**Scapegoating Pakistan for the Afghan Turmoil**

[Dr Tehmina Aslam Ranjha](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/dr-tehmina-aslam-ranjha/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Dr%20Tehmina%20Aslam%20Ranjha)

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On February 29, 2020, at Doha, the US played sharp and safe by negotiating with the Taliban to form a national government of reconciliation in Kabul after the withdrawal of foreign forces. With the end of the effort of the regime change in Afghanistan, the US withdrew all forces on August 30, 2021, by virtually handing over power to the Taliban, though no official ceremony was organized. It had been a two-decade-long engagement of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The swift withdrawal brought its own challenges. For instance, overnight, the Kabul regime headed by President Ashraf Ghani became an orphan – desolate and deserted. Internal strife, rampant corruption, and maladministration driving the Kabul regime must have convinced the US better not to funnel more taxpayers’ money into Afghanistan.

It is expected that the end of the US presence in Afghanistan would mark a change in the US foreign policy towards Pakistan, which kept its ambition allegedly alive to wield its influence in Afghanistan, despite all insistence from the US to stay away from the affairs of Afghanistan. Pakistan has been accused of masking its ambitions from the US to influence Afghanistan. The baseline is that Pakistan is disinclined to see Afghanistan falling into the lap of India.

The US and its allies see Pakistan as have been playing a double game. The US did not mince words and US former President Donald Trump expressed the same in his 2017 South Asia policy address on 21 August 2017 while outlining a new Afghanistan strategy. Interestingly, even at the height of the war on terror, when the US was longing for winning the war, Pakistan was wary of India’s influence over Afghanistan.

If Pakistan yearns to see the reversal of India’s influence in Afghanistan, India would also struggle for salvaging its sway.

In 1996, Pakistan supported the Taliban in their effort to take over Kabul, as the Taliban were from the Pashtun population straddling the Pak-Afghan border called the Durand Line. Pakistan tried to enrich its relations with non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan but to no avail. The situation is still the same. Pakistan’s protestations are that all Afghan groups, whether or not they are the Taliban, should join hands to forge an alliance to run the Kabul government.

In 2014, Pakistan’s former ISI Chief General Hamid Gul claimed publically that his spy agency defeated the Soviet Union with the help of America and would defeat American with the help of America itself in Afghanistan. Gul insinuated as if Pakistan had been playing a double game. In fact, this might not be the case. Gul, the former ISI chief from 1987 to 1989, was no authority on any current policy of Pakistan. Though Gul was known for embellishing his claims with unfounded theories to seek attention, his irresponsible statements often harmed the cause of Pakistan both regionally and internationally.

On television talk shows, almost all defence analysts have been rejoicing the victory of the Taliban and the way they have taken over Kabul. The advance of the Taliban has been hailed as a great strategic move and any commentary unleashed by the Taliban is extolled as a great diplomatic gambit, which outmanoeuvered both the Kabul regime and the foreign forces. It is as if the Taliban victory were offering consolation. The impression conveyed is that Pakistan’s proxies have won. The defence analysts are beating the refrain without realizing that the world is watching them and weighing their utterances. Further, their exclamations are replete with spurring mistrust in Pak-US bilateral relations. The message of Pakistan’s double-dealing is problematic: On the one hand, Pakistan has tried to enable the Taliban to take over Afghanistan; one the other hand, Pakistan has tried to disable the local version of the Taliban to have a say in local matters. The situation may exacerbate challenges in Pakistan instead of reducing them.

One of the stances of Pakistan has been that the Taliban are not under their control and that the Taliban do not listen to them. The stance spares Pakistan from the pressure to rein in the Taliban. The stance is certain to be tested now. If the Taliban and Pakistan are detached parties, the triumph in Pakistan to celebrate the success of the Taliban in Afghanistan has to be justified. Another challenge would be if Pakistan could persist with fencing the Durand Line.

The Taliban victory is not bound to leave Pakistan untouched. The victory is unsparing in its effects on Pakistan. The Taliban are about to reconstitute the medieval age version of the Islamic Emirate. The ascendance of the Taliban is destined to embolden their counterparts in Pakistan and the situation may get divisive for sectarian harmony. The sectarian fallout would be a testing time for Pakistan. Similarly, any disruption in Afghanistan expressed through an internecine war would throw refugees once again into Pakistan, thereby adding extra burden over the meager finances of Pakistan. Any ensuing civil war may also attract Pakistani nationals to cross over the border and get engulfed in the war.

Pakistan might be hoping that with the revival of Talibanism in Afghanistan, the threat of ethnic division (Pashtun and Baloch) of Pakistan from Afghanistan is diminished, if not outrightly over. One of the biggest challenges that would come from Afghanistan would be the behavior of the Taliban towards women and minorities. Pakistan would be tested if it supported the victim or the offender.

India may not sit idle to see its financial investment go down the drain and its diplomatic investment wasted. If Pakistan yearns to see the reversal of India’s influence in Afghanistan, India would also struggle for retrieving and even salvaging its sway in Afghanistan.

Another challenge would come from the presence of al-Qaeda. If any Ayman-al Zawahiri airs a radio or video message on the Taliban’s victory, the whole scenario is subject to modification. The Islamic State (ISIS) may turn against Pakistan if Pakistan permitted its airspace to attack the group operational in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan still yearns for reconciliation amongst all Afghan groups to form a broad-based government in Afghanistan.

*The writer is an analyst on national security and foreign policy. She tweets at @TA\_Ranjha.*