



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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US withdrawal from Afghanistan: Compromising the Peace?

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President Biden announcing the way forward in Afghanistan, April 14, 2021. Source: SCMP

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, Afghanistan, April 15, 2021. Source: The US Department of State/flickr

External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar delivering his statement at the 9th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) on Afghanistan in Dushanbe, March 30, 2021. Source: MEA/flickr

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Shreyas Deshmukh and Arun Sahgal

Contents

Where Does the US Stand?.....	1
The Taliban: Strategising Patience and Pressure.....	3
Intra-Afghan Scenario.....	5
The UN Conference.....	6
Approach of Regional Powers.....	7
Implications for India.....	11
Conclusion.....	14

US withdrawal from Afghanistan: Compromising the Peace?

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Shreyas Deshmukh and Arun Sahgal

Three months in office and after a comprehensive review of US policy towards Afghanistan, President Joe Biden announced, on April 14, the withdrawal of all American troops from that country by September 11, 2021, declaring "*it's time to end America's longest War*".¹

The announcement came at a juncture when several strands of international geopolitics, from shuttle diplomacy to brinkmanship, balance of power to proxy wars, are concurrently at play in Afghanistan. The US and the Taliban have been testing each other's resolve through a 'strained patience', even as they pursue intense diplomatic efforts with various stakeholders to gather support for their respective interests. As the Afghan conflict continues unabated and threats from terrorist groups loom large, regional actors like Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran are all trying to establish a "politically" balanced regime in Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the consequences of the US announcement on the ongoing peace process and the intra-Afghan dialogue, the Taliban perspective on Afghanistan's future and the way forward in resolving the increasingly complex Afghan imbroglio.

Where Does the US Stand?

President Biden has overturned many of his predecessor's foreign policy decisions, such as withdrawal from the Paris climate accords and WHO membership, and is considering rejoining the JCPOA.² In contrast, he has stuck to the previous administration's Afghanistan policy by announcing the complete withdrawal of US troops by September 11. His rationale for this decision has been based on the determination that the US objective was '*accomplished*' in 2011 itself, with the death of Bin Laden.³ Since then, "*reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear*" as the threat of terrorism "*has become more dispersed, metastasising around the globe*".⁴

¹ "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan", [White House](#), April 14, 2021

² "With strokes of pen, Biden overturns Trump policies and fights COVID-19", [Reuters](#), January 29, 2021

³ "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan", [White House](#), April 14, 2021

⁴ *Ibid*

Biden has further stated, "We (America) cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan, hoping to create ideal conditions for the withdrawal, and expecting a different result".⁵ With these words, Biden has set aside longstanding dilemmas, from maintaining the presence of US troops until a measure of stability returns to Afghanistan to the loss of all gains achieved in Afghanistan at great military and economic cost over the last two decades.⁶

The US decision will also pave the way for its NATO partners to withdraw, enabling them to focus on the brewing conflict in Ukraine and rising tensions in the South China Sea.⁷ NATO allies in Europe and partners like Australia and the United Kingdom have already announced the withdrawal of their troops.⁸



President Biden announcing the way forward in Afghanistan, April 14, 2021.

Source: SCMP

⁵*Ibid*

⁶"No decision on any NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Stoltenberg says", [Reuters](#), February 18, 2021

⁷"Secretary Blinken's Meeting with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg", [The US State Department](#), April 14, 2021

⁸"Australia to withdraw 80 remaining troops from Afghanistan", [Reuters](#), April 15, 2021

After Biden's announcement, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken rushed to Kabul to reassure the [Afghan leadership](#) of continued US commitment to the peace process and its full diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian support.⁹

With the decision to withdraw a 'fait accompli', Afghanistan is entering a critical phase, where its future will be determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue, moves by the Taliban and post-withdrawal contingency planning.

In ordering the withdrawal, Biden has gone against the recommendations of the [Pentagon](#)¹⁰ and the [CIA](#)¹¹. Little is known about US plans for post withdrawal support, dealing with the rise of extremist threats in Afghanistan and intelligence collection which is imperative for any future US intervention. The CIA has created a large number of assets among local Afghans, who will be the first to be targeted by the Taliban. President Biden has merely [stated that](#):¹²

"We'll reorganise our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent reemergence of terrorists – of the threat to our homeland from over the horizon. We'll hold the Taliban accountable for its commitment not to allow any terrorists to threaten the United States or its allies from Afghan soil"

That is easier said than done. Withdrawal from Afghanistan implies that the US will have no footprint on the Eurasian landmass and will have to depend upon bases in the Middle East or carrier task forces operating in the Persian Gulf, even as Taliban forces consolidate and extremist groups regroup. Central Asian Republics which are politically and economically aligned to Russia and China are unlikely to provide operational bases to the US for intelligence gathering or operations.

The Taliban: Strategising Patience and Pressure

The Taliban has called the US decision [to delay](#) the withdrawal of troops till September a "*violation of the Doha Agreement*".¹³ From the Taliban perspective, the February 2020 agreement resulted in gains only for itself, in terms of the release of 5000 of their detained cadres and recognition as a major political

⁹"Travel to Brussels and Kabul, April 13-15, 2021", [The US State Department](#), April 13, 2021

¹⁰"US Army Chief: 'Multiple Contingencies' for Afghanistan Policy", [Tolo News](#), April 13, 2021

¹¹"CIA chief highlights loss of intelligence once U.S. troops leave Afghanistan", [Reuters](#), April 15, 2021

¹²"Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan", [White House](#), April 14, 2021

¹³"Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding recent announcement by US President Joe Biden", [Alemrah](#), April 15, 2021

actor in Afghanistan. Their only commitments were the cessation of hostilities against US coalition forces and joining the intra-Afghan dialogue. As a result, since the signing of the accord, not a single American soldier has died in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The Taliban has now threatened to resume 'jihad' against foreign forces if the withdrawal is delayed beyond May 01, 2021. As a warning of what could be in the offing, the Taliban has mounted attacks on the American base in Kandahar and fired rockets on Base Chapman, a classified CIA installation in eastern Afghanistan.¹⁵

The Taliban has been celebrating Biden's decision as its triumph over another superpower. In a speech to the Taliban leadership, the Deputy leader of the Islamic Emirate, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is in fact the de facto leader of the Taliban, stated,¹⁶ "*..no Mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state? Or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors of the world and force them to admit their defeat at our hands?*". He added, "*you see how many movements were there? But they aren't there today, why? Because they didn't follow Shariah.*"

These statements highlight that the Taliban's strong religious beliefs are intact as is their confidence in strategies for armed conflict. In the last twenty years, the Taliban have successfully been able to divert attention from the issue of Islamist extremism and terrorism towards the battle of ideologies, of the West vs. Islam. Consequently, they have consistently opposed western democratic values by highlighting their failure in bringing peace and prosperity to Afghanistan.¹⁷ While blaming the Kabul Administration for its inability to govern and corruption, the Taliban have promised an alternative model of accountability under Sharia.¹⁸ This leaves little doubt that if the Taliban comes to the power, it will continue to use medieval precepts of governance as it did in the '90s. With Biden's announcement, the Taliban believes it is closer to achieving this goal.

It will be prudent to surmise that the Taliban today is in a position from where it has to just wait and watch while calibrating levels of violence as a pressure tactic. The Doha agreement was the product of the same strategy, as is their

¹⁴ "No Combat Death for US Soldiers in Afghanistan in a Year", Tolo News, February 10, 2021

¹⁵ "Taliban attack on covert US base in Afghanistan complicates Biden withdrawal decision", CNN, April 8, 2021

¹⁶ "Speech by the Deputy leader of the Islamic Emirate, Khalifa Sahib Sirajuddin Haqqani (HA), at a great assembly of Mujahidin", Alemrah English, March 2, 2021

¹⁷ "Kabul admin even lacks international legitimacy", Alemrah English, February 7, 2021

¹⁸ "Kabul regime: From promises to practice", Alemrah English, March 17, 2021

new demand for the release of the remaining 7000 Taliban prisoners and removal of all UNSC sanctions, before agreeing to any ceasefire.

Intra-Afghan Scenario

Putting on a brave face before the inevitable, the Afghan leadership has accepted the US decision to withdraw, as both President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman Abdullah Abdullah have placed confidence in the ability of the Afghan security forces to defend the Republic in the case of failure of the peace process.¹⁹ This followed a blunt letter by Secretary of State Blinken to President Ghani warning him not to drag his feet, practically directing him to work out a roadmap for peace and the role the Afghan Government must play, as well as a proposal for establishing an inclusive interim government that includes Taliban participation.²⁰ President Ghani rejected this proposal, counter-offered a presidential election within six months,²¹ and introduced his own peace plan.²² He knew very well that his counterproposal of a presidential election was in complete conflict with the Taliban's ideology, and that under present conditions it was impossible to conduct elections. This grand standing apart, the reality is that the Afghan Government led by President Ghani has little option but to go along with the US proposals and participate in the peace negotiations.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, Afghanistan, April 15, 2021. Source: The US Department of State/flickr

¹⁹“ We Are Not at Risk of Collapse: President Ghani”, *Tolo News*, April 17, 2021

²⁰[Letter PDF](#), Source: Tolo News

²¹“Rejecting US peace plan, Ghani to offer election in six months”, *Dawn*, March 24, 2021

²²“President Ghani Defends His Peace Plan”, *Tolo News*, April 7, 2021

The Afghan governments confidence in being able to dictate terms to either the US or the Taliban is debatable, given the fact that the Taliban controls over fifty percent of Afghanistan even in the presence of US and NATO troops.²³ Apart from the Taliban factor, there is growing political infighting among different ethnic groups and warlords. The government has launched an assault in central Maidan Wardak province to punish the warlord Abdul Ghani Alipoor, after the defence minister accused his fighters of shooting down a military helicopter and killing nine personnel.²⁴ This implies a weakened position of the government as its credibility is being questioned not only by the Taliban but also by the US and other domestic and regional actors. The former warlords from the North who defended their territories from the Taliban in the 90's, like Ata Noor and Abdul Rashid Dostum, are still strong and they will not accept the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia to be implemented in their provinces. This will become a further cause of conflict and instability in Afghanistan.

The principal fault line within the present government in Afghanistan is disunity of the top leadership, which could not even agree on forming an inclusive delegation to represent it in the peace process. With the US withdrawal, Afghan leaders will be in search of other patrons for the resources they require to hold on to their territories against the Taliban in the event of success or failure of peace talks.

The UN Conference

As the next step to ensure a semblance of peace and a workable governing arrangement, the US has asked the United Nations to call an international conference with the participation of the Afghan Government, Taliban, and important regional actors including India. The conference was initially scheduled to be held from April 24 to May 4, 2021, in Turkey. The conveners of this conference, Qatar, Turkey and the UN, in a joint statement laid down its broad objective which is to accelerate and complement the ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha.²⁵ This is a way of acknowledging that the Doha Dialogue is making no headway, and the need for a more broad-based approach by including other important regional stakeholders. The Taliban has thus far been ambivalent about attending the conference, as it is aware that it will come under international pressure to scale down violence and agree to the permanent ceasefire.²⁶ As a party to conflict, the Taliban cannot avoid this

²³“ Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan”, *FDD's Long War Journal*, Accessed on April 18, 2021

²⁴“ Tensions mount between Afghan govt, powerful warlord”, *Dawn*, March 24, 2021

²⁵“ Istanbul Conference on Afghanistan to Start April 24: Statement”, *Tolo News*, April 13, 2021

²⁶ “How should peace conferences be convened?”, *Alemrah*, April 20, 2021

conference as it is endorsed by other powers like China, Russia and Pakistan with whom the Taliban maintains good relations and receives important support. However, before agreeing to attend the conference, the Taliban is exploiting its position to put more conditions, such as releasing the remaining Taliban prisoners and lifting UNSC sanctions. In the above backdrop, after consultations with the US, the conveners have postponed the conference till the end of Ramadan on May 13, 2021.²⁷

These developments are pushing the US towards making some difficult choices. The first and most important issue is the post-withdrawal survival of the Afghan state and preventing the collapse of the democratic edifice built at the great sacrifice of the coalition forces, which is supported by India. This requires an agreement on the nature of the Afghan state, which in turn will determine the nature of economic and political support for the future establishment in Kabul, which could be the expected outcome of the UN conference. Meanwhile, regional countries are preparing to face any future scenarios in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US-led coalition troops.

Approach of Regional Powers

Pakistan: Just ahead of the formal announcement of the US withdrawal, Secretary Blinken spoke with the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Bajwa, and called for 'mutual consensus' among all stakeholders for the peace process.²⁸ Later, Gen. Bajwa held a meeting with the US Charge d' Affaires in Pakistan and welcomed the US decision.²⁹

The post-withdrawal scenario will in all probability put the Taliban at the helm of affairs in Afghanistan. This would be seen as a victory for Pakistan's larger geopolitical game plan by reclaiming strategic depth in Afghanistan on its own terms. Developments over the last two decades have slightly altered Pakistan's strategy towards Afghanistan. Earlier, it had been in favour of a weak and unstable Afghanistan. This was a time when Pakistan's economy was growing but the greater Pashtun movement was still alive and the issue of the legality of the Durand Line was being frequently raised, not only by the Afghan leadership but also by the Taliban. In the prevailing situation, issues of the Durand line and

²⁷ "Turkey postpones Afghanistan peace summit over Taliban no-show", *Aljazeera*, April 21, 2021

²⁸ "US Secretary of State telephones army chief to discuss drawdown plan", *The Express Tribune*, April 14, 2021

²⁹ "Gen Qamar welcomes US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, April 15, 2021

Pashtun nationalism have gone dormant, but Pakistan's economy has also tanked, which may force Pakistan to change the goal posts.



Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, with Taliban's Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Islamabad, Pakistan, August 25, 2020. Source: Aljazeera

Speaking at the National Defence University in Washington D.C. in 2010, General Kayani, who had led the Pakistani army against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), had defined strategic depth in the following terms:³⁰

"Strategic Depth is not physical space but the presence of a neighbour to the west that was friendly and not hostile to Pakistan's interests".

In the present circumstances of a weak and donor dependent economy, Pakistan appears to be shifting its stance towards a socio-politically peaceful but militarily weak Afghanistan. It is in this context that Pakistan Army Chief, Gen. Bajwa, dedicated much time in his speech at the Islamabad Security Dialogue to outline three steps for enhancing Afghanistan's trade connectivity;³¹

³⁰ "US troops pull out of Afghanistan after twenty years; What it means for India?", *Financial Express*, April 19, 2021

³¹ "Full text of Gen Bajwa's speech at the Islamabad Security Dialogue", *Dawn*, March 18, 2021

"Re-energising Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement and also providing access to Afghanistan to export her goods to India; Improving economic and trade environment along Pak-Afghan border by establishing border markets and development of infrastructure; Being part of energy and trade corridors binding Central, South and West Asia through land routes and inviting Afghanistan to be part of CPEC."

Beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan has accelerated efforts to persuade landlocked Central Asian States to carry out their trade through Karachi and Gwadar ports.³² Pakistan is trying to establish itself as the gatekeeper of South Asia-Central Asia connectivity and exploit the economic potential, with little incentives for Afghanistan.

At the same time, Pakistan is worried about the ideological impact of a stronger Taliban regime which is internationally recognised and will have political and economic means at its disposal. The TTP, the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban follow the Deobandi school of Islamic practice and share infrastructure to train their cadres. Most of their leadership is the product of the Deobandi Madrassa Darul Uloom Haqqania.³³ Meanwhile, the political heft of the Barelvi school of Islam, which is followed by 50-60 percent of Pakistan's Sunni population, is increasing. The Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) which claims to represent the Barelvi population, is trying to spread its influence by raising issues like the blasphemy law, which is at the core of extremist sentiments.³⁴ This could potentially give rise to violent competition between Deobandis and Barelvis to dominate the ideological arena. Being a product of Pakistani Deobandi madrassas, the Afghan Taliban cannot stay away from this struggle. Therefore, even in the future, Pakistan's military cannot afford to relinquish its hold over the Taliban leadership.

China: The primary concern for China after the withdrawal of coalition troops would be instability in Afghanistan which will impact its regional interests, most importantly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and could stir unrest among the Uighur minority in the Xinjiang region. The spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry has expressed these concerns in the following terms:³⁵

³² "PM, Uzbek president agree to boost bilateral ties", *Dawn*, April 15, 2021

³³ "'University of jihad' proud of Taliban alumni", *Dawn*, November 17, 2021

³⁴ "No intention of lifting ban on TLP, declares PM", *Dawn*, April 21, 2021

³⁵ "'Terrorist forces' may take advantage of U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan: China", *The Hindu*, April 15, 2021

"The current security situation in Afghanistan is still complex and grim and the problem of terrorism is far from being solved. Foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan should withdraw in a responsible and orderly manner to ensure a smooth transition in Afghanistan and to avoid terrorist forces from taking advantage of chaos".

In any event, China would not like its geo-economic strategies for Central and South Asia to be put at risk by instability in Afghanistan. Should the situation in Afghanistan deteriorate, China will face the option of either helping to eliminate security threats or contain these threats within Afghanistan's borders. Therefore, it has maintained a security presence in Afghanistan to face contingencies if they arise, and has also positioned troops near the Tajikistan border with Afghanistan.³⁶ On April 15, 2021, the External Security Commissioner of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Cheng Guoping, held a video conference with the Chief of General Staff of the Afghan Armed Forces and Acting Minister of Defence, Mohammad Yasin Zia. Their discussions are said to have focused on security cooperation, combating terrorist cells of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and the development of the Afghanistan-China comprehensive strategic partnership.³⁷

China's core concern at the upcoming UN conference will be to ensure that a solution to Afghanistan's civil strife does not in any way undermine its regional interests.

Russia: Contrary to China's position, Russia has criticised the US decision of delaying troop withdrawal beyond the timeline under the Doha agreement.³⁸ Russia has two main concerns: consolidation of ISK elements that could undermine peace and stability in Central Asia, and drug trafficking. Russia has conducted frequent joint military exercises with its Central Asian partners like Tajikistan to thwart terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan.³⁹ It has also deployed some troops on the Afghanistan border with Tajikistan. For Russia, the withdrawal of US troops provides an opportunity to strengthen cooperation with two major regional stakeholders, China and Pakistan, and carve out a common strategy. During his recent visit to Islamabad, Russian

³⁶ "In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops", *Washington Post*, February 19, 2019

³⁷ "External Security Commissioner of the Foreign Ministry Cheng Guoping Holds a Video Conference with Chief of General Staff of the Afghan Armed Forces and Acting Minister of Defense Mohammad Yasin Zia", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, April 15, 2021

³⁸ "Taliban, Russia criticize US over Afghanistan withdrawal", *DW*, April 14, 2021

³⁹ "Russia, Tajikistan hold anti-Taliban joint military exercises with over 10,000 troops near Afghanistan border", *Firstpost*, July 18, 2018

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed the supply of defence equipment to Pakistan,⁴⁰ and expediting work on the US \$ 2 billion Lahore-Karachi (North-South) gas pipeline project⁴¹.

Iran: Unlike other regional countries except for Pakistan, Iran's security concerns in Afghanistan emanate from the ideological confrontation between the two main sects of Islam, Shia and Sunni. For the last two decades, Iran has maintained tactical relations with the Taliban and hosted their delegations in Tehran multiple times. On the one hand, Iran would welcome the withdrawal of the coalition troops from its backyard, but on the other, it would also be worried that extremist Sunni organisations like ISK would gather in Afghanistan and their primary target will be the Shia Hazaras with whom Iran has close links. Iran also raised a force of the Hazara Shia, known as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, to fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Iran can use the returning fighters of this brigade to protect its interests in Afghanistan if the situation worsens. Meanwhile, it will try to maintain good relations with the Taliban and all other actors in Afghanistan.

Implications for India

India has been keeping a close watch on anti-India extremist elements in Afghanistan, and Biden's decision leaves India increasingly vulnerable. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs reacted cautiously to the US decision, saying "*any political settlement (in Afghanistan) must be inclusive and should preserve the socio-economic and political gains of the past 19 years.*"⁴²

Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar, during his speech at the Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process on March 30, stated that "*Collective success may not be easy, but the alternative is only collective failure*".⁴³ This is not a binary understanding of the situation, but the result of decades of India's experience countering terrorism and the ideologies behind it. Therefore, the primary and foremost objective of Indian policies

⁴⁰ "Qureshi-Lavrov talks: Russia to boost ties with Pakistan, supply military gear", *Dawn*, April 7, 2021

⁴¹ "Pakistan, Russia sign revised gas deal, rename project: Report", *The Economic Times*, November 19, 2020

⁴² "Official Spokesperson's response to media queries on the announcement by the US of withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan before September 11, 2021", *The Ministry of External Affairs of India*, April 16, 2021

⁴³ "Statement by External Affairs Minister at the 9th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) on Afghanistan in Dushanbe", *Ministry of External Affairs of India*, March 30, 2021

towards Afghanistan has been the strengthening of democratic values to achieve sustainable peace.



External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar delivering his statement at the 9th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) on Afghanistan in Dushanbe, March 30, 2021. Source: MEA/flickr

Throughout the Afghan conflict, India has stuck to the principled position of supporting the administration in Kabul. As recently as March 23, the [Indian Cabinet](#) approved the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) of India and the Independent Administrative Reforms and Civil Services Commission (IARCSC) of Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Earlier, on March 22-23, Afghan foreign minister Hanif Atmar had [visited Delhi](#) and held delegation-level talks with his Indian counterpart Dr. S Jaishankar.⁴⁵

India's approach towards peace in Afghanistan has been elaborated by Dr. Jaishankar as a "double peace": that is, peace within Afghanistan and peace around Afghanistan, that includes India's geoeconomic interests in the Central Asian region.

⁴⁴"Cabinet approves signing of an MoU between Union Public Service Commission, India and Independent Administrative Reforms and Civil Services Commission, Afghanistan", [PIB](#), March 23, 2021

⁴⁵"Visit of H.E. Mohammad Haneef Atmar, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to India (March 22-23, 2021)" [Ministry of External Affairs of India](#), March 24, 2021

On March 2, ministers from India, Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan and Armenia participated in Chabahar day celebrations, during which India proposed the inclusion of the Chabahar port in the International North-South Transport Corridor project.⁴⁶ A fully operational Chabahar port complex, with road and railway connectivity, will be a game-changer and provide an alternative, secure and connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The underlying message was that an unstable Afghanistan was hampering the confidence of investors and an assured peace is essential for the success of any of the connectivity projects passing through this region.

If invited, India will participate in the regional process to be convened under the aegis of the United Nations in Turkey. The conference will provide an opportunity to engage with multiple stakeholders, including the Taliban. But India may increasingly face a challenge maintaining a balance between its geo-economic interests and its longstanding principled position during the deliberations.

Failure of peace talks could lead Afghanistan into a continuation of the status quo minus America, or worse a descent into another civil war. In that eventuality, all regional nations will have to shelve their economic agendas and protect existing assets in and around Afghanistan. India will not be an exception, but will have to bear greater responsibility to support the Islamic Republic government and secure the projects it has invested in over the last two decades.

There are two possible scenarios in the offing for Afghanistan. One, that the Taliban joins a democratically elected government, agrees on a few amendments in the present constitution, and denies space for terrorist organisation like AQ, ISK and LeT. In this case, India with the help of its traditional partners from the former Northern Alliance and international watchdogs can make sure that anti-India extremist elements do not find safe haven in Afghanistan.

The second scenario is that under international pressure, the peace process settles on a 'negative peace' where the Taliban has the upper hand in governance and starts implementation of Sharia rule. Considering the present situation, this appears to be the most probable scenario, as most international actors are focusing only on reducing the imminent threat to the region from an unstable Afghanistan. Under these circumstances, the Taliban might gain

⁴⁶ India proposes inclusion of Iran's Chabahar Port in International North South Transport Corridor", *The Economic Times*, March 5, 2021

international recognition and India would have to find a way of engaging in diplomatic interactions with the Taliban.

Conclusion

After the enormous blood and treasure expended by the US over two decades, if Afghanistan remains violent and unstable and once again becomes a safe haven for terrorist organisations, the US withdrawal will be seen as another battle lost in Asia by the superpower and questions will inevitably be raised about its declining global role.

There is no easy way out for Afghanistan from the present standoff in the peace process unless both the Taliban and the Afghan Government come up with solutions, such as a more decentralised government in a united Afghanistan, or a new governance model like that of Iran, incorporating democracy and Islamic values. Ideally, Afghanistan should enjoy a stable government supported by international aid and backed by the Taliban. The reality, however, points otherwise: either the Taliban will directly assume power through military force, or they will install a regime and retain major control over the levers of power.

However, there is also a generation of young Afghans who have grown up after the exit of the Taliban in 2001, value their hard won democratic and human rights, and are unlikely to welcome strict Sharia laws. What becomes of them must be a matter of concern for the entire international community.

An eventual outcome could well be a Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan backed government, thereby increasing the presence and influence of these countries in Afghanistan directly and through their proxies.

The worst-case scenario would be the Balkanisation of Afghanistan along ethnic lines, with the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras controlling their respective areas of influence.

All above scenarios are fraught with varying degrees of danger for the stability of the region. A possible solution may lie in a United Nations backed Peacekeeping Force; however, the Taliban are unlikely to accept this, unless it is strongly backed by the US, China and Russia.

Peace or no peace, Afghanistan will require international assistance for decades to come and the main responsibility will lie with its neighbours and international actors who will need to step up their role.

As for the US, this will be a watershed moment, no less that Vietnam in 1975, for its credibility as a resident great power in Asia. The US will cease to have a presence in continental Eurasia and will cede strategic space to the very rivals it is confronting elsewhere. The message is unlikely to be lost on US allies and adversaries alike.



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