[**Once upon a Taliban**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1648322/once-upon-a-taliban)

[Fahd Husain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8675/fahd-husain)Published September 25, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is Dawn’s resident editor in Islamabad.

THE war in Afghanistan is over. Pakistan won.

No amount of hand wringing in Western capitals can change this hard reality. For now, at least. The post-victory battle however is still being waged on the airwaves and in oak-panelled boardrooms. Victory is not a happy ending. Not yet.

To live happily ever after, we may need to reinterpret what happened once upon a time.

But first Pakistan may want to acknowledge that it is floundering in the art of storytelling. Victors usually don’t struggle with their narratives, they revel in them. Pakistan though is bracing for a backlash. Something, somewhere is terribly wrong with how this story is unfolding.

The secret of this failure, in fact, is hiding in plain sight. The Pakistani state, and many influential sections of its society, cannot seem to resist the powerful urge to romance the Taliban even though the red wedding is over and the guests have limped back home. Very few in Pakistan are willing to recognise that walking away from a victory does not mean abandoning its spoils.

Something, somewhere is terribly wrong with how this story is unfolding.

These spoils will accrue from sustained peace. Victory is only the first step. It is an acknowledgement however that Pakistan was right all along in its approach towards the conflict in Afghanistan. When former army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani had argued in written form that the US/Nato strategy would not work, and the Afghan National Army would ultimately collapse, he was ignored in Washington and London. As reported in detail by American journalist Steve Coll in his book Directorate S, Gen Kayani kept on advising US officials to change strategy and not depend so much on the advice of people like Hamid Karzai. But the American hammer saw every problem in Afghanistan as a nail.

As did the belligerent American media and Beltway pundits. The ‘do more’ mantra kept picking up steam with every successive US official’s visit to Pakistan. In hindsight one can see how Pakistani officials held their nerve against this consistent and persistent pressure piled on year after year for nearly two decades. The continuity of policy paid its dividends.

But just when time has come to cash in on these dividends, Pakistan is fumbling.

The fumble may not make sense at first viewing. Pakistani officials are parroting a fairly reasonable position. We maintain that the Taliban should have an inclusive government, that they should include women and minorities in their government, and that they should ensure the Afghan soil is not used for terrorism against any country. The prime minister, foreign minister and the national security adviser are pushing this narrative well through repeated interviews. And yet, the problem persists.

**Read:** [*Afghan policy conundrum*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1643858)

It persists for at least three reasons: (1) Western leaders believe there is a gap between what Pakistani officials say and what they do (2) Western leaders also maintain that Pakistan has not used the leverage it has over the Taliban sufficiently to make them change their behaviour (3) they also maintain Taliban would not have gained the emphatic victory they have without the active support of Pakistan through the years.

These Western leaders — especially the Americans — are taking the three factors, welding them into a steel rod, and preparing to take a mighty swing at Pakistan. What can we do?

Plenty, as it turns out.

On factor 1: (a) introduce discipline in public communication. Brutal discipline. A bevy of ministers and aides shooting off their mouths on Afghanistan and Taliban is a major problem that needs to be zipped shut. Let’s face it: the prime minister’s ill-advised, ill-considered and ill-timed statement on the Taliban ‘breaking the shackles of slavery’ was the ‘gotcha’ moment that the West was looking for. ‘See we told you,’ they bloviated in their earnestness to prove to nobody in particular that Pakistan was ecstatic over the Taliban victory.

(b) Stop playing the victim. In inter-state relations, no one cares. Yes Pakistani state and society have been ravaged by terrorism, and yes Pakistan has paid a steep price for America’s war in Afghanistan, but this narrative is past its sell-by date. Shelve it. Instead, talk about shared interests from the peace in Afghanistan. What shared interests? Exactly. Figure them out. List them out. Spell them out.

(c) Construct a post-conflict vision for the region from our perspective. Move the discussion away from victory and defeat and steer it towards projects, pipelines and prosperity. Garnish the vision with specificity. Don’t have the vision? Don’t have the specificity? There you have it ladies and gentlemen: the challenge before us. Make this happen instead of harping on tired clichés and outmoded talking points.

On factor 2: (a) use the leverage, but don’t photograph it. Pakistan must invest all its energies in knocking some sense into the Taliban. If it could sustain two decades of Western pressure to stay the course on its Afghanistan policy, it sure as heck can cajole, persuade and influence the Taliban to become more acceptable. All these years we have absorbed the blame for our leverage — now it is time to use the leverage to gain credit for ourselves.

(b) Do this on the quiet. Till it is done. Then shout from the rooftops. Mainstream the Taliban as much as possible, then claim credit. Pakistan should reorient its entire approach so it can be seen as the engine driving the post-conflict transformation in the region.

On factor 3: (a) embrace the reality that Pakistan was right these two decades and the West was wrong. Then build a positive narrative around it. How were we right? Explain. What was our logic and rationale? Explain. How did we suffer? Explain. How can we use this to make it a win-all for all stakeholders now? Explain.

(b) Ditch the gloating. Abandon the chest-thumping. Dump the smugness. Replace the blame game with proposals for advancing shared interests. The past is another country. The future awaits. To live happily ever after, let us start over:

Once upon a time…

*The writer is Dawn’s resident editor in Islamabad.*

**Twitter:** [**@fahdhusain**](https://twitter.com/Fahdhusain)

*Published in Dawn, September 25th, 2021*