**The Afghanistan spillover**

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June 27, 2021

America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, without any clear or ascertainable ‘plan’ for the country, has cast a deep and pervasive shadow over the security of this region. This unceremonious conclusion to America’s ‘longest war’ cannot be viewed through the lens of ‘war on terror’—which was the original justification for American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Terrorism, or the presence of violent outfits in Afghanistan, has nothing to do with America’s decision to stay in or leave Afghanistan. Instead, twenty years and two trillion dollars later, America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, or its desire to retain some military presence in the area, must be viewed through the prism of the new world order, and America’s upcoming tussle with China (and Russia).

As such, American withdrawal from Afghanistan has consequences that extend beyond the territorial jurisdiction of Afghanistan, and contours of American foreign policy. Specifically, it directly impacts Pakistan, India, China, Iran, and Russian (long-term) interests in the region.

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Each of these require a deeper analysis.

Let us start with India. Over the past two decades, the biggest beneficiary of America’s war in Afghanistan has been India. In the post 9/11 world, as relationship between America and Pakistan soured, India used the opportunity to achieve five objectives: 1) position itself as the local and primary ally of America in this region; 2) expand its influence on the Western border of Pakistan, thereby distracting Pakistani military focus away from Kashmir and India; 3) use its money and political capital to develop economic and infrastructure ties with the Afghan government; 4) use its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan to exploit the ‘open border’ between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and promote terrorism through outfits such as the TTP; and 5) use Pakistan’s historical ties with Afghanistan to paint both countries as a hub for international terrorism.

America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan will necessarily frustrate Indian plans in the region. Despite recent attempts to establish contact with the Taliban, India knows that it has been caught on the wrong foot in the country. The Ghani government that India supports will not last for long, post American withdrawal. And with it, all of India’s goodwill in Afghanistan will dissipate in thin air. Taliban have already stated, on the record, that India has always supported their ‘enemies’ in the country. Also, Taliban have expressly committed that they will not allow anyone (read: India) to use their territory for militant activities (in Pakistan).

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In the post-America Afghanistan, Pakistan is likely to enjoy far more influence. Maybe not as much as it did during the 1990s. But certainly more than it has over the past two decades. However, a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan is not in Pakistan’s interest, for three primary reasons: 1) violence in Afghanistan will result in result in another exodus of refugees in Pakistan, which cannot be afforded; 2) instability in Afghanistan, along with refugee influx in Pakistan, will hamper Pakistan’s ability to develop and secure the CPEC route; and 3) violence in Afghanistan, by the Taliban or other factions, will bring greater international pressure on Pakistan to use its proximity and influence to bring about peace—a new ‘do more’ conundrum.

In the circumstances, Pakistan’s effort in Afghanistan are aimed at achieving three primary objectives: 1) arriving at a political solution in Afghanistan, so as to eliminate violence; 2) preventing the use of Afghan soil (by the Indians, primarily) to perpetrate violence in Pakistan; and 3) increasing trade and economic connectivity with Afghanistan to connect the CPEC route with Central Asia and beyond.

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This last objective is a common goal of Pakistan and China, which is going to benefit the most from a peaceful and regionally connected Afghanistan. Chinese plans in this region (unlike the Americans) are purely economic in nature. As the Belt-and-Road Initiative expands, China would want its flagship project (CPEC) to yield higher returns, through regional connectivity between Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and beyond. We have already witnessed China’s economic plans (of some $400 billion) to develop Iran’s port and infrastructure network—with the express goal of connecting it to CPEC. This regional connectivity, through existing BRI routes, can achieve better returns if Afghanistan can become a trade conduit to Central Asia. And this, for all intents and purposes, ropes Chinese interests in the region.

Away from economic connectivity, China is also wary about American military presence in the region. Afghanistan shares a small border with China, through the Wakhan Corridor. And, with a great-power conflict brewing in the background, American military or intelligence presence in Afghanistan, at the doorstep of China, does not suit long-term Chinese interests.

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Expanding the net, there are a few other regional interests at play in Afghanistan. One: Iran, which shares a border with Afghanistan. Even though the Taliban and Iran are no friends, they share a common ‘enemy’: the Americans. They also share a common friend: China. In these circumstances, post-America Afghanistan is likely to see greater Irani influence, in terms of countering American agenda in the region. Second: Russia, which has a historical axe to grind with America in Afghanistan. Russia (unlike the Soviet Union) does not share a direct border with Afghanistan. But it has an interest in ensuring that anti-Russian forces (read: the Americans) do not gain strength in the region. To this end, Russia seems to be at loggerheads with one its historical allies: India. Since India has placed itself as the harbinger of American interest in the region, Russia is beginning to reevaluate its alliance with Indian establishment. Russia had already expressed its reservations concerning QUAD (the Pacific military alliance formed against China), of which India is a member. And with the world entering a new age of fresh regional alliances and animosities, it is unlikely that Russia will extend any support to India and America in Afghanistan.

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These are monumental times for regional politics of Pakistan and the surrounding region. New international alliances are being created. Old ‘blocs’ created in the wake of the Soviet collapse, are disintegrating. Pakistan is going to have an important role in the new Great Game in this region. A role that is wrought with challenges and opportunities. It is time for our leadership—civilian and military—to assert itself in international diplomacy, and carve alliances that will ensure a productive, progressive and peaceful Pakistan.