**The Afghan chessboard**

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In the last twenty-two years, Afghanistan has gone through a long, complex and horrific war in the name of the War on Terror by the US, which caused hundreds and thousands of causalities, destruction of infrastructure, economy and social life. After 9/11, NATO allies were deployed for nearly two decades in Afghanistan to ensure that the country would not become a safe haven for international terrorists planning strikes on NATO member states. The Taliban were ousted out of power with the US intervention. In 2004, a new Afghan government, led by Hamid Karzai, assumed power, but the Taliban’s violent attacks persisted. Since his election in 2014, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani claims that more than 45,000 members of his country’s security forces have been slain.

The agreement for bringing peace in February 2020 specified a timeline for the complete pullout of foreign forces from Afghanistan if the Taliban upheld the deal. On 13th April 2021, US President Joe Biden announced that all US forces will depart Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. The Taliban surged over Afghanistan, seizing control across the country almost after two decades on 15th August, 2021. The Taliban vowed to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists against the US and its allies. When Kabul fell, political leaders from Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, the elected President, and his closest aides, including his National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, gave up and left the state. Sometimes without even trying to fight, the Afghan troops relinquished. According to Brown University research, the Afghan security forces have suffered 69,000 casualties. The number of civilians and militants killed is estimated to be at 51,000 each. Afghanistan has the world’s third-largest displaced population, according to the United Nations. A serious economic catastrophe was precipitated by the political events of August 15, 2021. Afghanistan’s economic prospects are bleak. Millions of Afghans are facing extreme food insecurity as a result of lost income, money shortages, and soaring food prices. Growth stagnated, though, as aid dwindled and the security situation grew more dangerous. The prolonged Afghanistan conflict quickly gave birth to an increasing human rights and humanitarian disaster. The Taliban rapidly reversed gains in the realms of women’s rights and media freedom.

The Afghanistan Papers is about the American military experience in Afghanistan. Additionally, it serves as a warning to upcoming military and political leaders that while political governments may fall and war fortunes may shift, people will still exist. The definite, defined goals are required before waging a war. The utilisation of violence alone, ignoring traditional culture and religion, or pouring excessive amounts of money into questionable nation-building initiatives didn’t change the Afghan heart and soul or a fighter’s spirit in any number of years. A troubled and extremist Afghanistan is a security concern regionally and globally. Pakistan and Afghanistan not only share a 2600-km border but also share cultural, ethnical, religious, economic and political linkages. Over the past forty years, Pakistan has taken in millions of Afghan refugees which resulted in sharp increase in terrorist attacks and a major blow to its economy and social fibre. Pakistan has been an important non-NATO ally in the War on Terror. The Pakistani leadership has called for political reconciliation instead of use of force and always has a vision of peace, connectivity and prosperity in the region. Pakistan supported the peace process in Afghanistan because “peace in Pakistan is absolutely connected to peace in Afghanistan.”

US think-tanks, media and the academia blame Pakistan for the American failure in Afghanistan. It is very clear that the US has been looking for excuses for its failure since their withdrawal but it is totally unacceptable to put all the baggage of 20 years of mismanagement on Pakistan. Leading American think tanks and media need to understand that neither war nor undue foreign interventions were a solution to end terrorism and chaos in Afghanistan. Only peace, proactive diplomacy and mutual understanding between the conflicting parties can resolve this problem. Islamabad was crucial in organising the peace talks between the United States and the Taliban that resulted in the agreement signed in Qatar, on February 29, 2020. Pakistan called for increased international efforts to engage with the Taliban government and pushed the Taliban to build an inclusive government.

The Taliban’s swift takeover has had a significant impact on Afghanistan’s neighbours in terms of regional security. If nothing is done by the international community and regional stakeholders then chaos will certainly extend throughout the region and not be restricted to Afghanistan. The Afghan people will continue to suffer and it certainly will have its spillover consequences. Containment strategies will also fail. In these circumstances, the regional and international community must play a supportive role.

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