**Anxious to leave**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-03-10

IN an effort to break the deadlock in the Afghan peace process the Biden administration has a proposal to move forward. While pushing for an inclusive interim `peace government`, it has also called for a unified approach from regional countries to support the peace process in Afghanistan.

The proposed peace draft lays out an ambitious roadmap for the future political set-up as the new US administration reviews its plan to pull out its residual American forces from the war-battered country. It envisions a phased plan for reduction of violence followed by a permanent ceasefire between the warring Afghan sides.

While the full review of the Afghan policy is still awaited,it`s apparent that there is now greater urgency on Washington`s part to chart a clear exit plan. But given the complexity of the situationit will not be easy for the Biden administration to push forward its plan.

Washington`s frustration over the stalled intraAfghan talks and the worsening violence is evident in a strongly worded letter from Secretary of State Antony Blinken exhorting President Ashraf Ghani to work collectively with other Afghan leaders for the peace talks to succeed. He has warned the Afghan president of the gravity of the situation, with the Doha talks going nowhere.

There is also concern over the Afghan Taliban`s continuing military of fensive as the Afghan president has failed to provide urgent leadership.

The tough tenor of the letter reflects the urgency in Washington to break the stalemate in peace talks.

There seems to be a growing feeling in the Biden administration that Ghani`s inflexibility has been a major factor hindering progress in the intra-Afghan talks.

According to some analysts, Washington is now thinking that Ghani with his rigid approach is becoming more of a problem. His uncompromising attitude towards an inclusive interim government is a major point of contention as the Biden administration presses for expediting the peace process.

The letter was followed by an eight-page US document that has been shared with the Taliban. Thepeace plan seeks to establish a national government with no parallel government or parallel security force.

It promises to protect Islamic values. An independent judiciary would have ultimate authority while the High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence would play an advisory role. The proposals also include guaranteed rights for women and for religious and ethnic minorities, and protections for a free press.

In order to finalise the plan, the Biden administration has asked Turkey to host a meeting of senior Afghan government and Taliban leaders to be organised by the UN. There has not been any formal response so far from the Ghani government and the Taliban on the US peace plan. The Taliban have said the proposal is being deliberated by their leadership council. The involvement of the UN in the talks will certainly help accelerate the process.

However, it will not be easy to achieve a breakthroughin the talks. There is resistance from both the Afghan government and the Taliban over the issue of an interim government. While the Ghani government has already rejected any move to instal an interim setup, the Taliban too are unlikely to join such an arrangement without an agreement on the constitutional framework. There is also no indication of the insurgent group agreeing to a permanent ceasefire during the talks as envisaged in the peace draf t.

It`s indeed a daunting challenge for the Biden administration to get its peace plan implemented before a May 1 deadline for the final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. It has been over a year since the signing of a historic peace agreement with the Taliban that had raised hopes for the two-decade-long war coming to an end.

Over the last one-year, the number of US troops in Afghanistan came down to 2,500. A complete US withdrawal is contingent on the outcome of intraAfghan talks on the future political set-up. The two Afghan warring sides began negotiations in Doha last September, but in the six months that have passed since, they have f ailed to even agree on a framework for a structured dialogue.

Both sides have stuck to their rigid positions mak-ing it hard to move forward. Meanwhile, there has been a marked escalation in violence with the Taliban trying to expand their territorial control. More worrisome has been the rise in targeted killings of the intelligentsia, mediapersons and members of civil society raising the spectre of a new civil war with the departure of the foreign troops.

Meanwhile, Washington has also suggested that the UN convene a meeting of foreign ministers and envoys from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the US. All these countries have high stakes in the Afghan peace process and an agreement among them on a joint approach is imperative for any future political settlement to work.

Afghanistan`s strategic location has historically made it vulnerable to the involvement of outside powers and proxy battles. The external dimension of the war is as critical as the internal. Outside interference from Afghanistan`s neighbours could spoil prospects for a comprehensive peace.

The country has long been the epicentre of regional rivalries. Proxy violence has exacted a heavy toll on Afghan stability and state formation. It has become a pivot for the competing interests of regional and international actors. The most consequential contest is between India and Pakistan. Afghanistan has become entangled in this regional competition.

These three countries are caught in a deadly triangle of mistrust and competition. An agreement among the regional states guaranteeing noninterference in Afghan domestic matters is extremely important to achieve for the war-torn country.

There will also be increasing pressure on Pakistan to remove the Taliban`s military structures and of ficers from its soil. It will certainly be a testing time for Islamabad. The proposed peace plan reflects the urgency on the part of the US to expedite the Afghan peace process. However, the road to peace is a difficultone. The writer is an author and journalist.

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