**Afghan refugees in Pakistan**

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Richard Armitage, former secretary of state, was bull’s eye when in 2002, he said that Pakistan was never important to the US in its own right. It was important, he said, because of third parties. This statement comes true yet again in 2021. The US wishes Pakistan to keep its borders open for incoming refugees from Afghanistan. Turkey has likewise been asked to accommodate Afghans until 14 months by when they can be resettled in the US. This suggestion has been turned down by not just Pakistan but even

Turkey. Whereas National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf in Washington stated that arrangements need be made to keep the displaced in their own country, Turkey said the US will destabilise the region by moving refugees regionally. They must be moved to other countries outside the region. Turkey, too, is hosting thousands of Afghan refugees, though Pakistan way outnumbers Turkey.

“According to refugee officials, an estimated nearly 200,000 Afghan refugees are living in Turkey, a number that is increasing daily since the United States announced its full withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in early April.” [July 7, 2021: Nilly Kohzad]

Pakistan’s repeated insistence on its positive role in Afghanistan and her repeated mantra of being the first casualty in WoT has not led to any revisit of US policy in Afghanistan and neither will it. For the simple reason that the interests of the US, as they stand today in Afghanistan, are different from the interests of the US post 9/11.

Let not Pakistan yet again become a party to be used as a whipping boy.

A certain segment in Pakistan fears the repercussions Pakistan may have to face should it not follow the directions of its master. A friend wrote, “Our economy and security both are largely dependent on the USA. It supports forums like World Bank, IMF, ADB etc. The inflow of US$ is possible only when it is cleared by US Central Bank.”

To implement the new strategy Pakistan must overcome her fear of certain steps being taken against her. The fact is even with doing US bidding they still may happen. First, all stakeholders are aware that Afghanistan now is a strategic depth area for India. It will continue to be used against Pakistan whether or not Pakistan plays ball. Second, the US interests are different from that of Pakistan so far as Afghanistan is concerned. Pakistan needs to stop explaining herself anymore like an errant schoolboy. This only happens in unequal partnerships. This has to change. Pakistan also must overcome the fear that without being a part of every initiative in Afghanistan some catastrophe is going to befall her.

Once Pakistan’s policymakers get these fears out of their psyche, they need to put their strategy for Afghanistan in place. They need to step up on the border fencing coupling it with mining and manning to be effective. Pakistan must return the Afghan refugees to their native land as soon as possible. They are a security hazard also offering easy cover to ingressions from another side of the border besides

being an economic burden.

Post 9/11 Pakistan has gone out of her way at the cost of lives, at the cost of the economy and at the cost of the erosion of her social fabric to help the US in Afghanistan without getting even appreciation. The result has been threats and name-calling. Time for Pakistan to let all stakeholders determine upon and put in place whatever strategy they deem fit to put in place. Let not Pakistan yet again become a party to be used as a whipping boy.

In 2007, Pakistan conducted a registration exercise of Afghan refugees within Pakistan. It issued Proof of Registration (POR) cards offering temporary legal stay in Pakistan, freedom of movement and exemption from the application of the Foreigners Act, 1946. Kindly reread. Temporary Legal Stay. These were extended till 2017 and owing to the Afghanistan situation. It was determined further refugees coming from Afghanistan shall come under the umbrella of the refugee status determination procedure conducted by UNHCR.

They do not have permanent residence rights. The U.S needs to understand that countries like Pakistan cannot afford any more economic or political pressure of increased refugees. Not only that the economy will not bear it, but sleepers entering Pakistan in the garb of refugees will also only create further issues for Pakistan. This programme is aimed to resettle Afghans who have affiliations with America against the Taliban and may be a sitting target for the Taliban to unleash their violence upon them. “The program applies to Afghans who do not qualify for the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program that covers interpreters and others who worked for the U.S. government, and their families.”

The bottom line is if the US wants to play Godfather let it do so on its turf! Not at the expense of others who are or have been “unequal partners” in the WoT. The US needs to at some point face up to the mess it created in the region. Stop asking Pakistan to lick it up!

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