Peace in Afghanistan is a Choice!

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The war in Afghanistan initiated by the US, after the tragic incident of 9/11, is finally grinding to a halt. Analysts are pondering the reasons behind this sudden withdrawal decision. One factor that is common amongst all the speculations is the uncertainty of US' core objectives. While the US stepped on Afghan soil with the declared aim to root out al-Qaeda, this objective was soon altered to 'build(ing) democracy.' Such abrupt policy shifts resulted in unprecedented human and financial losses in this war that ultimately, convinced the US administrations that the vision of turning Afghanistan into a modern democracy was too costly. The US, over different periods, has collectively spent around $2 trillion on the Afghan war.

Now, since the new administration in the White House has decided to withdraw, Taliban are gaining a solid foothold over the country. As they are making their moves, Pakistan is deliberately being painted by some as the ideal scapegoat for US blunders in the region, and by others, as the mastermind of Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

There is nothing new to this phenomenon as Pakistan has been blamed in the past for 'not doing enough' in the US-led War on Terror (WoT). No one wants to fail. No one likes losing, especially when the whole world is watching. To avoid being seen as the obvious loser, the US now wants to project its failure on Pakistan and expects the world to bandwagon. It is ironic but not surprising that whenever the US' tall claims on a particular policy go wrong, they try to shift their share of faults and blunders on another party rather than accepting failure.

While the agreement signed between the US and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, marked the end of America's longest-ever war. While the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was inevitable due to its fatal cost and blunders, earlier administrations delayed the risk of withdrawal because of the humiliation and embarrassment attached to it. The US invasion of Afghanistan with the stringent top to bottom approach in 'liberating' Afghan society by forcibly imposing a Western governance setup proved fatal. Previous intermittent invasions of Afghanistan highlighted Afghan society's unique trait – Afghans never accept being conquered, ruled, dictated or subjugated by a foreign power. Why the US deliberately disregarded lessons of failed interventions in this 'graveyard of empires' by the British in the 19th and the Soviets in the 20th century, will remain a mystery. One can even recall how back in 2008, then-US Vice President Joe Biden was skeptical about American aims of building a legitimate democratic Afghan government. One obvious answer could be hubris.

As a Pakistani, it may be argued that my views must surely be biased. However, the international community must seriously and at length analyze if Pakistan can really be blamed for the present Afghan turmoil that is getting worse an on hourly basis even before the US withdrawal, i.e., empowered warlords, narcotics proliferation, development

undermined by corruption, continuation of violence, and complex and fragile social situation with stilted ethnic power structures and failed functional governance.

Unfortunately, the world has forgotten Pakistan's unparalleled sacrifices in the US-led WoT. Pakistan's participation in this futile war endangered its security - non-state entities expanded terror activities in its restive areas, particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Punjab; its social security was invaded (APS attack); ethnic divide and religious extremism intensified. Furthermore, the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) experienced the highest incidents of terrorism, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Economically, Pakistan suffered losses of over $252 billion because of the war. This amount is eight times higher than what was provided as financial assistance by Washington, which stood at $33 billion.

Pakistan has advocated for peace in the past and would continue to do so in the future. Unforgiving turmoil and uncertainty in Afghanistan would undoubtedly impact Pakistan's national and regional security equilibrium. In case, the situation in Afghanistan gets out of hand, it may echo consequences of the Soviet invasion when Pakistan facilitated millions of Afghan refugees, besides managing the spillover of extremism, weapons, and influx of narcotics, which may ricochet again this time.

The present situation is no different from the outcomes of the previous crisis. However, under the influence of US' vested interests, the international community has conceived Pakistan's effort as part of some 'other scheme.' On the other hand, Taliban – have become the practical reality of Afghanistan that can neither be eliminated nor ignored. For this reason, the sole purpose of Pakistan's engagement with all Afghan entities is to facilitate a peace process that brings all concerned parties to the table in order to ensure regional peace and stability after the US withdrawal. This should not only be Pakistan's goal, rather the agenda of peace and stability should be given high priority by regional states as well. If peace in Afghanistan is not achieved, it would be costly for the whole region.

Pakistan has been acting as a responsible state and an empathetic neighbor. The onus now lies squarely on the international community, whether they endorse baseless controversies or recognize Pakistan's determination in bringing peace and stability to the region.

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