

# THE CONTOURS OF THE ENDGAME IN AFGHANISTAN

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

The peace process in Afghanistan has reached a critical turning point. As when then U.S. President Barack Obama announced the exit of U.S. forces from Afghanistan (and the Taliban famously exulted – ‘you may have the watches, but we have the time’), and more recently, when the Doha Agreement was concluded a year ago between the U.S. Government and the Taliban. Now, a more decisive step is in store.

Afghan social media and political circles are rife with details, corroborated by official sources in Afghanistan, that the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, has unveiled the initial conclusions of the review by the United States of its strategy in Afghanistan in a letter he has addressed simultaneously to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani and the head of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah. Mr. Ghani has been virtually read the riot act by Mr. Blinken, whose letter confirms the intention to fully withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan as early as May 1, as specified in the Doha Agreement. Mr. Ghani has been warned that without them, the security situation will deteriorate and the Taliban could make rapid gains.

Despite the Doha Agreement, the Taliban has not ended its ties with the al-Qaeda and other similar terrorist groups. Nor have intra-Afghan negotiations progressed. The policy review ordered in Washington DC by U.S. President Joe Biden has been shrouded in secrecy. What appeared in the U.S. media indicates that some within the U.S. Administration are voicing the need to defend American values. Protagonists in the Pentagon are passionate about keeping a modicum of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Mr. Biden has long held, even as Vice-President, that Pakistan is strategically more important to the U.S. than Afghanistan, and that U.S. troops should be pulled out of the Afghan battlefield as soon as possible. Donald Trump was doing nothing different from his predecessor, only in his inimitable way, which Mr. Biden wishes to distance himself from and leave a narrative of orderly exit.

The ongoing review had raised hopes in Kabul of a turnaround in U.S. policy. That is not happening in substance. The U.S. is anxious to proceed to a final settlement rapidly on terms visible from the very outset of the peace process. The continuation of Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the State Department was an early sign that, in substance, U.S. policy is going to remain unaltered.

The U.S. maintains that its objective is to bring about a just and durable peace through political negotiations in a manner that Afghanistan remains united, sovereign, and democratic, and preserves the gains made over the past two decades. This is a tall order, as it contradicts the abiding U.S. priority, to cut its losses and be out of Afghanistan at the earliest.

The conundrum for the U.S. is that it cannot disengage from Afghanistan, if that is its priority, without accepting Pakistan's terms. These would not be acceptable to Afghan patriots who want freedom for Afghanistan to choose its political direction.

If training, combat support, and the supply of weapons are stopped from Pakistan, the Taliban could be on its knees. The U.S. Government is wary but resigned about Pakistan's negative role. Instead of pressuring Pakistan, it is seeking Afghan acquiescence for a power-sharing

arrangement with the Taliban, enabling the exit of U.S. soldiers.

The U.S. Government is advocating 'a new, inclusive government' in Afghanistan, which implies an immediate 50% share for the Taliban in an interim government, as a *quid pro quo* for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. This will be without reference to a mandate from the people as elections will be held only in the future, after the principles guiding Afghanistan's future constitutional and governing arrangements are worked out.

As a prelude to the ceasefire, the U.S. has proposed to the Taliban to reduce violence for three months, intended to head off the Taliban's threatened spring offensive.

When the intra-Afghan negotiations envisaged under the Doha Agreement stalled, Russia offered Moscow as an alternate venue. Instead, the United Nations is being asked to convene, with Turkey being asked to host a meeting of foreign ministers or envoys from China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S. to discuss a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan.

Mr. Ghani is being encouraged to work closely with a broad consultative group, for which the core leaders identified are Abdullah Abdullah, former President Karzai, and an important former Mujahideen commander, Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. The objective of this exercise is to build consensus on specific goals and objectives for negotiations with the Taliban on power-sharing, governance, and essential supporting principles.

India remains fully committed to Afghanistan. Despite the policy flux there, bilateral relations are flourishing. There have been frequent and productive high-level exchanges between Indian and Afghan leaders. The Afghanistan acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Haneef Atmar, is visiting New Delhi on March 22.

India is to be part of the future consultation process on Afghanistan. Invites to prominent elders and senior Afghan leaders such as Abdullah Abdullah, Ustad Ata Muhammad Noor, and General Abdul Rashid Dostum over the past few months have helped India reconnect with the political spectrum in Afghanistan.

India has stayed the course with a long-term commitment to supporting state institutions in Afghanistan, expanding its development partnership, working with all communities across the country, and asking leaders of all Afghan ethnicities to remain together. That policy has been well-received by most of the Afghan people and government, it was well-suited to the time, and it has served India well.

The moment has now come to directly engage with those leaders on the ground who will determine the course that the peace process will take. The patriotic Afghan people admire their erstwhile leaders, President Najibullah and Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who were committed to building the nation. Prints and postcards of their portraits are still popular in the streets and bazaars of Kabul. Their photographs are displayed on the windscreens of many Kabul taxis. Such people look to India as a friend and expect solidarity.

If the American plan results only in a 'reduction in violence' and not its complete cessation, and U.S. forces are pulled out, India must step up to assist materially those who want to defend the Afghan republic. It should explore commonalities with key countries in dealing with the rapidly evolving situation. When in the late 1990s no country was willing to help the democratic forces in Afghanistan, India and Iran had scaled up their support. That time is again at hand.

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