**Stabilising Afghanistan**

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Before committing to a cause or objective, it is crucial to factor in the pros and cons to define a long-run strategy for success. For the last twenty years, and by extension since the late 1970s, Afghanistan has kept the world on edge due to its internal strife and proxy wars played by external players.

The US, once pivotal in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan via the Afghan Taliban’s founding members, became embroiled in a perpetual conflict since the dastardly 9/11 Attacks that washed away not only its hefty monetary investment in the region but also its political standing in the eyes of the world. Its longest war turned out to be much worse than previously thought, and comparisons with Vietnam were unsurprising.

The recent resurgence of the Taliban as a state entity through a combo of political and military blitzkrieg has simply stunned the global community. The media handling was equally astounding, which was unlike anything previously witnessed. Whether the Taliban council would adhere to the commitments made with the outside world—given their ideology and complex history rife with mistrust and misperceptions—is another story! Not even neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, expected a complete capitulation by the former Ghani Administration, which had lingered onto power unproductively and unfairly and pushed aside sane voices like Dr Abdullah Abdullah.

It also failed to commit to the several years-long Afghan Peace Process facilitated inter alia by Islamabad and Doha at the request of the global powers.  Of course, the process was beyond any layman’s understanding given the intricate nature of Afghan politics. Yet, those who wished for sustainable peace in the region were compelled to adjust to its lack of bearing fruit.Given the dramatically changed scenario, several countries have chosen to maintain informal contacts with the new de facto regime, albeit, cautiously. This stems from the fact that the Taliban do not have a great track record when it comes to freedom of speech and human rights.

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But then the irony remains that many other states have their skeletons in the closet to hide. So, whether it would be really about the rights of the Afghans or about vying for economic and security interests? More likely the latter, given the region’s importance as a connectivity corridor in the long run with a whole lot of untapped resources waiting to be mined. Pragmatism prevails over idealism in any scenario at the end of the day.

America’s failure in Afghanistan is of a monumental scale and all eyes are on the Biden Administration, which may not come out in glowing colours when the history of this era will be written. President Biden’s belief that Afghans should be left on their own doesn’t conform with the prevailing wisdom within or outside the US, regardless of Washington’s historical proclivity for nation-building attempts. The international community’s confidence in the Afghan National Army’s fighting capabilities was clearly a disaster in making, given the systematic corruption, lack of morale and total inability to hold ground.

The former Ghani regime was more involved in making hay while the sun lasted and blame games where Islamabad was the regular scapegoat. This worked for a while thanks to the regime’s partners in New Delhi whose shady role in propping up militancy, stoking ethnic divisions and fomenting terrorism against Pakistan have been ignored by the international community for far too long.The ISIL-K may be the new common enemy for the Taliban and the international community but such groups are easily replaceable with newer terror entities, hence, the root cause of such transnational terrorism needs to be identified and addressed. Digging up the terror group’s origins may likely lead to connections with the now-defunct National Directorate of Security (NDS), which used the group as a tool, amongst others.

There is a collective responsibility of the regional and global powers to ensure the stability of Afghanistan and that its territory is not used for harming other countries. Sanctions may not be the answer but rather become a part of the problem that won’t exactly help the people of Afghanistan by forcing them to take unwise steps owing to extremely high unemployment and poverty rates.  The US-Taliban cooperation in the recent events has certainly emboldened the notion that they may not be allies but are not to be considered full-fledged enemies any more thanks to realpolitik. If the Taliban have truly “reformed,” their commitment to peace, human rights, and international security should remain consistent.

Another point to note is Pakistan’s role as the primary facilitator of the complex evacuation process that was not accorded due recognition by the West, specifically the US. Washington should fruitfully engage with Islamabad based on shared values, and economic and security interests. Huge untapped potential for enhancing multifaceted cooperation remains unexplored and resetting ties is the way forward for both countries.  Now that major European leaders and top diplomats are interacting with Islamabad and recognising its important role, it is high time that the Americans do the same as well, as Pakistan remains the key player when it comes to promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan.

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