**Regional approach to end-game**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-08-11

AMID the escalating Taliban military blitz, of ficials from the US, Russia, China and Pakistan are meeting in Doha today (Wednesday) as part of an international effort to prevent Afghanistan from descending into a protracted civil war. The socalled extended Troika is seeking to develop a regional consensus on the Afghan conflict.

Notwithstanding some differences all these countries have a huge stake in peace in Afghanistan.

It follows another meeting in the Qatari capital on Tuesday of representatives of the UN, the US and Afghanistan to find ways to revive the stalled intra-Afghan peace talks. The Afghan Taliban may not be part of any of these conclaves but the presence of the group`s political leadership in the city could help put the message across to them.

A major question, however, is whether the multinational efforts can force the warring sides to stop hostilities and go for a negotiated political settlement. With the Taliban offensive taking a new and bloodier turn, a civil war is already unfolding in Afghanistan. After consolidating its hold on large swaths of the countryside the insurgents have now taken control of several provincial capitals.

Some of the major cities are now under siege with a highly demoralised Afghan government forces trying to stop the Taliban onslaught. The American air force bombing may have slowed down the insurgents` of fensive in some areas, but it is not likely to change the situation much. With the Aug 31 deadline for the completion of the withdrawal of US forces approaching, the prospects for a reduction in violence appear diminished. The only hope is strong regional pressure on the warring sides forcing them to return to the negotiating table.

Initiated by Russia, the Troika-plus format certainly has an important role to play in the Afghanistan end-game. The three regional countries Russia, China and Pakistan have far greater stakes in stopping the violence in Afghanistan that could have serious implications for the region. All of them have good relations with the Taliban and a collective effort could still work with the insurgents to moderate their hard-line position.

America`s role too remains pivotal despite the withdrawal of its forces.It has become more challenging for the group as both warring sides have toughened their stance.

Last month, a meeting between the Taliban and the Afghan republic delegation in Doha ended in a stalemate. Yet the parleys at the highest level gave some hope as the two sides agreed to meet again for more constructive negotiations.

In this situation, the role of the `extended Troika` and other regional countries becomes extremely significant to break the deadlock. More importantly, there is a complete convergence of views among the members of the extended Troika that no military solution to the Afghan conflict is acceptable.

In the last meeting in March, the special representatives of the four countries had called on all parties to the conflict, particularly the Taliban, to reduce the level of violence in order to create an environment that is conducive to reaching a negotiated political settlement.

The group also made it clear it would not support the restoration of an `Islamic emirate` or the old conservative order that existed under Taliban rule before the American invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. But the Taliban`s relentless military offensive over the last few months with the drawing down of the American forces has increased concerns about the Taliban ignoring the warning.

The latest move by the conservative Islamic militia to extend its military offensive to the cities has added to the urgency of accelerating the regional effort to prevent a full-blown civil war in Afghanistan. In her statement at the UN Security Council last week, Deborah Lyons, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, said: `Afghanistan is now at a dangerous turning point.

Warning that the outcome could extend beyond Afghan borders, she urged the international community `to prevent Afghanistan from descending into a situation of catastrophe so serious that it would have few, if any, parallels this century`.

Despite the Taliban`s recent diplomatic move to alleviate their concerns, there is growing fear among regional countries about the spillover effects of the rising power of the insurgents in Afghanistan. While warmly receiving the Taliban leaders last month, Chinese officials also empha-sised the need for a negotiated political settlement of the Afghan conflict. The Taliban leaders were also reportedly told by Beijing to make a clear break from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is a UN-designated terrorist outfit seeking an independent state for the Chinese Muslims living in Xinxiang.

China`smain concernis thatchaosin Afghanistan would stoke Islamic fundamentalism that threatens domestic security in the country. For China, continued instability in Afghanistan could foster the radicalisation of Muslims in the region and directly contribute to the unrest in China`s northwest Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

Although Russia is not a fresh entrant on the Afghan scene, its initiative to build a regional alliance points to a new alignment of forces in a changing geopolitical landscape. The Russian assertiveness is driven by the fear of political uncertainty in Afghanistan. Moscow has serious concerns regarding the deteriorating situation close to its borders.

Afghanistan`s stability is critical for regional peace more so for Pakistan which has been directly affected by the two-decades-long conflict spilling over into its territory. Pakistan`s role is vital to determining the course of the Afghan endgame and its cooperation is key to the winding down of the war. A political settlement in Afghanistan could also help Pakistan deal with its problem of militancy.

This strong convergence of views among the regional countries and their common security concerns over Afghanistan`s deteriorating situation makes the meeting of the extended Troika extremely important. The members are expected to urge both Taliban and the Afghan to agree on an immediate reduction of violence and the resumption of intra-Afghan talks. A negotiated political settlement intertwined with a regional approach is the only end-game. Both the Taliban and Afghan government should show equal willingness to reachaceaseñre andrestartsubstandaltalks.m The writeris the author of No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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