

AF-PAK REGION

The road beyond Kabul

Afghanistan begins retreat to the future.

OPINION

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August 15, 2021 will stand out as an epochal turning point in the turbulent history of Afghanistan, as on this fateful day, Taliban's blitzkrieg offensive culminated with the fall of Kabul, marking the return of the medieval theocratic regime after two decades. With the unceremonious exit of its forces from Kabul, the United States earned the distinction of becoming the third great power, after Britain and Soviet Union, to suffer ignominious defeat in Afghanistan.

The clock for this impending disaster had started ticking way back in October 2001, when President George W. Bush ordered invasion of Afghanistan to eliminate Al Qaeda and its terrorist network, as a sequel to 9/11-bombing of

the Twin Towers, to obviate such a catastrophe in future. The US-led NATO forces did succeed in defeating Al Qaeda and Taliban in less than a year, but these groups soon found safe haven in Pakistan. Bush went on to invade Iraq, leaving the Afghanistan cauldron simmering, only to digress later into a nation building venture. In the process, American got sucked into an "unwinnable war".

With the Trump administration signing a peace agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, excluding the Afghan government, the dye was cast for Taliban's return. As the Taliban took over the capital city, hordes of people made a beeline for the airport, in the quest to flee the country. With no framework in place for a future political structure and Biden's insistence to adhere to the evacuation deadline, ignoring the advice of military experts led to a botched up withdrawal and calamitous disaster. The curtain finally fell with a powerful bomb blast at Kabul Airport on 26 August evening by the ISIS (Khorasan) resulting in killing

182 people including 13 US military personnel, nudging American leadership to complete evacuation a day ahead of the 31 August dead line, marking the end of its longest war.

AFGHANISTAN'S RETREAT TO FUTURE

The façade of the current Taliban regime being a moderate one was shattered on 7 September, with the announcement of an all-male interim government comprising 33 hardcore old guard. More than half of them are on UN designated terrorist list including acting PM Mohammad Hassan Akhund, two Deputy PMs, Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mullah Hanafi, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani—son of Jalaluddin Haqqani—the founder of the insurgent group Haqqani network and Defence Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, the eldest son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar. The Haqqanis along with the Kandahar-based Taliban constitute two-third of the interim cabinet; the Doha team has been conspicuously marginalised. This obviously bears the stamp of Pakistan; the Haqqani network, known to be the sword arm of Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), was designated as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" by the US in 2012.

The model adopted by the current Taliban regime is on the lines of Iran, with

Hibatullah Akhundzada dubbed as the "Leader of the Faithful" and supreme leader, the final authority over Taliban's political, religious and military affairs. He has exhorted the new government to work hard to uphold the Islamic rules and Sharia laws. The inclusivity factor is virtually non-existent, with only three non-Pashtuns in the interim cabinet and with women's rights issues drawing a blank. Afghanistan can credit itself as the only country in the world to be formally governed by terrorist outfits.

It is ironic that Pakistan having played a key role in Taliban's victory continues to be seen by the West as indispensable for bringing about stability in the region. Various terrorist groups that joined hands with the Taliban to defeat the US are now pulling in different directions to pursue their respective agendas. This incidentally works to Pakistan's advantage for continuing to play the role of a kingmaker. However, Afghanistan is bound to degenerate into a hotbed of terrorism with fanatics and jihadi groups from all over finding safe havens to pursue their pan-Islamic agenda, posing serious security concerns to the region and world at large. Pakistan too will not be able to escape from the spill-over, with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) already upping the ante.

Afghanistan is one of the

poorest countries in the world. Post the US invasion, since last two decades its economy was sustained through foreign aid and developmental assistance, making up almost 42% of its GDP. With the Taliban coming to power, all Western donors and world bodies like IMF have suspended the flow of funds. With the nation's reserve assets, estimated to be \$9-10 bn, frozen, Taliban can't even access these. To add to the woes, Pakistan has initiated measures to control the Afghanistan economy, replacing the US dollar as the currency for bilateral trade with its own. Beijing extending \$31 million credit to Kabul is part of its cheque book diplomacy to further its strategic interests in the region and extend its "Belt and Road" venture into Afghanistan, with the Taliban already on board.

The Taliban's own economy is barely around \$2 bn, a third of which is dependent on narcotics trade. Hence, its leadership is fully conscious that to govern and meet minimal aspirations of the people, they will need access to the global financial systems. To this end, there exists some leverage with the Western nations to deal with Taliban on issues like human rights and inclusiveness. Considering Afghanistan in the middle of a serious humanitarian crisis, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' distress appeal for over \$600 million humani-

tarian assistance to save Afghanistan from impending famine has drawn a positive response, with global donors pledging \$1 bn.

Given the Taliban's regressive outlook, the composition of the interim government and the acute scarcity of expertise following a large-scale brain drain, the economic future of Afghanistan looks very bleak. It is bound to be a basket case surviving on humanitarian aid. In the absence of a suitable ecosystem, no worthwhile foreign investment is likely to pour into Afghanistan. Abject poverty will provide impetus to the narcotics trade, smuggling and gun running, lending an ideal environment for the terrorism industry to flourish, with of course patronage from Pakistan

GLOBAL POLITY AT CROSSROADS

The global polity stands at the crossroads, waiting and watching. Given the current profile and actions of the Taliban regime, any possibility of a recognition is a long way off. To see America out of Afghanistan, Russia, Iraq, China and Pakistan had a common agenda. However, now Russia is wary of the Taliban and has deployed mechanized forces in Tajikistan to secure the border with Afghanistan. Iran too is concerned about the Shia Hazara community in Afghanistan and has voiced serious displeasure on Pakistan's

role in Panjshir. It is the Pakistan-China duo along with Turkey and Qatar who are engaging with the new Taliban regime and trying to legitimise the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan".

In the US Senate, during Congressional hearings reviewing the American fiasco in Afghanistan, the duplicitous role of Pakistan has come under intense scrutiny. There is a clamour for withdrawing its Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status. To maintain its influence in the region, Washington is now working on the strategy of combining offshore intelligence with over the horizon strikes from staging areas in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan, to be able to take on terrorist strongholds in the Af-Pak region.

India has made significant contribution in building Afghanistan, investing \$3 bn in some 500 projects and earned enormous good will. While in the current scenario, Delhi's options may seem limited, yet there is considerable scope to join hands with the nations in the region to checkmate Pakistan's sinister designs. To this end, External Affairs Minister Dr Jaishankar has reiterated that India will stand by the people of Afghanistan. Foreign Secretary Harshvardhan Shringla has stated that global response to address the Afghan crisis must be guided by the recent UNSC Resolution 2593 which

clearly spells out that Afghanistan territory must not be used for terrorism and negotiated political settlement should be found to the conflict.

From the desperate calls by Pakistan PM Imran Khan to incentivise the Taliban regime and his National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf criticising international community's "wait and watch" policy alongside warning on the consequences if Kabul is abandoned, it is obvious that bankrupt Pakistan cannot hand-hold Afghanistan, which is on the verge of collapse. Rawalpindi's short-lived jubilation is fast turning into deep despair, as even Islamic countries barring Turkey and Qatar are showing no inclination to engage with the Taliban.

Given the prevailing scenario, Afghanistan is faced with a double whammy; the danger of implosion in the wake of inner contradictions and explosion due to external forces. Beijing and Islamabad are in a state of delusion, thinking that the road beyond Kabul passes through the Pakistan-China corridor. In fact it has already hit a dead end, with Afghanistan in the retrograde mode, as the world watches on.

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