**The Future of Afghanistan**

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The people of Afghanistan have seen turmoil for the last many decades; either at the hands of foreign powers or by internal division and civil war.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in the late 1970s; who started the war in which the Afghans of all creeds and cultures united to fight against the infidels. The Afghans were supported by the USA, KSA and Pakistan; with the former providing the material support and the latter the moral. Soviet left within a decade, duly humiliated and financially bankrupt that also caused its break down in subsequent years.

Civil war ensued afterward amongst the Mujahedeen. Kabul saw more destruction because of this civil war than it endured because of invasion by the Soviets. The unrest, and constant fighting were the main causes for the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s that provided the Afghans with much-needed normalcy in their lives. Most of the country became peaceful and disarmed and with it, the trade routes to Central Asian states prospered, the value of the currency increased, and agriculture improved. The Taliban rule might not have shown the world the best of Islam, like hanging of TV’s, lashing of women, or disallowing women from getting an education and medical treatment but it was a period of relative peace and stability for Afghanistan. Nonetheless, world powers did not accept the Taliban as legitimate rulers of Afghanistan and covertly supported the Northern Alliance under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood, which led to somewhat unrest in the northern Panjsheer valley.

And then 9/11 occurred and Americans blaming Osama bin Laden for the attacks on the Twin Towers decided to invade Afghanistan as the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to Americans unless concrete proof of his involvement is provided to them. That was quite logical demand by any sovereign nation but Americans to restore their pride and satisfy the public opinion decided to attack anyway and thus anything associated with the Taliban (good or bad) was considered evil and odious.

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The US declared aims for this war were the toppling of the Taliban Government and routing Al Qaeda along with promises of nation-building of Afghanistan and ensuring women empowerment. 20 years on and spending trillions of dollars and losing thousands of men, US troops are still there in Afghanistan trying to achieve their mission impossible. Finally, US president Biden has promised that the mission would end on 31st August 2021 and US troops would finally vacate Afghanistan. The irony is that not even one mission has been achieved and American, following the fate of earlier superpowers is leaving Afghanistan with humiliation.

All the initiatives aimed at bringing peace and stability including elections seem to have borne zero results. Taliban as an entity is the reality and are already in control of the majority of Afghanistan districts. Newspapers report about the presence of Al Qaeda in part of Afghanistan are also emerging and the Afghan National Army that was considered to act as life support for puppet government in Afghanistan is capitulating in hordes or are escaping to the neighbouring countries.

On the contrary, the Taliban’s sole aim was to free Afghanistan from foreign occupation. The same aim under which their forefathers have fought British and Russians, and they were fighting Americans. British and Russians failed in this region, not because they were weak but because they failed to understand the Afghan culture, their resilience, and their love for freedom. Americans were bound to fail as they did not learn from history and the old saying that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it proved right once again. And the phrase of Afghanistan as Graveyards of empires remains true.

The US has signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha acknowledging them as the legitimate power in Afghanistan and have caved in to their main demand of withdrawal of its troops in return that Afghanistan would not be used to support any other group and attack the US or its allies.

We are back to square one after 20 years. Writing on the walls is very clear that the Taliban are on the ascending paths and already control at least four entry points to Afghanistan as well as the majority of the rural areas. They have yet not attacked any population centers but it seems only a matter of time that the puppet government in Kabul would fall.

But will it mean victory for the Taliban? No, not until they can avert the fate that occurred to Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviets. US unceremonious withdrawal, leaving behind enormous weaponry is a recipe for a civil war that can continue to simmer for a long time to come. Warlords like Rashid Dostum and Abdullah Abdullah are already warning of the looming dangers.

Where are we heading then? Is there any hope for Afghanistan’s peace and stability? Will the Taliban behave the same way as their first innings?

I reckon that past performances do not guide the future and that the only hope for peace and stability for Afghanistan is that the Taliban had learned from their past mistakes. The statements of their spokesman and the op-ed in the New York times gave us hope that the Taliban would not repeat the mistakes of the past and try to share power amongst the various groups and become a modern Islamic state where everyone with a diversified background can live with harmony. An example of the government of Muslim Spain with inclusivity for all religions and beliefs can be ensured. Signs of changed Taliban thinking are visible as per the media reports; the governance shown by the Taliban in around 200 districts that are under Taliban control is positive. Taliban must also realize the fact that the new generation has come to Afghanistan that has not seen the Taliban’s government and the civil war that brought the Taliban in the first place. Therefore, they will be receptive to their rule if it conforms to normal Islamic values that are acceptable to the majority of people.

For that matter, it is to the benefit of regional powers like Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan to work together to ensure that a peaceful power-sharing arrangement can be achieved in Afghanistan that can ensure stability in the region, and with it, the regional cooperation and prosperity will follow automatically.

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