**[Challenging roadmap to peace](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613932/challenging-roadmap-to-peace)**

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THE Biden administration has launched its first diplomatic initiative to accelerate the Afghan peace process even as it continues its review of Afghan policy. This is reflected in a [leaked letter](https://www.dawn.com/news/1611550) from Secretary of State Antony Blinken to President Ashraf Ghani that sets out its proposed plan. It is also evident from the discussion draft of a peace agreement shared by the US with Afghan parties and the regional diplomacy now underway by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

These moves signal three things — a renewal of US commitment to withdraw from Afghanistan, its desire to do so after securing a peace settlement among the warring Afghan parties and the willingness to use pressure to quickly achieve this. This raises several questions. Is the Biden administration overreaching with an ambitious plan that it wants to accomplish in a limited timeframe? In deciding to mount pressure on the parties does the US have the leverage to get them to agree? Is the proposed ‘new, inclusive’ interim government an achievable goal as bitter foes will have to share power? With Washington having drafted a peace agreement, albeit for discussion, will Afghan parties take ownership of this?

The Biden team is vigorously engaging Kabul, the Taliban and other Afghan leaders in discussions over the peace plan and the May 1 deadline for US withdrawal with the proviso that final decisions will emerge once the review concludes. President Joe Biden has said that meeting the May 1 deadline will be tough but it won’t be extended by “a lot longer”. Meanwhile, the Taliban have warned against any delay in this deadline and of an unspecified “reaction” if this happens.

The US diplomatic initiative — according to the leaked letter — has four elements. One, a meeting to be convened by the UN of representatives of Russia, the US, Pakistan, Iran and India to forge regional consensus to support the peace plan. Two, a draft peace agreement to expedite negotiations on a settlement and ceasefire. A key proposal is to set up a transitional government once agreement is reached. Three, Turkey to host a meeting between the two sides to seal a peace deal. And four, a 90-day reduction in violence to avert a spring offensive by the Taliban. This plan is punctuated by the US warning that it is considering full withdrawal of forces by May 1 but not ruling out other options.

The US peace plan for Afghanistan faces critical tests ahead.

By clearly communicating that a political settlement is a priority — not just the military withdrawal, as it was for president Trump — a prudent path seems to have been outlined especially as diplomatic parleys underway will shape the conclusions of the US review.

Regional consensus to back a peace deal is clearly necessary. This is also a way for Washington to ensure that Iran is included in the diplomatic process. No timeframe has been set for this. But the UN will have to deftly play the role expected of it. Moscow, while welcoming the transitional government idea, has not said anything on the US plan and is embarked on its own regional diplomacy including a peace conference hosted last week on Afghanistan. The Pakistan-India dynamic also has to be kept in view; Islamabad has already conveyed its misgivings over India’s inclusion in the proposed conference to US officials.

With two new processes now envisaged in addition to that in Doha it would be important not to allow the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha to be diluted or complicated by the proposed new ones. They should facilitate the Doha process and not replace it. The principal diplomatic effort should remain in the Doha talks.

Washington is clearly in a hurry. Trying to force the pace of the peace process reflects US frustration with the stalled intra-Afghan talks. It also shows impatience with President Ghani’s obstructive tactics, evident from the tough tone of Blinken’s letter. The tight timeframe in which the US wants a settlement done and dusted aims to compel the two sides to negotiate seriously. Even so the expectation for negotiations to yield an expeditious outcome runs up against an ineluctable reality that the tough compromises needed for an agreement are unlikely to emerge quickly just because Washington has set a deadline. The US can intensify pressure on both sides but that doesn’t mean it has enough leverage over them to reach a speedy settlement. A senior Afghan official recently told PBS that the US has adopted a “fast food” approach, forcing everybody to consume something that is “too quick to succeed”.

There is also the question of whether in order to expedite the process Washington has overprescribed the elements of an agreement — drafting one itself rather than letting it emerge from negotiations. This lays it open to being viewed as an ‘imposed’ solution. While the US says it is not seeking to dictate terms and its peace agreement is a discussion draft it is yet to be determined whether Afghan parties see it the same way.

The idea of a transitional government, vehemently opposed by Ghani, makes sense before a more permanent government can be installed following adoption of a new constitution and elections. But can the two sides and other Afghan leaders show the accommodation needed for a workable power-sharing arrangement? In an initial response a Taliban spokesman asserted that interim governments have proven ineffective in the past but the Taliban have yet to take a firm position.

Pakistan’s interest lies in the success of intra-Afghan talks that can produce a negotiated end to the war and a lasting settlement before the full withdrawal of US forces. That is what Islamabad means by its repeated calls for a “responsible withdrawal”. It does not want its neighbour to descend into political chaos or a civil war, and sees an inclusive post-settlement government in Kabul as the best way to ensure peace and stability. It seeks assurances that Afghan territory will not be used against Pakistan. US officials have also been told that Islamabad stands ready to do what it can to help the peace process. It is however up to the Afghan parties to seize the moment as the US plan starts to unfold and faces critical tests in the months ahead.

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*Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2021*