

# Going from conflict to conflict

## There are more threats to Afghanistan than just the Taliban

SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

On August 16, while explaining why he was so firm on withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan, President Joe Biden acknowledged the U.S.'s myriad missteps of the last 20 years. The history of American missteps is, however, longer, and goes further back than the provocation caused by the 9/11 attacks. Steve Coll's book, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, is a detailed documentation of the endless list of misadventures of the U.S. and other western countries. By all accounts, Afghanistan is the worst victim of the fiercest superpower rivalry of the post-World War II era.

### A more humane foreign policy

Afghanistan's current predicament is only a small part of a much bigger story pertaining to American foreign policy. Seen in conjunction with what has happened to Iraq, Libya and Syria, the moral flaw in American foreign policy and the U.S.'s contribution to destroying nations becomes apparent. If national interest is the only game in town, it is high time American policymakers begin to re-imagine it in a way that is less destructive and more humane.

It was believed that President Biden would undo the agenda of his predecessor, Donald Trump. But he seems more determined to pursue Mr. Trump's agenda, and with greater ineptitude. Some argue that the decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan was President Biden's original agenda, which he aired unsuccessfully as Vice President in 2009.

The 2020 Doha Agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban merely eased the process and brought forth a rare consensus between a Republican President, Mr. Trump, and his Democratic successor, Mr. Biden. The current mess in Afghanistan, and in Syria, Libya and Iraq, once more reaffirms that in the domain of foreign policy, there is very little ideological difference between the Republicans and Democrats who alternately govern the U.S.

Though several western nations

were involved in this U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan, no country was interested in stepping in after the U.S.'s exit. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson revealed this in the British Parliament when he said that the NATO's "core mission" had succeeded. What is becoming clear is that the western nations lacked a vision for and commitment to Afghanistan.

### Monopoly of state power

While militant religious groups exist or operate in several countries, the Taliban enjoy the unique advantage of having acquired monopoly of state power. On the issues of rights, whether human rights or gender rights, each nation state has its skeletons in the closet. Consider, for instance, the U.S. itself and its track record on human rights with regard to African Americans or indigenous people. But the basic difference between nations like the U.S. and Afghanistan is that there is a political environment in the U.S. which allows these issues to be raised. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement could not have been possible if a militant group was enjoying the monopoly of state power in the U.S. Clearly, not enough was done in the last 20 years to create institutions for such a conducive environment in Afghanistan. The Taliban were allowed to expand and now they are ready to govern.

Aside from the extremist nature of the Taliban, what poses an equally dangerous threat to Afghanistan is that it remains the site of a power struggle among big and regional powers. At this juncture, a new equation seems to be emerging in the security game in the region. There is a China-Pakistan axis vis-à-vis an India-U.S. one. Russia, Iran and a few others have their own spin to the game. A new but more pernicious Cold War variety rivalry that doomed Afghanistan has reappeared. No one knows how these players will cast their die. But one thing is certain: there are more threats to Afghanistan than just the Taliban.

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Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches in Jamia Millia Islamia and is the author of the forthcoming book, 'Shikwa-e-Hind: The Political Future of Indian Muslims'