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**The blundering ways**

Pakistan is under an intense assault not just by the traditional adversary in the East, but also its collaborators to our West, fully aided and abetted by their sponsors who blundered their way through twenty years of a bloody and barbaric war imposed on Afghanistan and its people. The strangest part is that, in their hasty retreat from the country, the so-called ‘liberators’ of Afghanistan are looking for an alibi to turn their abject defeat into an ‘honourable exit’.

Much fiction has been written and much falsehood disseminated about the role that Pakistan has played in the swift surge by the Taliban across Afghanistan where most of the ANSF forces the US invested billions of dollars in are laying down arms in preference to offering resistance to the advancing troops. They have proved to be low in ability, deficient in training, short on courage and lacking in the conviction that the Taliban are actually their enemy, the last one being that one critical factor which the Western sponsors of the Afghan government are unable to accept. The deadly US aerial attacks have also not been able to dent the resolve of the adversary. So, as the Taliban juggernaut rolls on virtually unchecked, Afghanistan and its multiple promoters are desperately busy finding scapegoats to placate their badly battered egos. In this dastardly pursuit, Pakistan is the target of their foulest abuse and vilest attacks.

Understandably, the US had come to Afghanistan to decimate the Taliban whom they accused of harbouring Osama bin Laden, the person who was deemed instrumental in masterminding the suicide attacks in New York. Pakistan extended its total support in this contentious venture dubbed as the ‘war on terror’. Just when the operation appeared to be nearing the attainment of its objective, the Americans chose to enter the arena of their next adventure, Iraq, thus giving the enemy space and time to recoup and put its fighting lines in order. When the US came back to finish the job after making a mess of that other war, the situation on the ground had changed drastically as they confronted a reinvigorated adversary.

This one blunder changed the course of history in Afghanistan, ultimately forcing the US to seek Pakistan’s support to start negotiations with their nemesis, the Taliban, which led to a much controversial deal where the Americans gave a timeline for withdrawal of their troops in exchange for a commitment that the Taliban would not allow the use of Afghan soil for any terrorist activity.

This follow-up blunder deserves a few questions to be asked of the US: who were the Taliban and what authority did they command at that moment to give such a commitment? Why did they opt to negotiate with the Taliban by keeping their anointed government in Kabul out, virtually stabbing them in the back? And why did the US accede to withdraw its troops without linking it with substantive progress in the intra-Afghan dialogue to facilitate a negotiated settlement of the war? When Pakistan and other regional countries urged the US to go slow in the withdrawal of troops, their advice was rubbished; the US seemed eager to virtually run away. If that be so, why is it that they are looking for a convenient scapegoat now? And why Pakistan – which had facilitated the US-Taliban Peace Agreement, initiating the intra-Afghan dialogue and adoption of rules and procedures for talks? It appears to be a premeditated plan to demonise Pakistan.

Keeping the transactional nature of relations with the US over many decades, Pakistan sought to strengthen its ties with other countries, notably China. The process kept gaining momentum and, through the years, it emerged as a dependable partnership among two countries which trusted each other deeply and respected each other’s needs. Along the way, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was inaugurated as a pioneering initiative of the Chinese government to enhance the level, depth and expanse of economic connectivity between the two strategically aligned countries. Despite untiring effort by succeeding leaderships, and despite being partners in SEATO and CENTO and a non-Nato ally, Pakistan had not been able to establish a comparable relationship with the US. It was riddled with lack of trust as the US always deserted Pakistan in its hour of trial. On the contrary, China has proved to be a bedrock of reliability and support.

But the US never tired of demanding more from Pakistan. Even when full and unconditional support was extended, Pakistan was accused of double-dealing. Simultaneously, the pressure on it to go slow on CPEC and ‘downgrade’ its relations with China kept mounting. It was a classic case of blackmailing a country which is also espoused as an ally. One would hardly be able to find a parallel of such a relationship. Not only has it been disconcerting for Pakistan, it has been downright painful and humiliating.

Having blundered hopelessly through two decades of war in Afghanistan, the US is now eager to find a scapegoat in its retreat. Instead of recognising its role in rendering support in a war it had no business fighting, the die has been cast to target Pakistan with a can of worms instead. This is being done despite the fact that Pakistan faced a massive backlash of terrorist activity on its soil which its forces fought off by demonstrating an enviable level of spirit, determination, bravery and professionalism, making it the only army in the world to have defeated terror successfully. It cost the country over 70,000 dead and billions of dollars in material losses. It is nothing short of a miracle that Pakistan has returned to near normalcy. It cannot afford to plunge itself in the pit of terrorism again, that too for a country which relishes in demonising it.

Afghanistan has been an enigmatic presence in Pakistan’s neighbourhood. Earning notoriety with being the only country to oppose Pakistan’s admission in the UN, it has been working malevolently, by itself and in partnership with India, to destabilise Pakistan. It has blatantly housed the TTP and other militant outfits and facilitated India to use its soil for launching terrorist incursions inside Pakistan – a gruesome phenomenon which has gained in intensity with the passage of time.

Pakistan has no option but to confront these challenges in its quest for sustainable peace within its borders as well as in its neighbourhood. In this critical endeavour, it has to eliminate all possible obstacles placed in its way by the Afghan government and the criminal nexus it has built in conjunction with other spoilers. It is time for Pakistan to put across its narrative strongly to the world in pursuit of peace.

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