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**Afghanistan and a trapped Pakistan**

Though there is still some hope for peace in Afghanistan, generally the prospects of reconciliation and a political solution between the warring parties inside Afghanistan seem to be fading away. Concerns are also growing that Afghanistan is heading towards unprecedented chaos. As a consequence, it will be Pakistan that will bear the brunt of its unimaginable intensity.

But it is unfortunate that the prime minister of Pakistan and his courtiers have no sense of the looming threat developing across the western border. They have neither any understanding of it nor show any concern and play any role to avert it. They follow a policy of distraction when it comes to the main challenges that the country faces and have entangled the nation in nonsense politics of vested interests.

The proponents of Pakistan's past failed and foolish Afghan policy are jubilant over the Taliban’s victory and believe that Afghanistan is getting free and a pro-Pakistani Taliban government will protect Pakistan's interests. But these confused and irrational successors of the strategic depth predecessors do not realize the alarming fact that Afghanistan is sinking into chaos and Pakistan is being badly trapped in the Afghan quagmire.

The Qatar talks are still in progress, and President Biden has apparently taken Russia, China, Iran, India, Turkey, and regional powers, on board in the Afghan ongoing peace process. In addition, the withdrawal of US troops has started and it seems that a political solution is being pursued. But the real parties – the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government – are not serious about any meaningful reconciliation.

The US, which plays the role of silent spectator in the violent clashes between the Afghan government and the Taliban, has secured a truce for a safe exit in that the foreign troops and the Taliban do not fire a single shot on each other. But the Afghan Taliban and Afghan security have been left to attack each other with impunity.

Seeing no prospect of reconciliation and peace, all warring groups inside Afghanistan are stockpiling weapons. The New York Times in its report of May 14, 2021 states, while referring to Afghan intelligence documents, that Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, is purchasing weapons in the north. In this uncertain and fragile security environment, the Afghan elite class is searching for a safe abode in the UAE, Pakistan, and other countries. The Taliban too are busy training day and night and building an organized and well-paid militia.

The most dangerous aspect of the current scenario is that the US does not seem interested in durable peace in Afghanistan. Although the shuttle diplomacy of Zalmay Khalilzad is in full swing, and it seems that Washington is anxious for its exit and a quick success of the peace process, a closer look reveals the grim reality that the US is deliberately pushing Afghanistan towards civil war and political chaos.

The US sidelined Ashraf Ghani’s government in Kabul and started direct negotiations with the Taliban in Doha which badly undermined the status and credibility of the Afghan government. Moreover, the US signed the Doha agreement against the wishes of the Afghan government in which it accepted the Taliban’s demand for foreign troop withdrawal but failed to force the Taliban on a ceasefire.

Under the agreement, the US twisted the Afghan government's arms into releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners but in return got nothing except the willingness of the Taliban to start negotiations with the Afghan government. However, there was no explanation on what would happen if the intra-Afghan negotiation failed. As a result, the Afghan government lost its credibility while the Taliban's morale skyrocketed.

After the Doha agreement, the Taliban have started to see themselves as a victorious force that defeated a superpower like the US and a strong alliance like Nato. The agreement also paved the way for the world to see the Taliban as the main stakeholders and future rulers of Afghanistan. Hence, every country has started establishing relations with them. Standing at such a strong position, the Afghan Taliban do not count the Afghan government in any calculation. The agreement boosted the Taliban’s morale in such a way that now they do not pay any special attention even to Pakistan.

Though the Taliban have not rejected negotiation altogether, they are not in a hurry and not serious about any meaningful talks with Kabul. They think that sooner or later Kabul will fall into their hands. They also think that if they can reclaim and restore their Islamic Emirate through war, then why should they waste their time in negotiations and constitutional formalities.

On the other hand, President Ashraf Ghani and some people in his government apparently seem anxious and enthusiastic about negotiations with the Taliban but in reality they too are not eager for any meaningful results. The reason is crystal clear.

President Ghani and his people believe that an interim government will be the first step towards the success of the Afghan peace process. However, they are worried that it will cost them heavily and will pave the way for their exit from the Afghan new setup. This fear seems genuine. It is certain that Abdullah Abdullah, Rasheed Dostum, Ustad Mohaqiq who represent non-Pashtun Afghans will get their own share in the new setup. Even Pakhtuns like Hamid Karzai may secure some place in it, but there will be no room for Ashraf Ghani and his team in the new setup. Hence, although President Ghani and his team talk about talks, they do not want any progress in the intra-Afghan peace process. This is clear from the high demands that Ghani's government wants the Taliban to accept.

While the Taliban are at daggers drawn with the Afghan government, they also seem very angry at Pakistan. The gap between the two sides is widening due to the pressure being exerted by Pakistan on the Taliban at the behest of the United States over the past one year. The Taliban are also furious over why Pakistan is not accepting the Taliban emirate as it did in the past.

The US itself has appeased the Taliban and is giving them concessions but is demanding that Pakistan pressurize the Taliban into accepting this or that despite knowing the fact that the Taliban are not ready to accept any demand.

Though the US itself is fleeing Afghanistan, it is asking Pakistan for military bases for monitoring Afghanistan. Is that not very strange? It seems the US wants to withdraw its troops and ignite such a fire in Afghanistan whose flames will engulf and burn Pakistan, and China and Iran. Unfortunately, the attitude, behavior and actions of the Taliban and the Afghan government help this heinous game.

The only way to thwart this dangerous conspiracy by the United States is reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Either they should end their hostilities and join hands for the peaceful future of Afghanistan or China, Iran, Russia and Pakistan should come forward and find a way forward – in consultation with the Afghans.

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