**Beyond the ignoble exit**

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Amidst the fraught situation currently prevailing in Afghanistan, the Taliban’s rather bloodless takeover of the country continues to dominate airwaves and print space around the world. All kinds of views are being put out to analyse the diverse strands of the longstanding conflict, and predicting the possible future scenarios.

As the Taliban leadership comes to grips with the daunting challenge of putting in place some kind of governing mechanism inclusive of the various Afghan parties, a challenge that will not only test their negotiating skills but also their real intentions, the relative peace continues to hang by the thread.

As the situation gradually unfolds, the world waits and watches the events with bated breath, giving the Taliban the opportunity to walk the talk. The Taliban’s challenge becomes formidable against the lesson of history: it is easy to capture power but difficult to govern a country in the presence of rival claimants to power and inhospitable circumstances.

The facts of geography, history, and deep ethnic divisions are imposing enough to disincentivise any effort for an inclusive setup. The task becomes doubly challenging when the country has been home to several terror outfits, whose interest lies in keeping the fires raging and the cauldron of ethnic divisions boiling.

Every foreign invading power has ignored these lessons of history in the vain expectation of turning a new page, little knowing that at the end of the day, the outcome it leaves behind is uglier and costlier -- not just in terms of the loss of prestige but also that of tens of thousands of human lives.

The United States is the latest global power to join the ignoble club of the world powers whose imperial hubris was humbled by the sheer resilience of the people as much as by the former’s deliberate attempt to rewrite history in defiance of the abiding lessons and dictates of logic and commonsense.

How America could succeed where the equally powerful British and Soviet empires failed miserably will continue to haunt the US establishment. More so the case when the US had a thorough understanding of this reality as it had the experience of leading an international coalition to oust the Soviet Union in a decade-long proxy war in Afghanistan.

As John Oliver, the host of HBO’s The Last Week Tonight, put it, the fall of Kabul, likened to the ‘Saigon moment’, will serve as a lasting stain on President Biden’s legacy. Donald Trump’s assertion that the Biden Administration’s withdrawal decision was the “greatest foreign policy humiliation” in the history of the United States may have politics written all over but does contain a thick touch of harsh reality whose full implications will take time to settle in the American psyche.

President Biden’s recent press conferences are more precisely the outcome of the sustained pressure taking its toll on the White House. However, in the process of explaining the rationale of ‘hurried’ withdrawal, the US president made matters worse.

By exclusively placing the blame for the collapse of the Afghan state on Ashraf Ghani and the unwillingness of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) to stand up to the advancing Taliban, Biden not only cherry-picked facts but also came across as someone who was not ready to accept responsibility for the unfolding tragedy.

Here was the leader of the sole superpower whose thinking on a 20-year-long combat mission, the longest in American history, increasingly reflected a myopic view in an effort to peddle a self-serving narrative in a glaring disregard for facts.

Not just the world at large but the American allies too were left puzzled by the presidential explanations. Granted that the manner in which the Trump administration went about the whole Doha mission did not leave the Biden White House with many options. But, the incumbent administration could have consulted with the allies and the regional countries to tweak the peace plan so as to make the transfer of power orderly and peaceful.

Following the unilateral announcement of the withdrawal in April, the US increasingly thought and acted in a purely partisan fashion. There was little concern and even less appetite to marshal the disparate peace efforts into a unified diplomatic blitz with a clear set of actions, expectations, and concessions.

Nothing of the sort happened. For all intents and purposes, the Biden Administration continued with Trump’s policy of ‘America first’, with all efforts, energies and resources employed on the mission of pulling off the hurried exit at an unprecedented pace.

In his electoral campaign, candidate Biden lambasted his rival for undermining America’s longstanding global alliances by headlining his foreign policy actions with the ‘America first’ slogan. He built his case for the White House on the promise of rebuilding the trust of allies and restoring America’s leadership.

However, when push came to shove in Afghanistan, the incumbent administration took a leaf from its predecessor’s book. President Biden’s repudiation of the ‘nation-building’ project and the justification of the pullout only in terms of degrading terrorist threat has shocked the European allies.

German leader Armin Laschet, who is set to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel, described the withdrawal as “the biggest debacle Nato has suffered since its founding.” Nato was already feeling strains in its relations with the US. The recent events have accelerated the thinking process within the EU system about the need for self-sufficiency.

However, to single out Biden for the blame of the Afghanistan mess is to miss the overall picture. The American mission in Afghanistan merely represents the continuation of a pattern of behavior that has informed different Democratic and Republican administrations across different time periods and combat zones. This behavior has been shaped by the imperial hubris to remould the world in line with the aspirations and dictates of the superpower status that the US has enjoyed after the collapse of the USSR.

Stunned by the apocalyptic events of 9/11, the US chose to use its military power as an instrument to achieve its foreign policy objectives. At the heart of the missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East has been the strong urge to establish American military ascendancy by instilling fear and awe to deter those intending to challenge the US and its interests.

The subsequent militarisation of American power, policy and way of life led to the framing of the ‘war on terror’ in moral and religious terms. The binary of ‘with us or against us’ reflected a national mood rooted in moral superiority. The emphasis on the military aspects crowded out the concerns for human rights, pluralism, and respect for dissent. The notion of multilateralism was recast in the image of unilateralism.

The problem with this design was that it was governed by anger and sustained by the greed of war lobbies to profit from the longevity of such enterprises. As one country after the other was razed, the thirst for revenge was quenched. However, at the same time, the greed to accumulate the spoils of war continued to increase. This explains why the goalposts kept shifting and new slogans continued to be employed as part of PR to kill increasing criticism of the overseas military missions.

No invading power is ever interested in protecting the interests of the occupied people. As the recent American example in Afghanistan shows, an artificial political system is put in place in the name of establishing democracy; a group of powerful people (like warlords) are won over through the threat of stick and the lure of carrot, and the war lobbies (military-industrial complex) are given a free hand to indulge in loot and plunder.

Such a ‘win-win’ arrangement works all right until it becomes wholly unsustainable due to a combination of factors such as political opposition, popular resistance, and shift to new ‘targets’.

And it is the vanquished people who continue to pay the price of imperial greed, arrogance, and imported ‘solutions’.

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