

The script of the new endgame in Afghanistan

This is a moment of tragedy for Asia as well, with the U.S. leaving the country in a worse situation than when it came in



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The rapidity with which Afghanistan has unravelled has shocked and surprised everyone. The fall of Kabul, and the ignominious end of any resistance to the Taliban within six weeks of the U.S. forces vacating the Bagram airbase (near Kabul) on July 2, reveals how brittle the vaunted Afghan Security Forces were. The departure of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani and almost the entire top political leadership of Afghanistan to safer havens, removes the last vestige of hope that the Taliban can be checked. Like a 'house of cards', Afghanistan has fallen apart the moment foreign forces vacated the country.

Taliban's duplicity

The enormity of the current situation is only now beginning to be evident to much of the outside world. **The Taliban's duplicity in projecting, at one level the image of a mature group during the Doha talks while at another, perpetuating violence of the most ferocious kind, is clearly evident as events unfold.** The worst is, perhaps, yet to come. Afghanistan today is in a condition that is far worse than what existed when the Russians withdrew in the 1990s.

At that time, there was at least a titular leader around whom those opposed to the Taliban could hope to mobilise and put up a fight. Moreover, the 'retreat' of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 is far more humbling than the Russian withdrawal in the 1990s, for the latter at least had to contend with the actions of a superpower, like the U.S. This time the Taliban having played fast and loose with

the U.S. has left the 'superpower' with not even the fig leaf of a honourable withdrawal. U.S. President Joe Biden's decision to set a date for the withdrawal of the American forces, and treat this decision as one carved in stone irrespective of the situation within Afghanistan – without any consideration of the consequences – clearly enabled the Taliban to take over.

After the Russian withdrawal in the 1990s, Afghanistan still had a future, for in the final years of the 20th century, the world was intent on making efforts to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a 'black hole' that would create mayhem across a vast region that bordered Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. In the 1990s, moreover, the Taliban were a band of outlaws. Today, it is recognised – may be with different degrees of disdain – by powers such as the U.S., Russia and China, and is on the brink of gaining a country. For a regulated international order that most countries across the world seek, there could be no greater tragedy than the emergence of a 'rogue' state under the Taliban.

Paving the way for terror

The Afghan Establishment seemed to give up the fight against the Taliban earlier on by ceding authority to private militias, former Afghan warlords and a rabble of disparate armed groups. To expect that this kind of armed rabble would resist the Taliban was clearly a mistake. As the Afghan state implodes, one should now expect a wider cleaving between Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and the myriad other clans that populate Afghanistan. The virtual death of the Afghan nation, approximates as it were to the 'end of history'.

The collapse of organised resistance to the Taliban within Afghanistan, together with the group being courted by Russia, China



AFP

and quite a few other nations, apart from Pakistan – not excluding the U.S. – marks the saddest day in the history of a proud nation. This is also a moment of tragedy for Asia as a whole. It virtually spells the death-knell of any possible Afghan renaissance in the near future. Instead, the situation is far more likely to encourage erstwhile terror groups, such as the one led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – a one-time client of Pakistan and a traditional opponent of the Taliban – to return to their erstwhile hunting grounds.

Afghanistan versus Syria

References to Afghanistan becoming another Syria are again misplaced. At the worst of times, Syria had a relatively strong President (Bashar al-Assad), while Afghan President Ghani can hardly be compared to him. The territory of Afghanistan is also very different from that of Syria. **Afghanistan's borders, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, unlike that of Syria are extremely porous and almost impossible to guard or protect.** More to the point, the end-game in Afghanistan has little in common with the power equations witnessed in Syria. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is intent on keeping absolute control and is counting on China, Russia, and Pakistan to do so. All of them are more intent on keeping out the U.S., and in effect India.

Indulging in a blame game at this time may appear inappropriate. However, the U.S. cannot shrug off a major share of the res-

ponsibility for Afghanistan's current plight. Apart from the decision of Mr. Biden not to alter the last date for the exit of U.S. troops in Afghanistan – **which sent a clear signal to the Taliban of a collapse of U.S. resolve to safeguard the interests of Afghanistan – the stealthy exit of the U.S. from the Bagram airbase also left an indelible impression as far as the Taliban was concerned: that the U.S. had acknowledged the Taliban's supremacy in return for the safe passage of their troops.** All this has diminished the image of the U.S. in Asian eyes. In light of this, U.S. claims to 'make America great again' sound extremely hollow.

Old threats may resurface

Some political commentators seem to believe that after the initial success of the Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan state, the natural political dynamics of the region would assert itself. This seems like a pious wish. **After two decades of active involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan, and spending over a trillion dollars in the process to defeat terrorism and the al Qaeda, the U.S. has left Afghanistan in a worse situation than when it entered. It is not possible to discern any reduction in terrorism or the demise of any of the better known terror groups, such as the al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), or for that matter, of lesser known terror outfits.** As a matter of fact, there has been a resurgence in al Qaeda activities recently. The IS, after some earlier setbacks, is again regrouping and currently poses a real threat to areas abutting, and including, Afghanistan. Radicalised Islamist terror and the forces of 'doctrinaire theocracy' have, if anything, thus become stronger. The collapse of the Afghan state will ignite many old threats.

Compared to the situation when the U.S. left Vietnam in 1975 – which was also seen by many as

a kind of 'retreat' – the Afghan 'misadventure' has been a disaster. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, Vietnam was able to emerge as a vibrant nation with a thriving economy. Under the Taliban regime, Afghanistan cannot hope for any such outcome. It would remain the 'sick man of Asia' for generations to come, a standing folly to perils of outside intervention in the affairs of another nation.

Stakes for India, Iran

Among Afghanistan's neighbours, India and Iran are two countries that would find accommodation with a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan very difficult. Pakistan may be an enigma of sorts, but the Taliban will need Pakistan at least in the short and medium term. Relations between Taliban Afghanistan and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan may not be easy, but will not lead to any major problems for now. **India, even more than Shia-dominated Iran, may be the outlier among Afghanistan's neighbours for a variety of reasons, including its warm relations with the Karzai and the Ghani regimes in the past two decades.**

If the 21st century was expected to become the century of progress, the situation in Afghanistan represents a severe setback to all such hopes and expectations. **The aftershock of the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban can be expected to continue for long. For India, the virtual retreat of the U.S. from this part of Asia; the growing China-Russia-Pakistan nexus across the region; and an Iran under a hardliner like Ebrahim Raisi, all work to its disadvantage. A great deal of hard thinking is needed as to how to retrieve a situation that for the present seems heavily tilted against India.**

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