**Afghanistan at the crossroads**

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Afghan Baba, along with an estranged cousin of King Zahir, emigrated from Afghanistan to Pakistan. The family settled in Abbottabad, on the foothills of Chir Pahari (or Pine Mountain). We lived a few houses further down the street. Despite the fall from grace, the head of the family was known as Shahzada sb, the Prince. In the late fifties, early sixties, our young selves were awestruck by Shahzada sb and the way he moved around in American cars which were always tailed by guards in a jeep.

I am not sure whether Afghan Baba was relation or trusted employee, but he was forever in the company of the Prince. Tall, well-built, with a weathered face, Baba supported a long henna-coloured beard. His smile was disarming and his disposition pleasant when interacting with the locals in fluent Hindkoo, the language of the Hazara. He made friends with our neighbour — whose son was my chum — and became a frequent visitor to their house.

Most houses in our area comprised of family living quarters and an exterior building known as ‘baithak,’ which the males used as a lounge. It boasted a covered veranda where elders would smoke ‘chillum’, a smoking pipe, and chat.

After long hours spent at school following a rigorous routine, we were occasionally permitted to attend the bathaik, but as listeners only. We would sit in a corner and soak up every word. There had been a clash between some Afghans and locals in the city. Afghan Baba and a few elders from the area discussed the incident. Baba kept scratching his orange beard while listening to various versions of events. Finally, he spoke in his calm baritone voice: “Malik sb [his friend and our neighbour] always remember one thing. Never push an Afghan against the wall unless you intend to finish him off. If you don’t, he will keep coming back at you till one side drops or runs away.”

Finally, Afghan Baba spoke: ‘Malik sb, always remember one thing. Never push an Afghan against the wall unless you intend to finish him off. If you don’t, he will keep coming back at you till one side drops or runs away.’ Simple words uttered by a wise old man six decades ago

Simple words uttered by a wise old man more than six decades ago. It took the US twenty years and more than two trillion dollars to understand the Afghan temperament. I touched upon it in my article of for this newspaper, ‘The indestructible spirit of Afghans’.

While repetition may not be productive, I, nevertheless, see some some serious design defects in the strategies being touted. An old proverb comes to mind: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And nowhere does this perhaps ring more true than in the decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Even Pakistan has not been immune; in the past providing military bases for the US to wage war against its adversaries. Right from Zia-ul-Haq until very recently, all Pakistani rulers had knowingly participated overtly or covertly in this facilitation.

The last two decades has seen war between the Taliban and the West, led by US forces. Various indigenous Afghan regimes have been cobbled together with material, financial and training assistance to front this struggle. In all this, Pakistan has paid the highest price. After all, the Taliban and their allies blamed us for being friends of their enemy. India exploited this and spent India picked up on this and deployed vast resources to unify and activate anti-Pakistan and pro-Taliban militants to wage a terrorist war within the country. These groups also infiltrated FATA tribesmen to take on the Pakistan Army in a bid to inflict maximum damage on state institutions and civilians alike.

Only the Herculean efforts of the armed forces managed to quell this insurrection while building a barrier to control border crossings. This naturally took a tremendous toll in lives lost and resources expended. Pakistan has thus broken the terrorist backbone for now. Yet all this could restart very easily. The US is withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan but it wants to retain the ability to provide logistic and air support to Afghan forces fighting the Taliban. So they went for the default setting again and pressured Pakistan to make available its airbases from which Washington hoped to conduct these operations.

Fortunately, Prime Minister Imran Khan stood firm. This took the American establishment by surprise. The thinking minds amongst them must realise that this is a new Pakistan that they are dealing with. Thus, the premier could not have put it better than when he recently said, “We will be partners in peace, not in conflict”. Talk about hitting the bull’s-eye.

Without air support and US troops on the ground, Afghan National Security Forces’ (ANSF) resistance would unravel rather quickly. This has been the case since May and the Taliban have now taken over more than 50 districts out of a total of 370. They control the main highways as well as the Afghan-Tajikistan border crossing. The ANSF has suffered large-scale surrender and desertions. Old mujahideen groups are being commissioned.

This is the crossroad for the Afghans. Do they want to go back to the bloody nineties that led to the destruction of social infrastructure and highlighted ethnic fault lines? Or do they want to sit down and work out an acceptable power sharing agreement for all parties? Pakistan, China, Russia and other neighbours can ill-afford a turbulent Afghanistan from which instability can spill over into their countries. These are dangerous times and one hopes the Turkish-led effort to secure and guard Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport succeeds in bringing a resolution among the Afghans. For the Americans are gone and aren’t coming back.

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