stance and are unwilling to show flexibility to reach a peace agreement. Various other Afghan factions and war lords are also assessing the situation and would want their share in any future arrangement. Neighbouring countries are also critical to success or failure of the peace process. While their positive attitude can help bring peace, working for vested interests would lead to failure of the process. India may find an unsettled Afghanistan to its advantage as it would adversely affect Pakistan’s internal security as well as relations with Afghanistan, providing an opportunity to use terrorists based in Afghanistan against Pakistan. Lastly, the international community also has a huge responsibility in stabilising the country, as their funding is essential for running the government, paying the forces etc.

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At the moment, situation appears quite grim. A sudden US exit, the Taliban’s hardened stance, the government’s lack of interest in participating in the peace process are all indicative of a likely chaotic situation in the country leading to loss of life and property. Many people are already seeking political asylum for fear of reprisal by the Taliban. However, some people are also trying to exploit the situation in order to settle in Western countries.

Increasing militancy and violence in Afghanistan will also affect all its neighbours. The violence will force a huge number of Afghans to take refuge in neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, which is already hosting a large Afghan refugee population. An influx of refugees will not only put an economic burden on the host countries, but will also create internal security problems. Additionally, refugees are also likely to bring a surge in COVID cases in Pakistan and other host countries. Predicting an upsurge in violence and lawlessness, Australia has decided to close its diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. Many more countries, especially Western ones are likely to follow suit. Incidentally, these are also the countries that maintained their military presence in Afghanistan for a very long time.

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It is predicted that even if the present government in Kabul falls, the Taliban will face resistance from the war lords leading to a protracted civil war. Since militancy and instability in Afghanistan will affect the neighbouring countries as well as the world at large, all stake holders must make efforts for working out and implementation of a comprehensive peace plan. This cannot be achieved without sincerity and willingness of the Afghan leadership, neighbouring countries’ positive role and financial support from major world powers for many years.

Neighbours, especially Pakistan, which gets affected the most by stability or instability, are already making all-out efforts to bring all parties to the negotiating table. Pakistan’s political and military leadership has repeatedly reiterated their support for comprehensive peace in Afghanistan. The neighbouring countries can also help Afghan economy by taking steps to enhance trade and tourism. Distant neighbours must curb their temptations to exploit the situation and refrain from interfering in Afghan matters. The US at this time, must use its influence on the present Afghan government to work towards a negotiated peace process.