**The elusive Afghan peace process**

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

March 01, 2021

Last year’s agreement reached between President Trump and the Taliban to withdraw all foreign troops, including US service members, from Afghanistan by May 1 seems to have met the similar fate of all such deals made in the past. In view of the recommendations made by the US congressionally appointed panel to delay the deadline, Washington is likely release information regarding whether it would honour its former President’s commitment in this regard or not. The golden opportunity provided to the US in Doha to undertake a peaceful exit-strategy from the Afghan conflict seems to have been lost in the air, perhaps forever. Meanwhile, announcing that NATO’s troops would remain in Afghanistan until the time was right for withdrawal, Secretary General Stoltenberg, on February 18, lamented the fact that talks were ‘fragile’, the progress was ‘slow’, and the Afghan Forces were seemingly not capable of maintaining peace and security in the country. Are we back to square one?

[Zlatan Ibrahimović to miss Man Utd Europa League due to injury](https://nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2021/zlatan-ibrahimovi-to-miss-man-utd-europa-league-due-to-injury)

The question is not how many foreign troops will leave Afghanistan and when? Neither is it the right sizing of troops or the speed of withdrawal and advantages or disadvantages of going too fast or too slow in the withdrawal process. Nor is it the debate on finding non-political solutions to the Afghan conflict. The question is whether Afghanistan will become a terror-free and peaceful country once a broad based peace plan, after reaching agreement, is successfully carried out? Would the intra-Afghan settlement of mutual grievances or striking a doable peace accord or placing a broad based stable government in Kabul allay fears of the stakeholders and provide some breathing space to the people of Afghanistan? Hopefully, yes.

The irony is that the real aim of having a stable Afghanistan has unknowingly dissolved in the unending discussion on the proportionate increase or gradual decrease or complete withdrawal of foreign troops from this eternally war ravaged country. The crucial question as to who should run the country once America’s longest war in history comes to an end, still remains unanswered mainly because the warring parties desire total administrative control over the country with no interference from any sides. Rightly so then, the change of deadlines or announcing a fresh withdrawal schedule does not concern the Taliban at all. Believing that time is on their side and the withdrawal of foreign troops is on the cards in any case, they might not be seriously inclined to cut fresh deals any more.

[ECP to make final decision regarding ballot papers today](https://nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2021/ecp-to-make-final-decision-regarding-ballot-papers-today)

As if President Ashraf Ghani’s refusal to release thousands of incarcerated Taliban or the establishment of an interim government were not enough indications of the failure of the Afghan peace process that the Doha agreement has been unilaterally modified. On the other hand, imminent threats to Kandahar—seizing of highways leading to Kabul by the Taliban, the alarming situation in and around Kunduz and Pul Khumri in the North, renewed attacks on both sides, increased ‘undesirable’ activities of the Taliban, persisting violence and the ostensible inability of the Afghan forces to seize control—are strong enough indicators for NATO to change its pullout plans. With reports of continued fights amongst the Taliban, ISIS, various warlords, foreign troops and the Afghan government, any solution to the Afghan conflict or bringing peace and security in the region is, at best, an indefinable hope. Instead of withdrawal, one might see a substantial increase in the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan soon.

[MQM-P to support PTI in Senate elections: Amin-ul-Haque](https://nation.com.pk/01-Mar-2021/mqm-p-to-support-pti-in-senate-elections-amin-ul-haque)

Presumably, during the last 19 years of conflict, the US must have reached the same conclusion about messing with Afghanistan as the British and Russians did in the past. Washington must have a fair idea by now that the ‘Graveyard of Empires’, Afghanistan, has always been difficult to conquer or rule mainly because of its mysteriously unique terrain and extreme divergence in local political and cultural milieu. Trying to surmount the fearless people of Afghanistan or their extremely inimitable dwellings is nothing but a false hope. The US must have a fair idea by now that the hearts and minds of the Afghans could only be won by their own elders, if at all such a concept exists in the Afghan culture. In addition, it must be clear to Washington that the ongoing Afghan peace process is devoid of the most crucial element in any successful negotiations, sincerity of purpose. The West needs to realise one more thing about Afghanistan. Even if there was only one Afghani left on his soil, he would prefer to take a bullet in his chest instead of laying down arms. Hence, taking a lesson from history, even a hundred-year war is not likely to produce the ‘desired results’. The ongoing Afghan war is perhaps the most expensive and time consuming wild goose chase this world has ever seen.

[UN Syria commission calls for immediate cease-fire](https://nation.com.pk/01-Mar-2021/un-syria-commission-calls-for-immediate-cease-fire)

The human, economic, political and monetary losses so far borne in the 19-year old Afghan conflict by all concerned parties, including the people of Afghanistan, are incalculable. These losses are likely to increase in the coming days, months and years if promises were not kept or a better sense does not prevail or a spade is not called a spade. The Afghan conflict and efforts for bringing peace in Afghanistan have already cost the world more than the colossal amount of funds spent on the rebuilding of Europe after WW2.

Pieces on the chessboard are being rearranged to chalk out the future of Afghanistan, a country that has seemingly lost everything except its pride, history and strategic value. One only hopes that the ‘real objectives’ behind the conflict also included the after-war reconstruction of Afghanistan and this unfortunate country was not left at the mercy of fate once again. One also hopes the history of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is not repeated either. If the statements of former First Lady, Hillary Clinton, are to be believed, just as it did in the past, would the US leave the Colosseum for the Gladiators to sort everything out on their own? Only time will tell.