**What Pakistan needs to do in Afghanistan**

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June 23, 2021

Taliban will be taking over Afghanistan in a couple of months. On the 20th anniversary of World Trade Centres, all US forces will be out of Afghanistan. September 11, 2001 was the day that changed America and the world forever once again. But the million dollar question is, why has US decided to leave the evolving scenario?

After the Soviets invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor of the US in 1998 during an interview with Nouvel Observateur, a French news magazine, claimed that the US policymakers had lured the Soviets into Afghanistan to expedite disintegration of the erstwhile USSR. It proved correct though by default. In 1980, Iraqi invasion of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran provided a pretext for acquisition of ports by US on the Persian Gulf, from which Allied forces could invade and occupy Iraq. After a decade, Iraq occupied Kuwait in August 1990, creating a pretext for Operation Desert Storm by U.S forces in 1991. A decade later after 9/11 in 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan, and finally did get around to invading Iraq in 2003 to destroy ‘weapons of mass destruction’.

Donald Trump, former President of US, made a wrong agreement with the Taliban and later handed the deal over to his successor. He steadily reduced forces from Afghanistan with no effort to use withdrawals as to exert pressure on the Taliban to meet their own commitments. By the time Trump left his office, US had just 2,500 or so troops in Afghanistan. President Joe Biden should have rejected it, instead of embracing it. Is it a part of grand strategy or stratagem for a distant future?

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In April while defending the decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan, Biden made a questionable statement as if he needs further understanding of Afghanistan, “With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders.” Biden maintains that the United States must pay more attention to other areas that could threaten US interests. That is prudent. But it is hard to believe that the US military does not have the necessary forces to fulfil all its missions because 2500 troops are in Afghanistan. One can only hope that US comprehensive withdrawal is not aimed at shaping the future strategic environments for another major showdown in the region.

US is not concluding a war but leaving the ‘battle space vacuum’ to the adversaries. What will be the fall out of this decision? No serious discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government will take place. The Taliban have no reason to negotiate. The US ability to gather intelligence will be degraded as the capacity of Afghan security forces to remain in the field is almost negligible. Afghanistan of tomorrow will be the hottest bed of all types of conspiracies.

The Taliban advances and especially a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan could galvanise Islamist terrorists in Pakistan, including an already-resurgent Pakistani Taliban. The expected civil war in Afghanistan, following the US withdrawal, will be shocking for Pakistan in terms of instability in tribal belts and an opportunity for various militant groups to use war-torn areas for their activities and hiding.

For decades, one of Pakistan’s key goals in Afghanistan has been to keep India at bay. So long as the peace process is still happening, Pakistan will fully support it, because it is in the best interest of Pakistan leading to a political settlement. If the peace process collapses, regional actors would fall back on the empowerment of respective proxies war lords. Islamabad will be constrained to scale up support to the Taliban to give it an upper hand against rival groups supported by the likes of India.

Islamabad must oppose and undermine any Indian engagement with the Afghan Taliban or backing anti-Taliban units, such as the Northern Alliance. What happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan and Pakistanis feel completely vindicated in their support for the Taliban. The US withdrawal will make Taliban stronger either by giving it the upper hand in negotiations with Kabul or a major battlefield advantage, or both.

After the last American soldier departs Afghanistan in September, Pakistan will be left with some very difficult and unsavoury choices. Since the early 1990s, Pakistan has supported the Taliban in Afghanistan in one way or the other to push forward its regional security interests. Islamabad will now have to build trust with all Afghan ethnicities and political forces, rather than just being seen as a ‘Taliban supporter’ as Pakistan has earned a sound reputation by playing an effective role as a mediator. However, this effort on Islamabad’s part may have also uncovered the limits of the country’s influence on the group.

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