**The Afghanistan Debacle: Marco Rubio vs Reality**

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To say that America’s Afghanistan debacle has put the cat amongst the pigeons would be a grave understatement! For now, the area has become a hotbed of more uncertainty and instability. An abrupt and poorly planned end to more than 20 years of occupation will do that to a region. On cue, recriminations have started flying left, right and centre to find a convenient patsy for another American foreign and defence policy failure. Add to that list, the recent outpouring of gems from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, especially Marco Rubio – a Republican with a failed presidential bid under his belt. Consider.

First – “the Pakistani role in enabling the Taliban is ultimately a victory for those pro-Taliban hardliners in the Pakistani government”. Lest the esteemed Senator overlook history, the enabling of such a group of hardliners began years ago by the CIA and at the behest of the American foreign policy of containment. Right then, wrong now? Quite recently, and when all else failed, it was the American government that was negotiating with the Taliban in Qatar. He should acknowledge that the Taliban’s “talk, talk – fight, fight” strategy emboldened them to quite an extent and frankly outwitted the Americans. Furthermore, while it is true that in the 80s and 90s there may have been hardliners in the Pakistani government, it is equally true that now there are almost none. This is because, over the last two decades, Pakistan has been at the receiving end of extremist retaliation and has been – per force – at the forefront of the war on terror. Pakistani loss of life ranges to the hundreds of thousands! Who in their right mind would want to make those sacrifices again?! Nevertheless, like any other country, Pakistan also can’t isolate itself from its neighbour and would want to ensure that stability reigns in Afghanistan and outside interference subsides. And unlike in the past, Pakistan does not want to go against regional and international sentiment on what the Taliban must do to be engaged constructively by the world. Even Prime Minister Imran Khan echoed this policy, “if they do not include all the factions, sooner or later they will have a civil war, that would mean an unstable, chaotic Afghanistan and an ideal place for terrorists. That is a worry.”

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Second – “the Taliban had unchallenged safe haven in Pakistan.they were able to rest, retrain and recruit.”

Since the new millennium and especially after 9/11, even if there were any sporadic hideouts in the mountainous region between Pakistan and Afghanistan, they were eliminated. Simply because Pakistan had paid a heavy price for aligning with America’s misplaced policy of containment! Particularly with the influx of refugees and related social and human upheaval. One of these days, Senator Rubio should be parachuted into the mountains on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border so that he can find out himself how difficult it is to search and destroy these sanctuaries. Which, by the way, the Pakistani military has done without prejudice on this side of the border! Alas! The same can’t be said on the other side of the fence!

Moreover, the American record on collateral damage in Afghanistan is enough fertile ground for recruitment of elements hostile to the occupying army! A recent example of this is a misplaced drone attack on August 29, 2021 where only innocent civilians died. “The strike was a tragic mistake,” Marine General Frank McKenzie, head of US Central Command, told a news conference. “I am now convinced that as many as 10 civilians, including up to 7 children, were tragically killed in that strike.”

Third – “If the United States could have a third-rate power like Pakistan unravel its aims, what chance do they have of confronting China?”

A little introspection would have shown that America – and interested parties such as India – miscalculated big time when it came to the power dynamics of Afghanistan! Subsequent US administrations believed that puppet regimes of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani could do their bidding in Afghanistan without any backlash from the rest of the country. These imported leaders didn’t have much political constituency, to begin with, and all they did was allow rampant corruption in government and amass fortunes in their little time at the top of the pyramid and then make a swift exit! Hence, American foreign policy (read: folly) in Afghanistan didn’t need any outside help to unravel its aims. After all, the place is not called the graveyard of empires for nothing. Persians, Mongols, British, Russians and now Americans have learnt that although it is possible to capture Afghanistan temporarily it is next to impossible to keep it for long when it is rampant with forts, castles, tribes, guerrillas and fighters.

In the final analysis – not only did the US bet on the wrong horse(s), but it also overlooked the history of Afghani resistance to foreign occupiers. Nonetheless, this is not without precedence. Wherever American intervention has happened, either in the form of puppet governments or otherwise, it has been a disaster for the history books! But yet, the idea to play the world’s policeman seems just too tempting to ignore for the Americans. What’s that saying? The road to hell is paved with good intentions!

Other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee spoke along similar lines. Chairman Senator Robert Menendez, mentioned the “double-dealing” by Pakistan and Senator James Risch said that the US must understand Pakistan’s role in this entire matter. The solitary thing that Rubio was correct about is the fact that all this leaves the world in a terrible situation. Pakistan – for its part – doesn’t have an easy road ahead either. One, it needs to deal with an inspired TTP at its doorstep and see how a realistic reconciliation and disarmament – if at all feasible – can be executed. Two, it is expecting a colossal number of refugees if the world turns its back on the people of Afghanistan again. Three, its negligible influence on the Taliban means that it may not be able to convince them to stop cross border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan.

The Marco Rubios of this world will do better to get their historical context right and stop playing to the galleries unnecessarily. It is not that mistakes have not been made in the past, it is the lessons we learn out of these mistakes which enable us to move forward. And if this means engaging with the Taliban, in exchange for a degree of stability and a promise of inclusive governance and not allowing Afghanistan to be used for terrorist activities, then so be it. The alternative is to be sucked into The Great Game again resulting in an unwinnable, everlasting and catastrophic conflict.

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