[**Afghanistan on the edge again**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1628006/afghanistan-on-the-edge-again)

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WITH the closing act of the American military withdrawal well underway the situation in Afghanistan is at an inflection point. Fast-moving events on the ground are outpacing efforts to ensure an orderly transition to a post-America political dispensation there. Intense uncertainty clouds the country’s future as concern grows in Pakistan and elsewhere about the increasing danger of its slide into chaos. Prime Minister Imran Khan’s comments in an interview last week are the latest expression of those fears.

While the US pullout is proceeding ahead of schedule the Afghan peace process remains in a state of deadlock and there is a significant surge in violence. Another complicating factor injected into an already fraught situation is the cooling in relations between Islamabad and Kabul.

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There is no indication that the US-orchestrated international peace conference in Istanbul aimed to accelerate the intra-Afghan dialogue will take place anytime soon. The UN was supposed to convene the meeting in late April but efforts to persuade the Taliban to attend have so far come to naught.

While the political stalemate continues, the US withdrawal has picked up pace. There are credible reports that Washington wants to accelerate the withdrawal to mitigate the risk to its troops and complete the pullout by early or mid-July rather than the September deadline announced by President Joe Biden. Nato forces are also said to be working on a July deadline with the drawdown proceeding accordingly.

The spectre that looms is of chaos and more strife with grave implications for Pakistan.

This should lend urgency to diplomatic efforts for peace talks to make progress towards a political settlement. So far, despite some interaction between the Afghan negotiating delegations in Doha, the intra-Afghan process has all but come to a halt. What has not ceased is fighting between Afghan National Security Forces and the Taliban. Violence has intensified and US airpower has had come to the aid of ANSF in several places especially in the south. US/Nato air support remains critical to Kabul’s ability to withstand rising military pressure from the Taliban, who have however abided — so far — by the agreement not to attack foreign forces.

US and Pakistani efforts to persuade the Taliban to agree to a reduction in violence have met with little success. Washington sought this as a necessary accompaniment to the peace plan it outlined a few months ago. But the Taliban offensive has made it evident that they are not prepared to give up an option that aims to bolster their negotiating position and test Kabul’s strength. Their stance remains that the reduction of violence and a ceasefire have to emerge from intra-Afghan talks and not before. Hopes that by the beginning of June some reduction of violence would be achieved remain unfulfilled, for now.

A top Pakistani official has been in Doha to persuade the Taliban to show flexibility and resume the intra-Afghan dialogue and reduce violence. But the Taliban don’t seem to be in a mood to listen at a time when Pakistan’s leverage has been diminishing. The Taliban have been urged to put their peace plan on the table, but again, there is no sign of this. US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is soon expec­ted in the region for another round of shuttle diplomacy in a last-ditch effort to achieve these goals.

The Taliban argue that their demands for the release of their prisoners and de-listing from the UN sanctions regime have yet to be met and for which they await a response. They also say that attending a peace conference without knowing what obligations they will be expected to undertake would place them in an unacceptable position. They have reportedly indicated conditional acceptance to join the conference in Turkey provided they know in advance what will happen as they won’t sign up to anything pre-cooked.

This may be a pretext to buy time and wait it out for US troops to depart especially as the Taliban see themselves in an ascendent position. Taliban leaders also continue to signal that they will not yield on their insistence that the future Afghanistan should be an Islamic emirate and not a republic. Their position on core issues seems to have hardened as the American withdrawal has entered its end phase. Nevertheless, they continue to want to preserve the international legitimacy they secured since the Doha agreement with the US.

This however has not deterred the Taliban from ramping up attacks across the country despite international appeals to de-escalate violence. Their strategy seems to be to encircle provincial capitals and seek to choke several key routes to set the stage for the siege of cities later. Nine districts have already been captured. Defections from Afghan forces at the local level are aiding them in this strategy. The inevitable question this raises is how far ANSF will be able to sustain itself once international forces leave Afghanistan and they are bereft of crucial air cover.

Against this backdrop, the downturn in relations between Islamabad and Kabul has come at a delicate time. Despite Pakistan’s efforts to strengthen ties with President Ashraf Ghani’s government, as reflected most recently in army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa’s May visit to Kabul, two developments have set back relations between the two countries. Gha­ni’s gratuitously provocative remarks against Pak­i­s­­tan in an interview with Der Spiegel and his nat­io­nal security adviser, Hamdullah Mohib’s inc­end­iary comments — just days after Gen Bajwa’s visit.

This led to cancellation of a phone conversation planned between Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Ghani. It also put on ice a statement Islamabad was to issue supportive of the Afghan republic’s position on preserving the gains of the last 20 years in Afghanistan and protection of human rights.

Against the backdrop of intensified fighting, lack of movement on a political settlement and the remaining American soldiers packing up to leave, the spectre that looms in Afghanistan is of chaos and more strife and anarchy. This has grave implications for Pakistan who for decades has suffered the destabilising consequences of war, foreign interventions and conflict in its western neighbor. The question now is whether anything can be done to avert a 1989 or 1992 type scenario in Afghanistan, which can have such deleterious repercussions for its long-suffering people and for regional peace and stability.

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