**Fight or flight?**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-03-17

IN recent years, as the negotiations phase in the 21st-century variant of the Great Game has gathered pace, every cliché in the diplomatic playbook has been trotted out to illustrate its sporadic progress.

There have been multiple windows of opportunity, open doors, seats at the table, options on the table and inevitably some dealings under the table. `Between the devil and the deep blue sea` doesn`t figure all that frequently in official statements, but it pretty much sums up the choices Afghanistan has f aced for the past 40 years.

Among the latest options is a draf t `peace` agreement secretly proposed by the Biden administration, but much commented on since it was leaked last week. Some of ficials in Kabul have poured scorn on the US wish list which is hardly surprising, given it effectively consigns the Ashraf Ghani administration to oblivion. The Taliban have been more reticent in their response so far, saying they are studying the document.

The entity that the US and its allies dislodged from power nearly 20 years ago is being offered substantial representation in every tier of an interim government. A constituent assembly is envisaged, with elections to be held once it has completed its task. There are motherhood statements about education, intellectual freedom and women`s rights.

As golden-throated philosopher Freddie Mercury once wondered: `Is this the real life? Is this just f antasy?` For many years now, the biggest fear among some Afghans has revolved around their nation`s prospects once the foreign military forces exited. That apprehension highlights the crux of Afghanistan`s abiding tragedy: since thelate1970s,its fortunes have largely been determined by outsiders.

Of course, more broadly, that has been the case for centuries.

The tyranny of geography is an immutable fact, but what`s particularly remarkable is the extent to which Afghanistan has resisted being swallowed up by neighbouring empires.

Only time will tell whether that rugged exceptionalism serves it well in this century.

When the US invaded in collaboration with the Northern Alliance in 2001, in the wake of the 9/11, the Taliban chose to melt away, reinforcing the impression of a Western-led cakewalk into Kabul. Once the botched effort to track down Osama bin Laden failed, the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld administration saw little reason to expend too much energy or too many resources on Afghanistan. Its attention shifted to Iraq.

Perhaps the Taliban reahsed even back then that they had time on their side apart from sanctuaries in Pakistan, where bin Laden also found refuge. Over the years they steadily re-established their cloutacross the countryside. The US and its allies pouredin tens of thousands of troops, and tens of thousands of people mainly Afghans have been killed since then.

Both sides have committed innumerable war crimes that will likely go uninvestigated and unpunished.

And where are we today? The debate is over the exit of the remaining 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan by May 1. Actually, the figure is closer to 3,500, according to the New York Times (which notes that the Pentagon routinely understates troop numbers). Then there are the 8,000 or so `contractors`unofficial military personnel, in effect plus smaller contingents from the usual Western allies, which wouldn`t stay behind once the Americans pack up.

Joe Biden is under considerable pressure to postpone the pullout.Should he do so, as seems likely, the Taliban would have an excuse to renege on their part of the Doha bargain whereby they have resisted the temptation to attack foreign forces. Beyond that, the violence has not significantlydiminished in the past year. Apart from other atrocities, targeted killings of women in particular occur with brutal regularity. The Taliban deny responsibility, but no one else claims it.It`s reasonable to assume that the security situation would deteriorate in the immediate aftermath of a Western troop withdrawal, with uncertain consequences.

The alternative, however, is also fairly dire.

What could a continued foreign presence achieve that has not already been attempted in the past two decades, with all too few worthy results? Will a planned flurry of diplomatic activity including talks in Turkey between Kabul representatives and the Taliban, and UN-sponsored conference of foreign ministers from Russia, China, the US, Iran, India and Pakistan tentatively scheduled for next week achieve very much? Some commitments may be made, but what will they be worth? The latest US plan is informally being referred to as a moonshot. But the original moonshot was backed by science. This one is riding on unsubstandated hope. The Americans will only be postponing the inevitable if they linger. A `dignified departure` won`t be an option down the track, just as `peace with honour` proved elusive in Vietnam. m mahir.dawn @gmail.com