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Afghanistan's End-Game- Scenarios-Perspectives- Analysed

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By Dr Subhash Kapila

Afghanistan's preferred end-scenario in positive terms of a 'Stable and Secure Afghanistan' not materialising after seventeen years of US military embedment arises mainly from United States reluctance to impose deterrent punitive measures on Pakistan Army for its proxy continuous and sustained disruptive activities against the elected Government of Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Army has been double-timing the United States ever since 2001 through the proxy use of the Afghan Taliban till this very moment in 2019. Where does the Afghan Taliban draw its military sustenance from in the last 20 years in terms of arms, ammunition, explosives and safe sanctuaries to continue its onslaughts on Afghanistan's security and stability? The answer is obvious.

The truth of the above assertion is substantiated by the statement on the back cover of the Book: 'The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan 2001-2014,' by Carlotta Gall which ironically reads, in red capitals "THIS IS THE STORY OF AMERICA'S GRAVEST MISTAKE—HOW ITS MOST TRUSTED ALLY TURNED OUT TO BE THE VERY REASON IT WAS FIGHTING THE AFGHAN WAR". The main conclusion---"Pakistan, not Afghanistan is the real enemy all along" virtually highlights how badly the US policy establishment has read Afghanistan.

Should the United States in 2019 therefore be now enlisting Pakistan's cooperation for peace talks on Afghanistan when it is the most prominent source of Afghanistan's destabilisation and the undermining of US military presence in Afghanistan and its collusive partner—the Afghan Taliban?

The current geopolitical realities in and around Afghanistan is that the emergence of a China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral impelled by United

States discomfiture on its continued embedment in Afghanistan adversely affects US national security interests in Greater South West Asia. Much that USA currently dislikes being the global policeman but if the United States wishes to preserve its status as the global predominant power it cannot do this as a shared load. It has to shoulder its own burdens. In that direction United States needs to exhibit determination to stay the course in Afghanistan and militarily reinforce its presence.

Additionally, the US policy establishment needs to recognise and appreciate that unlike Vietnam where it was a 'peoples' war' against the United States presence, in Afghanistan it is not so. The majority of the Afghan people are not opposed to US military embedment in Afghanistan. The only ones who want the United States to abandon Afghanistan militarily are the Pakistan Army and its protégé creation-the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan's strategic patron China and now Russia added.

Evident from the resignation of US Secretary of Defense General Mattis recently is that the Pentagon is not in favour of any scaling down of US Military Forces in Afghanistan till the end-game was achieved. US President Trump's pressures were working on Pakistan till the recent U-Turn. Repeated by me in my writings, for more than a decade, was that the lack of US success in Afghanistan was not due to the professional incompetence of US Military Forces or its Commanding Generals but the 'micro-management of Afghanistan military operations by the Washington policy establishment' which was echoed by President Trump on his initial strategy pronouncement on Afghanistan.

The United States, to succeed in making Afghanistan secure and stable on its own strengths needs to (1) Enhance US Military Forces levels in Afghanistan for effective military operations (2) Not enter into any negotiations with Afghan Taliban as they have no stake in Afghanistan's future, and (3) Insulate Afghanistan from Pakistan Army's destabilisation activities by strong deterrent warnings of declaring Pakistan as a 'State Sponsor of Terrorism' and imposing economic sanctions on Pakistan.

If President Trump could threaten Turkey that he would inflict economic devastation on Turkey should it attack the Kurds, there is no reason why President Trump could not issue the same warning to Pakistan and insulate Afghanistan from Pakistan Army initiated disruptive destabilisation of Afghanistan. But for some inexplicable reason President Trump has not done so.

The sudden U-Turn of US President Trump from his declared year-old policy declaration of ensuring the end-game of emergence of a secure and stable Afghanistan strong enough to cater for its own security to President Trump's recent declaration of scaling down US Forces in Afghanistan shakes international confidence in United States honouring its commitments.

The United States should have exited from Afghanistan in 2002 after displacing the Taliban Regime by installing a Northern Alliance Coalition government. Not only did the United States not exit Afghanistan but worse instead of consolidating its hold over disturbed and disrupted Afghanistan the United States deviated to its military entanglement in Iraq in 2003. Worse still, was that the United States during this period of military neglect of Afghanistan, the United States did not permit NATO Forces presence in Southern Afghanistan adjoining Pakistan and thereby leaving Pakistan Army and its Taliban affiliates to hold and enlarge their hold in that vital region.

From the installation of Pakistan Army ISI proxy Taliban Regime in 1990s in Kabul, to the United States military intervention in 2001 to displace the Taliban Regime following Pakistan Army facilitated horrific 9/11 attacks on the citadels of US power in Homeland USA and Pakistan Army to escape US retribution submitting under US threats to collude in the 'Global War on Terrorism' it is one long saga of Pakistan Army "Double Timing" the United States.

The United States itself also needs to be blamed for political expediency vis-à-vis Pakistan Army starting from United States facilitating evacuation of Pakistan Army Regulars and its Taliban militias from Konduz when Northern Alliance had surrounded them and they faced massacre in 2001/2002 to 2019 where US President Trump after castigating Pakistan Army for not controlling Jihadi terrorism against Afghanistan now makes a U-turn and seeks Pakistan's cooperation to bring Taliban to the negotiating table.

Two major deductions stand out from the brief contextual survey above. First and foremost, that the Pakistan Army has no intention to deviate from its end-game in Afghanistan----to establish a colonial hold on Afghanistan by bringing back a Taliban Regime once again in Kabul through the backdoor, courtesy United States political expediency.

Secondly, that the United States under US Presidents of different dispensations continues to waver and wobble and strays off spasmodically from what should have been US end-game all along and that is to ensure emergence of a strong, stable and secure Afghanistan under a democratic regime.

The above two deductions logically lead to the conclusion that the United States at some time or the other will be tempted to abandon Afghanistan in a scaled down US military presence, a limited residual US military presence at US Air Force Bases in Afghanistan and finally the most adverse contingency of a hasty US military exit from Afghanistan. The implications of these three eventualities form the discussion of the end-game scenarios for Afghanistan.

The first scenario of a scaled down US military presence does not contribute substantially to the preferred end-game of a secure and stable Afghanistan. This scenario is likely to be more prompted by US domestic political compulsions and likely to pick up momentum as the United States enters the next US presidential election year campaign. Scaling down of US military presence sends wrong signals to both Pakistan Army and the Taliban in that the United States can be pushed in two directions of advantage for both of them to establish their hold on

Afghanistan. Firstly, the United States does not have the political will to stay embedded in Afghanistan long enough to ensure emergence of strong Afghan Government in Afghanistan minus the Taliban. Secondly, the United States with a little more shove by the Taliban and so sustained by Pakistan Army can be forced to military abandonment of Afghanistan---their preferred scenario

The second scenario for the United States would be to limit its military embedment in Afghanistan to be confined to its four major US Air Force Bases with limited Special Forces teams and military advisers with Afghan National Army without involvement of US military forces in ground combat missions against Taliban and its associates. This scenario once again does not contribute substantially towards the preferred end game of a stable and secure Afghanistan.

In the above scenario of US military detachment from the security situation in Afghanistan where the Taliban could roam free and enlarge its areas of sway, the United States could even tempt at some stage the Taliban surrounding the four US Air Force Bases and prompting a Saigon-type inglorious exit from Afghanistan----- the preferred situation which both Pakistan Army and the Taliban prefer.

The third scenario is the worst-case scenario for Afghanistan and the United States. Resulting from the United States military abandonment of Afghanistan would be Afghanistan relapsing back into the anarchy of a civil war and re-emergence of regional and ethnic warlords. In the ensuing civil war, strong possibilities exist of the Pakistan Army establishing its sway through the Taliban.

In the strategic vacuum so caused and the civil war anarchy that is sure to follow, the situation is ideally suited for the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral to exploit finally and push for United States geopolitical exit from Greater South West Asia. By abandoning Afghanistan, the United States would be losing its strategically valuable perch and ringside seat on Central Asia developments and influence.

In conclusion, the decision to stay put in Afghanistan and ensure its emergence as a secure and stable nation and as a strategic asset for the United States in the region is that of the United States. Others can only show the mirror to the United States of what the geopolitical and strategic costs that would ensue.

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