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Abstract

Afghanistan has been a conflict-ridden state for more than last three decades. The causes of the conflict have varied fundamentally over this period: while during the initial years of the tumult, the Afghans found themselves at loggerheads with an expansionist Soviet Union, the more recent epoch of conflict has largely been associated with the phenomenon of the rise of Islamic militancy whose effects have transcended Afghanistan's borders. One of the striking features of the conflict in Afghanistan has been its attribute of 'exporting' religious fundamentalism among its South Asian (Pakistan and Xinjiang in China) and Central Asian (Uzbekistan) neighbours. Nevertheless, the role played by the regional neighbours in fuelling the unrest and turmoil in Afghanistan has also undoubtedly worked to the detriment of establishing enduring peace in Afghanistan.

The present day conflict in Afghanistan can be studied from the vantage point of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by al-Qaeda. The attacks transformed the otherwise internal turmoil in Afghanistan into a grave security concern for the whole world especially the United States-led West. The emergence of the Taliban had raised concerns in the West prior to 9/11 as well, but their conservative attitude and atrocious outlook towards women were issues that remained confined within Afghanistan's frontiers. What turned Taliban regime into a pariah for the West was their increasing affiliation with the al-Qaeda, whose terror designs transcended Afghanistan's borders and the evidence of which came in the form of horrendous September 11 attacks. The attacks were transformative in that Afghanistan took the centre stage in the unfolding of US-led Global War on Terror (GWOt). This is precisely the situation where Pakistan's role became all the more important in solving the Afghan conundrum. Even though Pakistan had been involved in convoluted ways in Afghanistan's domestic politics since the days of popular uprising against Soviet-sponsored communist regimes, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks coerced Pakistan to emerge as a frontline state and a major non-NATO ally of the United States in Afghanistan. It was common wisdom during those days that securing Pakistan's support was indispensable for

safeguarding Afghanistan from the clutches of Taliban-al Qaeda combine. Pakistan's official policy posture suggested that it had abandoned its patronage for the Taliban and would help United States in ushering Afghanistan into an era of democracy and development. With hindsight, it now seems palpable to conclude that Pakistan has been as much a part of the problem as of the solution. Pakistan's policy of assisting the United States in eliminating the terrorist threat emanating from the Af-Pak region has remained selective at best. Pakistan's reluctance to conform to a standardized and uniform anti-terrorist policy has resulted in the prolongation of the conflict in Afghanistan. Unwillingness on part of Pakistan in thwarting the Taliban-led insurgency has become the fundamental cause of the unending conflict in Afghanistan which in turn has made the US-led campaign in Afghanistan look ineffective and a futile exercise. The success of the Afghan campaign has so far been held hostage by Pakistan's security establishment which views Afghanistan as Pakistan's strategic backyard and sees Taliban as an appropriate asset to wrest control of it. So much relentless has Pakistan been in preserving the Taliban, that the United States and its NATO allies were left with no other option other than to announce a withdrawal timetable since it became evident that defeating Taliban and al-Qaeda without Pakistan's support was a futile exercise which focussed on treating the symptoms of the problem of terrorism (in Afghanistan) and leaving the cause and source of the disease intact (in Pakistan). The conflict in Afghanistan has, therefore, remained far from resolved.

While the United States and its western allies remain hopeful that Afghanistan can positively carry on the nascent democratic processes and developmental activities into the foreseeable future, the challenges faced by Afghanistan, however, suggest otherwise. Tenuous security environment, overwhelming dependence on foreign largesse, deplorable economic growth, social and ethnic divide, desertion among members of Afghan security forces, and most importantly an ever increasing Taliban-led armed insurgency, all point toward the uphill task for Afghanistan to sustain itself as a stable and peaceful democratic state. Even though it is beyond doubt that Afghanistan has witnessed progress in key areas like education, infrastructure and security sector, yet the possibility of reversal of these gains is what can push Afghanistan back into an abysmal scenario resembling the chaos and disorder during Taliban regime and the preceding civil war years.