

Piecing Together the Afghan Puzzle

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History is being made in Afghanistan as the greatest military power in human history is leaving Afghanistan after sacrificing two thousand three hundred and fifty-two American lives, spending two decades and more than two trillion dollars in the longest and most expensive but unsuccessful US military campaign.

The complex security, political and social dynamics of Afghanistan have puzzled the governments and people more now than perhaps at any other time since 9/11. The following paragraphs briefly explain why the US is leaving Afghanistan, why everyone who matters in the world and has a stake in Afghanistan is really worried and what can be done to solve the complex Afghan puzzle.

Washington is rapidly pulling its troops out of Afghanistan because, in order to preserve its global preeminence, it wants to return to the great power competition by globally redistributing its military might to contain China.

Based on this grand strategic objective, Washington has asked NATO to shift its posture towards Asia-Pacific while the US is hurriedly reducing its own military commitments towards counter-terrorism campaigns in the developing world.

This will not only enable the US to concentrate more towards the ‘Quad’ alliance formation but also accelerate its own conventional and strategic buildup, as part of its ‘Indo-Pacific strategy’ against the Chinese rise.

The Afghan Taliban swiftly taking over

Almost in sync with the speedy US military withdrawal, several Afghan districts are falling virtually every day to the Afghan Taliban, who have faced little resistance so far. However, the most important question which the Afghan Taliban now face is whether their significant battlefield victories can earn them nationwide political legitimacy and international diplomatic recognition as well.

Afghan Taliban's military gains are swift and significant but to become nationally acceptable throughout Afghanistan and gain international recognition as the de jure rulers of Afghanistan will not be easy for them.

In contrast, with every passing hour, the Kabul Administration is becoming more politically insecure, diplomatically isolated, and militarily weak. The growing insecurity of Ashraf Ghani is also affecting the morale and commitment of the Afghan security forces to fight the Afghan Taliban.

President Biden hosted Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah on June 25, 2021 and the meeting yielded formal US commitment for enduring socio-economic and military assistance for the Kabul Administration. However, this could be too little too late and merely symbolize Biden Administration's attempt to pacify the increasingly insecure Afghan government.

Serious concerns towards the Afghan situation

Afghan Taliban's rising influence has also convinced some of their adversaries to try to mend fences with them in order to protect their investments and interests in Afghanistan. The frantic Indian attempts to repair its relations with the Afghan Taliban, despite New Delhi's longstanding support for the Northern Alliance and later for the Kabul Administration, in their fight against the Afghan Taliban could be seen in this context.

Pakistan has borne the brunt of Indian-sponsored terrorism from Afghan territories for two decades. Islamabad views the waning India influence within Afghanistan with some relief but there are fears that the escalating violence in Afghanistan could create another huge Afghan refugee influx challenge for Pakistan and revive terrorism.

There are serious concerns within Islamabad whether Pakistan will receive adequate and timely international assistance to host additional Afghans once again, which could arrive due to rising violence in Afghanistan, or will it be left on its own to deal with them and their socio-economic, health, and security consequences.

Chinese concerns towards the deteriorating Afghan situation are based on two key regional and global factors. The security of the BRI and CPEC corridors and related projects is a major Chinese regional interest but Beijing is also well aware that the primary reason for the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan is to accelerate Washington's global arms buildup against Beijing in the Asia-Pacific region.

Iran, which is already engaged with the US in Vienna to seek Washington's return to the nuclear deal and end international economic sanctions on Tehran, is cautiously building its influence with

all Afghan stakeholders. This Iranian approach indicates a hedging strategy to prepare for an uncertain Afghan future.

The US military withdrawal, the rise of Taliban, weakening Kabul Administration, Indian attempts to improve ties with Afghan Taliban, Pakistan's growing Afghan refugees and terrorism-related concerns, Chinese regional and global challenges, and Iranian hedging strategy represent only seven pieces of the complex Afghan puzzle. So let us briefly try to reduce its cluttered complexity, piece these together afresh and look for a way out.

Afghanistan needs long-term socio-economic development

The global powers like the US and the regional neighbors, all hold a piece of the Afghan puzzle and they all need to collectively piece together their individual leverages to make the Afghan state viable by building a stable and developed Afghan nation. But no single global power or neighbor can do that singlehandedly or unilaterally but its lingering insecurity and instability threaten us all.

Therefore, blaming Pakistan, celebrating US military departure, or welcoming the Afghan Taliban are emotional and populist short-term reactions that only temporarily appeal to the domestic audiences of different countries respectively.

However, these reactions, despite their domestic political utility, are neither a substitute for a comprehensive regional policy approach towards stabilizing and building Afghanistan nor will these solve the complex realities of the dangerous Afghan puzzle that haunts the world and this unstable region. A few dispassionate suggestions in this regard are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Ashraf Ghani has become more of an American liability than an asset. Therefore, instead of wasting its precious political capital and military resources on saving a weak and ineffective Kabul Administration, the US should see Afghanistan as a foreign policy challenge rather than only a military issue.

For the past twenty years, the US has spent too much on militarily securing a corrupt and incompetent Kabul administration and too little on building an Afghan nation. This means that instead of continuing to look at Afghanistan only from the security policy lens, the US administration must invest in the long-term socio-economic development of the Afghan nation.

This will not only reduce the national security threat for the United States but also offer hope and opportunities to the Afghan people by allowing them to return home to lead secure, respectable, and normal lives. It will also help them gradually repair their badly damaged social fabric and build their own nation rather than remain a permanent international economic liability and regional security threat.

What should Afghanistan's neighbors do?

The Afghan Taliban, notwithstanding their rapid military gains, should also show greater restraint and accommodation by avoiding a non-discriminatory use of force towards other communities that may not share their ideology or culture but do not directly raise arms against them.

The politics of revenge will neither earn them national political acceptability nor international diplomatic recognition and will only make their domestic political and international diplomatic legitimacy more difficult.

In addition, the leadership of all the Afghan neighbors must urgently meet under an ECO plus 2 arrangement that could also include China and Russia to help shape a comprehensive three-stage regional plan for the Afghan future.

The first step of this plan could be that these countries mutually use their respective leverages on individual communities to reduce violence within Afghanistan. The second step could be to jointly develop an Afghanistan Development Fund (ADF) that would help generate funds to promote socio-economic development within the war-ravaged country. The third step could be to gradually resume the return of Afghan refugees from all the neighboring countries to resettle them in their homes, villages, and towns by offering them hope, incentives, and security.

This three-stage regional plan could take a lot of time and effort to negotiate and refine and years to implement but it will help save the Afghan people and all its neighbors' thousands of lives and trillions of dollars of future trade via BRI and CPEC, which would otherwise be perpetually endangered, in case Afghanistan is not timely stabilized.

This will also allow Afghan neighbors to offer common and lasting security and economic commitment towards Afghan peace and progress and help recover this region from permanently remaining the victim of great power rivalries and deprived of peace and prosperity.

Avoiding past mistakes

After the end of the Cold War, leaving Afghanistan to boil further in a lethal cocktail of rampant violence and drugs economy was a tragic and collective mistake of the entire international community. This grave neglect by great powers made Afghanistan an international security challenge, which led to the 9/11 incident.

Repeating this mistake again will be a major strategic disaster for both the long-term US national security and Chinese geo-economic interests. Without stabilizing, developing, and investing in Afghanistan, neither the long-term US national security nor the future of Chinese trans-regional corridors or Pakistan's geo-economic driven foreign policy, based on regional connectivity, can be realized.

The fear of might can never defeat the power of hope. Therefore, one hopes that both the US and China will not neglect this valuable lesson of history and the costly 20th Century mistakes will not be repeated to help mutually shape a new world order that can offer humanity more hope than fear. Piecing together the Afghan puzzle will be its first and most critical test.

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