

CONGRESSIONAL AND UN INQUEST INTO AMERICA'S MURKIEST WAR

The rushed and chaotic withdrawal of US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan has put an end to the 20 year long occupation and war of the country, leaving very few positive results and a host of unresolved and worsening problems for the wider region. The Taliban have won back the power that the western invaders had taken from them in 2001. After claiming to fight for their elimination and the eradication of their 'terrorist' ideology, the American leadership ended up making a deal with them without involving the government that had been installed in Kabul by Washington and its allies. The Biden administration also essentially ignored the concerns of India in the matter. The excuses invoked and assurances proffered by President Biden do not amount to an explanation or an account for the disastrously failed American policies. A Congressional investigation and a UN conference into the conduct and management of this military/political operation is called for.

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The American hand in fanning the flames of terror and insecurity across the world is now more evident than ever, as the Taliban extremists legally capture Afghanistan through government formation after flaunting arms and ammunition carelessly left behind by the retreating US and Afghan troops. As events in war-weakened Afghanistan turn a full circle with the Taliban, whose government fell to the US military advances in 2001, returning stronger to regain power, the culpability of the four successive US administrations that waged this infructuous 20 year war will unquestionably need to be investigated and exposed.

Questions are also bound to arise on the abject political and military

capitulation, after Washington, by official estimates, expended a staggering US\$ 982 billion on the war effort. However, the Costs of War Project at Brown University assesses a phenomenal expenditure of US\$ 2.26 trillion, nearly US\$ 1 trillion of that towards the Department of Defense's Overseas Contingency Operations budget, and a further US \$530 billion being the interest on the money borrowed by the US government to fund the war.

This embattled land-locked country of 38 million has among the lowest GDP in the world, of US\$ 21 that is on par with Papua New Guinea's, and per capita GDP of US\$ 509 that is a degree higher than Madagascar's. Last year, then the President, Ashraf Ghani said 90 percent of the population lived on less than US\$ 2 a day.

By any accounts, the US's enormous investments there – whether official or Brown University estimates – should have pulled the numerically manageable population out of poverty, uplifted the ravaged economy, vastly improved all indices of human development, and created a sound political, financial, administrative and military framework. Resultant prosperity would have rendered internal terrorism more irrelevant, structured the resistance against the Taliban and their associates, and also halted their regrouping.

The splurge should additionally have accomplished all that the US had set out to achieve, in a far shorter time than the two decades it took. After all, the Taliban and their allies were armed with little more than Kalashnikovs, shoulder-fired rockets, improvised explosive devices and car bombs.

So where did those investments go? As rifle-waving insurgents are now the government in an Afghanistan left shattered by the degrading US retreat, they seem poised to mutilate the legacy of America's longest, and murkiest, war. In his address to the nation from the White House on August, 31, as regards the US's disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Joe Biden asserted, "I give you my word: With all of my heart, I believe this is the right decision, a wise

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However, central to the prolonged fortified presence of the most powerful army in the world in this impoverished country remains the question whether it has achieved its objectives in this war that had proven exorbitant in terms of both costs and lives.

In his news conference on July 8, President Biden had rejected the notion that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was inevitable following the US military withdrawal, expressing confidence that Ghani’s government and the 300,000 Afghan troops trained, armed and compensated by the US (at a cost of US\$ 83 billion) would be able to overcome the worse-equipped, smaller Taliban forces. He also denied that the Afghan government would collapse, a claim belied by Ghani’s flight with a hoard of cash on August 15, even as the Taliban surged into Kabul, overrunning the country in less than 10 days, encountering little or no resistance from his army.

President Joe Biden was possibly unaware of assessments by his own officials that a US troop withdrawal could lead to Taliban gains on the battlefield, as the Taliban were positioned more strongly than at any point since 2001, controlling half the country.

Though the number of US and 38-nation coalition forces had peaked to 140,000 in 2011, supplemented by the 300,000 Afghan troops, the Americans were eventually exposed in their inability to ward off tribal anarchists, whose strength was estimated at around 60,000 full-time fighters.

The military campaign in Afghanistan was launched on October 7, 2001 by President George W. Bush to avenge the unprecedented terror strike on American soil a month earlier, on September 11, or ‘9/11’. It sought to oust the Taliban, who were then in power in Afghanistan since 1996, and crush the Al-Qaeda terror network they supported and which was suspected to have perpetrated the onslaught.

To avenge the loss of 3,156 innocent lives in the carnage – 2,753 at the Twin Towers in New York, plus 403 firefighters, paramedics and policemen – the US reprisal led to the deaths of 2,461 American service members, including 13 killed in the deadly suicide bomb attack on Kabul airport on August 26, and 51,191 opposition fighters, including the Taliban.

However, Brown University’s Costs of War Project calculated that an additional 47,245 Afghan civilians – 47,340, if the 95 killed in the August 26, blast are added - and 66,000 to 69,000 Afghan military and police, who had no

involvement with '9/11', perished in the US operations.

These are heavy costs of war, and a heavier moral burden for Washington. The CIA has also armed and funded Afghan militia groups that have been implicated in grave human rights abuses and killings of civilians. The turmoil blighted the land with unexploded arms, which annually slays and injures numerable Afghans, especially children.

In his remarks from the White House on August 16, President Biden lauded the US campaign in Afghanistan for severely degrading Al-Qaeda in that country.

However, his own government had at the time assessed that Al-Qaeda retained a daunting presence in Afghanistan and had sustained its decades-long ties with the Taliban, which had left unfulfilled their counterterrorism commitments concerning the Al-Qaeda. The Defense Intelligence Agency had also estimated last year that some Al-Qaeda members are "integrated into the Taliban's forces and command structure".

India is justifiably worried, especially since the Taliban are the creation of, and are patronised by, Pakistan, and Indian assets in Afghanistan have been targeted in the past by the Haqqanis, a major Taliban faction with strong links to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

President Biden also defended American withdrawal from Afghanistan by saying, "Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralised democracy." However, his Department of State's January factsheet on 'US's relations with Afghanistan, notes "In order to strengthen Afghanistan's capabilities as a partner, and to improve the lives of the Afghan people, we continue to invest US resources to help Afghanistan improve its security, governance, institutions, and economy."

Surprisingly, while the US had in 2001 accelerated a regime change in Afghanistan by overthrowing the Taliban for harbouring Al-Qaeda, it sought to broker an interim "transitional" government that would include the Taliban leadership through the first direct peace negotiations between the then Ghani regime and Taliban representatives in Qatar last September. President Ghani had rejected the idea, while the US had itself held talks with the Taliban earlier, where the Afghan government was not represented.

Again, in his August 16, remarks from the White House, President Biden claimed, "We've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United

States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed.” However, he left unsaid how his administration planned on executing this commitment.

In June, Pakistan’s foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi had maintained that his country (which neighbours Afghanistan and mentored the Taliban and various terror outfits there) would not provide any military base to the US for monitoring Afghanistan after the foreign forces’ withdrawal from Kabul. “We have to see our interest,” he told the local broadcaster Geo News. On September 2, America’s former Indian-origin ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, warned that China might move to take over the Bagram air force base in Afghanistan and also “use Pakistan to get stronger to go against India”.

India is justifiably worried, especially since the Taliban are the creation of, and are patronised by, Pakistan, and Indian assets in Afghanistan have been targeted in the past by the Haqqanis, a major Taliban faction with strong links to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Fifty-eight people were slain in one such strike on the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008. The Taliban have also fomented terrorism in India through terror outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) that were created in Afghanistan and based in Pakistan from where they launch their terror strikes against India.

The most spectacular such attack was the hijacking of Indian Airlines IC814 Kathmandu-Delhi flight by four terrorists from the Pakistan-based HuJI splinter group Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), which had commandeered the flight to Kandahar in 1999 when the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. With Taliban backing, the HuM negotiated the release of three of its terrorists imprisoned by the Indian government. One of those released was Maulana Masood Azhar, who founded the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist faction that was behind the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament as well as the Pulwama terror attack in 2019 that killed 20 paramilitary soldiers.

To express concern that Afghan soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism, India made its first official contact with the Taliban on August 31, when its Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, one of the Taliban’s seven most powerful figures who has been a cadet at the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun and is now Deputy Foreign Minister. He assured Ambassador Mittal that the Taliban would “positively address” India’s concerns.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted these concerns again at the thirteenth BRICS summit he chaired on September, 9, 2021. He, along with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Brazilian

President Jair Bolsonaro and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa also discussed the threat from “cross-border movement of terrorists”, terror-financing networks and terror havens. Modi also raised these issues again in his address to the UN General Assembly on September, 26, 2021.

Though the four US presidents who have presided over the Afghan war have been from both the Republican and Democratic parties Bush (R), Barack Obama (D), Donald Trump (R), and Biden (D) – it is imperative that a Congressional investigation is held into the conduct of the abortive military operations.

While the US Constitution does not expressly authorise investigation or oversight by either house of the Congress, the authority to conduct investigations is implied since Congress possesses “all legislative powers”. Congressional investigations are said to be central to the system of balance of power, with investigatory hearings uncovering presidential abuses of power and corruption, such as the Teapot Dome scandal in the 1920s – that had led to the unprecedented conviction of a Secretary of the Interior (Albert B. Fall) in President Warren G. Harding’s cabinet for accepting a bribe while in office - or Watergate in the 1970s, that led to President Richard Nixon’s resignation.

To determine the US’s culpability under international law, the UN, because of its mandate to uphold international peace and security, should convene a Security Council meeting to ascertain any war atrocities that may have occurred. UN Special Advisers do not have judicial or quasi-judicial powers, but their organisation provides an open forum on debates for solving international problems. The UN should moreover explore the possibility of a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan.

America’s bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan has inadvertently threatened the world with terrorism. The world community cannot allow it to walk away from the global threat it has created, by leaving Afghanistan far poorer and more volatile than at the time American troops had walked in to set the house in order.

The Taliban are today in possession of arms and resources that can extend their reach and influence. With their continuing links to terror networks, these Islamist extremists can raise threats across countries, apart from intimidating their own citizens.

The developments in Afghanistan amount to a severe crisis. The international community, the United Nations, and the US Congress itself should be concerned enough to probe the war there, and seek reparations.

There is no alternative. 