**Babysitting Afghanistan**

[**Najm us Saqib**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/najm-us-saqib)

April 19, 2021

The decision to meet the agreed upon deadline of May 1 for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan was ‘tough’ but not tough enough to postpone the drawdown completely. Washington’s announcement of complete the withdrawal by September 11 has again revived the decades old debate on the future of Afghanistan once the foreign troops finally vacate this war ravaged country. That the unconditional withdrawal will be conducted ‘responsibly, deliberately and safely’ means the plan has been deliberated upon in a responsible way but after duly finding a safe exit for the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. The exit plan envisaged a post-withdrawal scenario in which the Taliban will be held accountable if they allowed any terrorists to mess with the US and its allies. The exit plan also expects all countries of the region, including China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkey and India, to support Afghanistan as these countries have a significant stake in the stable future of the country.

[Fake social media accounts and marginalisation of women in Pakistan](https://nation.com.pk/20-Apr-2021/fake-social-media-accounts-and-marginalisation-of-women)

Perhaps, by selecting this date—i.e. 9/11—for the withdrawal, it was thought appropriate to celebrate the exit plan by bringing in memories of the devastating day when the US was attacked and the twin towers turned into ground zero in a matter of hours. Perhaps, the US wanted the world to know that if attacked again, it would react in a similar fashion, with the same intensity, and if need be, its forces would go and stay in the troubled area for decades until the desired results were achieved. Perhaps, the world needed a reminder or a tacit warning of sorts lest they forgot the sheer power of the United States and more importantly, its determination to go to any extent if anyone took a chance with its mighty disposition and its national interest.

Ostensibly, the 2,400 deaths and the enormous cost of a 20-year ‘forever war’ was at the back of his mind when President Biden admitted the sheer futility of the whole exercise that started as a response to the 9/11 attack by saying, “We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result.” In this carefully worded statement, the regional stakeholders may have already read and understood the real message–the US is no longer interested in either waiting for the ideal conditions for a breakthrough or holding any parleys with the Taliban and others or finding a solution to the Afghan conflict as a whole. Though belated, Washington has seemingly reached a conclusion that the old Russians and English had reluctantly reached at after venturing into Afghanistan and trying to impose foreign dominance therein; Afghanistan cannot be ruled from outside or by outside forces.

[Naval Chief, Azerbaijan envoy discuss regional security](https://nation.com.pk/20-Apr-2021/naval-chief-azerbaijan-envoy-discuss-regional-security)

Soon after the announcement of the exit plan, the news of the Afghan forces’ preparedness to deal with any untoward situation comes as a pleasant surprise. According to President Ghani, the Afghan forces are fully capable of controlling the country with or without any assistance from the US or NATO forces. This sudden awareness goes hand in glove with the withdrawal plan and indicates a sort of clarity in Kabul about the future roles of all regional stakeholders. In fact, it’s a clarion call that Kabul would not need any help from Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, Turkey or India in addressing any undesirable move in any direction. On one hand, this confidence may bring a smile on the face of all those who thought Kabul was not capable of handling the aftermath of the withdrawal on its own and on the other, it may have warned the Taliban to forget about any dream of an Emirate governed under Islamic law by the religious leaders. This preparedness has also delivered a message to the participants of the moot scheduled for April 24 in Turkey on Afghanistan.

[US Ambassador to Russia to return to US briefly this week](https://nation.com.pk/20-Apr-2021/us-ambassador-to-russia-sullivan-to-return-to-united-states-briefly-this-week)

It would be interesting to analyse why the Taliban will be held accountable if the US or its allies were subjected to any terrorist attacks in a post-withdrawal scenario. Firstly, it is clear from this warning that the Taliban will be in power or at least in a position of strength to inflict any harm to the US and its allies. Secondly, the Taliban are not considered trustworthy of any mature behaviour and in Washington’s assessment, they are likely to continue posing problems in the way of achieving the desired stability in Afghanistan. Thirdly, the government in Afghanistan is not considered adequately equipped to hold the Taliban accountable on its own, giving legitimacy to the widely presumed notion that Kabul will not be able to hold the fort once the foreign troops are withdrawn. Fourthly, there are strong apprehensions that terrorist attacks would continue to take place especially after the drawdown is complete. Lastly, once the Taliban are held responsible of any wrongdoing, all sorts of measures would be taken to deal with the emerging undesirable situation including, unfortunately, the redeployment of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

[Sri Lankan Monks delegation visits Badshahi Mosque, Lahore Fort](https://nation.com.pk/20-Apr-2021/sri-lankan-monks-delegation-visits-badshahi-mosque-lahore-fort)

Expecting countries of the region, including China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkey and India, to support Afghanistan without defining what that ‘support’ is and without realising if such ‘support’ would be available from countries with divergent viewpoints on Afghanistan, is not practical. Countries of the region with some stakes in Afghanistan have different, if not diametrically opposite, standpoints on the elusive stability of Afghanistan. Why is it that Iran, the most affected regional country after Pakistan and with the most stakes in Afghanistan after Pakistan, was not considered worth mentioning is not understood either. Therefore, it is not difficult to deduce that the US would comparatively be far less concerned about the post-withdrawal situation in and around Afghanistan. On the other hand, the regional stakeholders, including Pakistan, may have already started serious strategic thinking on what to do and what not to do if this time the US was to actually honour the announced date of withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

[Sindh appeals ECP to postpone NA-249 by-elections](https://nation.com.pk/20-Apr-2021/sindh-appeals-ecp-to-postpone-na-249-by-elections)

Secretary Blinken’s unannounced visit to Kabul on April 15 soon after his President’s announcement of an exit plan was necessary as the Afghan government needed to be assured of the US’ continued support even after the unconditional withdrawal of troops is completed. However, ‘the partnership is changing, but the partnership is enduring’ is a diplomatic statement which could mean anything ranging from a verbal assurance of support to actual and material support as and when required to be rendered. It is not clear whether certain other matters of mutual interest were also discussed including the role of the Afghan government or the US in the next four months and beyond. One thing is however clear; the intended message to Kabul through Secretary Blinken could not be delivered at the time of announcing the exit plan.

The Taliban were always cognisant of the fact that time was on their side and that postponing the date of withdrawal was just another nerve testing ploy. The delayed withdrawal is likely to prompt them to ponder over initiating fresh attacks on the foreign troops, if at all they have not planned fresh assaults already. They would certainly be in an advantageous position once the withdrawal is complete. If they could gain ground in the presence of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, what the speed of their achievements would be without facing foreign troops is anybody’s guess. With the imminent withdrawal of troops and a possible victory in sight, would they even consider to talk about President Ghani’s proposal of brokering ceasefire followed by elections, is also anybody’s guess. Furthermore, by declining to attend the April 24 peace conference, the Taliban have already announced their intentions. No talking after the demise of the Qatar agreement, in which May 1 was decided as the withdrawal date.

India’s concern expressed by its CDS Bipin Rawat that the withdrawal would create space for ‘disrupters’ is genuine from the point of view of New Delhi’s ongoing activities inside Afghanistan. However, in the overall context of the Afghan conflict, this misplaced concern is nothing more than crying wolf and an obvious attempt to persuade the US to revisit Washington’s plans of a withdrawal. After all, how would India manage to see its marginalisation in a country after the withdrawal where it has invested $3 billion on the construction of roads and power stations? India seems to have no confidence in the government of President Ghani for safeguarding its interests in Afghanistan once the umbrella of foreign troops is removed from its several Consulates based in Afghanistan.

Perhaps, the US wants others to babysit Afghanistan now to see for themselves how difficult it was to handle the Taliban and intra-Afghan conflict. Perhaps, the US wants the regional countries to understand and fathom the uncertain aftermath of the withdrawal of troops and collectively request Washington to keep all foreign troops where they currently are deployed. For this to happen, Washington has given around four months to regional stakeholders to ponder over the pros and cons of an actual and complete drawdown and make individual and collective plans to extend ‘support’ to Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the past several time slots announced and retracted for a drawdown from Afghanistan, all concerned parties somehow tend to believe that this time, Washington will abide by its promise and the foreign troops will actually leave Afghanistan by September 11 this year. There would hardly be any change on the ground in case this deadline needed to be extended to another future date. However, everything in and around Afghanistan is likely to change if all foreign troops including foreign experts, professionals, paramedics, strategists, political scientists and others leave the country for good by the newly announced date. In an exit plan where the ‘stability of Afghanistan’ is not envisioned in practical terms, although it remains the ultimate goal, the ‘reconstruction of Afghanistan’ did not merit even a passing remark. Get ready for bigger chaos and larger than life challenges in the region after September 11. Soon there will be multiple babysitters to look after Afghanistan and that, is by no means, a pleasant sight.