

## **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**

