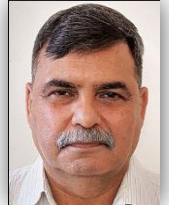




## Peace Evades Afghanistan: Where did the US go Wrong

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War and conflict have always been inimical to the progress of mankind and yet they have plagued us since time immemorial. Sceptics would argue that development of technology and enablers in various fields are spin offs from research conducted on weapons and related fields, but that is an argument for another day and time. The world's attention span being limited, due to constraints of memory and other imminent challenges and their requirements, we often fail to learn from history, to our own peril. With the United States deciding to pull out of Afghanistan, there is a scramble for other players to gain and maintain their influence in a region that has witnessed an escalation in violence and increased turmoil ever since this decision was taken. The world has increasingly been turning insular since the last decade, when the Arab Spring brought about a change in regime that spanned from Tunisia to the Middle East and North Africa. The stimulus for change was ignited by the frustration of the common people in these countries due to a lack of equity, development, human rights' violations and increased authoritarianism of the government / monarchies.

Twenty years after the "Global war on Terror" waged by the United States and its allies, the magnitude of the effort, both in terms of money spent and the lives lost leaves a lot to be desired in making this world safe and free from the scourge of terror. While the United States and the western world may have been able to prevent terror attacks on its soil, the Afghanistan-Pakistan, or the Af-Pak region is witnessing increased instability and turmoil with the Taliban taking control over Kabul and almost the entire Afghanistan as per the latest reports. The efforts and the promises made to train the Afghan security forces have not borne the desired dividends, as they have not been able to keep the peace. The writ of the Afghan national government, unfortunately never ran even during the presence of the International Security Assistance Force and the Resolute Support Mission. Though the United States and its allies from NATO were able to successfully drive out the Taliban from power and deny

safe haven to Al Qaeda, the return of the Taliban only reinforces the belief that the peace was only transient and limited to the duration that suited the Americans. The American strategy kept shifting its goalposts from the time the war on terror was initiated after 9/11 to the point when domestic appetite for the cost of the war hundreds of miles away from its homeland started dwindling and became untenable with the Covid crisis adding to its woes. Having spent over a trillion dollars over the last twenty years, training and equipping the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and suffering many casualties, why has peace failed the people of Afghanistan? From Resolution 1386, adopted unanimously by the United Nations Security Council in Dec 2001 for establishing peace in Afghanistan with the formation of the International Security Assistance Force, a NATO led military mission, to Resolution 2513 adopted in Mar 2020 following the peace agreement signed between the United States and Taliban, it has indeed been a long haul. The false optimism generated by this agreement, has however turned out to be a prescient preview of the events as they unfold today and the days to come. To expect the Taliban to mend its ways was akin to making a deal with the devil, wishful thinking at best. That the Taliban has failed to abide by any of the stipulations agreed to during the peace accord signed in Feb 2020 should not have come as a surprise to most. The rapid advance that they have made has surprised the world, making a repeat of what happened in 1992, after the Russian withdrawal from the country inevitable leading to anarchy and mayhem. Already there is complete subjugation of the security forces including the law enforcement agencies across the country, including the capital Kabul.

Events in Afghanistan will most certainly have repercussions in the extended region, disturbing peace and stability. China, with unrest in the Xinjiang region, Pakistan across the Durand line, Iran with its sanctions and the new hardline President and the Taliban occupied border provinces with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of Afghans desperate to flee the country, the region is likely to face an unprecedented refugee crisis. There is unease, no easy solutions and the people of Afghanistan have been left to fend for themselves. Why and how did it come to this and what can be done to ensure peace and prosperity in the region. If one were to trace the history of US intervention and conflict from Vietnam to Iraq, Syria to Afghanistan and Libya it would be fair to assume that most of these regions have remained strife torn and under-developed even today. Different regions of the world, nations and communities have their own identities, ethos and cultural influences that govern their societies and relations with others. National and communal interest would indeed remain paramount depending upon the prism that you view from, but others' perception of their good may be at variance with their own view. This is where the US or western perception is more often than not, not grounded in reality. Intervention to prevent genocide, regime

change of states sponsoring terrorism and humanitarian and disaster relief assistance is understandable, but unilateral presence without adequate and effective capacity building of the local administration, is neither good nor feasible in the long term. This is what happened in Afghanistan, the Taliban was thrown out, Al Qaeda flushed out and its leadership decimated with the killing of Osama bin Laden. Subsequently, efforts to ensure that women and children got their due with schooling and education were made with some success. However if one were to take a long term perspective these measures would only succeed with the tacit approval and active involvement of the local community and its leaders and not as viewed through the American lens.

The training and equipping of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces, said to be numbering over 300,000 also tells a similar story. While the security forces and the troops may have trained to fight, their mindset, morale and commitment to the cause probably left a lot to be desired. The training was limited to creating units of Special Forces, with the ability to operate in urban areas. There have been reports of widespread corruption and “ghost soldiers” with problems of lack of logistic supplies and low morale. It was predicted that these troops would fight and the capital city of Kabul at least would not fall as late as a few days ago. The writing however is on the wall, with Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan President fleeing the country and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban leader freed from a Pakistani jail not more than three years ago, at the insistence of the United States, set to become the new and undisputed leader of Afghanistan. The ANDSF lacked appropriate training to operate on its own without US support. They lacked air power and its soldiers were morally defeated by the Taliban as their commitment to fight was found wanting. In addition, victory for the Taliban would have been difficult without the covert support of Pakistan. The statement made by their Prime Minister, Imran Khan that the people of Afghanistan had broken “shackles of slavery”, bears testimony to the fact that the Taliban and Pakistan are ‘hand in glove’. These events only reiterate the fact how difficult it is for a country to free itself from the shackles of its past.

The international community, the families of those martyred in the Afghanistan conflict, approx 2300 from the United States and many others from the ISAF and local innocent victims, all owe to the people of Afghanistan their best shot at living a peaceful and prosperous life. India has always been in favour of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process which would provide the country with lasting peace and stability. However, for this to happen the international committee through the United Nations Security Council has to provide the means and mechanism to facilitate this, with the partnership of neighbouring countries and local leaders through a collaborative arrangement to build capacity, strengthen existing governance structures and give the people of Afghanistan their due. India has the golden opportunity as the President of the UNSC this month to

initiate dialogue and obtain assurances for the safety of women and children from the interim government being formed. Recognition must be conditional as any hasty steps to recognise the Taliban government would only embolden them and may have far reaching implications in the region. The long term plan should help in capacity building in all spheres, politics, governance, education, economy, military and healthcare, with international assistance. The world at large needs to ensure that the future road map of Afghanistan must lead to peace and prosperity, only then would the sacrifice of all people embroiled and martyred in Afghanistan, irrespective of nationality, would not be in vain.

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