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THE Afghan peace process is now on hold as the negotiating parties — as well as the region — await the outcome of the new US administration’s review of its Afghanistan policy. Top officials of the Biden administration have [announced](https://www.dawn.com/news/1603156) that they would review the February 2020 agreement forged between the US and Taliban in Doha a year ago.

Earlier this month, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Congress during his confirmation hearing that the administration would “have to look carefully at what has been negotiated to understand fully what commitments were made by the Taliban and to see where they get with their negotiations with the government of Afghanistan”. He also made it plain that Washington wanted to “end this so-called forever war” and “bring forces home”. And he added that the US may want to “retain some capacity to deal with any resurgence of terrorism”.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan reiterated the same message during a call to his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib. He was cited as saying he “made clear the United States’ intention to review” the (Doha) deal and check whether the Taliban are “living up to [their] commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, reduce violence in Afghanistan, and engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders”. In quick response, a Taliban spokesman declared they would “honour the agreement” and expect “the other side to remain committed to their agreement too”.

None of this is a surprise. Any incoming administration can be expected to examine afresh agreements made by its predecessor. But what will this mean for efforts to find a negotiated end to Afghanistan’s long war? And for withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 US forces, pledged for May 2021 under the Doha deal, in exchange for Taliban guarantees to prevent Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups from operating in Afghanistan. Firm answers to these questions will only emerge once the review is concluded.

The US may shift the May timeline of its withdrawal to ensure the Taliban’s compliance with commitments.

There are however pointers to the direction the review might take. President Joe Biden has long been averse to prolonged US military engagement in Afghanistan. As vice president he opposed the military surge president Obama ordered in 2009 and urged a narrow definition of US interests focused on counterterrorism. He advocated an end to “forever wars” often invoking the Vietnam experience to support his stance.

These views and the fact that the US troop pullout is now so far down the road suggests that the Biden administration is unlikely to reverse or significantly change course from what has been agreed under the Doha accord, which is in its interest to affirm. The political context too is significant given public fatigue with a long, unwinnable war. During the year since the agreement was signed there has been no American casualty in Afghanistan with the Taliban adhering to their commitment not to attack US/Nato forces. Any policy change that risks the loss of US lives is not a likely option, the political cost of which will be high. Another indication of policy continuity is the decision announced by Blinken in his first press conference to retain special representative Zalmay Khalilzad, apparently till May.

Some policy clarity may emerge from Washington before a Nato defence ministers meeting scheduled for Feb 18 in Brussels with Afghanistan on the agenda, even though the review would take longer. Europeans have been sceptical about a total troop withdrawal in May given intensifying violence in Afghanistan. That may influence the review. Biden has in the past argued for retaining a small counterterrorism force in Afghanistan, a view Blinken echoed in his congressional testimony. But it is questionable whether this can be negotiated with the Taliban, who are unlikely to agree to any kind of residual force in Afghanistan. This could be a deal breaker and may lead to the collapse of the Doha accord — an outcome that will make the presence of international forces unsustainable and put the peace process at risk.

While the Afghan policy review may not add new US conditions (as some in the Afghan government hope) indications are that the Biden team will want existing conditions to be effectively met and insist on implementation of all aspects of the Doha agreement. As Barnett Rubin (former special adviser at the State Department) told me: “In deciding on how best to implement the agreement, the US is likely to follow the provision of the agreement stating that all of its components are ‘inter-related’.” According to him, the Biden administration “will focus on comprehensive implementation of the Doha agreement to ensure a safe US withdrawal but also engage in robust regional diplomacy to back that up”.

The Biden administration is widely expected to reaffirm the framework of the Doha agreement. But there is every possibility that it will push the Taliban much harder to ensure they are, as a US National Security Council spokesperson put it, “living up to their commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, reduce violence in Afghanistan, and engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders”. A Pentagon spokesman said as much but added that Washington remains committed to the agreement. A more serious US effort is also likely aimed at eliciting Taliban assurances that women’s rights and human rights are protected and respected.

In order to secure compliance with these commitments Washington may shift the May timeframe of its final withdrawal making it contingent on comprehensive implementation of the Doha agreement, especially reduction of violence and real progress in intra-Afghan talks. How the Taliban will react to a delayed pullout is an open question.

As a key stakeholder Pakistan should engage early with the Biden administration to convey its views so that the review takes them into account. Islamabad is looking to Washington to reaffirm the Doha agreement and believes that it offers the best and perhaps only chance for a negotiated peace. This warrants active US backing for the peace talks and pressing both, not just one of the parties, towards a settlement. But if the US decides to delay the deadline for its withdrawal it will need much effort to prevent the peace process from unravelling.

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*Published in Dawn, February 1st, 2021*