**Pragmatic Parenting**

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For many countries and politicians, last month’s fall of Kabul came as a surprise; leaving them clueless as to how to handle the Taliban situation. To avoid messing up the whole region, China, Russia and Pakistan have coordinated their response as recently confirmed by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. After a recent meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, US Secretary of State Authority Blinken confirmed that China, Pakistan and the US were on the same page about Afghanistan.

The challenge posed by the Afghan uncertainty gives Pakistan a wonderful opportunity to mend its foreign policy stance in the matter. Never fully recognised as a partner of the US in the Afghan misadventure, but being the subject of abuse, Pakistan is now in sync with policies because Asian cooperation is now concentrating on Eurasian development. Meeting diplomats during a recent visit to Islamabad, I was pleasantly surprised about the unanimous praise for Pakistani government entities across the board (the Foreign Office, the Army, ISI, the Interior Ministry, KPK and Balochistan Provincial Govts) in helping them out in the Afghan situation. Most of all, they praised our officials for being accessible (wonder of wonders!) and attempting to solve our problems! This was done without fanfare and chest-thumping (albeit, except for a few exceptions), executed with efficiency while keeping the security of the foreign nationals paramount. Because of the Pakhtoon ethnicity across the “Durand Line” and landlocked Afghanistan being dependent upon Pakistan for many of its critical needs, our destinies are intertwined, unlike other countries. If we want to seek peace and stability within Pakistan, we cannot afford and/or sustain the spillover of violence and chaos.

Our newly-found self-confidence, based on extended cooperation with China on CPEC and aggravation of US relations with China and Russia, has opened up options for Pakistan, deemed nearly impossible just a couple of years ago. This will allow Pakistan to avoid its dependency on the US and strive for its destiny as a foreign policy player in the international arena, especially when the Afghan situation worsens.

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The unwinnable “forever war” damaged the US economy and society; resulting in a growing revulsion among Americans against this war. Trump’s initiative to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban enabled the US face-saving exit while according a credible political role to the once rag-tag conglomerate of Afghan fighters. With Biden changing the agreed date of withdrawal from May 2021 to September, the Taliban filled the power void created by the ineptitude of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and started taking over the areas being vacated. Having a low motivation to fight against their Afghan brothers, the ANA saw their possible future salaries vanish with the US exit. The Taliban encouraged them to peacefully hand over weapons and allowed them to go home.

The Taliban did not enter Kabul because of an agreement with the US. However, with President Ashraf Ghani and other high-ranking officials fleeing the country, the US military left it to the Taliban to quickly take over Kabul to avoid a law-and-order situation (again, without a shot fired). Despite adverse media reaction, considering all circumstances, the US made an orderly withdrawal without clashing with the Taliban who successively took over positions previously held by the Ashraf Ghani administration.

With the NATO forces and Europe relying on their US partners, the decisions taken without keeping them in the loop has created a considerable amount of frustration. With the affront of the Biden administration leaving France in the dark about their politico-military shift against China, NATO has suffered quite some cracks, making European powers revive their idea of a security arrangement without the US.

Considering that peace within and without Afghanistan is in the interest of all other countries, the formation of an inclusive government representing all nationalities and all major factions takes centre stage. Foreign powers will keep looking at the inclusion of women in government positions. During 20 years of foreign occupation, women empowerment in urban surroundings has been quite successful, and should not be reversed, but this is not true in rural areas. That has, certainly, pitched urban against rural traditions where women remain more or less in their traditional position inside the house. These vagaries will touch the entire Afghan population. The Taliban is a rather decentralised movement, consisting of various powerful leaders disagreeing, among other things, on the women question. A conservative, mainly tribal, society that has lived for centuries in segregation is naturally feeling insecure about how to handle educated, self-confident and emancipated women. They will need time to make up their minds and adjust their attitudes.

The interpretation of Islam that has been around in Afghan society over decades will take time. Given the fact that we are short of time, both sides–the Taliban and the foreign governments making their recognition of the Afghan government dependent on its inclusivity–need to step-by-step adjust their positions to reach a compromise. Give credit to the Taliban for taking over the country without many shots fired. After a brief revolt, even the Panjshir valley is quiet today. The new government has assured all neighbours that it has no intentions to invade any neighbouring country and does not have territorial claims. That bodes well for Pakistan’s Durand-line problem to be solved in time! The US assurance during the UN meeting that humanitarian aid for Afghanistan would be permissible is a very important step in the right direction.

We must both avoid high expectations about the Taliban or fanning old prejudices against them in the human rights field, and by doing so, fanning hysteria among Afghans to leave the country. This deprives Afghanistan of skilled manpower to take the country forward. In addition, it makes good people refugees, sitting and waiting for months or even years in camps in Africa and elsewhere for a visa to join the “developed” world. Even with a visa, most of them will be looked at with prejudice in their new locations. They will work below their qualifications, take the example of one of the Ghani government’s ministers evacuated to Germany working as a pizza delivery man. The Taliban have changed to a certain extent and proven to be a reliable partner in the peace and withdrawal negotiations. This can proceed further, but will not go on without slipping a couple of times.

The much-demanded human rights is a western idea that has not been adjusted to Afghan (and other) cultures. The equality of men and women–even not fully achieved in the West–needs time. So do ideas that only at the age of 18 years, a person is legally mature. What about our lawyer community objecting to the elevation of a widely-respected female judge of some consequence to the Supreme Court on the pretext of seniority when over 50 such cases exist? Even human rights are fluid, the age of maturity came down in Europe from 21 to 18 and voting rights from the age of 16 and political influence on the decision-making of children has been voiced by the “Fridays-for-Future” climate movement. Things are moving, but change takes time. That is why compromises are needed – we are short of time. Afghan people need food, security and a future. Pakistan with a better insight into all those problems than any other country will be the natural leader in the process.

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