**US drawdown from Afghanistan**

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Although President Trump’s intention to [leave Afghanistan](https://dailytimes.com.pk/115868/us-should-leave-afghanistan/) was evident to the policy makers in the region, his decision would come so soon especially when his Special Envoy on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was in the middle of holding preliminary talks with the regional countries. Still, there is opposition in the US Defence Department for an abrupt withdrawal as its officials would plead for a gradualist approach in order to seek a negotiated settlement between Afghan stakeholders. It is not clear whether drawdown is a confidence building measure aimed at the Taliban or an impulsive decision of President Trump.Nevertheless, Taliban must have been happy with the decision which established their credentials as a formidable power and a major stakeholder.

In line with Trump’s earlier announcements of cutting down US’ overseas liabilities a drawdown from Afghanistan would, according to official estimates, save US$ 20 billion while a complete withdrawal is likely to save an average of US$ 45 billion per annum. However, if cutting cost is the only or prime motive of drawdown then Afghanistan and the region should brace for hard days ahead. Already hasty decisions in the past have plunged the country to an unending turmoil during the past four decades.

*What are the likely gains or losses emanating from the Trump decision?Undoubtedly, Taliban would emerge as immediate beneficiaries and arbiters of the country’s affairs.This would cause friction with the Ashraf Ghani led National Unity Government (NUG) which is already skeptical of President Trump’s decision. Sudden appointment of Asadullah Khalid and Amrullah Saleh as Defence and Interior ministers, respectively, is an expression of annoyance by President Ghani who feels left out in the dialogue process between the US and Taliban. Both, Saleh and Khalid hold anti-Pakistan bias and have been receiving financial support from India for long. Politically, both gentlemen are light-weights and would be ineffective to influence the outcome of the future dialogue between the Americans and Taliban although being loud mouths they may try to play spoilers’ role. Even if symbolic, the choice of these gentlemen is symptomatic of Mr. Ghani’s future policy towards Pakistan.*

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While President Trump has set his own priorities rooted in “America first” dictum and his decision to withdraw from Syria and Afghanistan fits the bill, it would be naïve on the part of any American President or officials to infer that their disengagement from the troubled regions, especially where they have been deeply involved, would be a smooth affair whether parties in a conflict are onboard or not. Let’s hope Americans would not repeat the mistakes of early nineties when they abruptly wound up from Afghanistan soon after the Soviets left Afghanistan. The resultant chaos in Afghanistan culminated into 9/11.

The US withdrawal is a scenario which may spell disaster for Afghanistan if not handled with utmost care. All the stakeholders will have to make serious efforts for the success of intra-Afghan dialogue. Not only that, regular flow of financial and material assistance from the US and western countries to the future Afghan government would be essential to sustain and support [socio-economic](https://dailytimes.com.pk/333985/china-sindh-govt-to-collaborate-for-socio-economic-uplift-of-people/) projects in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has so far been treading carefully while facilitating the dialogue between the US and Taliban. Significantly, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has undertaken visits to four nations-Afghanistan, Iran, China and Russia- soon after President Trump’s announcement of drawdown. This shows that Pakistan would like to involve the neighbours of Afghanistan in order to ensure a comprehensive settlement of the Afghan problem.Since Iran, China and Russia also have direct contacts with the Taliban, Mr. Qureshi’s visit should provide an opportunity to coordinate their future positions regarding the dialogue process.Pakistan will have to make it clear in the beginning that it can only facilitate the dialogue and encourage the Taliban to plead their case at the negotiating table. Other Afghan stakeholders, especially NUG, would also be required to show accommodation.

Seriousness of interlocutors of the Afghan dialogue would determine the success or failure of the dialogue process. For the Taliban, it would be crucial to raise the comfort level of the people even if they are in opposition. However, repeat of past practices by the Taliban to introduce their brand of Islam would be resisted by the opponents and in doing so they would have the support of outside world. Moreover, Taliban’s conduct as a coalition partner or independent government would be under microscopic scrutiny. Hopefully, in the name of restoring peace the Taliban will not establish peace of the graveyard.

For the National Unity Government (NUG) a new paradigm for the future of Afghanistan would be required to save the country from further bloodshed. The NUG must realise that they are not a monolith to attract the people or effectively counter the Taliban. Secondly, so far, they have enjoyed the protection of the Americans which baptized them as “moderates, progressives and democrats”. Afghanistan even had presidential and parliamentary elections under the American protection. However, everyone knows that Afghanistan, being an ultra-conservative tribal society, is still far away from the concept of modern democracy. In terms of conservative credentials there is hardly a difference between the Taliban and NUG affiliates; the only difference that distinguishes NUG with Taliban is that the former enjoys the ears of the Americans while the latter are on the other side of the fence.Afterall, before 9/11 Taliban were negotiating with the Americans for the supply of gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India.

The predominant view is skeptical about the drawdown decision as it raises apprehensions for an uncertain future of Afghanistan. The moot question is whether Taliban would give assurances to the Americans and the world that Afghanistan would not be allowed to become a sanctuary for Al-Qaida or Daesh/ISIS. It is obvious that Ghani led NUG lacks capacity or motivation to offer such assurances. On the other hand, Taliban control 50% of the country and contest another 20%, and are in a better position to counter Al-Qaida and Deash/ISIS threat. Recently, Taliban have been clashing with Daesh cells in eastern Afghanistan. Taliban head of delegation also gave assurances during the Moscow conference on 9th November that they did not entertain extra-territorial ambitions or interfere in other countries internal affairs.

However, for the neighbours of Afghanistan the crucial question would be the establishment of peace and stability in the war-torn country, for a chaotic Afghanistan would continue to be a source of instability and tensions for the entire region. Prudence demands that all stakeholders whether Afghans or neighbours of Afghanistan should collectively contribute for peace in a country which has bled for the past four decades.

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