**Afghan dilemma**

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T HE Biden administration has made clear its desire to bring America`s 20-year involvement in Afghanistan to a dignified end. But af ter a decade of missed objectives in a country ravaged by conflict in a region vulnerable to mistrust, there is little dignity to be found.

While President Joe Biden made no overt reference to Afghanistan in his first foreign policy address, senior of ficials have been locking horns on what it will take to bring home the last remaining 2,500 American troops four months before a May 2021 deadline.

The problem is that in their current discussions in Doha, the Afghan government and the Taliban seem to be at an impasse. IntraAfghan violence is on the rise, and neither party seems ready to make major concessions. A recent congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group has suggested that the Biden administration consider revoking the May 2021withdrawal deadline stipulated by its February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, and instead, condition US withdrawal from Afghanistan on a further reduction in violence.

The possibility that the US may seek to unilaterally alter the withdrawal timeline carries risks, with the Taliban warning of dangerous escalation if the terms of the deal are breached. While Pakistan has long viewed the prospect of a clumsy US exit sans credible security guarantees unfavourably, the prospect of any unilateral alteration of the terms of the US-Taliban agreement is worrying for another set of reasons.

The first has to do with the signal such an alteration will send to the Taliban primarily of America`s unreliability as an honest broker. If last February`s deal is revised, Pakistan may not be able to get the Taliban to agree to get back to the table, unless it does so on vastly diminished US terms. This is because the May withdrawal was an explicit component of the agreement, and a politically invigorated Taliban will likely view an eleventh-hour change uncharitably. Taliban hardliners could use this to make a case for another summer fighting season. Heightened violence will snuff out hopes for progress in Doha and undercut Pakistan`s own political and security interests which, Pakistani officials have made clear, are co-dependent on a stable, secure Afghan state.

Two, Pakistan has been looking to reset the tone of its own ties with the US by moving the conversation away from the war in Afghanistan to other avenues of potential cooperation, especially geoeconomics. It has also been wanting to get Washington to look beyond zero-sum configurations of the region, especially with respect to China (in particular, disabusing the US of the notion that it has to compete with China for Pakistani cooperation). But by jettisoning the terms of theFebruary agreement, the US will only ensure its conversation with Pakistan remains predictably short term, framed by the broader structural context and compulsions of tactical outcomes next door.

Three, by toying with the May deadline, the US risks upsetting a delicate equilibrium that has taken years of public and private diplomacybyallstakeholders-Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US, Iran and China to configure.

Whether or not the US decides to cut its losses remains an open question. But despite, or perhaps because of, the damage to America`s regional reputation as a deliverer of peace and stability, it won`t be long before Biden casts around for a scapegoat when the Taliban block future overtures. When that happens, the first casualty will likely be Pakistan`s bilateral equation with Washington, followed by heightened tensions with the Ghani administration in Kabul.

Diplomats in Kabul and Islamabad have worked hard in recent months to crisis-proofthe relationship; from agreeing to set up border markets to expediting development projects. But creeping tensions have the capacity to flare up and turn into serious security concerns for Pakistan, including Kabul`s tendency to reach out to India to referee a testyregional dynamic.

As Biden looks to formulate policy around America`s last remaining forever war, levelled for now at seeking some kind of facesaving, he will likely opt for a strategy that makes the May withdrawal contingent on other factors. If this happens, the consequences will be high for Pakistan, whose support was crucial to facilitating the initial deal as well as ongoing intra-Afghan discussions in Doha. It would be good, then, for Islamabad and Washington to speak soon and holistically about the region and its constituent constraints.

It would also be helpful if the US could persuade the Ghani administration to show greater flexibility around political power-sharing, once guarantees for women and minorities are safely and constitutionally enshrined.

Ultimately, the US should steer clear of choosing a policy that disproportionately raises the costs of its own objectives vis-à-vis both Afghanistan, and the neighbourhood. The writer is a PhD candidate in political science at Yale.

Twitter: @fahdhumayun