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**Withdrawal and challenges**

The gradual withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has created a ripple of excitement among right-wing circles in Pakistan.

Amidst this euphoria, many tend to forget the catastrophic outcomes that might be caused by the internecine war in the neighbouring country that has witnessed nothing but death and destruction during the last four decades. Most of those who perished were not the victims of foreign invaders but their own Afghan brothers who chose to unleash a reign of terror against one another, burning houses, destroying public buildings and targeting women, children and the elderly. It was these rival factions that plunged the country into a bloody civil war in the decade of the 1990s, ruining even the urban centres of the country that were by and large safe during the Soviet occupation of the state.

A spectre of a civil war is again haunting millions of Afghan people. Our ‘gentle and civilized’ Afghan Taliban do not seem to have learnt anything from history. They have reportedly started imposing their conservative interpretation of religion on Afghans. They are not afraid of being declared a pariah by the international community. Riding on the wave of victory, they believe that they can do whatever they want in the country that they have won with the might of guns.

But the story does not end here. This euphoria could spell a disaster for the entire region including Pakistan. The victory of the militant group will embolden other extremist outfits that have been moribund for a long time because of the state crackdown in various parts of the region or other factors. It might prompt the TTP to spring into action, unleashing a reign of terror.

China, Russia and the Central Asian States are also wary of this victory. China made arduous efforts in stamping out the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in its western province but now the fear of their revival will haunt Beijing. Russia managed to suppress the Chechen rebels and others in Muslim-majority parts of the country but now the separatists might be encouraged. Uzbekistan and other Central Asian States have also battled extremist forces for years.

In the current scenario, it is clear that Afghanistan will witness a civil war, posing more problems to the states of the region than Washington and London. The much-vaunted Belt and Road Initiative is likely to be disturbed by this new wave of instability that is likely to grip Afghanistan. The landlocked state does not only border Iran and Pakistan but China and some Central Asian States as well.

Most of the countries in the region are part of the BRI in one way or another. China has pumped billions of dollars into Pakistan. It has inked several deals with Iran, promising to invest billions of dollars with some estimates claiming that Beijing plans to spend over $400 billion on various projects. It has heavily invested in Russia besides striking various deals to import natural gas from Moscow. According to Global Times, “As of 2019, Russia ranked No13 among foreign destinations for Chinese investment at $12.8 billion.”

China is also making inroads into the Russian backyard through investment and trade. The Chinese government struck business deals with Central Asian States worth over $50 billion in 2013. Beijing pledged a further $40 billion in 2014 to set up an infrastructure fund to boost connectivity in Asia. The Asian Development Bank estimated that the region faces a yearly infrastructure financing shortfall of nearly $800 billion and China is willing to fill the gap with its massive investment. With the countries of the SCO, whose member states account for 22.5 percent of global GDP with overall foreign trade volume surpassing $6.3 trillion, China is trying to transform the region.

But this dream could greatly be shattered by the turmoil in Afghanistan. No country wants to invest under the shadow of fear, wars and uncertainty. Many extremist groups have idealized the Afghan Taliban in the past. If they spring into action, they have the potential to plunge the entire region into great turmoil which will greatly hamper the Chinese plan of regional connectivity.

The West pampered radical forces in the past to counter the Soviet threat. It threw support behind retrogressive elements and obscurantist forces to arrest the tide of communism. There is no guarantee that it would not do the same against the Chinese.

So, this could turn out to be a nightmare for the region, revitalizing the dormant extremist forces in the region, disrupting not only the BRI but the much-feared economic rise of China, which is impossible without the stability in the region. In case of any turmoil in the region, the $960-billion scheme, which is one of the biggest trade initiatives so far, is likely to be halted or at least slowed down. It seems that what the US and its Western allies cannot get through the trillion dollar projects that they agreed to launch to counter the BRI, they might get through the instability that might be triggered by the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. It is to be seen as to how Russia, China and other states of the region cope with the challenges arising out of the pull-out. This will be a litmus test of the Chinese and Russian leadership.

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