

Afghanistan: the days to come
(*A global coalition to reshape Afghanistan*)

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The purpose of America's Afghan war has changed perceptibly.

It began with a bang as a war to end terrorism for all times to come. It is true that the rhetoric refused to look at the social and political dimensions of the weapon of terror, and therefore refused to understand what it set out to hunt down. But even as plain physical terror, the notion as employed by the US was not without its ambiguities, since the definition of terrorism in the lexicon of that Super Power has over the years been characterized by whimsical oddities and eccentricities. Put plainly, such terror as served the purposes of the US was never called by that name. And such political activity as went against those purposes – including many national liberation movements and egalitarian struggles – was branded terror even when it was not. And the terror directly indulged in by the US and its client States was not only not called terror, but was glorified as the defence of such noble things as democracy, human rights and the liberal way of life.

But at least the stated aim had a grand sound in the first few days. Now it has changed to a very familiar aim of the big powers: to bring Afghanistan under control. An appropriate State is to be structured and put in place in that benighted country to this end before the US and its allies leave it. Each of the partners of the 'international coalition to end terrorism for all time to come' has its own blue print for Afghanistan's future.

The US wants a Government which will not shelter its enemies. It and its Western allies also want a Government that will permit oil and gas to be taken from Central Asia to the port of Karachi and beyond. Pakistan wants a Government which will be its ally. India wants a Government that will *not* be Pakistan's ally. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan want a Government that will not export Islamic fundamentalism across its borders. So does Russia, but in particular it wants a Government that will not export militants to Chechnya. It is certainly an international coalition, but only a coalition to reshape hapless Afghanistan in accordance with the common denominator of the needs of its members. European history, or for that matter all history, is replete with such coalitions for spoils. Only, they did not call themselves by such grand names as infinite justice and endless freedom in the past.

When the declared aim was to end terrorism, the purported concern was democracy. Now the concern is any thing but democracy. It is the prolongation of the nightmare of Afghanistan, namely that its people have never in modern times been allowed a decisive say in the affairs of their own nation. The peculiar geo-political location of that country has entailed continuous and constant interference in its internal affairs by the big powers of the day for well over a century

now. All the rhetoric that we have been hearing for the last one month about freedom, democracy and civilisation is but a camouflage for the ugly fact that the latest chapter of this unseemly saga is to be scripted in the next few months. And India, it appears, wants to author at least a foot note in this new chapter.

In the nineteenth century Afghanistan suffered from being at the border of the Tsarist empire of Russia in the north and the British empire of India to the south and south-east. The two big powers of the day interfered endlessly in Afghanistan's affairs. Then came the Bolshevik revolution and the US coalition to suppress it. Soviet Russia quickly learnt all the petty games of big powers, and soon enough Afghanistan became a victim of the Soviet-American play of power that is called the Cold War. Afghanistan suffered a Government imposed by Soviet Russia, and then a civil war initiated by the US to overthrow that Government. The US calculated in cold blood that the best force to fight a modern army of occupation in a backward country is the force of religious extremism, and encouraged jihadis of all sorts to get together and fight the Soviet-sponsored Government of Afghanistan. The Soviets went away, but the jihadis remained to rule Afghanistan and turn that country into a center of militant fundamentalism. By and by, the original proteges of the US became its enemies and therefore the enemies of human civilization, and now the game is on to replace them.

All the powers big and small – including India – have jumped in and are bargaining to set up a replacement that will suit their disparate (and here is the rub) interests. Arithmetic calculations are on: what combination of the Pashtun and non-Pashtun ethnic groupings in the State will serve its exact interests, and which Pashtuns are the good Pashtuns, is the calculation each partner of the 'international coalition' is busy making. The sordidness of this game is illuminated by the only contrast one sees around: Mohammad Khatami's Iran, which has as much of a 'stake' in playing the power-game in Afghanistan as India or Pakistan, but has nevertheless exhibited the moral courage to keep away, with the admirably honest assessment that 'the US and the Taliban are two sides of the same coin'. But what will the people of Afghanistan get out of this? Certainly not a State or a Government of their choice. It may be a Government that suits the US 70%, Pakistan 10%, the Central Asian countries 10%, Russia another 5%, and even poor India 1%, but not a Government that will reflect the needs and the will of the people of Afghanistan.

Then the 'international coalition' will leave Afghanistan, happy to varied extents that the interests of each are safe, leaving the seeds of civil war behind. Civil war reflecting the dissatisfaction left behind in the various armed groupings clamouring for power in that land. Civil war, and the horrible social, economic and industrial backwardness that runs through the politically unfree history of that land like an ugly thread.

Are we eager that India participates in this ugly game?

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