

A PERPETUAL WAR: ON DILEMMAS OF ENDING U.S'S 'FOREVER WAR' IN AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The dilemmas of ending the U.S.'s 'forever war' appeared to fall heavily upon the shoulders of President Joe Biden, who is now helming his country's rush for the exit before the self-imposed deadline of September 11, 2021, the 20-year anniversary of the WTC terror attacks. While he clearly signalled his intention to remain engaged with the war-torn country by meeting, in the first instance, Afghanistan's President, Ashraf Ghani, and Chairman of its High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, at the White House this week, the U.S.'s troop withdrawal since May 1, 2021, in a sense signals the opposite intention. There is no mistaking the Taliban's reaction, especially to Washington's plan to wind down its Afghan military presence. Ever since February 29, 2020, when the U.S. and the Taliban signed the Doha "agreement for bringing peace" to Afghanistan, Taliban-linked violence has risen steadily, U.S. intelligence reports have assessed that al-Qaeda still has a presence in Afghanistan and the terrorist outfit's decades-long ties with the Taliban have been undiminished. Meanwhile the situation on the ground is far from inspiring for anyone who hopes for peace in the region. Facing tepid resistance from the ANDSF, now with ever-reducing access to U.S. air support, the Taliban have managed to fight, hold on to and even take back the territories from the government.

This reality begs the question of what new vortexes of violence, terrorist havens and other sources of regional instability Afghanistan might play host to now, and whether the U.S. and western powers will retain enough influence to prevent events in this regard from spiralling out of control. Closer to home, a sense of concern must be pervading South Block as the last U.S. troop carriers lift off from Bagram, potentially allowing agents linked to Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment a freer hand to engage with extremist elements in Afghan with possible blowback for India. What will become of New Delhi's long-sighted, soft-power investments into education, training and infrastructure and civil society development? Had the U.S. played a consistently strong hand supporting the Afghan government instead of pushing as hard as it did to engage the Taliban, that might have delayed Washington's exit plans but provided more leeway for the ANDSF to push harder and take enough territory to weaken the Taliban's overall strategic grip. Given the prospect of the ANDSF's fragmentation — already occurring in some areas — it now appears more likely that a deal may be forged between the Taliban and powerbrokers once associated with the Afghan government. This could lead to a Taliban-centric religious council that sets an overall tenor of governance based on Islamic law yet permits a semi-autonomous executive governmental power to operate within that framework.

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