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**The Afghan challenge**

With US and Nato troops having all but departed from Afghanistan after 20 years of political and military failure, Afghanistan’s present situation is a tough call for Pakistan. It is tough in every respect since the current and likely future situation will challenge Pakistan's security, stability, politics, economy and diplomacy.

The Taliban currently claim control of 85 percent of Afghan territory, and reportedly the border crossings at Iran and Turkmenistan have also been captured. Some unconfirmed reports of pushback by Afghan forces are also trickling in. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden has already announced that it may be difficult for the Ghani government to hold on to the country.

As Afghanistan is being overrun, at least for now, by the Taliban forces, the US has packed up its billion-dollar Bagram fort, where tanks, troops, McDonalds and swimming pools were all located for the comfort and security of the American forces to fight the Taliban. No one in Afghanistan knew about the timing of this departure. Now with most foreign troops gone, and impending trouble in Afghanistan, Pakistan will be the worst-hit country after Afghanistan.

But there is a past that has put Pakistan in a difficult position and structured its present challenge. On the history pages where the torturous story of post-1979 Afghanistan, full of violence, war and hate, has been written ironically the role of Pakistan as the main destroyer and villain rather than the invaders. For the Afghan jihad – which many Western and Muslim states funded and Afghans of many political orientations actively participated in – it was Pakistan that earned abiding criticism. As a neighbour, key facilitator-cum-participant and the co-author of the jihad along with the US, like most states Pakistan too pursued what its governments considered to be in its national interest. Blundering steps were made by all governments, starting from the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan and subsequently by others including the US. And yet Washington snatched all the credit for the fall of the Soviet Union and piled criticism for all failures on Pakistan.

On the other hand, the immoral and unprincipled moves of various states were considered ‘realpolitik’ – for example: Washington destroying Afghan territory and people to settle scores with the ‘evil communist empire’ for defeat in Vietnam; India not condemning Soviet invasion because of the Indo-Soviet alliance; Iran politically influencing the Hizb-e-Wahdat group among the Mujahideen, the French and the Soviets supporting the Northern Alliance and in 1997 the US engaging with the Taliban for UNOCOL business etc; then invading Afghanistan in 2001 and losing the war in a country where trillions dollars worth of war machine was deployed.

Against this background, loaded heavily against Pakistan, both in fact and fiction, Pakistan has to chart its own future Afghan policy. Indeed added to the difficult past is a present where while Pakistan ad nauseam declares its committed to facilitating peace and being neutral, Afghanistan’s beleaguered US-supported President is seeking the ‘last refuge of the scoundrel': patriotism. He asked the Taliban during a Khost gathering on July 10 to promise that they had not accepted the Durand Line. Ghani attempting to frame them as Pakistan's proxies will probably not buy him survivability. However, Pakistan remains the calf in the regional and global buzkashi over control and influence in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s ambassador in Afghanistan, like other officials, has been urging the global community to further strengthen the Afghan forces so they can fight the Taliban. Arming the militias to fight the Taliban would be guaranteed civil war, he said to Reuters in a recent interview.

Since the Taliban are now facing resistance by Afghan forces in some areas, the question is if a political dialogue in Doha can lead to some government-Taliban agreement. Next Friday another round of Doha talks are expected. Former president Hamid Karzai Is likely to be included in the Kabul delegation. This is a hopeful development for Afghanistan’s political reconciliation. Karzai is a wise, wily and respected politician within Afghanistan. Washington’s envoy Zalmay Khalilzad will participate in the talks. He enjoys the confidence of the Taliban with whom he has old links from his time in 1997 as a consultant for oil company UNOCAL. There is speculation that Khalizad has been instrumental in Washington accepting the Taliban as Kabul’s next government while the Taliban stick by their commitment of not entering Kabul in tanks like they did last time.

The political Kabul-Taliban dialogue beyond Kabul has also been organised by Russia. This may well help avert a prolonged civil war. Iran also invited the two sides for talks aimed at political settlement.

While it may take a few more weeks to be clear about what direction the Afghan situation takes, Pakistan is engaged in its own policy deliberations – internal and external. Pakistan needs to address four issues: reconciliation within Afghanistan; refugee influx within Pakistan, recognition of Afghanistan; and of regionalism.

On the regionalism issue, given its past with Afghanistan, Islamabad’s best option is to move ahead on Afghanistan as a regional country. It remains the lead country in terms of impact, inflow of refugees, security factor etc yet its policy moves, in-keeping with its own interests, must take place within a regional framework. This must include encouraging Kabul-Taliban reconciliation using regional platforms including Pakistan's existing trilaterals with Iran and Russia which include Afghanistan. Another important and fairly active multilateral forum focusing on Afghanistan is the Extended Troika with China, US, Russia and Pakistan as its members with the likely inclusion of Iran too. India remains, within security parameters generally, a marginal neighbour but important as a trade partner.

The return to the devastating civil war of the nineties can only be averted if Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries are committed to genuine dialogue amongst the different ethnic and political Afghan groups instead of through their respective proxies as was seen in the past. Hence, collective regionalism is absolutely central to some degree of reconciliation and co-existence within Afghanistan.

On the critical refugees question, Pakistan has some lessons learnt. Perhaps influx, despite 90 percent border fencing, is inevitable – but it must no longer be open. The government must restrict country-wide movement. This current Afghan challenge is one of the most significant challenges Pakistan has faced in its recent history.

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