

Afghanistan: On the brink of disaster

SALEEM SAFI

At last, what was being dreaded actually happened on the Afghanistan front. The unpredictable President Donald Trump hinted at an abrupt withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

It seems that history has started repeating itself in a more horrifying form in the Afghan theatre. The US faces more or less the same fate as that of the mighty Soviet Union in Afghanistan. While time will judge whether Donald Trump proves to be a Mikhail Gorbachev for the US, but he has been proving to be another Gorbachev for Afghanistan. The hint at troop withdrawal by Trump is more dangerous for Afghanistan and Pakistan than that of the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s.

The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan with bag and baggage, leaving nothing behind except destroyed tanks and deserted camps. But the US intends to maintain its military bases. The Soviet Union left Afghanistan at the mercy of the Afghans or of its neighbours. But the US is leaving Afghanistan at the mercy of more than a dozen regional and global powers that will interfere in Afghanistan's internal matters

with impunity. During the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan had some sort of organised setup in the form of Dr Najeebullah's government, but now the country is under the already fragile and chaos-ridden government of Ashraf Ghani. Similarly, in the 1980s, Afghanistan was divided into two parties: the Najeeb government and the Mujahideen. But now the political setup is divided among several ethnic and political parties as well as dozens of militants and resistance groups.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan was left to Pakistan and opponents of Pakistan, but the US is handing over the country to multiple players. The proxies of external powers like India, Russia, Iran, Arab countries, Turkey and the UK etc have a strong presence in Afghanistan. In the late 1980s, people had hoped that the mujahideen would occupy the whole country sooner or later after the withdrawal of the Red Army. While there are those that still harbour the same hopes post-US withdrawal, it is clear that the Taliban and Isis could give a tough time to the Afghan government but can still not occupy the whole country.

The news of the impending US

withdrawal jolted the Ashraf Ghani government and indeed boosted the morale of the Taliban. Comparing this situation with the defeat of the Soviet Union and victory of the mujahideen, the Taliban of today perceive themselves as winners and celebrated the victory with jubilation; they were joined in by some right-wing forces in Pakistan. Critically analysing the situation, analysts have unfortunately reached the conclusion that Afghanistan is on the brink of another disaster as it was in 1989. The fallout of this disaster could prove disastrous for Pakistan like it was in the 1990s. The horizon is cloudy and uncertain but we assume a clear sky.

George W Bush's decision to invade Afghanistan was indeed a foolish act, but now Trump's decision of an abrupt withdrawal is also an absurd and insane step. Internally too, he is also facing opposition to his decision from concerned quarters. The text of the resignation of US Secretary of Defense James Mattis shows how much difference in opinion existed among them. Lt Gen Kenneth McKenzie warned the US Senate Armed Service Committee of the collapse of the Afghan military in case of an abrupt withdrawal of US troops: "If we left precipitously right

now, I do not believe they would be able to successfully defend their country". Whenever the officials of the US establishment and the US State Department talked to the Afghan side, they would insist on a quick solution of the issue as well as warn that Donald Trump could announce a unilateral withdrawal. This was probably the reason that the Pakistani establishment made great efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiations table.

Negotiations were held between the US and the Taliban but, despite being a main stakeholder, the Afghan government was sidelined. Even Donald Trump did not wait for the final outcome of the ongoing negotiations and hinted at a possible withdrawal – just on the basis of the preliminary meeting.

The decision is part of Trump's 'America First' policy, but the strategy is absurd and totally flawed. On the one hand, he agreed on negotiations and on the other hand hinted at an abrupt drawdown of troops – instead of waiting for the result of the negotiation process. Moreover, the position of the Afghan government has further weakened after having been kept out of the negotiation process; this has enhanced the morale of the Taliban. In the past, the Taliban

did not give much importance to the Afghan government; now their attitude and stance towards Kabul will be even harsher and inflexible.

Although the Americans have not managed to achieve their goals in Afghanistan, and some would say they face a Soviet Union type defeat, on some fronts, Washington did get some success. For example, Afghanistan was a safe haven for Al-Qaeda before 9/11. But now the network has been considerably disrupted and is unable to strengthen its position in Afghanistan. It is also not possible for anyone to plan and launch attacks on the US mainland while sitting in Afghanistan. In fact, the US has strengthened its own position in Afghanistan and made a strong lobby in Afghan politics to defend and protect American interests. The deteriorating economy also put Kabul in a disadvantageous position and every government will be highly dependent on Washington.

In addition, the US will keep its military bases in Afghanistan through which Washington will likely try to keep the region under its influence, as has been the case in the Middle East. Moreover, Washington will continue its aggressive approach against Pakistan since its dependency on Islamabad will considerably shrink once

American troops leave Afghanistan.

The abrupt withdrawal will end up causing political instability and civil war in Afghanistan with serious repercussions for its neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan. The others to be affected include Central Asia and Russia as well as the Belt and Road Initiative of China – the US's number one competitor. Needless to say, the United States will not face any such direct consequences.

Therefore, Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran should initiate strong diplomatic efforts and pave the way for reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Afghan side should focus on building the bridges that they broke in their ties with Pakistan and other regional powers so that these countries may play an effective role in the reconciliation process with the Taliban. The Taliban should also shake off the fancy assumption of victory and see the ground realities and then find a solution to the Afghanistan issue.

If Afghans keep fighting amongst each other, they will be handing over space to external powers to interfere in Afghanistan's internal matters. But if the Afghans come together and stand united, Afghanistan has a chance at one day being free of all kinds of external interference.

The BJP's politics

MALIK MUHAMMAD ASHRAF

Reportedly, a 55-year-old Muslim man was lynched by a Hindu mob in Bihar in India for allegedly stealing a cow. This is not an isolated incident but in fact a continuation of the pattern of violence unleashed by the BJP government against the Muslim minority in India.

The mindset of the ruling BJP against Muslim and other minorities is amply reflected in the hate-mongering comments of Vikram Saini, a BJP MP who referring to the incident said "those who are unsafe in this country are anti-nationals and do not deserve to be there. Give me a ministry and I will attach bombs on their posteriors and blast"

The BJP government, headed by Narendra Modi, has been pursuing discriminatory policies against Indian Muslims and other minorities, inspired by the RSS ideology of Hindutva, a form of extremist Hindu nationalism which explodes the myth of the much-touted Indian secularism. Hindutva essentially wants an India that is for Hindus – to the exclusion of all other communities and religions. That philosophy adequately explains the incidents of violence against Muslims and Christians under the Modi government.

In fact even during the previous BJP government, anti-Muslim and anti-minorities policies were either pursued at the official level or extremist elements were encouraged to pursue the RSS ideology. Who can forget the demolition of Babri mosque in 1992 and the consequent riots in which 1000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed? Or incidents like the Samjhota Express attack and the Gujarat pogrom?

The recurring episodes of violence against communities other than Hindus have assumed alarming proportions under Modi. Muslims are particularly being targeted. In fact, Modi used anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiments as a tool to expand his vote bank during his election campaign. Banning cow slaughter in various states like Maharashtra and Haryana and the killing of a fifty-year-old man Muhammad Akhlaq in Uttar Pradesh by a Hindu mob in 2016 – on the

suspicion of storing and consuming beef – are the consequences of the communal politics of the Modi government. Threats to Pakistani artists in India by Shiv Sena, the attack on Sudhendra Kulkarni who headed the Observer Research Foundation, and the assault on an independent Muslim lawmaker from Kashmir by Hindu extremists in Mumbai are also irrefutable testimonies of the communal politics pursued by the BJP.

These are dangerous signs for things to come. Notwithstanding the fact that the communal politics and philosophy of Hindutva have been rejected by a vibrant majority of Indians, the Modi government continued to pursue the RSS philosophy faithfully. As a backlash to those policies, the BJP was defeated in Delhi and Bihar in the state elections which were held shortly after the general elections won by Modi.

Annoyed by the communal politics of Modi, and in protest against the rising culture of intolerance and assault on free speech, 50 Indian intellectuals and writers returned their literary awards in 2016, reiterating that by pursuing such policies Modi was defacing the secular face of India. The Modi government has confronted such resentment within India for its discriminatory and oppressive policies. In the state elections held on December 11, 2018 Congress defeated the incumbent BJP governments in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and also emerged as the single largest party in Madhya Pradesh; this victory for the Congress has been attributed to the communal policies of the BJP.

In pursuance of philosophy of Hindutva, a deliberate attempt is also being made by the BJP government to change the demographic features of Kashmir by pursuing a policy of settlement of Hindus in the valley as well as a move to repeal Article 370 of the Indian constitution that gives special status to Kashmir. In defiance of UN resolutions and the commitments given by the Indian government regarding a plebiscite in Kashmir, a ruthless reign of terror has been let loose to suppress the freedom movement of the Kashmiris.

Since the current uprising against the Indian occupation in the backdrop of the extrajudicial killing of

Burhan Wani, nearly 800 Kashmiris have been killed and thousands have been either maimed or injured by the pellet guns. During 2018 alone, 500 people were murdered by the Indian security forces.

India is acting like a war-like state with a defined objective of establishing its hegemony in the region and practising communal politics within the country as per the RSS philosophy. By remaining oblivious to the treatment being meted out to the minorities in India and the reign of terror let loose by the Indian security forces in Kashmir, the world community is actually encouraging the Modi government to continue to pursue the course it has chosen for itself.

Blinded by their strategic and commercial interests in the region, they are showing criminal indifference to the dehumanised policies of India and the killing spree in Kashmir, not realising the consequences of such an attitude. The unmitigated hostility shown against Pakistan by the Modi government and India's refusal to initiate a dialogue with Pakistan to resolve disputes between the two countries, including the core issue of Kashmir, are actually pushing the region towards perennial instability.

Kashmir admittedly is a nuclear flash point which can not only endanger peace and security in this region but also could put world peace at peril. Under the prevailing circumstances, it is incumbent upon the UN and the world community to work for the implementation of the UN resolutions on Kashmir.

India also needs to realise that it cannot suppress the freedom movement in Kashmir through the barrel of the gun. The Indian state's policies are bound to have a boomerang effect, harming Indian interests as well. The solution lies in settling the disputes between the two countries, including that of Kashmir in line with the UN resolutions.

The bilateral mechanism evolved through the Simla Agreement has failed to make any headway and the situation warrants the intervention of the UN and other world powers to play their role in de-escalating the tension between the two countries as well as looking for a real solution to the Kashmir dispute.



Taxing the rich

DAVID SCHULTZ

Taxes impede economic growth and high taxes kill the economy, right? This is the belief among many who criticize Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's proposal to raise taxes on the wealthy to 70% or more. But what does the evidence really tell us?

Do high taxes really hurt the economy as much as they believe, and will lowering them have much of an impact on stimulating it? The economic literature is clear – tax breaks to encourage economic relocation or investment decisions are inefficient and wasteful. Hundreds of studies reach this conclusion. When businesses are surveyed regarding factors important to their investment decisions, taxes often come in behind proximity to markets, suppliers, and the quality of the labor force. These other factors occupy a larger percentage of a business's budget than do taxes, and all of them are far more critical to long-term success than are taxes. Businesses occasionally admit this. Nearly 62 percent of those interviewed in a California study on hiring tax credits indicated that they had never or rarely affected their decision to employ individuals.

Anecdotal stories and illustrations

also confirm the tax fallacy. High tax states such as Minnesota have generally fared better in terms of economic growth, unemployment, median family incomes, and location of Fortune 500 companies than low tax ones such as Mississippi and Alabama. In many situations high taxes, and with that, government expenditures on education, workforce training, and infrastructure, correlate positively with income, low unemployment, and business retention. One needs to look not just one side of the equation – taxes – but the other side too – what taxes buy – to see what value businesses get out of them in terms of educated workforces and infrastructure investments. Most debates fail to do this. Bureau of Economic Analysis statistics demonstrate how economic growth is related to tax rates. One can compare annual economic growth as measured by the percent change in the gross domestic product (GDP) percent based on current dollars to the highest federal individual tax rate and the top corporate tax rate since 1930. If taxes are a factor affecting economic growth, one should see an inverse relationship between growth of the U.S. economy and higher tax rates. The GDP should grow more quickly when top individual and corporate tax rates are lower.

If taxes are a major factor deterring economic growth, lines on a graph should go in opposite directions: As tax rates go up the GDP should go down. No such pattern emerges between high taxes and GDP growth over 80 years. During the Depression of the 1930s corporate and individual taxes rates increased, but in 1934 through 1937 the GDP grew by 17%, 11%, and 14% annually. Top corporate tax rates climbed to over 50% through the 1960s, again with no discernible pattern associated with decreased economic growth. The same is true with top tax rates on the richest which were 91% into the 1960s. Conversely, since the 1980s after Kemp-Roth and then after 2001 with the Bush era tax cuts, there is no evidence that the economy grew more rapidly than in eras with significantly higher tax rates on the wealthy and corporations. The same is true even of the much heralded 1960s Kennedy tax cuts. While at one time economists thought they had an almost magical impact on the economy, more recent evidence questions that.

Looking at time periods when tax rates were at their highest, GDP often grew more robustly than when taxes were cut. Visually, the attached graph simply fails to demonstrate that tax rates negatively impact economic growth. Pictures are worth a thousand words, but statistics are priceless.

Letters to the Editor

Where did all the teachers go?

A large number of children in Balnigwar, a large town in Dasht, are struggling to get an education. Although many schools have been set up in the town, students are often seen outside their classrooms because there are no teachers at these institutions. A vast majority of teachers have been absent for long periods of time and this has adversely impacted students. Residents have repeatedly asked the Balochistan government to take action to ensure that teachers perform their duties with regularity and a sense of responsibility. However, suitable steps have yet to be taken in this regard. At this stage, the provincial government needs to make a concerted effort to hire new teachers.

Ahmed Bashir
KECH

Student discount

In October 2018, Sindh's transport minister announced a 50 percent discount on bus fares for students. The decision serves to provide a major incentive for students to opt for public transport.

Unfortunately, the discount has yet to be implemented in Karachi. Over the past few months, bus fares have spiralled upwards. More often than not, bus conductors are reluctant to offer discounts to students. This has imposed an unnecessary financial burden on students, especially those who have to change two buses every day to reach their respective destinations. The relevant authorities should take immediate action to introduce discounted fares for students in a timely manner.

Hafiza Zuha
KARACHI

Beyond the drawdown

US President Donald Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw 7,000 American troops from Afghanistan has been viewed as a sign of capitulation. Some experts have maintained that the US cannot win the Afghan war on the basis of its military strength. Regardless of the reasons for Trump's decision to reduce the number of troops in the war-torn country, it is evident that the US has realised that a long-drawn-out war can achieve little. The US has understood the importance of meaningful dialogue in restoring peace in Afghanistan and paving the way for progress.

Sheeaz Akhtar Bhutto
SHIKARPUR

The withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan has raised concerns among America's allies. Many of them fear that a hasty pull-out from both countries will revive the presence of Isis in Syria and culminate in the failure of peace talks between Washington and the Afghan Taliban. However, given the repercussions of US military involvement in both countries, the US president's decisions ought to be welcomed. The so-called war on terror spearheaded by the US has resulted in unprecedented destruction and any attempt to put an end these long wars shouldn't be discouraged.

Mohammad Tabasum Malhan
GHOTKI

Restricted access

Most public offices in Bannu are situated in the cantonment area of the city. These include the offices of the DPO, the AC, the DC and the commissioner. The DIG's office is perhaps the only office that isn't located in Cantt. As a result, it is comparatively more accessible to the people. In the past, it was relatively easy to gain access to these offices. But the security dynamics in the city have changed drastically over the past

few years. Security has been tightened at all entry points to Bannu's cantonment area. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for a private vehicle to be permitted entry into the area. Owing to these restrictions, people have been unable to visit these public offices to have their domiciles made or obtain other essential documentation. The provincial government is requested to shifting of these offices to the main city to make it easier for people to gain access to them.

Aryan Khan Wazir
BANNU

Don't follow the sign

People who travel from Peshawar to the New Islamabad Airport are often misdirected by the signpost near the airport premises. A large number of people who take the motorway to the airport from Peshawar have complained that the arrow on the signpost points towards the wrong direction. As a consequence, many passengers tend to go straight instead of turning left as they should. Once they realise that they have been led astray by the signpost, many of them have to reverse or make dangerous turns to enter the airport through the correct exit. The authorities are requested to move

this signpost a little further down and ensure that the arrow points in the right direction. This will make it easier for people to know what route to take.

Irfan Khattak
PESHAWAR

Gridlocks in the city

Karachi's traffic problem has worsened over time and citizens are facing countless challenges while commuting from one place to another. A vast number of citizens travel in buses, coaches and rickshaws and their lives are at constant risk because most bus and rickshaw drivers tend to flout traffic rules and drive recklessly. Accidents are also a regular feature on Karachi's streets. At times, ambulances that transport patients to hospitals tend to get stuck in gridlocks across the city. This puts the lives of patients in danger. Suitable measures need to be taken to address these traffic woes and enable vehicles to ply the city's streets without any disruptions. The onus of ensuring this falls directly on traffic police officials and they must fulfil their obligations with care.

Imtiaz Ali
TURBAT