

Picking up the threads from the Afghan rubble

Of all the countries involved in Afghanistan, India possibly has the best credentials to enable Kabul's neutrality



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The Taliban does appear to have established control, by and large, over Afghanistan, with the last remaining holdout at Panjshir having fallen. Nevertheless, many more questions than answers exist. One significant question is whether the 'Global War on Terror' has been consigned to the detritus of history or not.

Much turmoil, terror shoots

The latest episode in Afghanistan's tragic history has resulted in several thousands being displaced, and many thousands being forced to flee the country. The overweening threat, however, remains including the presence of many newer terrorist outfits, such as Daesh, ISIS-K, al Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), ETIM-K (a militant group from China's Xinjiang), the Fidayeen mafhas, all of which are the enduring legacies of 20 years of foreign occupation.

The Taliban have in the meantime, announced the setting up of a 33-member interim government, headed by Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund as the acting Prime Minister. Prominent appointees include Abdul Ghani Baradar as acting Deputy Prime Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani as acting Interior Minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob as acting Defence Minister, and Amir Khan Muttaqi as acting Foreign Minister. Notwithstanding earlier pronouncements by the Taliban, the government is, for the present, solely a Taliban construct, and overwhelmingly Pashtun in character. Pakistan holds certain key cards given the prominent role assigned to its protégés, Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mohammad Yaqoob, the son of Mullah

Omar. The new government is unlikely to be fazed by the fact that quite a few members of the interim government are on various terror lists, including that of the United Nations and the United States.

A great deal of wringing of hands about the choices made may exist, but on a deeper reflection, it would be apparent that the original sin was the U.S. Agreement with the Taliban last year, which conferred on the group a degree of international recognition. Many more aftershocks can also be expected. Hopes of a pragmatic Afghanistan behind the religious garb may thus prove highly evanescent.

What was achieved in Afghanistan, despite two decades of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) occupation, can be summed up in three words: an unmitigated disaster. Destruction of the terror network – essentially of the al Qaeda network – was an objective which was far from achieved. Terror networks were driven underground for a time, but many new variants such as the Islamic State and many offshoots of the same thrive not only in Afghanistan but also in many different regions of the globe.

India's engagement

The facade of seeking to impose democracy in Afghanistan currently stands exposed, but the real damage possibly done is to the idea of democracy itself. Spending trillions of dollars cannot cloak this flawed effort. India's efforts regarding the economic development of Afghanistan have been rendered infructuous, and its reputation has suffered lasting damage. More serious is the fact that India's relations with the new Taliban leadership remain strained due to its association, earlier with the Northern Alliance, and subsequently with the Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani administrations. This has put India in a different category, compared to many of Afghanistan's other neighbours such

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as China and Russia. Pakistan clearly falls into a different category as the 'patron saint' of the new regime.

Those who do not heed the lessons of history, it is said, are doomed to perdition. Afghanistan has been the graveyard of the ambitions of many nations in the past, notably Great Britain and Russia. Ever since the days of the Great Game between Russia and Great Britain, and right through the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Afghanistan had been viewed as strategically important. Its strategic value has only increased subsequently. The hasty withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan is not merely a setback for the U.S., but for all those who sided with it.

Beginning with the decision of the Donald Trump Administration to institute talks with the Taliban – and not with the government headed by Mr. Ghani – for the withdrawal of U.S. troops which not only legitimised the Taliban and acknowledged their premier role in the affairs of Afghanistan, the U.S. has committed one error after another.

Duplicitous roles

Its unfailing trust in the creator of the Taliban, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which, while pretending to be an ally, outsmarted the U.S. is another. The Taliban are beholden to the ISI and it was hardly a surprise that the ISI Chief, Faiz Hameed was there to greet Mullah Baradar when he flew into Kandahar. Safe havens of the Taliban for the past

two decades have been in Pakistan and these were not only well known to the ISI, but also nurtured by it. Even the U.S. knew that the Taliban's Shura Council was located in Quetta (Balochistan).

The near duplicitous role of Qatar, another important U.S. ally, which has nurtured the Taliban leadership in recent years, also bears scrutiny. In a bid to outflank Saudi Arabia (and emerge as the new fulcrum of West Asian politics), Qatar is known to play both sides. While being perceived as a U.S. ally, it pursues its own brand of politics – including that of acting as a shoulder for the Taliban to lean on. Not one, but at least three U.S. Administrations should, hence, share the blame for the catastrophic retreat from Afghanistan.

The eyes on the pie

The collapse of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and the simultaneous rise of the Taliban with their outreach to Pakistan, China, Russia, and to an extent even Iran, are likely to set in train developments that could alter the geo-politics of the region. Russia, though no longer the power it once was, is currently seeking to enlarge its influence in Eurasia, and the Afghan imbroglio gives it an opportunity.

China, which envisages domination of Asia as the first step in its bid to become the world's number one power, sees Afghanistan as a prize both from a geo-economic and geo-political standpoint. Eyeing the mineral wealth of Afghanistan is only one aspect; a key objective is to make its Belt and Road Initiative a truly viable entity, and further extend its reach to the Indian Ocean, without being totally dependent on Pakistan.

Many West Asian countries are, meanwhile, assessing the situation in Afghanistan to see how best to take advantage of the fluid situation. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar have already shown their hand. Saudi Arabia is anxious to become involved, more so to

prevent Iran from extending its influence into Afghanistan. Iran is anxious to secure a hold in Afghanistan to ensure its own security. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have a rather troubled relationship with Afghanistan, are not unwilling to maintain peace with a Talibanised Afghanistan. The U.S.'s plans to enhance regional security/connectivity through a new Quadrilateral diplomatic platform, meanwhile, may well prove still-born, even before it takes off.

The path for New Delhi

India's concerns regarding Afghanistan have as much to do with geo-political positioning, as to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a crucible for pro-terror forces that could impact India's security. Hence, it must think hard on how to overcome the adverse constellation of forces that have emerged. One possibility is for India to take on a mediating role among the different nations anxious to involve themselves in Afghanistan, and produce a formula that would help maintain Afghanistan's neutrality and ensure that it becomes a buffer zone to prevent further Chinese expansionism towards South Asia.

Seven decades ago, India had performed such a mediating role in bringing tentative peace to what was then Indo-China, now Vietnam. It is critically important for India to ensure the unity and the integrity of Afghanistan, and in turn achieve an agreement in principle to maintain Afghanistan's neutrality.

Of all the countries currently involved in Afghanistan, India possibly has the best credentials to act as an honest broker; India should choose someone who can act like a 'Zelig-like figure' to ensure that the final decision is something that would ensure peace in the region and prevent any major turmoil in South Asia, checkmating both Pakistan and China.