**Humanitarian Transactions for Afghanistan**

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December 14, 2021

On 4 December 2021, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi held a press conference in Islamabad to announce that Pakistan would host a session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation’s (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers on December 19 to sensitise the OIC to commit to offering economic assistance to Afghanistan for humanitarian purposes. The effort would be to ward off the looming humanitarian crisis and eventual collapse of the economy in Afghanistan.

Though time is running out fast, Pakistan has been attempting to evolve an international consensus on helping Afghanistan monetarily for the sake of humanity. For this purpose, at the occasion, Qureshi said that Pakistan would also invite special representatives of P-5 countries such as China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the US, besides the representatives of the European Union. Pakistan desires to enhance its diplomatic outreach on the question of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Understandably, a country that had been running on foreign financial help for two decades (2001-2021) cannot switch swiftly to indigenous economic resources. The occupying force, the Taliban, has no economic producers and managers. With the parting of foreign assistance, which had created an artificial economic bubble, the economy has gone into a nosedive. In the absence of any external help, Afghanistan’s cratering economy may not withstand the vagaries of the harsh winter.

Pakistan reckons that the situation is fast deteriorating and falling beyond the ambit of being manageable. With the increasing ferocity of the winter, the situation may slip out of everyone’s hands. As per an estimate, out of 39 million people in Afghanistan, 22.8 million people would face food shortages and 3.2 million children may get to grips with malnutrition.

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Recent history indicates that leaving Afghanistan to its own devices has proven a blunder the cost of which has to be paid by both the Afghans and the neighbors. The immediate consequences are a civil war, hunger, and disease posing a pivotal impetus to the natives to relocate to neighbouring countries (Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) as refugees. Presently, Pakistan and Iran have been hosting five million Afghan refugees.

Woefully, regional worries do not affect the Afghans, who prefer to launch internecine conflicts meant for shedding blood more than that spilled during any war with an external nemesis. The proclivity for picking up arms and settling scores is inherent in Afghanistan. Reputation precedes action. Even drone strikes fed on the Afghan feud system. The next is the penchant for wielding power at all costs without exuding any semblance of modern prevalent modes of governance such as democracy.

The history of Afghanistan is also rife with civil wars, especially after the end of the Cold War in 1991. The civil war creates a wave of instability hitting the shores of neighbouring countries including those of Pakistan. Dolefully, Afghanistan has become another name of instability and oppression. Afghanistan is still failing to come to terms with the global realities of interdependence and intercommunication.

Yet, leaving Afghanistan alone is not a solution. The answer lies in engaging with Afghanistan. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-American diplomat, who belonged to the realist school of international relations as a political scientist, advised US President Jimmy Carter in 1978 to not isolate the People’s Republic of China during the Cold War. As national security advisor, Brzezinski opined instead to engage with China even at the cost of relations with Taiwan. In the post-Cold War phase, the same is true for Afghanistan, a regressive hotspot ever ready to suck unpityingly the region in. If memory serves the purpose, the Cold War saw its last inferno blazing nowhere but in Afghanistan. Peace is a unicorn, hardly available for sharing out. After the end of the Cold War, Afghanistan has been a regional and international challenge. This is where the concern of Pakistan seeks relevance. Beset with harrowing experiences, Pakistan cannot introduce peace into Afghanistan, nor can Pakistan hold off the instability wave evolving from Afghanistan.

In the post-withdrawal phase of 2021, the crisis of political legitimacy of the Taliban regime has held the Afghan population hostage. Tottering under the pressure of getting their government recognized, the Taliban are refusing to submit and they ooze no desire to catch up with the global evolvement. They want to keep Afghanistan siloed. Pakistan itself is hobbled with an economic crunch. Though Pakistan has dispatched medicines, wheat, and other relief items to assist Afghanistan, the aid is insufficient to meet the needs of the Afghan populace.

It is known that the aid would help but the path is rife with two challenges. The first challenge is how to bypass the Taliban and reach out to the Afghan masses. Making a distinction between the recalcitrant ruling Taliban regime and the Afghan hoi polloi is no more an arduous task. The path shown by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to circumvent sanctions on Afghanistan is that channel funds directly to the health, education, and municipal service sectors for humanitarian assistance by paying salaries to the employees and by meeting the running costs of the three sectors such as hospitals, educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) and the staff.

The second challenge is how to funnel funds into Afghanistan by bypassing sanctions, whether imposed by the US or the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The latter maintains a Taliban sanctions regime underlining banned entities and persons, besides freezing funds and assets under Resolution 1988 passed on 17 June 2011. Nevertheless, on 30 November 2021, the World Bank-backed transferring of $280 million from a frozen trust fund (amounting to $1.5 billion) to two aid agencies such as the World Food Program and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to help Afghanistan withstand the brewing humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, the transfer has to be approved by 31 donors of the World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). Being the biggest donor of the ARTF, the approval of the US is also required, though the US treasury has issued comfort letters to facilitate banks to process humanitarian transactions.

Above all, there is also a need for offering explicit dispensation to Afghanistan in the UNSC on a humanitarian basis allowing the relief agencies to deliver aid without the fear of violating the imposed sanctions.

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