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**Choosing a side in Afghanistan**

There is growing trepidation that the situation in Afghanistan is rapidly deteriorating. This sense of doom has been locked in for Afghan elites outside the Taliban’s Doha Shura since at least November 2018, when the US government appointed Zalmay Khalilzad to oversee a peace process that led to the agreement between the Taliban and the United States.

Pakistan’s calls for an Afghanistan solution to the Afghanistan problem are demonized and mocked as being part of a so-called double game in which it simultaneously seeks friendship and support from the US, as it also protects the Taliban leadership from the effect of financial, legal and other kinds of actions by regional and global actors that oppose the Taliban. Instead of engaging with fellow Afghans to solve problems, Afghan leaders find it easier to try to blame Pakistan for their country’s ills. But the response to Afghan agony and desperation should not be reactive, nor should it be defensive. The response should be rooted in what is good for Pakistanis and good for Pakistan. Step one is some deep and honest reflection.

One of the tendencies that all humans have, when dealing with complex situations, is to fall into patterns of behaviour, lenses of analyses and zones of comfort informed by familiarity. However, this array of cognitive biases we are vulnerable to, both individually and collectively, make the task of classifying and understanding complex situations dramatically more difficult.

One way in which we see the Afghanistan situation becoming more untenable is the growing set of toxic exchanges between the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) led by President Ashraf Ghani, and leaders of the Pakistani system – including cabinet members in Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government. The danger of an exchange of verbal or rhetorical volleys in the digital age is that those that work in the shadows are able to have much greater freedom as public attention and leadership top-of-mind become occupied with responding to the latest trollish outrage from angry, desperate men in Kabul.

This should be a key concern for Pakistanis as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates – because the actions of India’s clandestine agencies in Afghanistan over the last two decades have damaged Pakistani state and societal capacity. The first war on terror (2007-2015) was won decisively by Pakistan – but the mortgage payments for this victory are growing in magnitude, and their terms remain unknown. In part this is because Pakistani security sector leaders have opted for less democracy and less freedom of expression as an outcome of the victory in that war.

The principal reason Pakistanis need to have a serious, open and difficult set of conversations about Afghanistan today, immediately and urgently, is to prepare for the second war on terror. It has already begun, and is claiming at least a dozen Pakistani soldiers each month – attacks on the Serena Hotel in Quetta, on the Dasu Dam engineers’ convoy, on numerous checkposts and security installations from North Waziristan to Islamabad – are all clear signals.

Winning this new war, whilst maintaining silence or falsehood about the costs of the first war will not be possible. We are in this new war because of the unfinished analysis, reconciliation and absence of accountability for the first war. This, at its core, is the reason why the trepidation about the challenge posed by the situation in Afghanistan is so vital to unpack and understand.

Let us begin by understanding the key actors and their stakes in the Afghanistan challenge. There are the IRA and other non Taliban leaders in Afghanistan – men like Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. These are elected leaders with legitimacy both at home and abroad. Having held power for two decades, this cohort will not flee with its tail between its legs. It will fight to the death. Ignoring or maligning them is only an option if Pakistan believes it has the right to decide who should run another country, and the capability to enforce this right. It doesn’t. It can’t. It shouldn’t.

Next, there is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) or the Taliban, with its leadership, the Doha Shura, and many others (some in Pakistan). The IEA also has legitimacy, at home, and abroad. The IEA is an Afghan entity. It is loyal to Afghanistan, not to Pakistan. Never has this been in doubt, no matter what many Afghans may say, or what many Pakistanis may believe. The Taliban are nobody’s proxy. They can now smell victory. They cannot be coerced by anyone, much less a Pakistan that lacks will, capability, capacity, imagination and clarity.

The United States, which has solemnized and recognized the IEA as a legitimate entity and stakeholder, is the next most important actor in Afghanistan. American haste of withdrawal should not be mistaken for an absence of interest or stakes. The withdrawal will shape the manner in which US interests will be pursued and stakes will be claimed. This too is easy to misunderstand, but dangerous to get wrong. The incentive for American leaders to frame Pakistan as the root of Afghanistan’s problems is higher today than at the lowest point at any time during the last two decades. Pakistani strategists should be thinking deeply about what this will mean in the spring of 2022.

Daesh and the wider array of terrorist groups, including those that have been driven away by s military power, into the caves of Afghanistan (and the arms of mercenaries of the NDS and the New Delhi South Block compact in that country), is a vital actor and stakeholder. A cleaned up and peaceful Afghanistan, where children attend school, women run banks and technology startups and people pursue life and happiness freely, is death for Al Qaeda, Daesh, the TTP, and all other terrorists. They NEED an Afghanistan at war with itself and its most important neighbour: Pakistan. The more terrorists can complicate the Pakistani decision matrix – through information warfare, the misuse of religion, and the art of subterfuge and sabotage – the easier their path to sustenance in Afghanistan, throughout Pakistan, and beyond.

Which brings us to Pakistan – a key stakeholder and actor in Afghanistan. Like Afghanistan, which has multiple important stakeholders, Pakistan is a diverse country with contested stakes both within society and within the state and its structures. Only two groups in Pakistan actually matter, and they are not what they seem to be.

Group A is for Pakistan dealing with the challenge in Afghanistan in a manner that leads to security and prosperity for Pakistanis in the shortest time period at the lowest cost possible. Group B is not. It is that simple. If you believe you are part of the first group, you need to understand three facts, and all decision-making must align with these three facts.

Fact 1: A Taliban takeover in Afghanistan will be catastrophic for the people of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will destroy freedom in the short term, economic potential in the medium term and any chances for an orderly society in the long term. Right-wing extremism’s appeal can only be fought through effective state capability – not through compromise with angry mobs, nor cold, calculating and manipulative negotiators like the men of the Doha Shura.

Fact 2: Whether the extremists of the Doha Shura, or the fantasy loving irredentist ethnonationalist trolls of the Kabul Arg, the core incentive for Afghan groups is to use Pakistan’s vulnerabilities against it. The Kandahari Mullahs use Islam, the Afghan elite use Western anger towards Rawalpindi, as well as ethnic baiting – but the result is the same: the exploitation of Pakistani vulnerability. The problem is not the Afghans. It is Pakistani vulnerability.

Fact 3: Long-term solutions to social, economic, political and security challenges require a compact between the strong and the weak, between the powerful and the powerless, and between those that have guns, and those that have roses. A centralized Pakistani narrative alienates those on the periphery, driving them into the arms of Pakistan’s enemies. Pakistanis that cannot fathom truth, reconciliation and accommodation within Pakistan should not expect accommodation from foreigners – especially not Afghans.

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