Afghan Future after withdrawal of US Forces

What is the issue?

- President Joe Biden recently said he would withdraw remaining U.S. troops from the “forever war” in Afghanistan.
- The impending withdrawal of all American soldiers will not diminish the importance of Afghanistan as a geopolitical microcosm, and nations will continue to play a role there.

What does the withdrawal indicate?

- The ferocious American response to the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington highlighted the enormous weight of American military power.
- In comparison, the withdrawal now points to the limits to the use of force.
- The exit of US and NATO forces after two decades of military intervention underlines the end of the unipolar moment in international affairs.

How is Afghanistan likely to be?

- As in the last five decades, Afghanistan will continue to showcase the main international trends.
- These include shifting great power relations, growing role of middle powers, spread of religious radicalism, enduring agency of local forces who know how to play the outside powers.

How is U.S.’s role set to evolve?

- Ending US military involvement does not necessarily make Washington marginal to the future evolution of Afghanistan.
- The US remains the most significant global power even after the end of the unipolar moment.
- **Assistance** - Washington has promised that it would continue to support Kabul during and after the withdrawal.
- The nature and scope of that assistance are not clear.
- But, President Joe Biden seems to be under some pressure at home not to be seen as abandoning Afghanistan.
- Nor can Biden ignore the dangers of Afghanistan re-emerging as a breeding ground for international terrorism.

What does U.S. mean to Afghanistan?

- Even if the Taliban quickly overruns the Kabul government, its leadership will have to think of the day after.
- The US will figure prominently in any Taliban strategy to win international diplomatic recognition and political legitimacy.
- Any government there will also need Western economic assistance for stabilising the war-torn country.

Does Russia have a role in this regard?

- If the 1980s turned out to be an intense final decade of US-Soviet Cold War, Afghanistan was the major theatre where it played out.
- Now, Russia, the great power successor to the Soviet Union, is determined to play an important role in the future of Afghanistan.
- Russia remains influential, being a member of the UNSC, the joint leader of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with China, and a major source of weapons.
- Above all, Putin brings plenty of political and strategic will to compensate for Moscow's loss of superpower status.

What is China's scope?

- China is widely seen as the biggest beneficiary of US withdrawal.
- If the US is a distant power, China is Afghanistan's neighbour.
- And unlike Russia, China can deliver massive economic resources to Afghanistan under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative.
- China also has expanding relations with the different nations of the Gulf and Central Asia and a deep partnership with Pakistan.
- This lends much potential depth to Beijing's role in Afghanistan.
- In the last few years, Beijing has been trying to involve in Afghan peace diplomacy.
- Both Kabul and the Taliban have seen China as a valuable partner in the pursuit of their divergent interests.
- Beijing has often talked of extending the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.
- **Challenges** - China's potential contribution to Afghan geopolitics is complicated by Beijing's lack of experience in navigating the treacherous terrain of South West Asian politics.
    - But Beijing is a quick learner.
- Also, China is vulnerable to the extremist politics of the region.
- This might promote religious and ethnic separatism in China's Muslim majority Xinjiang province.

How important is the factor of Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan?

- Notably, through the last four decades and more, Afghanistan has been the incubator of Islamic radicalism.
- It has been a laboratory for its weaponisation, for geopolitical ends.
- Complicating the matter, some of the religious extremism is driven by sectarianism that rival Muslim powers leverage against each other.
- A key apprehension on Afghan future is the kind of influence Islamic radicals might regain in the country under Taliban rule.
- The consequences of it for the subcontinent, Central Asia, and the Middle East are worrying.

What role do Afghan neighbours play?

- The Afghan dynamics are not just about rivalries between big powers.
- Kabul's neighbours have had much say in shaping Afghanistan's evolution.
- Pakistan and Iran, which share long physical borders, have had the greatest natural influence on land-locked Afghanistan.
- Iran's stakes and ambitions in Afghanistan are high.
- Iran contributed to the regional coalition against Taliban rule during 1996-2001.
- Iran's regional influence has increased significantly over the last two decades.
- It is thus bound to play a decisive part in Afghanistan's future.
- When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the only countries other than Pakistan to recognise the government-run by its leader, Mullah Omar.
- They have taken a back seat in the current round of Afghan diplomacy.
- Nevertheless, these would certainly return to the centre stage sooner than later.
- Meanwhile, Qatar and Turkey have injected themselves into the Afghan discourse.

How do the local powers in Afghanistan work?

- The local actors in Afghanistan are powerful too, having agency of their own.
- All of them know how to manipulate external powers for their own ends in Afghanistan.
- In this context, the dominant image of the Taliban as a creature of the Pakistan army is misleading.
- The Taliban is quite capable of making independent deals with the rest of the world.
- The Taliban's opponents, too, are likely to fight for their interests and will

seek out external partners.

How does the future look?

- Contradictions at the three levels - international, regional and local - intersect with each other.
- With this, the new Afghan picture will be a multilayered one.
- Several contentions unfolding in and around Afghanistan promise to reorder the region again.
- Delhi needs much strategic activism to secure its interests and promote regional stability in this race.
- Discarding old hesitations and building new geopolitical coalitions will be critical for a successful Indian engagement with the Afghan microcosm.

Source: The Indian Express

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