**An Unending Quagmire**

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On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan added US-led Western Allies to its graveyard of fallen invaders. In the footsteps of Russia, mighty powers of the west succumbed to Afghans’ iron-clad resolve and their faith in Allah Almighty. After 20 years, for $2.313 trillion, besides getting thousands dead/life-changing wounds, Occupation Forces called quits on the physical occupation it embarked on in Afghanistan. Has normalcy embraced Afghans? Has the peace arrived? Have the world powers retracted their vested objectives and designs? Has the tussle amongst world powers and within Afghan ethnic/sectarian warlords ended with the withdrawal or has the quagmire only changed its dodgy surface? Have the world powers changed their ways and means, only not objectives? Is there any hope of ending the miseries of common Afghans or they would remain victims and lesser humans? Will peace and prosperity hug this region? Are the humans in this region children of lesser God? The answers based on transparent lenses to stated questions would set the mosaic in place.

The question arises that what fruits attracted three global powers to invade the landlocked and moderately resourced country? First, the UK and then Russia was humbled by the Afghans. Now decades later, the Taliban sent US-led Western Allies along with their puppet government packing. Why did Western Allies fail to learn from history? What made them disregard the lessons? A deeper look at history and the environment reveals so-called “Vested Interests coupled with feel of mightiness,” as the poison triggering the events. Times apart, all three superpowers marauded Afghanistan for somewhat similar motives; to sit at the gateway and dominate, obstruct opposing access and connectivity, enhance own areas of influence, regulate uncertainty and insurgency in neighborhood sitting next door, grab resources or deny to others, while sitting there defend own political and power construct in the region, implant puppet rulers to implement Master’s moves and to appease their supremacist proclivity by imposing their culture cum system in Afghanistan. After all, in the last over four decades, Afghan soil was the only platform for kissing so many goals. All intruders put together killed millions, inflicted enormous destruction, committed unspeakable ‘Human Rights’ abuses, and denied the due share of peace and prosperity to humans in this part of the world. Unfortunately, the humanity suffered and is still in the clutches of the same quagmire orchestrated by competing world powers. Just imagine that common Afghan masses are suffering due to power contestation for over four decades. Masses have no interests in a power struggle, they have no fault other than living in this region, and the majority are innocent/ignorant of what still is to come.

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The world power contestation is at its peak. Presently World stands in transition shedding unipolarity and jumping to the bipolarity phase with the pendulum fast edging towards China. Understandably, US arch-rival, Russia and her Allies in the region are hugging the Chinese in the run. The other states in the region and neighborhood are likely to embrace a rising China or at least would grow sovereign in policies divorcing western pliant status. This means the US-led west will lose resources, influence, dictatorial policing, and engineered world construct. It also means they would be losing grip on the pedal; pressing Pakistan and Iran besides CARs. They fear that once this act gets triggered, it would induce sympathetic detonation in the region and globe by default. Thus, in the given power contestation, Afghanistan, in particular, and this region at large remains a vital battleground. Anyone of the opposing ‘Giants’ who controls/dominates Afghanistan would impede the opposing designs and objectives allowing herself time for a balancing act. US-led West has already won the battle so far by sustaining occupation for two decades though at an enormous economic and human cost.

In the ongoing post-withdrawal phase, US and Allies will keep the rising influence of China at bay by keeping the region fragile and unstable. This would impede the burgeoning rise of the Chinese and arch-rival Russia under Chinese shades. Instability would also keep Pakistan and somewhat Iran under the thumb. On the other hand, stable Afghanistan means economic connectivity leading to economic interdependence thus accelerating human and regional development. This scenario best suits the region as a whole. The biggest beneficiary would be china as Chinese BRI would get materialized smoothly.

Have the withdrawing forces retracted their objectives and designs? The answer is a Big NO. Retracting motives would be detrimental to US hegemony in the global landscape. With China on the horizon, the US cannot afford to offer her a motorway for attaining world dominance. The US and its allies now seem embarked on a different route to achieve their motives. Their means and ways would not hinge on physical presence any more. Instead, they are playing from the shadows while remaining at a distance. Some dots need connectivity: not striking the deal from a position of strength, keeping the truce for the security of withdrawing forces only, withdrawing in haste, melting of the ANDSF and slipping off their weaponries, asking inclusivity in Kabul, denying much needed humanitarian aid for suffering Afghans on coercion pretexts, letting the puppets flee from Presidency on a chopper in Allied air supremacy, silence on the fleeing puppets and warlords even to Iran, blocking the banks functioning, freezing over $ 9 billion once 70 percent of Kabul’s budget hinges on donation/support and still no tangible conversion of promises. Connectivity of stated dots would allow understanding of the dodgy Afghan quagmire.

During the 20 years long escapade, the Occupation Forces kept changing goalposts to prolong their stay in the region but now time is to play from shadows. Exploiting fault lines within through multi-dimensional prongs would be the order of the day. Even after five months of Taliban control in Kabul, stability in entire Afghanistan is still viewed as a pipedream. The spillover effect from next door has already consumed over 80,000 lives and a direct loss of over $160 billion to Pakistan’s economy. Any further instability in Afghanistan would have devastating spillover effects on Pakistan. Our masses need respite. Given the economic strangulation, Pakistan cannot afford any more instability next door. Our masses especially youth also dream of prosperity and stability. Others in the region and neighborhood would suffer the same though at a lesser intensity. CARs also need revenue generation through exporting their multi-faceted stockpiles for development as they are of no lesser God.

How to go about then? Deeper analysis hints at a “Regional Approach” for addressing the challenge at hand. This approach demands realization in respective ruling elites and deep states that their masses need respite, human development, and prosperity. The individual state will no more be able to prosper rather a region would grow collectively. No country can solve the Afghan mess on its own due to capacity issues and anticipated tremors from world powers. All six neighboring states and Russia need to join in for sustainable peace in Afghanistan. China being the rising pole/beneficiary of peace and connectivity must lead the way through. All must pledge not to allow each other’s soil to be used against anyone and no more meddling in the affairs of others. Said neighboring states including Russia must have a joint body to evaluate the entire mess, make solutions along with manifestation strategy. All must facilitate and contribute to infrastructural and institutional building/development. All must respect Afghans’ faith, culture, values, and system. They must not be made victims of yet another cultural and system imperialism. At the same time, Afghans must realize that they cannot remain at a tangent to world obligations/responsibilities. They need to dig deep and plug the loopholes within. They must not be paid mercenaries any more. They must realize that others would not always come to rescue them. The whole path of the “Regional Approach” is tough and rugged but holds more chances to succeed in the given environment.

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