**Afghanistan on a Cliffhanger**

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Since the stunning fall of Kabul to the Taliban on August 15, Afghanistan has been precariously hanging onto a dangerous cliff with the potential of a safe return to peace and stability or a plunge in the depth of devastating chaos and anarchy. This poses a daunting challenge to the civilised world in general and South-West Asia and surrounding regions in particular.

The US has since been raging with anger over its humiliation in Afghanistan. The current US policy is underpinned by an implicit desire to see the Taliban fail in restoring stability in the country. This represents the mindset of a world hegemon and a spoiler than the wisdom of a world leader. Unfortunately, this adds to the hesitance of the US allies and the international community to play the much-needed constructive role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

Taking a cue from the US approach, the spoiler states have been actively encouraging militias in some pockets of the country to challenge the Taliban. They are also sponsoring demonstrations by the new generation of Afghans brought up during the relatively liberal era of the US occupation of the country. They aim to get the Taliban bogged down in distracting conditions than settling down and governing the country.

What they hope for is that given the US policy to starve the new rulers of their genuine financial reserves and international assistance, the resultant acute poverty and hunger would stir wide public unrest. The ensuing chaos would allow them to force the Taliban to fall in line. This is a dangerous plan that could bring another wave of bloodshed with massive population exodus apart from providing space to non-state actors.

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Their calculations being shorn of humanitarian considerations such as healing the wounds, sparing the Afghans of further misery and stabilising the country are simply mischievous. They expose their hollow commitment to the so-called international rule-based order already grossly undermined by the unnecessary US military interventions and its coercive sanctions on states. This chaotic situation would devastatingly impact the neighbouring South West and Central Asian countries.

After exiting from Afghanistan, the US is in search of facilities for “over the horizon” attacks on Afghanistan if the new rulers fail to toe the US line. Some reliable reports suggest the new US policeman of South Asia has been actively examining this proposal. India seems ready to be the catspaw for the new US aggression in South West Asia. This imparts credence to apprehensions that the US, the UK, Australia and India are trying to lay the chessboard of a new great game for competition and conflict in this region and Asia-Pacific.

The US remained in Afghanistan for two decades and cherry-picked Afghan leaders in a sham democracy. These regimes failed to plug the political, ethnic and tribal fault lines in that country and massively indulged in the plunder of state resources and foreign aid to the peril of the people of Afghanistan. Their massive pilferage was not hidden from the US leadership. The US Inspector General’s reports exposing the corruption of the Afghan ruling elite were deliberately hushed up.

While the US created and funded militias for regime change in Iraq, Syria and Libya to fight the national armies of these states, it funded the notorious warlords to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan. They were generously funded and armed to the teeth. How these warlords fought the Taliban is known to the world now. The militant outfits and militias pitted against the national government in the Middle East, wrought havoc in the region and beyond.

The peace and stability in Afghanistan are of utmost importance to the bordering states of Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Any destabilisation in Afghanistan will directly impact the bordering states along with the remaining Central Asian Republics. The political and strategic situation in South West Asia has since been of great concern to Russia too. It considers Central Asia as its backyard and is linked with it in SCO, CIS and CYSTO. Therefore, the great game being contemplated by the US and its allies would greatly undermine the delicate equilibrium that underlies the current international order.

It is surprising the West views the Taliban as a political party with a trained and disciplined cadre to unfurl its blueprint for governance after dislodging an unpopular regime. It is a ragtag militia composed of ideologically distinct groups clustered under one banner generically called Taliban. Now that the militia has regained the country after the foreign occupation of two decades, it is confronted with the most daunting question of striking a delicate equilibrium among its various component groups and addressing the ethnic and ideological divide in the country for governance.

Their task is further compounded by high expectations of the international community and remnants of the former ruling elite. The Taliban have been cautiously moving towards broad-based or inclusive governing structures. They have already included representatives of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras and a few political parties in their cabinet.

However, it remains to be seen when they would adjust women in the governing and administrative structures and open schools for the girls. No doubt, the arrangements for the schooling of girls would represent the Afghan cultural traditions. Gender segregation is well within the Pakhtun and Baloch cultural traditions in rural regions. Ignoring these cultural traditions is always problematic.

What Afghanistan now needs is financial and economic aid to stem the collapse of the country in the face of gnawing poverty and hunger. The US has no justification for procrastination to unfreeze the Afghan funds or to discourage international economic and financial aid to Afghanistan. Having played with the destiny of the Afghan people for two decades, the US is morally bound to help Afghanistan return to peace, stability and normalcy.

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