

RESIST INFLUX 2.0 AND STAY ALOOF FROM AFGHAN MESS



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Time to address Pakistan's internal strife as Afghanistan explodes and goes wayward



Pakistan is once again seized with the Afghan fall-out equation as the United States exited the war-devastated country in a nightmarish mode. Washington has left behind dozens of unanswered questions in the geo-strategic and political milieu and its so-called peace plan negotiated with the Afghan establishment and the Taliban is in limbo. This impacts Pakistan negatively as the reigning violence and the possible influx of refugees will prove catastrophic for its economy and security. This is Pakistan's fun-

damental concern and not who rules Afghanistan.

This emerging security-cum-transition of power syndrome has put Pakistan in a dilemma. The reason is simple: Islamabad is being singled out by many as being responsible for the mess and at the same time pinning hopes on it to come up with a formula to tame the Taliban who are knocking on the doors of Kabul. This is an unrealistic and ungrateful proposition from the international community, especially the dispensation in Kabul.

Pakistan has tried to keep itself aloof from meddling in Afghan affairs since it started cleansing its home of non-state actors; especially its tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The security forces have mopped the entire territory, and terror stands almost defeated. Nonetheless, fissures and remnants are there, and the authorities are conscious of the black sheep. Secondly, more than 90 per cent of the 2,670 kilometers porous border with Afghanistan has been fenced. Last but not the least, Pakistan has main-

tained a policy of 'no favourites' and had made it clear to the Taliban too that "it would not endorse the takeover of Kabul by force."

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Before we go to analyse the ramifications of unrest in Afghanistan on Pakistan, let's take a cursory look as to what is Pakistan's modus operandi

in brokering a solution in the war-shattered country. It is at Pakistan's behest and courtesy that the Taliban signed on the dotted lines in Doha, as they agreed on a broad-based consensus to seek a political solution rather than a military-one after the American withdrawal.

Likewise, Pakistan to a greater extent has prevailed over the Taliban to make them realise that this is not 1996, and the concept of another hard-line Emirate government would not be acceptable to the world at large.

Last but not least, Pakistan is on a conciliatory note with all the regional players in an attempt to broaden the scope of diplomacy, so that warring factions are discouraged from resorting to a military solution. The proposed international moot in Islamabad wherein all Afghan factions have agreed to attend, along with other regional stakeholders, is a case in point.

Afghanistan, nonetheless, is a multi-pronged dilemma for Pakistan. Islamabad is often at odds in making its case, as it is supposed to safeguard its national interests in terms of security, and at the same time convince the world that it is not involved in the internal affairs of the

war-torn state.

Perhaps, this is why Prime Minister Imran Khan at an international moot in Uzbekistan had to directly address Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's claims about Pakistan's "negative role" in the Afghan peace process. An attempt seen by many as un-courteous! He said, "President Ghani let me just say that the country that will be most affected by turmoil in Afghanistan is Pakistan. Pakistan suffered 70,000 (on minimum estimates) casualties in the last 15 years. The last thing Pakistan wants is more conflict." While he made this statement as he stopped reading from his prepared text, it has won laurels at home. Like his "absolutely not" dictum with the American journalist, the Prime Minister's extempore words have made an obvious impact. He was referring to the obvious!

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The real enigma for Pakistan lies at home, notwithstanding how and in what manner Pakistan is understood vis-à-vis the Afghan imbroglio. While Taliban are on a victory stride conquering town after town, Pakistan needs to redraft its internal security policy instantly. It cannot afford to have another headache in the form of fissures from across its western frontiers.

Three areas are worth-attending

One: Islamabad should immediately rewrite its interactions with Balochistan. It is a good omen that the government and the security

establishment have made it clear that they "wish to engage in a dialogue with the insurgents", and in this regard the Prime Minister has appointed late Nawab Akbar Bugti's son Shahzain Bugti, MNA, as an advisor on Baloch affairs. This initiative needs to be cultivated in harmony, and in all sincerity. An earnest attempt should be made to reach out to each and every Baloch tribe that nurse grievances with the ruling dispensation and system in vogue.

The government doesn't have a very good track record of honouring commitments with the Baloch, and the way Sardar Akhtar Mengal had to abandon his support to the ruling PTI on the floor of the house is a case in point. Similarly, there are voices of dissent all across Balochistan, and all that the Baloch ask for is their due rights, and a sense of sovereignty in their own affairs. It goes without saying that excessive use of force and political dodging-cum-cheating has pushed them to the wall. This policy has to change.

Men at the helm of affairs should realise that Balochistan and Afghanistan share a vicious geo-strategic paradigm, and it is very important to keep the Baloch calm and composed.

Pakistan luckily doesn't have a separatist movement in Balochistan, and at a time when Afghanistan is experiencing transition, a New Deal with the Baloch of Pakistan ensuring them their due constitutional rights, especially the right to life, and redressing their age-old grievances will be a shot in the arm.

Pakistan has successfully knitted its tribal belt, FATA, and the Northern Areas, Gilgit-Baltistan, in national fabric and it is high time to replicate the module in Balochistan. This indispensable step will reap dividends in terms of national cohesion.

This reconciliation policy will help severe Baloch nexus with hostile agencies, as well as their abettors who are primarily, and unfortunately, in political cloak.

Two: keep an eye on non-state actors in Punjab and Sindh. This is the ripe time for such anti-social elements to gang up and create renewed problems of law and order. Central and Southern Punjab and northern Sindh still remain a fiefdom of radical elements, and it is here that foreign meddling takes its roots.

While Pakistan is also in the last leg of dealing with FATF obligations, which primarily concern with terrorist funding, flushing out all such elements who act as sleeping cells will be a bonanza. Intelligence reports and dossiers make a convincing case that RAW, Afghan intelligence as well as Western outfits work hand-in-glove with such unscrupulous elements, and resort to mayhem. Plough them out well before another diaspora hits the Pakistani soil.

Third: Pakistan should exercise a zero-tolerance policy with Afghans crossing over into Pakistan. As rightly stated by Inter-Services Public Relations Director General Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar, Pakistan will seal all outlets with Afghanistan. He also linked the growing number of terrorism incidents with the evolving situation across the borders.

Refugees have started heading for Tajikistan from Afghanistan and are also knocking on several Central Asian states, thus Pakistan is not immune from it. The trickle may develop into a flood of diaspora and, at least, Pakistan cannot afford to have a few more millions on its territory.

Pakistan already is home to three million Afghans and many of whom have sought Pakistan identity by hook or crook. It is a serious



security threat to even visualise another influx of refugees. Pakistan's economy which has just started picking up, cannot withstand another robust shock and awe!

The best response to the evolving Afghan situation is to embolden the security mosaic inside Pakistan.

The country has been a breeding ground for foreign elements because of our own fallacies. Our passion to defeat the Soviets landed us with the Mujahideen, who in turn tore our social edifice by using Pakistan's territory for their nefarious designs. Pakistan became the world's largest refugee hosting state with more than 5 million uprooted souls. Then the Americans abandoned us in lurch. But still we were 'considerate' about Afghans for reasons best known to men at the helm of affairs. We played carrot and stick and tried to influence events across the border as we were part of the disgusting 'war on terror,' which damaged Paki-

stan beyond means: 70,000 civil and military casualties and the country sunk in bloodbath and chaos.

As history repeats itself on our western borders, we should not walk the same trap. Denying bases to Washington and refusing to become a CIA stooge is a strategic decision. The Prime Minister has rightly upheld national pride. Cleanse Pakistan of non-state actors' remnants, and rewrite a new social contract with all the dissenting national voices for rebuilding a new Pakistan. Afghanistan has a jingoistic history of 200 years, and it can survive another tragedy whereas, we are an infant state just trying to fill the puzzle of 'One Nation.' Seize the Afghan revulsion opportunity in disaster and strengthen Pakistan inside-out.

Author Information

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