**Ending the `forever war`**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-04-21

LAST week, President Joe Biden declared the end of what is described as America`s `forever war` in Afghanistan. The announcement came nearly two decades after president George W. Bush had initiated hostilities. Declaring that the US had long ago accomplished its mission, Biden said all the troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by Sept 11.

That would also mark the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on America that led to the start of the longest war the world`s greatest military power has been fighting. Biden said there was no longer any justification if there ever was to continue fighting an endless war. He maintained that America went to war with clear goals and that those objectives have been achieved. But it`s not clear what those objectives were.

This may not be an admission of defeat, but neither is it a declaration of victory. It`s the humbling of the most powerful superpower on earth. After fighting for nearly two decades, the US is finally exiting an unwinnable war. Three American presidents since 2001George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, and their respective commanders were not able to make good on their promises to win in Afghanistan, described as the `graveyard of empires`.

Tens of thousands of Afghans were killed in the war that cost close to a trillion dollars. Since 2001, over 775,000 US troops have been deployed in Afghanistan. A f alse perception was created that the US was winning the war when that was not the case.

Ironies abound in the US war that turned into a multi-generational one. Many analysts agree that the war could have ended far more quickly with far less human and financial costs. The rise of the Afghan Taliban that became a formidable insurgent force also owed itself to America`s imperial hubris.

Weeks after the US forces invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, the Taliban reached a surrender agreement with the newly appointed Afghan president Hamid Karzai in Kandahar that would have allowed the leaders of the ousted regime to go home. `The Taliban are finished as a politicalforce,` Mullah Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad declared. `I think we should go home.

Under the agreement the Taliban abandoned the city Kandahar where the Taliban movement had originated and that was its stronghold. The relinquishing of Kandahar signalled the end of Taliban control of the country. But then the US intervened and stopped Karzai from making any deal with the Taliban leadership.

America`s desire for revenge ended any possibility of a peace deal. The then secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfield, rejected any negotiated end to the conflict. It brought an end to the efforts to win the war by negotiation. For the Bush administration, every Taliban was a terrorist and had to be annihilated. Many Taliban leaders who had surrendered and returned to their villages were later arrested and some of them were sent to Guantanamo prison.

In fact, the US didn`t have any understanding of the country when it went to war in Afghanistan in order to punish the perpetrators of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks. The ouster of the Taliban regime was not much of a problem for the mightiest military power on earth. For Washington, the Taliban had been defeated. But that was not the case.

By 2005, the insurgency had spread to large parts of the country. That was the beginning of what was described as the second American-Afghan war that the US forces could never win despite the massive surge of troops under the Obama administration which had come to power in 2009. It was an unwinnablewar buttherewasnorealisationin Washington about the deteriorating battlefield situation. It was the American hubris that would not accept that it was an unwinnable war.

Moreover, there had been fundamental disagreements on the objectives of the US operation in AfghanistanwithinsuccessiveUS administrations.

For some, it was turning Afghanistan into a democracy; for others it was about bringing a cultural change in the country. President Biden says that the main objective of clearing Afghanistan of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations that posed a direct threat to the US had long been achievedparticularly after the killing of Osama bin Laden.

But it took 10 more years and thousands of more lives for an American leader to recognise this fact.

It is not just Biden; his predecessor Donald Trump too had accepted the futility of the `forever war`.

The February 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban had laid the ground for the complete withdrawal of American forces.

In what could be termed as a remarkable twist of fate, some 18 years af ter the start of the war US of ficials sat across the table to negotiate peace with the same insurgent leaders they had once declared as terrorists and sought to annihilate. Many in the Talibannegotiatingteamwereformerinmatesof the infamous Guantanamo prison. America faced the awkward reality of having to accept some insurgent leaders who it had listed as terrorists and pursued relentlessly for years with its entire military might.

It is an irony of history that yet another superpower was forced to face ignominy in Afghanistan.

While the Russian forces pulled out in 1989, a decade after invading Afghanistan, the Americans were mired in the war there for two decades.

President Biden`s announcement has certainly not come as a surprise. Although there are still some elements in the United States particularly its military establishment who are sceptical, the decision has received overwhelming support. It may be true that the absence of an agreement between Afghan warring sides on a future political set-up has rendered the situation uncertain.

But an indefinite deployment of American troops won`t help improve the situation. In fact, the presence of foreign forces has been the basic cause of conflict in Afghanistan. Regardless of who the adversary was at any point, two generations of Afghans have known only war. Now it will be left for Afghans to decide about war and peace in their country.  The writer is the author o/No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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