**US withdrawal and what it means for Afghanistan**

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On April 14, US President Joe Biden announced that all his country’s troops would leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021; and not by May 1, as pledged by the former White House administration. Indeed, Biden claimed that the US had achieved its objectives in Afghanistan, saying: “We went to Afghanistan in 2001 to root out Al Qaeda, to prevent future terrorist attacks against the United States planned from Afghanistan. We accomplished that objective”.

Yet ground realities in Afghanistan contradict Biden’s talk of success. After all, there are reports of a Taliban-Al Qaeda nexus. Back in October of last year, Edmund Fitton-Brown, co-ordinator of the UN’s Monitoring Team on the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and the Taliban, confirmed as much to the BBC, noting that Al Qaeda was “heavily embedded” within the Taliban in Afghanistan. In addition, that same month saw Afghan Special Forces kill top Al Qaeda chief Husam Abd al-Rauf (Abu Muhsin al-Masri) in a raid on the southeastern city of Ghazni, an area mostly under Taliban control. Al-Masri featured on the FBI’s list of Most Wanted Terrorists.

**Violence amidst peace negotiations**

The Doha negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government have stalled. Moreover, the future of the US-backed Istanbul Conference on Afghan peace, re-scheduled for later his month, remains uncertain. The Taliban had initially ruled out attendance. And while their position hasn’t officially changed, the group is facing mounting international pressure to participate. Elsewhere, violence is steadily on the rise across in the country. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), from January to March 2021, civilians causalities totalled 1,783 (an increase of 29 percent as compared to the first quarter of 2020). These were attributed to both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Taliban, which were responsible for 17 percent and 43.5 percent, respectively. UNAMA further documented a 37 percent increase in the number of women killed and injured, as well as 23 percent increase in child casualties compared to the first quarter of 2020.

**Preparing for the fight**

The Taliban’s sustained campaign of violence and reluctance to declare a ceasefire have forced Kabul into the arms of former warlords and re-emerging ethnic militias. The government is preparing both militarily and politically to counter the Taliban’s offensive. To strengthen his political position, President Ashraf Ghani has made concessions to former warlords and there may be more of this to come. Last month, a Hazara commander of a private militia, Abdul Ghani Alipur, gave the order to shoot down an Afghan military helicopter in Wardak province. Nine were killed in the targeted attack, including soldiers and crew. The government responded by labelling Alipur a terrorist. Yet it must also be noted that he still enjoys the support of Hazara leaders like former vice president, Karim Khalili, and senior presidential adviser Mohammad Mohaqiq). Significantly, Alipur remains at large and is reportedly regrouping his Fatemiyoun militias somewhere in the central highlands. The Fatemiyoun Brigade was established by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to recruit and arm Afghan Hazara Shias to fight against ISIS in Syria. In an interview to a private television channel last December, Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif confirmed this. He further said that he had suggested to Kabul that the Brigade could be used to fight ISIS within Afghan borders.

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Former Northern Alliance leaders have responded to the prospect of a Taliban peace deal. Younas Qanooni, a former vice president, warned, in an interview in February, that the Alliance would regroup to defend its interests if threatened by an accord. Similarly, Gen Dostrum, another one-time Alliance leader who entered into to the Karzai fold, has already mobilised forces loyal to him to prepare for such an eventuality. Even Mohammad Mohaqiq, who works directly alongside President Ghani, has declared his readiness to fight the Taliban if peace fails.

**Troops withdrawal, Taliban and Afghan government**

Certainly, there are pros and cons of US withdrawal for both the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Taliban’s two-decade insurgency was based on a single-point agenda: to expel US military forces from the country. Aside from its support base in neighbouring Pakistan — the group was able to recruit under-privileged youth from under-developed rural Afghanistan to wage the ‘sacred’ cause of jihad against the invaders. Thus, once the US leaves Afghanistan, this religious and moral compulsion will begin to ebb and it will therefore become more difficult to convince Afghans to fight their fellow compatriots. This is also the major reason behind the Taliban’s unwillingness to agree upon a comprehensive ceasefire.

In reality, eventual US withdrawal will boost Afghan forces’ morale both on a religious and nationalist front, thereby leading to a united effort to secure the country against those extremists that are following a foreign agenda. However, without US military support — mainly air support — it will be challenging for Afghan forces to independently fight and protect against a resurgent Taliban. Though the US and NATO have reiterated their commitment to continued financial support to sustain Afghan forces, this will naturally not be at the same level as before and will, in all likelihood, gradually come to and end.

**Withdrawal and Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours**

In Moscow, the March meeting of the Troika ‘plus’, comprising the US, Russia, China and Pakistan, the decision was taken to not to support the restoration of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan; a key Taliban rallying cry. India and Iran, meanwhile, support a sovereign and democratic Afghanistan. Iran’s Zarif, at a panel discussion on Afghanistan at the Raisina Dialogue on 16 April, termed the Islamic Emirate impractical. He called on the Taliban to embrace democratic change since today’s Afghanistan was different from that of 2001.

Nevertheless, Pakistan’s decades-long Afghan policy envisages a Taliban that is in power to to counter India as well as securing its political and economic objectives in the region. Despite Islamabad’s repeated claims of supporting a peaceful Afghanistan — no tangible or institutional action has been taken to dismantle Taliban support networks within its borders. Returning Afghanistan to Islamic Emirate tule or absolute Taliban authority will fuel radicalisation in the region and Pakistan will be the first country to be impacted. Pakistan has has spent the last four decades supporting and feeding jihadism and Talibanism in Afghanistan, which has, in turn, also exposed Pakistani society to religious extremism. Having deep religious, cultural and historic ties with Afghanistan, Pakistan cannot remain unaffected from ongoing turmoil in its neighbourhood. Thus, an inclusive and stable Afghan government is in Islamabad’s genuine interest, as well that of the broader region. It necessarily falls to Pakistan to use its leverage with the Taliban to urge the group to accept a comprehensive ceasefire and become part of an inclusive democratic Afghanistan.

**The way forward**

The Taliban must realise that without a peace deal in place, they will not be welcomed at home or abroad, either regionally or globally. Certainly, the group was an accepted substitute to the anarcho-warlordism that prevailed in Afghanistan during the 1990s. But today, despite the odds, Afghanistan is home to armed forces totalling more than 350,000, an elected Parliament and functioning government institutions. Millions of boys and girls are attending schools and colleges. The Taliban must therefore stop imposing their strict interpretation of Islam on the citizenry. Instead, the group needs to accept the new realities of Afghan society, including its values, culture and ethnic diversity. The inclusion of the Taliban in Afghan political system can be a reason for wider reforms to address corruption, weak governance and incapability of delivering public services. However, if the Taliban opt to gain power through violence — there is the very real possibility that ordinary Afghans will rally behind the current government in a bid to protect basic rights while preserving the gains of the past two decades. If this happens, the country will tragically enter into another unending conflict.

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