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COMMENTARY

Regional Fallout of Us Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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31 August 2021 is the deadline for withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the world is apprehensive about the fallout in the entire region.

Radical groups in Pakistan, Central Asia, China, Russia as also in Gaza, Syria and West Africa have exhibited triumphalism. Jihadist groups, particularly those linked to Al-Qaeda, have viewed the Taliban's return as a victory for Islamism and Jihadism, reviving hopes for the restoration of Shariah.

Of particular interest to India are media reports that the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan and in Pak-Occupied Kashmir have held victory rallies.

The vacuum created by the departure of US and allied forces from Afghanistan will undoubtedly encourage radical groups, militants and terrorists to revive their safe havens in that country. Pakistan will use its close nexus with the Haqqani network and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) to build new hide-outs and training camps for India-centric terrorist groups in Afghanistan. This will enable it to deny the existence of terrorist camps on its soil.

There is also the possibility that radical fighters trained by the ISI of Pakistan and long embedded in the Taliban, Haqqani network and the ISIS-K could now be infiltrated in Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan cannot rule out the blowback from its nexus with terrorists. There is a strong probability that the return of the Taliban could also strengthen the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which is engaged in hostilities against the Pakistani state.

There is a strong probability that once the lid is off, there will be more bloodletting between the ISIS-K and the Taliban in the north-eastern parts of Afghanistan.

Radical Central Asian groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) will get a shot in the arm. If the Taliban fails to control the northern areas, the risk to Central Asian stability is obvious. Moscow too may have to deal with an increase in terrorist attacks by emboldened Islamic groups from the northern Caucasus.

China's restive Xinjiang region is not inured to the instability in Afghanistan despite the Taliban's assurances. The mere fact of the Taliban's victory and its enduring commitment to the re-establishment of an Islamic Emirate and Shariah law will spur the Uiyghurs to challenge China's draconian presence in their homeland.

Iran is at the junction of major drugs and people-smuggling routes out of Afghanistan. The economies of the border regions of the two nations are intertwined. Uncertainty in Afghanistan has already sent the Iranian rial into a tailspin. A refugee influx across its 900-kilometre border with Afghanistan will add to the burden of hosting 3.5 million Afghans.

An ambitious Turkey has operated its armed forces in Afghanistan under the UN, NATO and bilateral auspices since 2002. Turkish forces must adhere to the deadline of 31 August. The Taliban have requested Turkey to provide technical assistance in operating Kabul airport beyond that date. Turkey's growing profile in Afghanistan may well come at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the UAE which have played a big role in the past, including diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime.

The Taliban had once banned opium cultivation in 2000, ostensibly acting out of puritanical zeal. In reality, it used the illicit trade to finance its operations for years. The Taliban's assurance that the ban will be reinstated is questionable. A large part of the rural population depends on opium cultivation for its livelihood. Areas under the sway of the ISIS-K, such as Nangarhar and Kunar, are likely to remain major centres of illicit opium cultivation and drugs production.

An Afghanistan under sanctions is unlikely to have either the will, or the means, to stem the tide. This could have devastating adverse consequences for the global opioids market.

On the military front, an assortment of light attack aircraft, helicopters, Humvees, high-explosive rockets and different types of launchers and ammunition recently fell into Taliban hands. This arsenal may add to the Taliban's firepower against resistance in the Panjshir valley but cannot pose a real military threat to any neighbouring country that has a professional military. The Taliban's menace is centered on the possible rise of terrorism across the region.
