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**The India factor**

As Afghanistan continues to simmer, efforts by Pakistan and the regional countries are intensifying to help the warring parties reach a negotiated settlement. There is consensus among them that, in the absence of a military solution to the conflict, the sole option the combatants will have to cultivate peace in a war-ravaged Afghanistan is by sitting around a table with a flexible mind.

There is one country which does not agree with this prognosis. That country is India. Its role is becoming increasingly disruptive to the peace efforts that Pakistan and other regional countries are earnestly making to facilitate a settlement with a spirit of mutual accommodation. On the one hand, India’s role is visible inside Afghanistan in the shape of support for terrorist organisations including ISIS, Al-Qaeda and other splinter militant groups and, on the other, it is evident in the attacks perpetrated inside Pakistan from across its Western border. Solid evidence is available proving its involvement in the recent terrorist attacks in Lahore and on a bus in Dasu. Sadly, Afghan leadership remains a partner in this nefarious venture to the detriment of the efforts for peace in their country and the larger region.

The litany of abuse routinely emanating from President Ghani and his senior aides, accusing Pakistan of undermining their interests is indicative of the deep-set frustration they suffer from by not being able to push things their way. This is a desperate effort to hide their utter failure in bringing good governance to the country and eliminating corruption which has only increased with the passage of time. Occasionally, this frustration is also directed towards the US for having withdrawn their forces from the country in a rush – a ploy they use as a convenient shield to hide their own inadequacies.

The disorderly and hurried US withdrawal has raised questions of its own with regard to their actual intentions for the region. When the Americans sat across the table, courtesy Pakistan, and concluded a deal with the Taliban by giving a timeline of withdrawal of their troops in exchange for a commitment that Afghan soil would not be used as a staging ground for any terrorist attacks, they knew full well that they were doing so by extending them both legitimacy and a right to rule the country. Otherwise, how could a mere group extend the kind of guarantee that was elicited from them?

Having secured the commitment of withdrawal of troops within a stipulated period of time and the corresponding legitimacy to rule the country, what did the Americans expect they would do? Lower the level of violence – the singular instrument they have consistently employed to fight the US successfully for almost two decades? If so, that would go down in history as one of the worst ever blunders made in ascertaining the intentions of the adversary in a situation of war. That’s why the US plan to withdraw troops was not likely to bring peace to Afghanistan and, by extension, to the region. On the contrary, it was a step to free the Taliban to battle it out with the government troops to win the prize of Kabul.

At a different level, it can also be debated whether peace in Afghanistan was ever a component of the post-withdrawal plan. It is said that the real intention was the continuation of fratricide, thus subverting the efforts for economic connectivity among the countries of the region and blocking their linkage with China and its groundbreaking initiatives. In pursuing this policy, the US has consistently worked in league with India as there is a commonality of stakes among the two countries. India is specifically focused on destabilising Pakistan while the US is consumed with the containment of China and subverting its efforts to becoming the economic leader of the world. The same is reflected in the formation of the QUAD with India especially inducted to lead the anti-China charge.

In the same context, it can be assumed that if the US was really interested in forging peace in Afghanistan, it would have exerted some meaningful pressure on President Ghani to take the process of negotiations more seriously and adopt an approach of compromise in preference to rabid intransigence. That has not been done. On the contrary, the US has rewarded the Afghan government by promising them a lucrative aid package for the next year as well as continuing military support. The recent aerial attacks on the Taliban which have resulted in the death of a number of innocent people have further aggravated the crisis.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has worked tirelessly for peace in Afghanistan. In this effort, it has the support of the regional countries encompassing China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Central Asian Republics as they are all desirous to benefit from the prospective economic linkages. This is not possible unless peace returns to the region, beginning with peace in Afghanistan. In this realm, Pakistan is working closely with these countries to structure methods and mechanisms to facilitate an end to the ongoing war – an effort that is being consciously and wickedly thwarted by India which is investing heavily in the continuation of conflict across Pakistan’s western border and infliction of terror in its midst.

The inability, unwillingness, or a combination of both, on the part of the Afghan government to engage the Taliban in a productive dialogue together with the sinister India factor constitute the biggest hurdle in the way of peace in Afghanistan. While there is a need to remain engaged with the US, Pakistan should make a concerted effort to expose the Indian agenda before the world. This should be done with the collaboration of other key players of the region including China and Russia. It has to be a collective effort for a collective cause.

India should be taken to all international forums with facts exposing its close linkage with terrorist organisations in a bid to thwart the efforts for forging peace in Afghanistan. Together with India’s vile involvement in subverting the peace efforts, continued criminal complicity of the Afghan leadership should also be projected as an impediment in the path of reconciliation.

Peace in Afghanistan remains a priority for Pakistan. This 40-year-old conflict must end; this is a prerequisite for economic activity to pick up to benefit the impoverished people of all regional countries. That is why it requires a joint effort by all regional stakeholders which should join hands for ushering in peace in a strife-riddled Afghanistan and help the alleviation of people from the tentacles of conflict and hunger.

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