[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

February 9, 2021

**Engaging the Americans**

The Biden Administration is less than a month old, but already it is knee-deep in the quicksand that is the American war in Afghanistan.

A full US troop withdrawal by May 2020, which is the promise that the US has made with the Taliban in the Doha Agreement, is looking less and less likely. The Biden Administration is made up of numerous veterans of this war – both those that have fought on the battlefield, and those that have served previous administrations, especially Obama I and Obama II.

For many that have experience in the Afghan war theater, the momentum of what they knew is likely greater than the momentum of what has taken place since 2016 in Afghanistan, or for that matter since 2018 in Doha. The American deep state has interests in maintaining a military presence in the South and Central Asia region, and the deteriorating US relationship with China further emboldens those that hold this view. Externalizing whatever burdens the US carries on other actors is a trick as old as the US invasion of Afghanistan that will turn 20 years old in October this year. Target number one? Pakistan. Let’s come back to Pakistan in a second.

The Afghanistan Study Group report that was released last week by the US Institute of Peace is a good reminder of the bipartisan commitment in and around the Beltway, to the status quo that preceded the Trump Administration and the Doha Agreement. Notwithstanding the imbalance that the Doha Agreement represents, any attempt to unilaterally walk back the agreement represents a disaster. The Afghan people will be worst-affected by such a catastrophe – but American interlocutors have watched the Afghan people suffer violence and instability now for four decades. This is not a primary or even secondary consideration in the US calculus on Afghanistan.

The Taliban may feel a sense of invincibility, but this intoxication with the notion of victory is a strange one for a group that claims to stand for the sovereignty of its land, the pride of freedom and autonomy that is the hallmark of Afghans, and the well-being and safety of the Afghan people. The threat of renewed anti-US troop violence in Afghanistan by the Taliban is not the end-all game changer that many among the Taliban may believe it to be. As of February 1 this year, the US had endured 1,847 soldiers killed in action (KIA) and over 20,000 wounded. The notion that the American political discourse cannot withstand the sight of new bodies landing at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware somehow? It is a ludicrous construct.

The truth is that the cost of an American about-face on the Doha Agreement, while extremely high for Afghanistan and the South and Central Asian region, is limited and manageable for “the Blob” in DC. In case it decides to renew hostilities with the US in Afghanistan, further war and conflict for the Taliban will metastasize with three groups actively pursuing and killing the Taliban: the residual US and Nato troops, the Afghan government, and Daesh. Of the three, Daesh represents the most potent and mortal threat to the Taliban. It is more extreme, more invested in gruesome violence, and more likely than any other group to draw in and recruit the Taliban that feel betrayed with the greying leadership that has signed an agreement with the Americans on the one hand, and is flirting with accepting human rights and especially female mobility in Afghan society, on the other.

Add to this entire mix, the external actors in Afghanistan. Ajit Doval’s recent visit to shore up visibility of India’s commitment to the spoilers within Afghanistan, including Vice President Amarullah Saleh, is likely little more than a photo-op provocation for keyboard warrior hawks in Pakistan. The real action is in Tehran. Iran’s malign influence in Afghanistan is one of the most astounding factors that is given a free pass by the international community – largely because the sectarian divide between the Mullahs of Kandahar and the Ayatollahs of Iran is one that many have banked on for years. But the Taliban are nothing if not brilliant negotiators, and the recent visit of Mullah Baradar to Tehran, to meet with Iranian leaders signals the degree of flexibility that the Taliban are willing to invest in, to expand and widen their space. The target of this visit was not the Americans, nor President Ashraf Ghani, but in fact, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Why?

Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership has occasionally treated the Afghanistan war as a secondary issue in its national security and foreign policy calculus. This has often resulted in the deployment of second-rate military, intelligence and diplomatic talent to the Afghanistan war, and wider Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Since June 2020, however, Pakistan has arrived at a fascinating convergence of its finest diplomatic and intelligence talent on issues that shape Pakistani policy toward Afghanistan. Special Envoy Mohammad Sadiq is, far and away, the most capable and visionary diplomat that has ever worked on the relationship full time. Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed is the most 'get things done' intel chief in perhaps a generation. Combined, with the blessings of PM Imran Khan and COAS Bajwa, the Afghanistan team in Pakistan has generated the space within which Pakistan’s role as an enabler of peace has blossomed.

The so-called 'delivering the Taliban to the negotiating table' is a reach. The Taliban are far too independent and far too many times-bitten by Pakistan to be so readily available for Pakistan. But there are a series of policy measures taken by Pakistan that have helped reduce the wide berth that perhaps the Taliban had enjoyed in past years. This shrinking space, combined with consistent and constant prodding, probably made the Taliban more willing to engage with Zalmay Khalilzad than they would have been otherwise.

Perhaps more importantly, the Pakistani diplomatic blitzkrieg with Afghanistan that has been designed and delivered by Special Envoy Sadiq has helped establish the truth that has eluded so many Afghans and Pakistanis for so long: neither country is ever out of options in terms of who to engage with. The Afghan-Pak relationship can afford multiple channels. Sadiq’s diplomacy helped address many concerns in Kabul, and especially among ordinary Afghans in Jalalabad, Spin Boldak and elsewhere. In return, Pakistan has been able to re-engage many non-Taliban Afghan leaders – all of whom have always sought a dialogue with Islamabad, and most of whom only ever turn to New Delhi because they are ignored and mistreated by decision-makers in Pakistan. Remember: a Pakistani military dictator calling Hamid Karzai the mayor of Kabul is an insult that doesn’t get forgotten.

As President Biden is pressed by the Blob to extend the war in Afghanistan, and as PM Khan and COAS Bajwa watch events unfold, they will be well served to adopt the lessons of their own policy actions in the last twelve months.

Opening doors with groups that may seem adversarial, to help turn them into allies is not only possible, it is also imperative. Afghan civil society is likely a better ally in the pursuit of regional stability and safety than those for whom a reign of terror is a viable instrument of policy. A country that actively finances and recruits citizens of Afghanistan and Pakistan, to fight wars in other countries, cannot be counted on as an ally in peace. But perhaps most of all, Pakistan must not casually accept the labelling and externalizing exercise that has already begun in Washington DC.

American failure or success in Afghanistan is a product of American decisions. Pakistan has been an incredible ally in the battlefield, and has stretched itself to align with American interests beyond its capacity. Since 2018, Pakistan has enabled, empowered and catalyzed the peace process with discernible and measurable actions that have created the Doha Agreement. Today too, Pakistan must stand ready to help sustain the dialogue between the US, the Taliban and the Afghan government. What it must not do is allow American institutional memory of 2008 to 2016 to shape 2021 and beyond. This will be the greatest test of the foreign policy chops of PM Khan and COAS Bajwa, and may determine their long-term legacies.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.