**Why did the US Leave Afghanistan?**

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It is a cliché to believe that the US has left Afghanistan as it was defeated by the Taliban and that another tomb has been added in the graveyards of empires. This is not an entirely true analysis.

The US has withdrawn because of its changed priorities and after getting assurances that the Taliban would not threaten its national interest.

A realistic analysis would reveal that the main aim of the US in Afghanistan had always been to pacify its public opinion that wanted revenge for the September 11 terror attacks. The objective was achieved in the first few months: the Taliban government was toppled and Al-Qaida was routed out of Afghanistan. That is why the US became distracted by a separate war in Iraq that started on March 20, 2003.

President Barack Obama wanted to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, but the debate that ensued about Osama bin Laden – the main suspect – still at large forced the US administration to maintain its footprint on the ground and hunt down bin Laden. The US finally succeeded in killing him on May 2, 2011. Since then, the withdrawal of USA troops from Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion.

Nation-building of Afghanistan was never an objective of the US as is visible by the breakdown of expenditure that was incurred in Afghanistan during the last two decades.

The US merely shifted its energies and focus from counterterrorism to great-power competition in the new theatre (from South Asia and the Middle East to China and the Indo-Pacific).

A study at Brown University estimated that the US has spent around $2.26 trillion in Afghanistan since 2001. The biggest chunk of nearly $1 trillion was spent on military expenditure followed by $530 billion paid to the creditors as interest on the money that was borrowed to fund the war. The study shows that merely $130 billion has been spent on the reconstruction activities in Afghanistan since 2002. This is less than $7 billion a year as compared to more than $200 billion spent on food, clothing, medical care, and other benefits of its troops. Moreover, the majority of the $7 billion was wasted in corrupt practices. This is why Afghanistan still has one of the smallest economies in the world. Ex-President Ashraf Ghani said that 90 per cent of its people are living below the poverty line or less than $2 a day.

Another argument given for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is that the human cost was becoming unbearable. That is not correct either.

Since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, there have been around 2,406 casualties of USA soldiers. However, in the last two years, casualties due to combat have been zero. The last causality recorded was in Nangarhar on February 8, 2020, when two soldiers were killed by an Afghan National Army soldier in friendly fire. The Taliban did not claim responsibility for that attack.

The human cost was thus negligible and the US could have easily maintained its presence in Afghanistan just like it has been in South Korea or Japan for many decades.

The matter of fact is that like any other nation, the US’s engagement is determined by her self-interest, rather than by altruism. Bigger challenges were emerging in the Asia Pacific where China was flexing its muscles. If not countered timely, it would have dwarfed the events that are now unfolding in Afghanistan. China is fast reaching a stage where it will take over and become the sole economic superpower of the world. And that was alarming for the US. Therefore, the US merely shifted its energies and focus from counterterrorism to great-power competition in the new theatre i.e. from South Asia and the Middle East to China and the Indo-Pacific.

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) wherein massive infrastructure is being constructed across Eurasia and Eastern Africa is, undoubtedly, Beijing’s strategy to reshape the regional and international order, hence, challenging the US’s dominance.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) project, proposed by Japan and adopted by the US in 2016, can be seen as a strategic countermeasure against the Chinese BRI. Similarly, holding a quadrilateral summit meeting (Quad) by the US, India, Australia, and Japan on March 12, 2021, to formulate a strategy to counter the rise of Chinese power in the East and South China Seas is a step in the same direction. Philippines restoring the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US on July 30, 2021, and, thus, allowing its military aircraft and vessels free entry and operations from its bases is also considered a big move in the region. All these steps are a message to China that the US still thinks of itself as a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region–through which as much as $3.3 trillion in global trade passes annually.

Napoleon Bonaparte is believed to have said, “Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world.” The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan must be seen in this context. The Chinese dragon is awakening and this will have far-reaching effects around the world. The country most affected will be the US and that is the main reason why the US did not want to be tied down in an endless war in Afghanistan. It needed to redirect its energies and efforts toward new, more pressing challenges, which are emerging in the new theatre of the Indo-Pacific region.

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