**A responsible withdrawal from Afghanistan under Biden?**

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Peace talks for Afghanistan have progressed at snail’s pace, stalled, then restarted, then stalled-with the process continuing in this pattern for a long time. U.S policy was to try smoothen out differences between the Kabul government and Taliban. However, Taliban has always declared the Afghan government as illegitimate, therefore the efforts did not meet with success.

The course was changed in 2018 with Trump administration deciding to engage the Taliban directly without the Afghan government. Venue Qatar. Immediately upon this recognition, U.S gave Taliban the legitimacy they had desired. It also undermined an elected government in Kabul.

An understanding of pulling out the troops from Afghanistan was agreed upon without paying much attention to details of the structure to be left behind. It also failed to put in ink how the commitments by Taliban will be checked by the U.S. It also did not include Taliban’s agreement [in measurable steps] in cutting ties with terrorist networks, nor stopping attacks on Afghan settlements. There is a strong feeling, Taliban may have used different tactics for the new political settlement to come in and reaching at better settlement terms with them. The snail-pace correlates with the timeline of the2020 U.S. presidential election and lends credence to this belief.

For Taliban, an early withdrawal of U.S troops in spite of violations from their end came as a rude shock.

With the incoming new American government, Afghan Second Vice President Sarwar Danish has been quick to point out, ‘As the government of Afghanistan, we didn’t sign this agreement. We were not a party to it. From a legal standpoint, we do not bear any responsibility about the details of this agreement.”

Biden inherits an Afghan situation with a chessboard with Trump’s move to cut the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 4,500 to 2,500 by January already being made. This puts Biden administration at a distinct disadvantage with the balance of pressure shifted in favor of Taliban in future peace talks.

*Biden has to make a choice. First is to go for a political settlement. Second is to continue presence with counter-terrorism mission. But there is a third choice. Where he can have his cake and eat it too*

The decision by Biden to continue with boots on round indefinitely will push Taliban into an all-out warfare in which U.S/NATO will be in a more vulnerable position due to a weaker military presence

It will be interesting to try analyze the direction Biden’s policy in Afghanistan will take in the given scenario. In Biden’s 23 February 2020 interview on CBS’ “Face the Nation”, in a segment entitled “Joe Biden talks Afghanistan, future of troop presence overseas,” when asked “But then, don’t you bear some responsibility for the outcome, if the Taliban ends up back in control and women end up losing their rights?”, Biden had strongly responded, “No I don’t! Look, are you telling me we should be going to war with China, because of what they’re doing to the Uighurs … the concentration camps? Do I bear responsibility [for Afghanistan]? No, zero. The responsibility I have is to protect America’s interests”.

Biden will nonetheless have to decide for how long the footprints will be maintained in Afghanistan. Biden supports presence of small number of military personnel which is in direct contradiction of Washington’s commitment of the exact opposite in the 29 February 2020 agreement with the Taliban.The agreement states:

“The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement. …”

Will Biden place emphasis on regional stability? A sudden withdrawal of U.S forces will lead to Afghanistan’s descend into chaos. Infighting. Disruption of civilian lives. Killings. Biden will probably pay heed to NATO allies’ concerns for Afghanistan of potential breakout of internal fights and destruction.

Biden needs to process many sides of this flawed agreement, it will not be an easy going. He needs to put in place members for the new national security team have experience on Afghanistan. This is expected to take some time. We may be into March or April before any policy decisions are announced. This will mean delay in meeting with the deadline given in the agreement for pulling out the troops. However, Taliban will have to be taken onboard for this.

What Biden may probably attempt to achieve is to make interpretations of the Doha deal tougher. Sending the deal to the trash bin may be tempting but political suicide so far as the Afghanistan peace process is concerned. U.S would, under Biden want to see sustained measurable steps by Taliban towards cutting off ties with not only al-Qaeda but also other groups seen to pose a threat to U.S.Biden, being a seasoned politician may try to negotiate terms that deal with the gray areas that need clarity and that can be measured.

It is a fact, that Afghan military will be overrun by Taliban if U.S footprints are gone. Is keeping a strictly counter-terrorism force an advantage? If U.S does so, thereby restricting the purpose of its presence in Afghanistan, the Afghan military will start losing to Taliban. This will force in turn increased Allied military presence.

So Biden has to make a choice. First is to go for a political settlement. Second is to continue presence with counter-terrorism mission. But there is a third choice. Where he can have his cake and eat it too. Biden will have to review the agreement. Add bilateral agreements sprouting from this. Suggesting measurable steps for gray areas. This has to be done with Taliban on board. Take realistic time for measuring these responsible steps. He also can then withdraw after Step 1 is satisfactorily accomplished.

On the other hand some kind of cooperative agreement must come from Kabul government as well. An understanding between U.S and Afghan government..

What has to be critically evaluated is will Taliban reduce, preferably end acts of violence. When U.S and Taliban talked about Afghan peace and inked the agreement, what this term means to be acceptable to both parties was not explained whereas, the entire framework of this agreement rests on this term. Further, they obviously think of themselves as the only legitimate authority to take over after the Allied forces leave Afghanistan. Thereby, they do not feel they need compromises.

Regional states with stake in Afghanistan pose yet another challenge for Kabul.

Till settled, U.S can keep Taliban placated by offering an olive branch of more prisoners release, sanctions relief and so on.

Whichever way it settles, there is still a long way to go for Afghanistan to see peace.

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