**Evaluating the Lessons of the Afghan War**

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Although the Taliban had no hand in the barbarous 9/11 attacks (15 out of 19 attackers were Saudis), the presence of Osama bin Laden on Afghan soil became their connection. While all the hijackers were affiliated to Al Qaida, the Taliban neither had any knowledge about the plan nor were they involved in it. However, there remains no doubt that he was the perpetrator of this atrocity and that they should have handed him over. Their miscalculation caused the citizens of Afghanistan to take the brunt of the US’ vengeance (its violence, murder and mayhem spilling over into Pakistan). The 9/11 Commission established in November 2002 issued their final report on July 22, 2004. Multiple criticisms were heard that many documents remained undisclosed. The one document recently released by US President Biden doesn’t add to anything that we already know.

9/11’s condemnable act of savagery was totally directed against non-combatants. This pure unadulterated terrorist act cannot be condoned by any stretch of the imagination. My son almost became its victim as he was working in a law firm in Chase Manhattan Plaza across the road. Having heard the first explosion, he walked around to the Conference Room facing the World Trade Center (WTC) and actually saw the second aircraft plough into the tower. Hunkering down for a couple of hours because of the falling debris, smoke and rubble, he then made his way through the unfolding chaos to find my daughter several blocks away. Indeed, it was a miracle that they found each other. With sore feet (their shoes torn by walking on the rubble), both walked for nearly 90 blocks home. Many NY residents offered water, food and even temporary shelter on the way. That this horrible act did not affect me personally is God’s will but should I not condemn it and grieve for all those thousands of innocents who died without knowing why? Certainly, I will unequivocally condemn those who perpetrated this atrocity! The US was 100 per cent right in seeking revenge but it was 100 per cent wrong in not targeting Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaida specifically; putting all their effort in taking them out.

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The Commission established severe intelligence failures by the FBI and CIA. The report has been accused of not giving the whole story about the warnings the US had received before the attacks. The Commission opined that military means aside, public diplomacy should be used to bring Afghans around: envisioning an eventual government being able to build a national army, coordinate infrastructure and public services in major provinces throughout the country. The Doha talks and Accord thereof, initially without participation by the Ashraf Ghani regime, recognised this home truth.

The largest tribal population in the world have their lifestyle and set of values. Afghans cannot be made to give it up and adopt the western one. They will stand up against anybody who tries to pressurise or colonise them, be it the British in 1842, the Soviets in the 1980s or the combined power of the US and NATO during the last 20 years in the 21st century. These latest fruitless efforts of the “most civilised” nations, against a supposedly uncivilised population, has destroyed generations of young Afghans. Born into turmoil, they have starved, missed health care and malnourishment, been maimed and/or have died from bullets and drone attacks. Having never seen peace during their lifetime, it will take decades to overcome the trauma of 20 years of war.

The 9/11 Commission report was criticised heavily soon after its release. In a 2004 article, titled, “Whitewash as Public Service: How the 9/11 Commission Report defrauds the nation,” Harper’s Magazine writer Benjamin DeMott stated:

“The plain sad reality – I report this following four full days studying the work – is that the 9/11 Commission Report, despite the vast quantity of labour behind it, is a cheat and a fraud. It stands as a series of evasive manoeuvres that infantilize the audience, transform candour into iniquity, and conceal realities that demand immediate inspection and confrontation.”

Another story conveniently forgotten is US oil company UNOCAL, attempting to secure a gas pipeline deal with the fundamentalist Taliban regime and forge a partnership with them. This is despite the regime not being recognised by the international community. Senior Taliban members were flown to Texas by UNOCAL in 1997 in an attempt to come to an agreement. The point of contact for meeting the Taliban leaders in Houston was Zalmay Khalilzad, a Consultant for UNOCAL. Having served as a State Department official when Ronald Reagan was President, he publicly voiced support for the radical Islamists. Negotiations over the pipeline collapsed in 1998 when Al-Qaeda bombed two US embassies in Africa. However, in 1998, TAPI became the new US attempt to get access to Central Asian oil and gas. The contract for TAP (without India then) was signed in 2002 soon after the US had installed a client government in Kabul.

This should be a moment of reflection for us as well. General Musharraf’s spur-of-the-moment decision to join the US in the Afghan war had severe consequences for Pakistan. One must not blame Musharraf only. Whatever criticism one may level at Musharraf, before taking any major decision, he would consult those generals who were his closest aides. When he went wrong, it was invariably because of bad or motivated advice-or worse, usually being told by some of his slavish aides sucking up to him for their perks and promotions what he wanted to hear (Anything new or strange here?).

Did any one of them remonstrate and advise against it? This requires courage of conviction! Some of these outright hypocrites now come on primetime TV and shamelessly (blandly) pontificate about Afghanistan. Their present status of wealth was bought by the blood of our Shaheeds, both military and civilian.

US President Trump alleged in 2018 that “Pakistan had not done a damned thing” for the US. PM Imran Khan summarised Pakistani contributions for him and the world. Pakistan had suffered over 100000 casualties in this war while over $150 bn was lost to the economy. US “aid” was a minuscule $20 bn, “most of it being “Coalition Support'” funds for which every penny spent was accounted for. With Pakistan’s tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan devastated, Imran Khan added that millions of people had been uprooted from their homes.

“Pakistan continues to provide free lines of ground and air communications (GLOCs/ALOCs), can Mr Trump name another ally that gave such sacrifices?”

This is only the tip of the iceberg. Hosting millions of Afghan refugees over decades, the spill-over of violence of a Kalashnikov and drug culture permeated into Pakistan society. Talibanization has resulted in a strengthening of a strict, close to the Wahabi form of Islamic practice that has been radicalised today and does have connections to terrorism. Coping with the residual legacy of the Afghan war will take decades and demand considerable economic and intellectual effort. It also requires our security establishment to wake up to ground realities – photo-ops and a 9-to-5 syndrome will not do. Above all, it will require political will!

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