**The Afghanistan conundrum**

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July 17, 2021

The last remaining US soldiers stationed at the Bagram Air Base, once the symbol of US presence in Afghanistan, returned home on Friday July 2, just in time to spend the fourth of July weekend with their families. The transfer of the airfield – just 40 miles to the north of Kabul – to Afghan forces marks the virtual end of the longest war in American history.

After this drawdown, approximately 650 US soldiers are expected to remain in Afghanistan with the limited mission of protecting the US embassy and Kabul’s international airport.

In order to allay the fears that the United States was abandoning Afghanistan and to reassure the Afghans that the United States would continue to back them even after the pullout, President Biden hosted an Oval Office meeting, on June 25, with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation.

Referring to Ghani and Abdullah as “two old friends” whom he “met many, many times in Afghanistan for long hours,” Biden promised to extend “sustained” military, economic and political support to their country. [“Our] troops may be leaving, but support for Afghanistan is not ending,” the president said.

While Biden’s words may have been reassuring for the two beleaguered Afghan leaders, the somber tone that surrounded the summit was hard to miss. Most people knew that it could well be the last time a US president would be hosting a pro-American Afghan president at the White House in a long while – possibly forever.

The Taliban have been emboldened by the American withdrawal and the prospects for a negotiated peace for Afghanistan have grown exceedingly dim

This is the case because the nation of Afghanistan exists in a precarious position today. The Taliban, assisted by those streaming in from Pakistan, have gained broad swathes of territories with little resistance from the Afghan government troops. On the weekend after President Biden’s announcement, Taliban swept through a series of districts in northern Afghanistan and more than 1,000 Afghan government troops fled across the border.

On ABC’s This Week on Sunday, July 4, General Austin Scott Miller, the man overseeing the troops pullout stated, “You look at the security situation, it’s not good,” “The Afghans recognise it’s not good. The Taliban are on the move.”

Some intelligence reports now predict a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan within six months to two years of the US departure. The consequences of this could be disastrous for the people of Afghanistan and peace in the region.

Under Taliban rule, many of the gains made during the past two decades, especially in the areas of literacy and women’s empowerment, might be wiped away. In addition, it is questionable whether Taliban would deliver on the counterterrorism guarantees it has made.

Given this dire situation, one is forced to ask why this turnaround on Afghanistan is occurring. There are myriad reasons. The primary ones include: the mindset of the US on Afghanistan, the positions of the players in the region, and the nature of Afghanistan itself.

The United States entered Afghanistan after the attacks of 9/11 to destroy the Taliban and in pursuit of Osama bin Laden. Outside of that primary purpose, the mission has been an extremely muddled one that grew through the years and decades with an enormous cost in US dollars and lives. The Afghan war has claimed the lives of more than 2,400 American troops and 3,800 private soldiers employed by the US military, and cost US taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.

There was never much popular public support for the Afghan War in the US. And whatever support there was has shrunk considerably over time with the majority of Americans today opposed to the involvement there. This has made it easy for presidents to withdraw troops over the past decade.

President Barack Obama shrunk the troop presence considerably between 2012 and 2016. President Donald Trump announced a full pullout by May 1, 2021 if the Taliban met the commitments it made in the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan on February 29, 2020.

President Biden sealed the deal by beating the deadline of September 11, 2021 that he had set for withdrawal. The Washington Post opined in an editorial that “Biden has long been a skeptic of the US mission in Afghanistan…” As president, he was able to act on that skepticism.

Nations in the region and those invested or interested in Afghanistan have seen the writing on the wall regarding Afghanistan’s future.

New Delhi, which has long been a significant player in Afghanistan, has been preparing for the US withdrawal and the potential fall of Kabul. Many have linked the Indian government’s recent talks with Kashmiri leaders to US withdrawal and a potential return of Taliban in Kabul.

India is not the only country in the region concerned about the Taliban’s rise. Iran, China, Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Gulf States, who bankrolled the Afghan Mujahideen fighting the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, all have skin in the Afghan game.

Through the years, many of these countries have been preparing for the American departure. It is reported that, just like India, Russia, Iran, China and others have held secret negotiations with the Taliban as well.

As in the past, there is one country that will play an outsized role in relations with Afghanistan going forward. That is the country’s neighbour and longtime benefactor of the Taliban, Pakistan. While Islamabad’s influence on the Taliban has dwindled over the decades, Pakistanis are still believed to have some sway over the militia.

Finally, there is Afghanistan itself. The country has been in an almost endless state of conflict and civil wars since 1978. The US presence in this latest war brought a modicum of stability beginning in 2001 but at a heavy cost. Over the past two decades, more than 66,000 Afghan soldiers and a hundred thousand civilians have died, and over 2.7 million have been rendered homeless.

In conclusion, Afghanistan is a conundrum. There is no simple answer to what lies ahead.

It appears likely, however, that in the near term the Taliban will gain control of much of the country except for Kabul which is well fortified and protected by the US and selected international involvement. That said, the US embassy in Kabul already has an “emergency action plan” in place and arrangements are being made for the evacuation of thousands of Afghan interpreters who assisted the US during this war.

The Taliban have been emboldened by the American withdrawal and the prospects for a negotiated peace for Afghanistan have grown exceedingly dim.

In spite of this, it should be remembered that hope dies last. Peace talks must be pursued. Peace must be given a chance. It is the last best hope for Afghanistan and its people.

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