**Afghanistan and the Second Great Game**

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When US President Joe Biden announced in April of this year that he would be pulling out all remaining US troops from Afghanistan by the very beginning of July — the White House administration described it as a shift in “the US global focus from counterinsurgency campaign to current priorities.”

That spoke volumes about the future American plans for the region and the mindset behind the February 2020 agreement that the previous administration inked with Taliban, regarding a complete exit from Afghanistan. Not to mention Washington’s insistence on securing guarantees that the Taliban would not allow terrorist groups to operate on Afghan soil.

Of course, all this had been on the cards since May 2014 when then president Barack Obama announced that all combat operations would stop by the end of that year and troops would fully withdraw by the end of 2016. However, his successor Donald Trump temporarily halted the process before later developing consensus with the Taliban; leading first to the September 2019 understanding and then the February 2020 final agreement, according to which the pullout was to be completed by May 2021.

However, the Biden administration’s initial decision to complete the process by the upcoming 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks came within a changed regional and international power equation.

A total of 130,000 US and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2014 while the remaining 9,600 servicemen had ceased combat operations. Ever since, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) have only been receiving air support from the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) for counterinsurgency operations. Major combat operations were the ANDSF’s sole responsibility and it largely remained successful on that front.

A return to Cold War politics would exacerbate the US-China rivalries in South China Sea, Washington’s perception of the ever increasing US-China military competition, and reinforce the resurgence of Russia as as a rival to American hegemony

Neither the Afghan or regional media, nor civil society have ever doubted Washington’s intentions behind the move, particularly when it kept repeating that this did not mean it was turning away from Afghanistan.

After all, how long could the US continue with this cumbersome exercise. The twenty-year war has cost a staggering $2.26 trillion 240,000 lives, including some 2,300 American soldiers. By all standards, Afghan security forces — who had received advanced training from the world’s most professional military consultants for two long decades and possessed all modern weapons at their disposal — were supposed to stand on their own feet and repel the insurgents’ threat. Hopefully they are doing that well up to their capacity.

What the US did not do was ensure complete cessation of hostilities and resumption of a reliable peace process in Afghanistan before resuming the deferred troop withdrawal. Instead, under the provisions of the unilateral peace deal with the Taliban — the latter were duty bound to begin negotiations with Kabul the follow month. However, this did not happen until September 2020. And even then, this was after the Afghan government released 5,000 Taliban prisoners. The second round of Kabul-Taliban talks was held in January this year while the third one on May 14, during which both sides pledged to speed up the peace process.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in an article in Foreign Affairs magazine, published back in March, spelled out his government’s peace plan. At the heart of this were the following conditions: ceasefire, formation or interim administration, holding of fresh elections under the Afghan constitution, and the offer to step down in case of a peace deal plan. Yet the Taliban, have always been clear that their vision for Afghanistan includes the enforcement of the Islamic system. Their spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, repeated this as recently as last month, in an interview with Foreign Policy Magazine.

As for the role of regional countries, the so-called Extended Troika — comprising the US, Russia, China and Pakistan — has continued its efforts for the restoration of peace in Afghanistan. In its April 30 meeting in Doha, the group “expected the Taliban to fulfil its counter-terrorism commitment” and “prevent terrorist groups and individuals from using the Afghan soil to threaten the security of any other country”.

This whole scenario reminds of the 2001 US-NATO intervention when critics described it as the beginning of a Great Game: a hypothesis, which, otherwise, never saw the day of light as far as the Caspian gas and oil reserves are concerned.

The Second Great Game is, however, very much likely to materialise in the shape of active hostilities among the big world and regional powers, particularly the US, Russia and China. Indeed, if Washington and its western allies fail to save Afghanistan from falling into a cataclysm, an unbridled land where extremist individuals and groups are have a field day, the country will pose a grave threat to the security and development of the entire region.

This will undoubtedly trigger a Second Cold War, which would exacerbate the US-China rivalries in South China Sea, Washington’s perception of the ever increasing US-China military competition, and reinforce the resurgence of Russia as as a rival to US hegemony.

Leaving Afghanistan in a lawless state means leaving the country at the mercy of hostile groups; all of which have divergent political and sectarian interests. The linkages of these groups with Pakistan, India, Iran, and others, is liable to ignite a multi-pronged war of proxies in the country.

Once this erupts, such all-out war will be confined within Afghanistan’s borders. It will spill out and spread like a jungle fire, threatening not only the fragile fabric of this region but engulfing the whole world.

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