**Complicated Afghan endgame**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-04-26

THE postponement of the US-orchestrated Afghan peace conference marks an early setback for renewed efforts to expedite talks on a political settlement of the conflict. It leaves the nascent peace process in disarray at least for now. The conference co-hosted by the UN, Turkey and Qatar was scheduled for April 24-May 4 in Istanbul.

Announcing its postponement until af ter the end of Ramazan, Turkey`s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavusoglu said that in view of the Taliban`s nonparticipation it was `meaningless` to press ahead especially as there was `no clarity about the formation of delegations and participation`.

The conference was being calibrated by Washington with its plans to completely withdraw from Afghanistan. Announcing this in his muchanticipated address on April 14 President Joe Biden boldly acknowledged that nothing more could be achieved by retaining US troops in the country and all would be pulled out by Sept 11. He said once Al Qaeda had been degraded and Osama bin Laden eliminated a decade earlier, the US goal was achieved but its presence in Afghanistan continued for another decade for increasingly unclear reasons. Rejecting the Pentagon`s preference for a conditions-based drawdown, Biden said: `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.

Under the Doha agreement between the US and Taliban, forged in February 2020, American forces were to fully withdraw by May 1 in exchange for the Taliban commitment to prevent Afghanistan`s soil from being used by terrorists and agreeing to intra-Afghan talks. Even before Biden`s announcement the Taliban had declared they would not participate in the Istanbul talks and threatened `consequences` if the withdrawal deadline was shif ted.

Washington probably hoped that by giving a final and unconditional deadline for its departure the Taliban would accept the decision. But the Taliban maintained a tough posture and responded to Biden`s speech by reiterating their position that delay in the pullout was a breach of the Doha agreement for which `necessary counter-measures`would be taken. They refused to attend the Turkey conference andsaidthatcreatingexpectationsthis would yield a peace deal was an effort `to push the Taliban willingly or unwillingly, to a rushed decision which was needed by America`.

Plans for the `Istanbul Conference on the Afghan Peace Process` had been set in train by the US weeks before its withdrawal announcement. A leaked letter from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to President Ashraf Ghani laid out key elements of the American proposal. They included a UN-led peace conference in Turkey attended by regional and other `partners` to mobilise a consensus to support the peace plan followed by a meeting between the Afghan parties to finalise a peace deal. A joint statement by the UN, Turkey and Qatar cast the aim of the conference in ambitious terms: `The Conference will focus on helping the negotiating parties reach a set of shared,foundational principles that reflect an agreed vision for a future Afghanistan, a roadmap to a future political settlement and an end to the conflict.

Driving this effort with a sense of urgency was, of course, the US in the hope of accelerating the peace talks into making significant progress ahead of its withdrawal deadline. Intense shuttle diplomacy by its special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in the region was aimed at persuading the Afghan parties to attend the Istanbul Conference and give an impetus to the peace process.

The postponement raises many questions. Is the Turl(ey peace conference stillborn? Can the peace process be revived? If so, can progress be made to reach a settlement before the US withdrawal? Will the US leave without a peace deal? Will the Taliban wait for the departure of American/Nato forces to strengthen their hand in peace negotiations afterwards? The answer to all of the above turns principally on the Taliban`s calculation as well as to how much leverage and interest the US has to push the peace effort. Indications are that the Americans willremain engaged in diplomatic efforts and seem serious in wanting a peace deal or at least progress towards it before their departure. This would be an important element of face-saving for Washingtonand also enable an orderly and `honourable` exit.

That is why behind the scenes talks are also focused on negotiating a 90-day reduction of violence with the Taliban. As for leverage, while the effectiveness of coercive pressure has been diminishing with the withdrawal underway, the UN sanctions process remains a source of leverage as de-listing is among the Taliban`s main demands. In any case, the Doha accord committed Washington to begin this process once intra-Afghan talks commenced.

The US along with the international community can also use economic incentives by holding out the promise of assistance after September. This is also the hope expressed by top US diplomats as well as Pakistani officials.

The Taliban while adopting a tough posture have nonetheless kept space open for engagement and significantly refrained from announcing their spring offensive. The thinking among field commanders may be that all the Taliban need to do is wait it out for the US to depart and there is little value in engaging in peace talks where they will have to make concessions.

However, the leadership`s calculation may be different. They may feel they have more to gain from resuming the peace dialogue than abandoning it especially as they would not want to risk losing the international recognition and legitimacy they now have. Release of their prisoners and removal from UN sanctions can only be secured through diplomatic engagement.

They may also see an opportunity after two decades of military struggle to secure their goal through negotiations an option that would help them elicit international support and assistance needed in post-America Afghanistan and importantly, offer a better chance of achieving lasting peace.

For these reasons the Afghan peace process is far from being dead even if it faces daunting challenges ahead. All stakeholders, and above all, the Afghan parties know that if the path of negotiation is abandoned Afghanistan will descend into chaos and strife from which no one will benefit. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.