

From the graveyard of empires, the US retreats

What does it mean for the future of Afghanistan?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

TWENTY-years after 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan by US and NATO forces, the US is on the cusp of withdrawing its forces from the proverbial "graveyard of empires", with the US military claiming its withdrawal is more than 90 percent complete. On July 1, US forces left the symbolic Bagram Airfield "by shutting off the electricity and slipping away in the night without notifying the base's new Afghan commander," the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported. The *New York Times* observed that the final withdrawal "occurred with little fanfare and no public ceremony, and in an atmosphere of grave concern over the Afghan security forces' ability to hold off Taliban advances across the country." Already, on July 1, the Taliban announced they controlled 80 percent of Afghan territory. That's close to the situation 20 years ago, only a few weeks before 9/11, when the Taliban controlled around 85 percent of the territory.

The end of the 20-year US war on Afghanistan was predictable. No one has conquered Afghanistan, and Washington was as foolish as Moscow was in the 1970s for trying. As the US rushes to pull out its troops, having just evacuated what has been the symbol of US occupation of Afghanistan for 20 years, many couldn't help but call it Washington's "Saigon moment 2.0". According to former US presidential candidate Ron Paul, "While perhaps not as dramatic as the 'Fall of Saigon' in 1975, where US military helicopters scrambled to evacuate personnel from the roof of the US Embassy, the lesson remains the same and remains unlearned: attempting to occupy, control, and remake a foreign country into Washington's image of the United States will never work."

That this lesson remains unlearned

is evident in how the US media and the military have opposed the withdrawal. President Biden, however, has shown great resolve in keeping to his words and resisting the immense pressure put on him by the country's military-media-industrial complex. Supporters of prolonging the occupation argue that the Afghan government is not ready to withstand the Taliban offensive without foreign troop presence. They say there are a number of issues that need sorting before Afghanistan can regain some stability. Opponents of this position point to the obvious: if this couldn't be done in 20 years, then how can the US occupation help achieve this now?

The US is estimated to have spent nearly USD 100 billion in training the Afghan army and police force. The real number is likely several times higher. For all that money and 20 years of training, the Afghan army still cannot resist a full Taliban offensive. Earlier in April, Brown University's Cost of War Project calculated the total cost of the Afghan war at more than USD 2 trillion. That means, millions of Americans have been made poorer for this failed project, while thousands of the well-connected contractors and companies that lobby for war have become richer—that may explain the real reason for the opposition to the US withdrawal instead of a legitimate concern in Washington for the plight of Afghans once the US retreats.

While the US leaves Afghanistan red-faced, it still cannot admit fully that it has lost the war in Afghanistan. It has created more extremism than what existed before, and produced more terror than what the world witnessed on 9/11. As a result, according to former US intelligence officer and UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, only someone who is "blind to reality could make a case that the US has degraded the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, a cliff-hanger is set for the end of July, as the Taliban announced they will submit a written peace proposal to Kabul, which ultimately may amount to an



While the US leaves Afghanistan red-faced, it still cannot admit fully that it has lost the war in Afghanistan' PHOTO: AFP

intimidation for the Afghan government in Kabul to surrender and transfer full control of the country. Consequently, the Taliban are fast advancing in western Vardak. If they get control of Vardak, they will literally be at the gates of Kabul. And they are also about to make a move on Hairaton, in Balkh province. Hairaton is at the Afghan-Uzbek border, the site of the historically important Friendship Bridge over the Amu Darya river, through which the Red Army departed Afghanistan in 1989. The symbolism of it all couldn't be more ironic.

So where does that leave the Afghan people and the government?

As far as the people are concerned, most are already afraid of what is to come. A full-blown civil war would be the worst outcome, and many see this as being a likely outcome.

The Taliban are currently armed to the teeth, having "recovered" massive amounts of weaponry from abandoned US weapons caches. Ordinary Afghans, in order to have a say in their own future, are also arming themselves as much as possible, while militia groups are rising up.

The government, although currently negotiating with the Taliban, are yet to solidify any final agreement. According to Nader Naderi, a member of the Afghan government's peace negotiating team, it is clear that in the end, the Taliban cannot win in achieving all of their objectives. So there are two potential scenarios: (I) "A prolonged war that the Afghan defence and security forces will continue" if a peaceful settlement is not reached—which would strengthen different terror outfits in the country and

the region; and II) "A peaceful settlement where the Taliban will agree to be a part of a structure" that defines a shared future for all sides in Afghanistan.

The best way to ensure that all parties to the conflict within Afghanistan choose option two is to involve all regional players in the negotiations. That includes India, Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran. None of these countries gain anything from having a volatile Afghanistan that threatens regional security and cooperation.

India has already tasted the bitter taste of extremism. China has been in close contact with the Taliban since early 2020, as it essentially wants to extend the USD 62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—one of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) flagship projects—to Afghanistan. The first crucial step will be the construction of the Kabul-Peshawar motorway, through the Khyber Pass and the current border at Torkham, which means Afghanistan de facto becoming part of CPEC. Therefore, its plan, clearly, is to dangle the carrot of economic benefits in front of both the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Russia is already concerned about the increased violence in northern Afghanistan, which borders former Soviet countries such as Tajikistan. Iran, on the other hand, definitely doesn't want Sunni extremist groups to increase in its border regions with Afghanistan.

And thus, all of these countries should look to join in the efforts to get the different warring parties in Afghanistan to find a peaceful, political settlement to the crisis. That is what the US should have tried to do a long time ago. In the end, while trying to turn Afghanistan into Soviet Union's Vietnam some 30-40 years ago and then going back and occupying the country, the US is now having to leave its own Vietnam 2.0, once more in defeat.

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Keeping low-income groups at home during lockdown



ZULKERNAIN KHANDAKER

BBRITISH writer Terry Pratchett explained the "boots theory" in his novel *Men at Arms* (1993). The idea is that the rich can spend USD 50 on a pair of sustainable boots which can last for ten years. On the other hand, the poor can afford to spend USD 10 on a pair of boots per year, which lasts only a year. In ten years, the rich will have paid USD 50 to keep their feet warm whereas the poor will have paid USD 100 for the same. This contrast points to the disparity and unfairness that exist in our socioeconomic structure where, in essence, the rich pay less than the poor but enjoy more privileges.

One can find numerous examples of this kind in our day-to-day life. People who buy stuff in bulk get discounts for merely having that purchasing power, whereas those who struggle to buy just a single unit barely get any. Society rewards the rich for being rich and punishes the poor for being poor.

One such example is the lockdown enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The highly contagious coronavirus still remains a threat to mankind as it keeps getting modified into different variants. Imposing lockdowns has, therefore, become an established practice around the world to prevent mass-level transmission.

For informal workers, however, going into lockdowns means accepting a cut in salary or income or losing jobs. Research reveals that rickshaw pullers, construction workers, bus-truck drivers, helpers, housemaids, and agricultural labourers are the worst sufferers of lockdowns from a financial point of view. Imagine the cost of going through lockdowns with the concomitant dip in household incomes and consumptions. The high-salaried people, businessmen and industrialists, have very little to let go of consumption because their consuming habit is "inelastic" to the temporary economic shutdowns.

Even though they also incur losses in their economic activities, their marginal expenses of an additional unit of income go to savings, investments or entertainments, not to their dining tables.

Low-income groups saw a drastic fall in their incomes. Innovision Consulting conducted a survey last year among these groups where the respondents were from various parts of Bangladesh. The survey revealed that men had an average income of Tk 13,432 and women Tk 5,068 during normal times. The initial lockdown in 2020 caused the respondents' income to fall by 83 percent and their average household income by 78 percent. At the same time, farmers' income from agriculture declined by 58 percent.

The survey demonstrated how the decrease

in income was translated into a decrease in consumption. It showed that 94 percent of the respondents reduced their spending on protein food items, and 89 percent reduced expenses on non-protein food items. It also showed that except for rice and other grains, low-income people had to cut down expenses on every item of consumption. Almost 90 percent of them even cut down on medicines which, in light of economics, shouldn't have been cut down as it is considered inelastic consumption. Smooth consumer behaviour theory is violated by their consumption of medicines in lockdowns.

Recently, Power and Participation Research Centre and Brac Institute of Governance and Development jointly conducted another survey that showed that 24.5 million people are still "new poor" due to the covid-19

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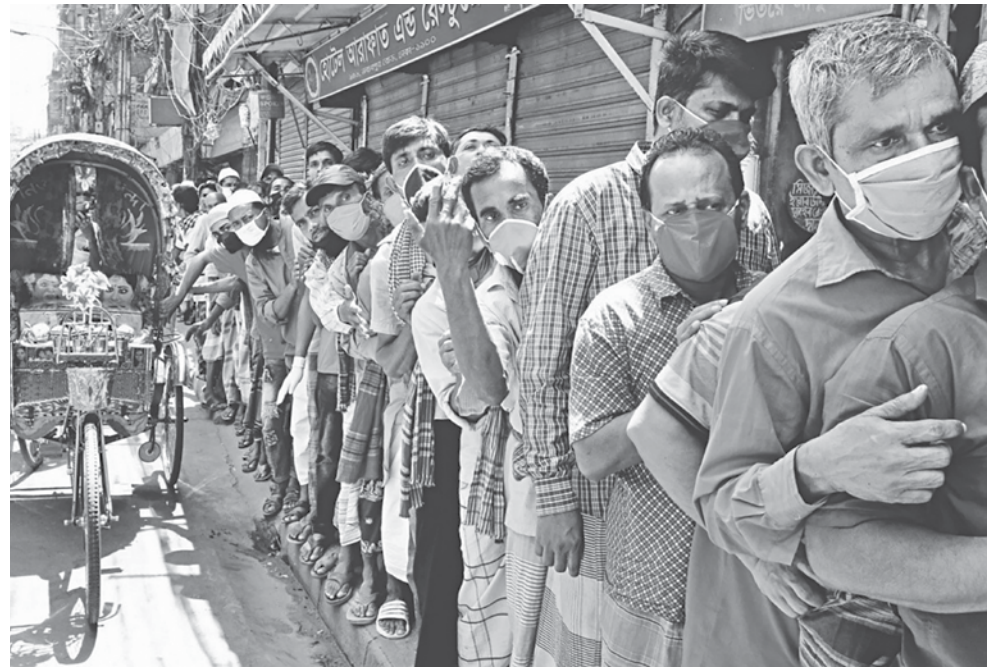
extend a lockdown beyond that period, it has to provide them with basic food items. Otherwise, they won't abide by the lockdown rules.

Secondly, food and other relief items' distribution process needs to be closely monitored. Multiple news reports appeared in the media in recent times about mismanagement and corruption in distributing relief food by local government bodies. UNOs stationed at Upazillas had to make frequent visits to Union Parishads, check and monitor local chairmen's activities to eliminate nepotism and check the dominance of local thugs and political families in relief food and money distribution.

Thirdly, the problem of the "boots theory" lies in poor people's inaccessibility to credit. If the poor could borrow USD 50 in the first season, they could buy a good pair of boots, be able to pay off the debt in five years, and enjoy that pair of boots for five years. Low-wage earners also need access to credit to go through economic shutdowns smoothly. This can be facilitated by local mosques, temples, churches and other religious and social institutions. Janata Bank once introduced a special programme in which landless and marginal farmers took out interest-free, collateral-free loans from 2009 to 2012. The result of that programme was incredible economic and social upgradation of those farmers. They also reportedly enjoyed more income, consumption, better health, quality of life, etc.

Religious institutions, for example, have funds of their own, for renovating their buildings and other purposes. Because religions are all about spirituality and enlightenment, helping the needy in hardship is espoused by all religious beliefs, and their institutions could come forward to offer interest-free and collateral-free loans to the low-income groups and make lockdowns more bearable for them. The government should take steps in this regard.

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File photo of people on the Nawabpur Road in Old Dhaka waiting for food relief to be distributed by a local business house amidst the nationwide coronavirus lockdown.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

QUOTABLE Quote



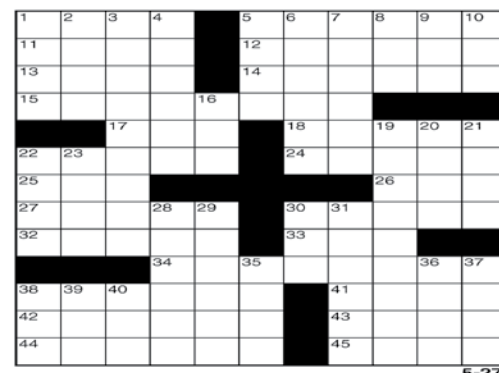
MAYA ANGELOU American poet and civil rights activist (1928 – 2014)

You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Monument Valley sight
 - 5 "Jane Eyre" writer
 - 11 Persia, today
 - 12 Enjoy, as a favorite book
 - 13 Necktie material
 - 14 Globe features
 - 15 Rogue
 - 17 Bear's lair
 - 18 Assignments
 - 22 Swell
 - 24 Inquisitive sort
 - 25 Bustle
 - 26 Salt Lake City player
 - 27 Criminals, in cop slang
 - 30 Snared, as a steer
 - 32 Crooked
- DOWN**
- 1 Fail to see
 - 2 Rocker Clapton
 - 3 Piece of silverware
 - 4 Short sock
 - 5 Eye line
 - 6 News summaries
 - 7 Salem's state
 - 8 Teachers' org.
 - 9 Brown hue
 - 10 Harris and Asner
 - 16 Some amount of silverware
 - 20 Carry
 - 21 Expedited
 - 22 California wine valley
 - 23 Midmonth day
 - 28 Dangers
 - 29 Veer suddenly
 - 30 Brink
 - 31 Carrot color
 - 35 Some bucks
 - 36 Pencil part
 - 37 Pipe bends
 - 38 M.B.A or Ph.D.
 - 39 Time preceding
 - 40 Tofu base

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