**Will the US be allowed to use Pakistan air space?**

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On October 23, 2021, CNN creating a furore on social media when it announced that Pakistan and the US were inching close to an agreement to allow the US to use the former’s air space to conduct military operations in Afghanistan. The clamouring of panic was loud enough for the government of Pakistan to go in complete denial of any such development whether for operation or intelligence purposes.

“The CNN report claimed that Pakistan had “expressed a desire” to sign a Memorandum of Understanding in return for help in its counterterrorism operations and assistance with managing the relationship with India. The report said that according to a source, the negotiations were still underway and the details of the agreement, which have not yet been hammered out, were still subject to change.” [Daily Times]

Interestingly on May 24, 2021, a news report stated that Pakistan had allowed access to the US to Afghanistan, to support their presence in Afghanistan. However, with the exit of the final military flight from Afghanistan, the premise for the earlier agreement had legally ended.

“General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of US Central Command, said that the US evacuated 79,000 people from Kabul, including 6,000 American citizens, since August 14, a day before the Taliban took control of the city.” (Al Jazeera, August 30, 2021)

The forces at the airport were to ensure a complete exit of “American citizens, third-country nationals and Afghan allies” by August 31, 2021.

An end of a 20-year-old mission.

Or is it?

To think that it’s all over will be a fallacy. The US will make the efforts long-distance to remain engaged in Afghanistan by (a) continuing to maintain the UN and US sanctions that exist on Taliban leaders; (b) “controlling” flow of aid to Afghanistan to ensure behavioural compliance; (c) engaging with the neighbours to ensure better “management” of Afghanistan, and (d) continue raising voice to condemn the violation of rights of women.

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Although other stakeholders like Russia, China and Iran have a role to play in Afghanistan, that of the US would continue to be most significant. It is also a fact that instability in Afghanistan will lead to a negative cascading effect on Pakistan. How the world sees the situation as it unfolds post-US exit and the role of Pakistan, is intrinsically linked with what happens in Afghanistan from this point on. The instability in Afghanistan is going to strengthen the opinion that it’s a result of Pakistan’s double game. One example is of Admiral Mike Mullen who, way back in 2011, told the US senators that the attack on the US embassy in Kabul by a militant group was with the help “of the ISI.”

Although what advantage a war-ravaged Afghanistan could offer Pakistan beats reason.

There is a group of analysts who think that the US is history and friendships with China and nations like Turkey and Russia will suffice. Nothing can be further from the truth. Pakistan is dependent on loans from international institutions. It will do well to remember that the IMF Managing Director and that of World Bank meet “regularly to consult on major issues.” Both their staffs also collaborate very closely on policy matters and country assistance. In FATF, the US, the UK and France are prominent members.

Pakistan and the US have had a very long relationship. They have had ups and downs. Pakistan is wary of the many occasions when blame has been laid on its doorstep for things going wrong in Afghanistan. Public sentiments run high on this score. However, this relationship has stood the test of time and Pakistan must not rush to dump it in favour of new friendships. Even if they are higher than the Himalayas and sweeter than honey. Regionally, the situation is going to be trickier than ever before. Egos have been hurt by Biden not calling Khan. However, like Pakistan, the US knows that the involvement of Pakistan is important for the stability of Afghanistan. The fall of Afghan security forces like a pack of cards has to do with their insufficient preparedness to fight the Taliban. Also, with the US leaving and the Afghan President fleeing, any moral ground to fight was lost. The human factor cannot be taken out of the equation. The American president’s attitude can, therefore, only be deemed as baffling. Afghanistan is land-locked and its geographical nexus with Pakistan can neither be overlooked nor matched by any other stakeholder. “Pakistan has done more for the United States in the direct fight against al Qaeda than any other country I know of,” the then chief of the US Central Command, Army General John Abizaid, had stated in 2004.

Certain lobbies have succeeded in creating a perception that Pakistan has acted as a spoiler to the US in her years of Afghan occupation. This perception ignores the bigger picture; supporting certain vested interests alone and giving too much credit to Islamabad. Pakistan has a fragile economy, especially today. The presence of 1.4 million registered and 1.5 million unregistered refugees on her soil is a massive strain. Pakistan lost over 84,000 civilians in WOT. “The War on Terror cost her 126 billion dollars.” (World Asia, January 12, 2021)

Constructing the border fence has put pressure on the national exchequer to the tune of USD 500 million.

Maybe, Pakistan needs to revisit its entire strategy. A crumbling situation in Afghanistan’s political landscape will have a traumatising impact on Pakistan–a fact that Pakistan’s premier agency understands. Containing the Taliban beyond a given parameter for the safety of Pakistan will work in her favour. Containing Taliban without inciting their ire to react towards Pakistan. The question is, can Pakistan pull off an agreement on one hand and continue to deny its existence successfully for optics on the other hand?

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