Afghanistan 2021 Strategic Paradox for United States President Joe Biden

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By Dr Subhash Kapila

Afghanistan's contextual geopolitical and security environment is a paradoxical challenge for new US President Joe Biden which he inherits as a 'legacy challenge' from two decades of successive US Presidents sending confused signals of US intent and resolve on Afghanistan's security and stable future.

Geopolitically in 2021, US President Joe Biden's strategic paradox on Afghanistan becomes that more challenging as Pakistan and China today are on the opposite side of the strategic fence and their Afghanistan agenda is inimical to United States strategic interests. Both China and Pakistan can no longer be expected to be co-opted by United States on Afghanistan peace and security processes.

Geopolitically, therefore, to offset any perceptions in the region of a US power on the decline, President Joe Biden has to exhibit rock-hard resolve of United States firm and sustained commitment to Afghanistan’s security and stability. Twenty years of American blood and money cannot be thrown down the drain in a US Saigon-style military abandonment of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's military abandonment by the United States at this crucial geopolitical stage will only create a bigger strategic mess or the United States as the void so caused would result in United States losing its “Strategic Perch” which facilitates its military capacities to intervene in Greater South West Asia in event to threats to US security interests.
President Joe Biden is no stranger to United States strategic paradox on Afghanistan having been US Vice President under President Obama at the height of US Military Forces “Surge” in Afghanistan totalling to nearly 100,000 troops to subdue Afghan Taliban militias supported by Pakistan Army for regaining control over Afghanistan’s future.

President Joe Biden is also no stranger to a virtual reversal of United States robust policy reversal on Afghanistan by setting ‘Time Lines’ for withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan without due regard to the unfolding threatening contextual security and stability of Afghanistan. Domestic political pressures were at play.

US President Trump followed up with an initial enunciation of United States policy formulations on Afghanistan stoutly asserting that US Forces withdrawal from Afghanistan would not be based on ‘Fixed Time Lines’ but solely dependent on the security and stability situation prevailing in Afghanistan. He also gave dire warnings to Pakistan for its disruptive policies on Afghanistan and even cut off US aid.

President Trump also later backtracked on the above policy under domestic political compulsions and unwisely reached a “Deal” with the much hated Afghan Taliban who were nothing but proxies for the Pakistan Army used as a weapon to prompt exit of US Forces from Afghanistan due to prolonged ‘combat fatigue’.

Such policy reversals by US Presidents on Afghanistan emboldened the Afghan Taliban and their strategic patrons for intensification of insurgency and terrorism in Afghanistan.

So emboldened, the Afghan Taliban perceived that the United States would tilt for ‘peace at any cost’ to the extent of military abandonment of Afghanistan. Token residual US military presence in Afghanistan was envisaged by Washington policy planners would be incapable of imposing credible deterrence to Afghan Taliban depredations against the legal Kabul Government.

The prevailing security and stability situation in Afghanistan in February 2021 should be worrisome for United States and President Biden as the Afghan Taliban armed by Pakistan Army and perceptionaly by China and Turkey in tow as diehard supporters of Pakistan Army, continue with their unabated disruption of Afghanistan’s stability by terrorist violence attacks and suicide bombings.

Primarily, and analytically, Taliban’s relentless attacks on Afghanistan’s stability arise from United States policy makers not standing firmly to back the Kabul Government and Afghan National Army. Both of these two Afghanistan State entities were hamstrung by US Administrations parleying with Afghan Taliban behind the back of the Kabul Government.

Before delving into what President Biden should initiate to resolve the 20 years old strategic paradox on Afghanistan some major drawbacks of United States Afghan policy need to be outlined to set up the context for future US policy options.
The policy failures highlighted below in outlined stood highlighted right from mid-2000s in my SAAG Papers on Afghanistan. So much so that e-mails from senior US Army officers fighting in Afghanistan mentioned that “Why can’t the blokes in Washington not read your Papers?”

**United States Policy Failures on Afghanistan were Political Failures NOT Military Failures**

United States failures in achieving complete success after 20 years of its military intervention in Afghanistan cannot be blamed on lack of professional competence of US Forces apex military leadership or the bravery and resolve of US Military Forces fighting in Afghanistan.

United States successive Presidents and their policy planners in Washington persistently indulged in “Micro-management” of US Military Forces operations in Afghanistan whereby successive US Military Forces Commanders in Afghanistan were hamstrung in successful prosecution of combat operations against Afghan Taliban.

US Military Commanders in Afghanistan who stood-up to Washington’s “Micro-management” of military operations were speedily replaced as politically inconvenient.

Political “Micro-management” of US military operations in Washington primarily arose from then United States policy political fixations to give ill-advised deference and priority to Pakistan Army’s sensitivities on the course of US military operations against Afghan Taliban and sealing of Afghan-Pakistan border to deny sanctuaries in Pakistan Army havens in Pakistan’s border areas.

The above also led to United States not to commit US Military Forces in Afghanistan for nearly five years initially in Southern Afghanistan leaving it free for Pakistan Army.

Politically, the major failure of US ‘s Afghanistan policy under President Bush and President Obama was to give Pakistan and Pakistan Army’s sensitivities on Afghanistan over-riding priority over solid and resolute military operations by US Forces and similar backing to the democratically installed Kabul Government.

The same US impulses led to not to expand the Afghan National Army to at least 500,000 strong to effectively secure Afghanistan.

Successive US Presidents were blinded to the strategic reality that Pakistan was not a solution to the Afghanistan problem but that Pakistan was the ‘Major Part & Disruptor’ of the security and stability of Afghanistan and also that Pakistan Army was constantly “Double-Timing” the United States.

The above strategic reality continues in 2021 going by the pattern of US Special Envoy on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad’s flurry of visits to Islamabad and Doha where Afghan Taliban interlocutors were ensconced. It was only much later that the Intra-Afghan Dialogue process was
Afghanistan Strategic Paradox Challenge for New US President Joe Biden in 2021

Afghanistan’s security and stability environment perspectives in 2021 have undergone a radical transformation to what prevailed during eight years when Joe Biden was Vice President under President Obama.

Then it was purely the strategic triangle where intersected the interests of United States-Pakistan-Afghanistan with United States and Pakistan’s preferences prevailing over those of the Afghan Government in Kabul.

President Biden has to “Recognise” in 2021 that Pakistan has shifted decisively away from the US-orbit and now firmly and comprehensively embedded in China-orbit. Afghanistan in 2021 has become more complicated with competing strategic interest intersection of United States, China, Russia, Pakistan and not forgetting the hapless spectators of the legitimate Kabul Government of Afghanistan.

In 2021, in relation to Afghanistan, the strategic objectives of China coincide with those of Pakistan and moreso in context of their virtual adversarial confrontation with the United States. Additionally, in recent years there seems to have emerged a China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral on Afghanistan—subject of my many SAAG Papers on Afghanistan.

So therefore in 2021 the United States is ranged against the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral in Afghanistan, with all these three inimical to the United States.

Briefly, within space limitations of this Paper, what can be adduced is that US President Joe Biden necessarily has to jettison his past baggage on Pakistan and Afghanistan and has to recognise that the Afghanistan’ strategic paradox needs resolution by a combination of firm “politico-military” initiatives in which Pakistan cannot be a part.

Politically, President Biden must put his full political weight unreservedly behind the lawful Kabul Government. If peace and stability has to achieved in Afghanistan promotive of US vital interests in Greater South West Asia then it could be only by a strong US-backed democratic Kabul Government and a sizeable and professional Afghan National Army.

The above entails United States under President Biden adopting a policy of “No Temporising with the Afghan Taliban on Grounds of Domestic Political Expediencies”.

initiated by USA.
Strong geopolitical imperatives exist for President Joe Biden to “Exorcise” the Afghan Taliban from US strategic policy perspectives as a force that can contribute positively to the future peace and stability of Afghanistan and that the Afghan Taliban need to be co-opted into Kabul’s democratic processes.

President Biden cannot ignore that Afghan Taliban take their operational cues from Pakistan, China and Russia—in that order. Then where is the scope for Afghan Taliban to find space in US strategic calculations and policy perspectives?

Politically, it needs to be emphasised that security, peace and stability, can only return to Afghanistan when the United States can decisively put an end to the disruptive and de-stabilising combined strategies of Afghan Taliban and Pakistan Army directed at the lawful Kabul Government.

The above can be only be achieved by what I have been advocating for nearly a decade that the United States must embed within Afghanistan a “Forward Military Presence” of 30,000-0,000 US Forces on the lines being done in Japan and South Korea.

Such a US Force would be able to impose both deterrence and punitive costs on Afghan Taliban for any attempted disruption/attacks to undermine Afghan security and peace.

US President Joe Biden needs to recognise that the Afghan Taliban have not outfought or defeated US Military Forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban at best can be said to have manufactured a ‘military stalemate’ in Afghanistan exploiting the political micro-management interference of US Forces in Afghanistan by Washington and thereby limiting the operational success of US Forces combatting the Afghan Taliban.

In tandem, the United States must aid the Kabul Government to expand the size of the Afghan National Army, assist in the capacity-building of the ANA and by military training programs make the ANA into a hard-hitting force capable of sealing Afghanistan’s borders with Pakistan and also striking hard at the Afghan Taliban.

If the Afghan Taliban can be credited with military aggressiveness and their military strike prowess then the Afghan National Army coming from the same stock of people can be no less as an effective combat force. What are required are sustained military training improvements, counter-insurgency training and Special Forces training.

**Concluding Observations**

Afghanistan is more than ever contextually required as a stable and secure strategic asset for United States national security interests both in global and regional terms.
Afghanistan abandonment by United States as it did in the 1990s would be geopolitically suicidal when China is in an expansionist mode and intent on denting United States image both as a Superpower and as a regional nett provider of security.

Secure and stable Afghanistan, free of Afghan Taliban scourge and Pakistan Army’s military adventurism would provide United States a “Strategic Perch” for domination of South West Asia--- a crucial imperative for the unfolding geopolitical environment.

Regional political expediencies of United States and nor American domestic political compulsions should over-ride United States resolve to retain Afghanistan as a vital strategic asset for coming years.

Towards that end President Biden should so modulate American policies on Afghanistan and more addedly position a “Forward US Military Presence” in Afghanistan as discussed in this Paper.