Great Power Fatigue: The New World Disorder

What is the issue?

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan would shape regional geopolitics in Asia but it is certainly one of those developments that will have a far-reaching impact on global politics.

What are the narratives about the American withdrawal?

- **The U.S.'s own will**- The U.S. might have exited the country on its own will as it is undertaking a larger realignment in its foreign policy.
- **The U.S.'s failure**- The U.S. might have failed to win the war in Afghanistan similar to the American pull-back from Vietnam in 1975.
- The reorientation that is under way in American foreign policy, focused on China, certainly played a role in the Afghan withdrawal.
- But that does not mean that the world's most powerful military and economic power failed to win the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban even after fighting them for 20 years.

What do the historical examples showcase about the military setbacks of superpowers?

- Superpowers suffering military setbacks at the hands of weaker forces would create a perception of weakness of great power fatigue that would prompt both their allies and rivals to rethink their strategic assessments.
- **British influence in West Asia**- In 1956, Britain along with France backed Israel's misadventure in the Suez against the U.S. and the Soviet Union.
- Despite making military advances, the Anglo-French-Israeli troops had to withdraw from the Suez and Sinai of Egypt that marked the end of British influence in the West Asian region.
- **The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam**- In the 1970s, the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam prompted the Soviets to act more aggressively.
- In 1978, communists, backed by the Soviet Union, seized power in Kabul and and installed an ally in Kabul's presidential palace.
- **Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan**- The inability to defeat the Mujahideen and Islamist guerillas who were backed by the U.S., Saudi

Arabia and Pakistan led to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.
- The communist regimes in Eastern Europe started crumbling, eventually leading to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

How does the withdrawal of troops affect the U.S.?

- The U.S. is far more powerful than the U.K. of 1956 and the Soviet Union of 1989 as it has seamless access to the world's two vast oceans and definite borders and a continent under its command.
- But the gradual erosion of the U.S.'s ability in shaping geopolitical outcomes has already shaken up the structures of American unipolarity.
- In Iraq and Libya,the U.S. has failed to establish political stability and order after invasions.
- The U.S. could not stop Russia taking Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and even in Syria, the U.S. was bypassed by Russia.
- Also, the way American troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power strengthened the perception of great power fatigue and strengthened America's rivals to openly challenge the U.S.-centric rules-based order.

What are the current challenges for the U.S.?

- **Geopolitical competition from Russia**- Russia has piled up about 175,000 troops on its border with Ukraine which could possibly order an invasion of Ukraine.
- Russia has also backed Belarus President over the refugee crisis on the Polish border of the European Union.
- Through these incidents, Russia is sending a message to the West that the region stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea is a Russian sphere of influence.
- **Issues in West Asian region** - Iran, which has unilaterally withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear deal, has insisted that the U.S. should first remove the sanctions and give assurance that it would not violate the terms of the agreement.
- But, the U.S. has promised to lift nuclear sanctions on Iran only if the Islamic Republic returns to the deal.
- As both sides stick to their positions, the attempt to revive the agreement through talks in Vienna is in a halt.
- **The South China Sea issue** - China is sending dozens of fighter jets into the so-called Taiwan Air Defence Identification Zone, triggering

speculation on whether Beijing was considering taking Taiwan by force.
- As the U.S. is trying to shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific region to tackle China's rise (through the AUKUS partnership), China is becoming more assertive in this region.

What choices do the U.S. have?

- **Imposing sanctions**- The U.S. and its European allies could impose harsher sanctions on Russia but the sanctions imposed on Russia after the Crimean annexation in 2014 did little to prevent Russia from taking more military steps.
- Economic sanctions will also drive Russia further into the Chinese embrace, strengthening the Eurasian partnership which is a critical challenge to American interests.
- **Lifting sanctions**- With regard to Iran, if the U.S. lifts the sanctions, it could be read as another sign of weakness.
- If the U.S. does not impose sanctions and if the Vienna talks collapse, Iran could continue to enrich uranium to a higher purity, attaining a de facto nuclear power status without a bomb which would be against America's declared goals in West Asia.
- **Reluctance to use hard power-** The U.S. would not prefer to get involved in another conflict as the structures of the new Cold War are taking shape.
- The transition from American unipolarity into something that is still unknown has put America in a strategic dilemma of should it stay focused on China or continue to act as a global policeman of the liberal order.

Reference

https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/fathoming-the-new-world-disorder/article37948756.ece

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