[Aimen Akhtar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/aimen-akhtar)

April 13, 2021

**The May deadline**

Whether the Biden-Harris administration will pull out the remaining US troops, estimated at 3,500 in number, by May 1 or whether the peace talks will rupture into the spring offensive is a matter of speculation as the deadline approaches.

On the one hand, the continued violence and mayhem in Afghanistan have blurred the smooth peace negotiations, which are already taking place at a slow pace. On the other hand, regional stability is tightly linked with peace in Afghanistan in terms of security and economic progress.

Countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian countries have massive stakes in the Afghan peace talks. However, in the eventuality of an impasse in Doha peace negotiations, the ramifications are dangerous and will dictate the foreign policy concerns of major superpowers and other regional countries.

Since the 1980s, Afghanistan has been used as a battleground by a number of protagonists. First, the proxy-jihad insurgents were employed by America against its war with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Thereafter, these militants were left unguarded, who then took over the governance of Afghanistan and sought to impose their own version of Taliban government. Events took a major turn after the initiation of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001 when the Taliban administration in Afghanistan was toppled by US and Nato forces. Since then, around two decades have passed by and the troika of the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US has been engaged in a blood bath.

It is now high time that the common Afghan be allowed to breathe freely, enjoy his/her right to life without any fear of militancy, and embrace her/his freedom and liberty in an unfettered way. This, however, requires the active participation of key players in the peace process. Significant compromises ought to be made to make possible the dream of an independent, sovereign and terror-free Afghanistan.

The inclusion of the two contending parties in Afghanistan, non-interference by external elements in a sovereign state’s affairs, and simultaneous regional and global cooperation are the three-fold essential principles that need to be realized to honor the May deadline and avoid any possibility of a truncated Afghan state embroiled in a perennial war.

Where does this leave Pakistan? It is important to contemplate the prospects and challenges for Pakistan if the peace process concludes efficiently or otherwise falters respectively. The domestic policy concerns of Pakistan have often followed the terrain of global strategic matters.

The events unfolding in Afghanistan one after the other have influenced Pakistan’s alliances with central players, not to mention the US, and dictated the internal security situation. It is time for Pakistan, which is playing a strategic role in the Afghan peace negotiations, to prioritize national stability in light of changing global events and push for a positive agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, thus making an automatic way for the US to pull out its forces.

The economic stakes in case of a prosperous Afghanistan are also high for Pakistan keeping in view the connectivity of Pakistan’s highly revered CPEC project with Afghanistan. However, before Afghanistan and Pakistan can join hands for economic cooperation, the security loopholes alongside the Afghanistan-Pakistan border need to be tackled. The flagship BRI also marks China as a crucial player hoping for a stable and secure Afghanistan. Besides, the economic stronghold of South Asian countries under the banner of China will prove to be a strategic balancer against the growing influence of India in the region.

All in all, an independent and democratic Afghanistan is good for all major stakeholders. On the other hand, massive complications are set to arise if the long-awaited peace negotiations abate.

As the May deadline approaches, the eyes of global players are set on any drastic change of events. Biden’s decision being conditional upon a peace agreement between rival contenders in Afghanistan leaves Pakistan at the centre stage to make the reconciliation possible and bring about amity in the region.

The writer is a Lahore-based lawyer.