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**Cautious measures**

The escalating situation in Afghanistan is recalling the images of American and Taliban warheads that have been at conflict with each other since the end of the cold war.

The only twist now is that the rivals are threatening the unthinkable as the US-Nato forces prepare to withdraw. The temporary hiatus in the backdrop of Doha peace negotiations has now loomed into dangers of war between the Afghan forces and the Taliban. At the same time, the vague position of Pakistani officials towards the battle-hardened Taliban regime is reminiscent of post-9/11 events. Instead of receding into the background, history seems to replay itself.

The ongoing dialogue, both official and through back channels, is the talk of the town. Although Pakistan has categorically refused to participate in any such endeavor, the recent statements given by officials in Pakistan, buttressed by the New York Times report, has put Pakistan in the limelight.

The recollections of history, particularly the Musharraf-backed regime, can be a good starting point to highlight Pakistan’s policy towards war-torn Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2008, the commando-turned-president went against the pro-Taliban policy when it became apparent that the Taliban were not worthy of turning a blind eye towards America’s struggle against ‘war on terror’. Instead of unleashing the fury of the world’s sole superpower, the then-president joined hands with America when India, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were also dragging their feet on providing air bases and sharing intelligence services to strike off against terror-ridden Afghanistan.

However, simultaneously, a formal announcement of Pak-US alignment in combating terrorism in Afghanistan provoked an array of Islamist groups and pro-Taliban elements in Pakistan. To offset public estrangement calling for anti-American ‘jihad’, against coalition with the US, the then-president did not disallow support for the Afghan Taliban and militant groups. This inherent incompatibility was soon exposed and, despite being the focus of international interest for providing its military bases to the CIA for countering extremist elements in Afghanistan, Pakistan was termed as the most dangerous country in the world.

In light of this, the current situation is no different and instead of vacillating back and forth between extreme positions, Pakistani officials ought to be unambiguous about its anti-terrorist stance. This will also be in conformity with Pakistan’s determination to exclude itself from the FATF grey list. Not to mention, Pakistan’s fight against Islamophobia at a global level will also strengthen and gain momentum due to its categorical stand against the Taliban’s deadly attacks as the international forces pull out their troops.

Concurrently, the unfolding of the Taliban’s intentions not to proceed forward with peace negotiations in collaboration with the Ghani-backed government also provides Pakistan with an opportunity to make its way in settling the controversial Kashmir issue with India. Pakistan may negotiate any logistical support to the US in Afghanistan in exchange for free and fair elections in Occupied Kashmir. Being a crucial ally in America’s plan for a continued counter strike against the Taliban after withdrawal, Pakistan should use that to resolve the decades-old Kashmir conflict.

The geopolitical tensions in South Asia may become a turning point for Pakistan, provided that Pakistan does not dither on its stance towards mounting extremism in Afghanistan. With intensifying China-US rivalry, Pakistan can become an important ally for both countries and may prove a strong deterrent against any possible open conflict. At the same time, the significance of Pakistan as a staging ground for the American war can be harnessed towards ameliorating the Indo-Pak enmity on Kashmir; with India highly dependent on American military aid, the American officials can dissuade the Modi-backed regime from disseminating its Hindutva ideology against minority Indian Muslims, restoring the status of occupied Kashmir, and providing autonomy to Kashmiri people in deciding their fate.

Pakistan should take measures with extreme caution, keeping in view the lessons learnt from history. Any deviance or ambivalence can go against the county and will undo its efforts against terrorism.

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