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**The gathering storm**

The Afghan scenario is getting darkened by the violence levitating ominously over the horizon yet again. A conservative assessment of the peace prospects by old analysts as well by current observers of the Afghan scene paints a sombre outlook.

These assessments blame the US for an unimplementable agreement with the Taliban, leaving the current Afghan government and its affiliates in an unenviable situation. The impending withdrawal was a chronicle foretold in Obama’s autobiography, ‘The Promised Land’ where Joe Biden’s persona as vice president clearly presented the image of a politician who hated the wasteful spending of US taxpayers’ money on the nation-building operation in Afghanistan.

The book mentions Biden opposing McChrystal’s surge request for 40,000 more troops to “defeat [the] Taliban” and “secure the population”. Biden opposed the request and wanted the objectives to be pared down to “degrade [the] Taliban” only. Eleven years on, the Americans are pulling back – having failed even to degrade the Taliban. Pakistan has also paid a very high price due to instability in Afghanistan. Having suffered 83000 human casualties and $126 billion loss to the economy, Pakistan, as a responsible and affected neighbor, weathered the crisis with remarkable equanimity. The American troops managed to defeat Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan through Pakistan’s help – despite an insurrection by their affiliates like the TTP inside Pakistan’s territory. Pakistan, with its limited resources, is still hosting 2.8 million Afghan refugees which is the second largest refugee number after Syrian refugees in Turkey. Despite suffering an onslaught by terrorist organizations like ISIS, TTP, JuA, and HuA, Pakistan continues to support Afghanistan and its people on the economic and development fronts. It still provides 55,000 visas to Afghan people every month for health and education needs.

Pakistan is contributing generously towards infrastructure development in Afghanistan. Jinnah hospital at Kabul and two more hospitals in Jalalabad attest to the support Pakistan is providing to the Afghan healthcare sector. In addition to around $1 billion development aid to Afghanistan, Pakistan is also playing an important role as member of the ‘Practical Cooperation Dialogue’ comprising Afghanistan, China and Pakistan.

For the above to happen, however, a sustainable peace agreement amongst all factions of Afghans through a Grand Afghan Jirga is needed. The biggest weakness of the US-led Afghan peace initiative with the Taliban at Doha was the non-ceasefire clause vis a vis the Afghan government by the Taliban. The American announcement of withdrawal from Afghanistan has emboldened the Taliban to continue using armed methods to capture Kabul.

The ground realities point towards the Taliban’s gains on the battlefield; the group has made rapid gains in four districts in May, capturing 26 posts without much resistance. The Taliban apparently have waited out the Americans and are supremely confident of their battlefield victory vis-a-vis the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). With weak discipline, poor motivation and no ideological objective to fight, the ANDSF is likely to disintegrate quickly with the absence of American training and air support.

The US withdrawal – without a consensus amongst the Afghans on the future power-sharing constitutional scheme – is for sure going to lead towards an internecine conflict. The lack of interest of Ghani’s government in an interim government and the rigid Taliban stance on a future power-sharing agreement makes an Afghan consensus on power sharing before US withdrawal a remote possibility.

Pakistan needs to develop a regional consensus through China, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian States (CARs) on Afghan peace as it stands to lose the maximum on the economic front in case of a civil war. The Afghan government’s refusal to allow Pakistan’s trade access with the CARs unless Pakistan allows India overland access to the CARs emasculates the trade potential that the improved connectivity offers. The 2010 Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement’s (APTTA) Article 5 however excludes Indian exports from the agreement. Due to the Afghan government’s increased tilt towards India, Afghan transit trade through Pakistan has reduced to 30 percent – from 60 percent in 2008. Pakistan’s exports – that had risen to $2.6 billion in 2011-12 from $140 million in 2001 – have gone down to $1 billion in 2020, despite a potential of $8 billion annual trade between the two countries.

The post US withdrawal scenario paints a bleak picture for peace in Afghanistan. The ability of the ANDSF to resist the Taliban onslaught is highly suspect without active US and Nato air, intelligence and training support. With the Taliban winning on the battlefield, terrorist organizations like the TTP, ISIS, and others would have to be countered by neighbouring countries like Pakistan. American commitment to the Ashraf Ghani government and military assistance after withdrawal from Afghanistan is still unclear. Any government that gets involved in Afghanistan’s civil war on behalf of a faction would be scapegoated by rival factions.

The gathering storm in Afghanistan needs to be tackled intelligently through a regional consensus amongst the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan so as not to allow any proxy wars by outside powers. Pakistan should keep playing its positive role while encouraging the Taliban to engage meaningfully in an intra-Afghan peace dialogue to reach a power-sharing consensus. In addition, all protective measures should be taken to absorb the fallout of a likely civil war in Afghanistan.

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