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**Fallout management**

The United States is leaving Afghanistan in turmoil after two decades of occupation. The Doha Agreement with the Taliban, bypassing the Ashraf Ghani government, had pulled the carpet from under the feet of the Afghan government – leaving the last rites to be performed by the Afghans themselves in the time-honoured Afghan tradition of military conquest.

The strategic objectives of the US in Afghanistan will remain a subject of debate for a long time to come. Whether this was counterterrorism or nation-building only time will tell. If it was counterterrorism, they achieved it long ago after Osama bin Laden’s death and if it was nation-building they have abandoned it as a lost cause.

Could it be that the US had some other objective? If conspiracy theorists would have their way, then in the words of Lawrence Wilkerson, the former chief of staff of Colin Powell, the main objective of the US in Afghanistan was to contain China and to watch over Pakistan’s nuclear programme. Looks like there are not many takers for Wilkerson’s prognosis in the US, since it has decided on a precipitate withdrawal without resolving the knotty issue of power sharing amongst the competing Afghan factions. Could it be that we are overlooking the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the US’s Afghan project? Is it possible that peace and stability was never the objective and managed chaos was a preferred strategic option?

If the above is conceded, then it appears that the two decades long US presence achieved that objective. Afghanistan remained unstable and the regional connectivity espoused by Pakistan remained a pipe dream. The managed chaos theory appears to gain traction looking at the way the Afghan project has been abandoned.

The lack of sustainable international aid commitment to Afghanistan and a lack of UN-led development commitment suggest doom for Afghan peace. With no means to sustain an aid-hooked economy and no means to fund the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF), the country is all set to return to chaos and anarchy. US Congressman Michael Waltz recently remarked in a CSIS sponsored seminar that the US is committing a mistake by leaving Afghanistan and Bagram without residual force. The Taliban already are on the offensive and there is a spring in their step; 50 out of 387 districts are already in their direct control whereas they claim 50 percent of Afghanistan within their sway.

If managed chaos is indeed the preferred choice of global forces, then fallout management is the strategic imperative of neighbouring countries like Pakistan. Fallout for sure is coming and its management should therefore be the top priority for Pakistan. In order to understand the nature of the fallout, one needs to understand the Afghan power-brokers’ mosaic. The Taliban are the dominant Pashtun group that is headed by Mullah Haibatullah and deputized by Mullah Umar’s son Mullah Yaqub who is both the military commander and finance minister of the Taliban. This group has a loose centralized control with maximum operational autonomy devolved to field commanders. Like a man with a hammer seeing every challenge as a nail, the Taliban field commanders thrive best while practising their military skills.

It was the above compulsion that always forced the Taliban leadership to shun ceasefire against Afghan forces despite the best US efforts. Other power-brokers like Hikmatyar are ideologically close to Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami but remain fringe players in Afghan war due to the numbers game. Erstwhile Northern Alliance actors like Karim Khalili are tilted towards Iran. Muhammad Muhaqiq from Mazar e Sharif charts an independent course from Iran. Uzbek leaders like Dostum enjoy Turkey’s patronage while Ahmed Massoud the son of Ahmed Shah Massoud commands the Tajik community’s allegiance.

Seeing the complex mosaic, a sane course for any neighbor should be to engage at the operational level with all the factions without playing favourites. The Taliban are the strongest faction and will be courted by all countries. It is therefore essential for Pakistan to capture the space before it is encroached upon by outsiders willing to fish in troubled Afghan waters. It is absolutely vital at this juncture for Pakistan to put into effect a robust fallout management strategy, along with cobbling together a regional alliance comprising China, CARs, Iran, Pakistan and Russia with Turkey as a co-opted member. The alliance under the rubric of a ‘Regional Security Framework’ should work out a common formula for peace in Afghanistan. After the formula all countries should reach out to factions amenable to their influence.

Pakistan must reach out to the Taliban to retain its leverage and to sensitize them of its concerns regarding revival of violence by terrorist entities like the TTP, ISKP, and other sectarian groups in its restive ex-Fata regions bordering Afghanistan. The Taliban should be clearly told to control the flow of the TTP towards Pakistan and respect the inviolability of the border, especially the fenced portion. Pakistan must strengthen its border control arrangements through armed surveillance, and use of border protection measures employing army, FC, and police. It must also be prepared to face the influx of refugees.

Pakistan should not pressurize the Taliban to enter into an agreement with the Afghan government; it would be construed negatively by the Taliban as pressure tactics to deny them their perceived due in the Afghan power pie. It is time for fallout management through a strong regional alliance which should now be the top priority for Pakistan’s leadership.

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