**The Afghan triangl**

[Iftekhar A Khan](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/iftekhar-a-khan/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Iftekhar%20A%20Khan)

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The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan seems quicker than anticipated. This has left the Ashraf Ghani government in a real quandary over what to expect and how the situation will unfold once all foreign troops have left. Predictably, violence will erupt throughout the country; a tug of war ensuing among various tribal factions.

Some erroneously believe that the US-led exit will not mean victory for the Afghan resisting forces, or the Taliban, or whatever one prefers to call them. If the military pullout from Afghanistan — after two decades of war and bloodshed — isn’t tantamount to a conclusive defeat, most of us have no idea what is. After all, the Americans have lost some 3,500 of their own soldiers, with thousands more incapacitated for life, while sinking a staggering $2.26 trillion into an unwinnable war.

The US and its NATO allies tested their most modern weapons in Afghanistan. They killed and maimed a huge number of civilians and forced hundreds of thousands to seek refuge in the neighbouring countries. In his book ‘The New Rulers of the World’, journalist and documentary filmmaker John Pilger serves up a chilling quote: “Geoffrey Hoon [former British Defence secretary] said that cluster bombs were the best and most effective weapons we have.” Yet these were dropped in Afghanistan as cluster ‘bomblets’ and thousands still lie unexploded; leaving Afghanistan as the world’s most ‘land-mined’ country. Unfortunately, Pakistan at that time readily assisted the US — by opening up air space and leasing out military bases — in its quest to inflict atrocities on one of the poorest countries in the world.

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Now that US forces are departing from Afghanistan and insurgent forces have escalated their attacks against Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), President Ashraf Ghani faces a precarious situation. Even reports of desertions in the Afghan army have increased, which must be unsettling for Ghani. We must keep in mind that the Afghan people constitute a tribal society. Meaning that tribal bonds are held closer to their hearts than loyalty to the ANSF, which had been propped up and controlled by foreign militaries. Thus, all that Afghans would have to do to join their respective tribes would be to simply slip out of their uniforms, put on their turbans and walk away along with their official weapons.

Presently, US negotiators lament that the Taliban are not abiding by the terms of the bilateral negotiated peace agreement. Yet this is one side of the story. Afghan insurgent forces believe that since they won the two-decade-old war, there is no reason to uphold terms and conditions imposed by the defeated superpower. The old dictum that warns ‘losers cannot be choosers’ applies now more than ever. It should also remind the good Americans how the Russians withdrew in 1989. They also left their proxy ruler in power in Afghanistan, thinking that their regional interests would continue to be looked after. Russian withdrawal was more of a rout than an organised pullout. The only difference now is one of faces. In 1989, it was Mohammad Najibullah. Today, in 2021, it is Ashraf Ghani. May he live long!

However, the hotly discussed issue is the American request that Pakistan hosts US military bases so that in the post-exit climate Washington can monitor the situation in Afghanistan. It is indeed a very sensitive subject. As it is, there is not much love lost for the US here in this country due to its foreign and defence policies. The superpower has a compulsion to wage wars on one pretext or the other since it is home to a war-based economy. Muslim lands for this purpose have proved the best choice.

William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Programme at the Centre for International Policy, wrote in a recent article, ‘Selling Death’:“When it comes to trade in the tools of death and destruction, no one tops the United States of America. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published its annual Analysis of trends in global arms sales and the winner — as always — was the U S of A. Between 2016 and 2020, this country accounted for 37 percent of total international weapons deliveries, nearly twice the level of its closest rival, Russia, and more than six times that of Washington’s threat du jour, China.” Giving up attacking defenceless countries would mean shutting down the businesses of weapon manufacturers, Boeing, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin and the rest.

Let’s consider the Afghanistan situation as a triangle of conflicting interests. The first point of the triangle is occupied by US troops, the second by the US-imposed Kabul government, and the third by the Afghan resisting forces. Having lost the war, foreign occupants on the first point of the triangle want to quit without looking back; occupants on the second point want their foreign backers to stay, and, of course, those on the last end, having spilled their blood for freedom, want to be rid of the first two sooner rather than later. Stay tuned!

*The writer is a Lahore-based columnist and can be reached at pinecity@gmail.com*