

The Only Way

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There are many speculations and assumptions running through the region about the US retreat and its repercussions on Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries. It seems obvious, without a shadow of a doubt, that Afghanistan will be dragged again into a state of chaos, turbulence and anarchy. History has so far been unkind to that troubled country and every now and then it is dragged back to square one. One wonders whether or not the US will be quitting Afghanistan for good. If so, then what's next in the kitty of US strategies? Many scholars, intellectuals and think tanks anticipate a purely Afghan civil war. On top of that, the time spent there by the US with all its underlying motives will have been in vain. What that simply means is that it was a waste of time, energy, lives and resources on the part of the US. Half of the game plan is already on the move -- I refer of course, to the election's outcome, which is just around the corner. So far Karzai has acted wilfully to his whiplashing master and will continue to do so. Nonetheless, recent resentment against US demands could prove to be expensive for Kabul. More likely still, the next government will be another dummy setup (Dari speaking), installed on the dictation of the US. Even if Karzai, otherwise, uses his own political influence in the presidential elections, the fate of the Afghan people will remain the same.

It is unlikely that Washington will let the Taliban grow again. A 60 percent turnout in the elections already assures the downfall of the Taliban. Still, the Taliban could get hold of the Pakhtun belt. Restricting the Taliban would be more conducive for US strategists, while preventing any backing or fuelling towards Taliban simultaneously.

The US departure could also have drastic implications for Pakistan. Unfortunately, Islamabad as usual seems to be in a whirlpool of ifs and buts, and no firm stance is appearing at the surface. Savvy foreign policymakers, political scientists and the military establishment must come up with visionary goals to cope with such an alarming situation.

India's elections could also play an important role and one has to wait and see how Indian influence in Afghanistan is going to shape up. India is the fifth biggest donor in the reconstruction and rehabilitation process in Afghanistan. This can bring a double advantage to India -- economic stability and alliance against Pakistan. For national security measures, Islamabad must remain vigilant to secure its north-west border to sustain peace and avoid cross-border terrorism.

China's foreign policy in case of a civil war in Afghanistan is still unclear. Meanwhile, Beijing is busy promoting economic cooperation and continues to build infrastructure and roads. Even a continuation of bilateral trade depends on the volatility there; unrest in Afghanistan can put an end to China's successful economic ascension.

Iran, as a neighbouring state, is highly concerned about the post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan. It has vowed nearly \$1 billion in aid at international aid conferences held to help Afghanistan. Its aid in the first decade after the Taliban's ouster was estimated at about 12 percent of the total assistance for reconstruction and development.

Tehran and Kabul have multiple disputes over water, Afghan refugees and drug trafficking. Tehran equally blames Kabul and Washington for not shutting down the production of opium. One should remember that Iran is a major corridor for narcotics smuggling to Middle Eastern and other European countries. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran claims to have lost more than 3,700 members of security forces fighting drug traffickers, many of whom were heavily armed. Tehran estimates that it spends around \$1 billion annually on its war on drugs.

Washington has to play an anchor role before walking out; it must leave behind peace, tranquillity and stability in Afghanistan. This chiefly depends on whether the economic aid would be sufficient for Afghanistan to run its military affairs and secure the state from insurgency and internal turmoil. As for the neighbouring states, Afghanistan would require them to pursue their foreign policies with utmost care. India, China, Pakistan and Iran will need to bury their animosities and grudges and stand together to avoid another conflict in the region. Peace is the only way forward for a prosperous and stable South Asia.