

The costs of abandoning the Afghan war



THE 20-year war in Afghanistan has been abandoned, with the United States announcing in mid-September that it will withdraw its troops from the country. What has the US left in its wake? Leaving power in the hands of

a deliberately weak government is virtually a US handover of power to the Taliban. This significant setback has once again left a "black mark" on the claim of US supremacy. The US declaration of abandonment of the Afghan war will also profoundly affect Central Asian politics, as well as the politics of Pakistan, India, and many countries in South Asia and the region. Many say China will benefit significantly from other aspects, including mineral extraction and investments in Afghanistan. However, China's biggest concern is with Uyghur Muslim rebels living in their Xinjiang province, adjacent to Afghanistan, and they fear the Taliban's presence on the Afghan border along the Wakhan Corridor could increase. A Taliban spokesman has assured them that they would not cooperate with Uyghur Muslims, but how credible is this assurance really? Russia is also concerned about the Taliban's influence in Central Asia's Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

According to many experts, the current situation in Afghanistan suggests that the Taliban may take the initiative to mend relations with neighbouring countries. The regime can create a new impression and get an image makeover by building a relationship with China, Russia and others. While this demands a more comprehensive analysis, there is no doubt that the politics of Central Asia will change dramatically.

From the South Asian political sphere, India supports the government of the current Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, largely due to its investments in Afghanistan. According to different estimates, several Indian businesses and companies have already invested between USD five to seven billion in Afghanistan. India has invested USD three billion in

infrastructure development alone, according to *The Times of India*. The Afghan president has also announced his commitment to increasing India-Afghanistan bilateral trade to at least USD 10 billion. India is also using the Chabahar seaport in the southeastern part of Iran through Afghanistan to connect with Central Asia. All in all, India is worried about what will happen to these billions of dollars of investment and trade.

In this context, to protect its interests in Afghanistan, India has started a secret or

Taliban in Afghanistan has already made Pakistani militant groups happy with the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Pakistan's notorious militant group born in 2006, is expected to grow stronger. The rise of the Taliban and subsequently, of TTP, can become a significant threat to Imran Khan or any government in Pakistan in the future. However, Pakistan has already said that it is possible to resolve the Afghan issue through talks. In this situation, if Imran Khan's

the US proposal, the balance of Pakistan's foreign policy will be in jeopardy, with a huge possibility of Pakistan being targeted by the Taliban. In the last week of May, the Taliban said in a statement that it would be a "historic mistake" if Pakistan favoured a US military decision. However, Pakistan's influential daily *Dawn* reported on May 24, quoting Pentagon sources, that Pakistan has allowed the US military to use its airspace, and has given ground access. It is safe to say that the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan will

defeat in the Vietnam War, and they have once again lost the longest-lasting war in Afghanistan by withdrawing troops. In 1969, Henry Kissinger wrote a lengthy article on the Vietnam War in the January issue of *Foreign Affairs*, in which he said, "We (US) fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process, we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win." The ideology of the Taliban, no matter how militant or radical it is, is in line with Henry Kissinger's statement.

The United States has suffered substantial financial losses in the 20-year-long war in Afghanistan. According to the Associated Press, the US has lost more than USD two trillion in direct financial losses to Afghanistan in the 20 years to 2021. As of other estimates, the amount is USD 2.6 trillion. By 2050, the total cost of the war will be 6.5 trillion, including war veteran healthcare and various financial benefits. A total of 200,000 people have been killed in the war, including 2,448 members of the US military, ordinary Afghan civilians, US civilians at different levels, and members of the Taliban. Of these, 444 humanitarian aid workers and 72 journalists lost their lives, and 47,245 Afghan civilians were killed in the war.

After the defeat in the Vietnam War, the United States faced the questions of the people in its own country. There were protests all over the world against that war. Perhaps the same question about the Afghan war may come to the minds of US citizens. Many (not just the American people) may be wondering what it means to spend so many trillions of dollars on the loss of so many lives. In the book *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*, the authors—Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes—said, "The failure in Iraq was not the result of a single mistake but the culmination of dozens of mistakes made over a period of years." The statement may also be true about the Afghan war.

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Afghan security forces inspect the site of a car bomb attack in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, July 6, 2021. PHOTO: REUTERS

back-channel negotiation with the Taliban, according to an Al Jazeera report from July 6. Indian Foreign Office officials acknowledged the allegations and said, "We are maintaining relations with all parties involved in Afghanistan. Because we want to continue India's commitment to building Afghanistan's long-term infrastructure and rebuilding the country."

Meanwhile, Pakistan is in quite a predicament. The substantial rise of the

government wants to confront the Taliban by promoting its own Islamic ideology, it will be another catastrophe for Pakistan.

Various media outlets have reported that US pressure on Pakistan will increase after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Last month, the *New York Times* reported that the United States has already been trying hard to establish a military base in Pakistan. However, Pakistan is trying to reject interference from an outside power like the United States. If it agrees to

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impact not only India-Pakistan but the wider region, including Iran and NATO-affiliated Turkey. In particular, militants from countries in the region, including Bangladesh, may rise to prominence.

The Taliban strongly believe that the US is the defeated side in this conflict, apparent by the withdrawal of troops and the abandonment of war. Presumably, this is why the Taliban's morale is higher than ever before. In fact, they have already taken control of many areas, with very little force and resistance. To people across the world, it seems like the US did not learn from the

Protecting children's mental health during Covid-19



LAILA KHONDKAR

RECENTLY, many parents in Bangladesh are expressing concerns about the behavioural changes of their children and feeling worried about the impacts of Covid-19 related restrictions on their health and wellbeing.

During an interview, Nancy Close, Assistant Professor at the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine and Associate Director of the Yale Program in Early Childhood Education, explained what parents may be experiencing with their children (from toddlers to university students): "I've been seeing a lot of regression and more than what, in typical times, is developmentally appropriate. I've seen children regressing through using baby talk, needing help with routines, needing help with sleeping and toileting—and much more than what's usual for them. Coping with and expressing strong feelings can be really challenging, so we're seeing temper tantrums in older and younger children and even college students. We are discovering that consistency and predictability have been more difficult to achieve during Covid-19. This can lead children to feel anxious and frustrated which can certainly result in behavioural dysregulation."

Covid-19 is primarily a public health emergency, but it has lots of secondary impacts on children's education, health and protection, in the short and long run. Due to prolonged school closure and social isolation, children have lost their regular lives.

Covid-19 has created stress for parents all over the world. Many of them are struggling to manage working from home and looking after children. In our society, we hear about this in general discussion and media also highlights the challenge. However, are we realising that children are used to going to schools, interacting with friends and being taught by teachers? Staying at home is stressful for them also. Are we viewing things from children's points of view? Are we listening to their concerns meaningfully?

"Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of children in Bangladesh: A cross-sectional

study", published by Children and Youth Services in October, 2020, highlighted that children are suffering from depression, anxiety and sleeping disorders. Estimates of moderate and severe mental disturbance were 19.3 percent and 7.2 percent respectively.

Different children are reacting differently to the situation. Many children have been resilient and adjusted to the crisis. However, there are many who need support to go through this difficult time. It is important that parents, caregivers,

print, electronic and social media.

Children need to feel they are being loved by parents and caregivers. It is also helpful when family members spend quality time together. Children should be encouraged to play, read books, maintain an active life by engaging in various activities, and reduce over-reliance on electronic devices. Parents should also limit their own screen time, as children follow what adults do.

Children have a lot of questions, especially



PHOTO: REUTERS FILE

teachers and other adults of society have the sensitivity and capacity to respond to their needs.

Research on effective parenting in the last 30 years demonstrated that parents need to provide warmth as well as structure, according to the age of their children. Parents should understand how children think and feel at various stages. Effective parent-child communication is critical at any and all times, and particularly during the Covid-19 crisis. Positive parenting messages, as well as messages on how all members of society can be more child-sensitive, should be promoted through

during crisis periods. Parents can share age-specific information with their children on how the virus spreads, what they can do to protect themselves, and the efforts that are being taken throughout the world to fight the pandemic. Parents can take initiatives to limit children's consumption of news to avoid unnecessary worries. The pandemic also provides an opportunity to teach children the importance of receiving information from credible sources.

There is no need for parents and caregivers to ask too many questions on how children are

feeling. But children should feel reassured that there is someone they can talk to if they want. Some may like to draw. Some may want to talk. They should be encouraged to express themselves in ways they are comfortable with.

Children get their emotional cues from adults. So, parents should not express anxieties in front of children. Parents need to find support around managing their own stress as this can ultimately help their children's wellbeing.

If a child continues to show signs of distress that affects his/her daily functioning and/or or are not regular (e.g. sleeplessness, lack of concentration, acting in a way that is suitable for children younger than his/her age), then parents should seek support from a trained mental health expert. As a society, we should also learn to understand that mental health is very important for our overall wellbeing, and there should not be any stigma about this.

The capacity of teachers should be developed so that they are able to respond to the needs of children when they return to school. They should be trained on mental health concerns that children are likely to face, what signs of distress may look like, and how to intervene with appropriate action and referral. Schools should also support teachers to manage their own stress.

The executive director of UNICEF has cautioned that if children's wellbeing is not adequately addressed, "The mental health consequences for a generation of children and young people could far surpass the immediate health and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving long-term social and economic consequences in its wake."

Children's health, nutrition, education, protection and overall wellbeing will be profoundly influenced by the impacts of the global pandemic. The next decade could see a huge reversal in children's rights or be a significant moment in the fight for a world where all children can grow up to realise their potential. It will depend on the decisions we make today. If we are serious in addressing the negative consequences of Covid-19 on children's lives, which includes stopping developmental regression, and protecting their mental health, then policymakers must make investing in children a priority.

Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

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QUOTABLE Quote

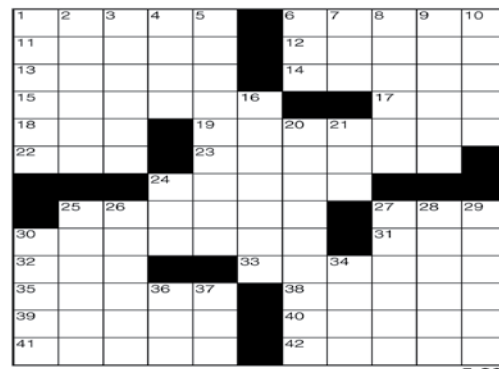


SARA AHMED
British-Australian scholar
(born August 30, 1969)

A system is working when an attempt to transform that system is blocked.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 30 Latitude | 7 Uncle, in Acapulco |
| 1 Giraffe features | 31 Bruins legend | 8 Michener book |
| 6 Playwright | 32 Stirrup setting | 9 Like some garages |
| Fugard | 33 Lady of Spain | 10 Sophia of "Two Women" |
| 11 South Asian language | 35 Enormous numerals | 16 Lines through circles |
| 12 Grand, for one | 39 Famed fur tycoon | 20 Moved sinuously |
| 13 Met work | 40 News item | 21 Down |
| 14 Might | 41 Poor | 25 Lingerie buy |
| 15 Parking attendants | 42 Pub pastime | 26 Commend |
| 17 Top pitcher | | 27 Give fizz to |
| 18 Pupil's place | | 27 Child of the 1950s |
| 19 Revolutionary mercenary | DOWN | 28 Straying |
| 22 Plunked down | 1 Kitchen fixtures | 29 Academic funds |
| 23 Bakery treat | 2 Tropical fruit | 30 Kicked off |
| 24 Make pigtailed | 3 Egggy dish | 34 Flaring star |
| 25 Pop, e.g. | 4 Fatigue | 36 Auction bid |
| 27 Implore | 5 Smearred liberally | 37 Take a stab at |
| | 6 Phone download | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES



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