

President Joe Biden's Afghan Policy: Challenges to Afghanistan's Peace and Stability

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Abstract

US President Joe Biden has announced the unconditional withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, assessing that the Afghan war would not be resolved by continued US engagement and more troops. According to the policy announcement, the US needs to focus on potential modern threats looming large on global horizons.

This paper investigates the imminent challenges to Afghanistan's peace and stability once the foreign forces leave. Unconditional withdrawal in itself jeopardises security, puts in doubt the maintenance of Afghanistan's National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and, particularly, imperils the political stability of Afghanistan, given that the Taliban and the Afghan government are not engaging in any meaningful negotiation.

The end of conflict in Afghanistan can now be envisaged in only two ways: either through convening a People's Grand Assembly to formulate a plan for a transitional, all-inclusive government, with the necessary constitutional amendment; alternatively, the Taliban will march on Kabul with more killing and will establish an Emirate.

Introduction

The US engagement policy in Afghanistan rested on a complex range of interacting factors, including the neutralisation of the Afghan Taliban threat by military means; training and arming the Afghan National Army and the Police; strengthening the capacity of the Kabul government to govern effectively, and; supporting the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.¹

¹ Hasan Askari Rizvi, A Defence Analyst narrated this in his Interview with Author at Lahore on 6th October, 2013.

The US invaded Afghanistan mainly for two reasons: firstly, to defeat, disrupt and dismantle Al-Qaeda and, secondly; to dismantle the Taliban regime, which had traditionally given a safe haven to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. President George Bush followed a policy of military engagement in Afghanistan through a number of operations conducted throughout his presidency, starting with Operation *Enduring Freedom*. A political solution through negotiation or peace talks was never part of his policy. Successive US administrations were not limited to Bush's policies in Afghanistan, as Barak Obama's conciliatory approach showed. But the current President, Joe Biden, concluded that, as US policy had mainly been to defeat and dismantle Al-Qaeda and any similar militant organisations as they represented a potential threat to the US, that aim had been accomplished with the killing of Osama Bin Laden.

Consequently, President Biden has reviewed US policy on Afghanistan, announcing that on September 11 this year there will be a complete, unconditional withdrawal of US and NATO forces. This announcement, made from the Treaty Room of the White House — the room from which former president Bush declared a 'War on Terror' in the aftermath of terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 — is considered unwise by some leaders of the Republican Party and senior military officers.²

In what may become a historic speech, Biden told American audiences that "the United States had become mired in an endless and increasingly irrelevant conflict that more time and more troops would not resolve". As he pointed out, some serving US service personnel had not even been born when the war started. Washington has tried everything — surging troops, partial withdrawals, talks with the Taliban — and nothing has ever paved the way home.³ Did it still make sense to send youngsters from Sioux City, Iowa, or Bremen, Kentucky, to die in the Panjshir Valley or Helmand province?⁴

He added that a continuous US presence in Afghanistan would do nothing to further national interests, not least because the US must now focus on a "modern landscape of threats" quite

² Rustom Shah Mohmand. Troops Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Express Tribune. 16 April 2021.

³ Stephen Collinson. Joe Biden is taking a calculated risk in Afghanistan. Updated 2319 GMT (0719 HKT) April 15, 2021)

⁴ Stephen Collinson. Joe Biden is taking a calculated risk in Afghanistan. Updated 2319 GMT (0719 HKT) April 15, 2021)

different from the ones that existed when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001.⁵ Military engagement cannot solve the Afghan war or deter the Taliban: "It was not true when we had 98,000 US troops on the ground, and it won't be true keeping [the current] 2,500 troops on the ground... We don't think they are a game changer," he said.⁶

In an interview with CNN, Senator Chris Coons (D) of Delaware – a confidant of President Biden – said: "My strong impression was the very thing we went into Afghanistan to prevent was al-Qaeda having a base of operations. A decades-long war to build a successful, independent, democratic republic and to help ensure their security is an effort that I have concluded would have no reasonable end in the next five to ten years."⁷

But, now that President Biden has announced unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan from September 11 of this year, there have been objections from various US factions, including several members of Congress and the President's military advisors. Those opposing the decision argue that after the US exit the Taliban will provide a haven for Al-Qaeda again and the US will be unable to exert any counterterrorism pressure and attacks on the US similar to 9/11 could be made by Al-Qaeda from a safe base in Afghanistan.⁸ However, as acknowledged above, prolonged US engagement cannot resolve the Afghan problem; in fact, it seems to have been counterproductive as international terrorist groups in Afghanistan now number 20, compared to only four in 2001.

So, a decision either way will incur costs: if the US prolongs its presence inside Afghanistan, the cost to the US is probably short term in the form of casualties and the fear of unresolved conflict; while leaving has a long-term cost to the fabric of Afghanistan in the form of chaos and

⁵ Rustom Shah Mohmand. Troops Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Express Tribune. 16 April 2021.

⁶ Zachary B. Wolf. Afghanistan: Why the US is there, why it's leaving, what will happen when it's gone. By CNN Updated 1111 GMT (1911 HKT) April 15, 2021)

⁷ Christiane Amanpour. Why Biden is pulling the US -- and NATO -- out of Afghanistan. CNN. Updated 1115 GMT (1915 HKT) April 14, 2021)

⁸ Daniel L. Byman. **Don't expect an al-Qaida reboot in Afghanistan.** Brookings Institute. Tuesday, May 4, 2021

the possibility that all the developments and progress made in the past two decades will be lost.⁹

Challenges after the withdrawal of foreign forces

The US withdrawal will certainly be followed by a number of serious challenges. The most significant will be the survival of the ANDSF and how it will handle the military pressure of the Taliban this autumn when all foreign forces will have left Afghanistan. There are still problems plaguing the ANDSF, such as: poor logistics, resupply and maintenance, including of the Afghan Air Force; pervasive corruption; discord among some commanders; poor unit leadership; difficulty holding ground; lack of specialist enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and medical evacuation; a basic lack of readiness and willingness to launch offensive actions against the Taliban; poor retention of personnel, and; very high casualty levels.¹⁰

Furthermore, according to the report of the Special Inspector for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Afghan Air Force has not even trained personnel to operate the aircraft and remains dependent on the personnel of *Resolute Support* for that. An effective air force is essential to maintaining counter-insurgency operations and makes the continued presence of an American contingent crucial well beyond the deadline given by Biden.¹¹

Moreover, there are Afghan militias which are financed, trained and commanded solely by the CIA or by US military personnel whose role is vital in the fight against Daesh and Al-Qaeda, and

⁹ Madiha Afzal. What the Biden Administration Narrative on Afghanistan Went Wrong. Brooking Institute. June 7, 2021.

¹⁰ Vanda Felbab-Brown. Afghanistan After American Withdrawal: Part 1. Internal Factors Shaping Developments . Brooking Institute. June 16, 2021

¹¹ Najmuddin A Sheikh. Challenges Ahead. The Dawn. April 23, 2021.

whose survival beyond the deadline is in doubt, despite the fact that the CIA would like these militias to remain intact after the withdrawal of foreign forces.¹²

According to President Ashraf Ghani, his government will receive military aid after NATO forces have left, but a Pentagon statement makes it clear that this will be limited to financial assistance; the US will not support Afghan government forces with air power or by military operations.¹³

Given these deficiencies and uncertainties, it is difficult to see how the Afghan security forces will be able to cope alone with their present enemy. So the question of withdrawal needs very careful consideration and pre-emptive planning, because any erroneous decision will only lead to the extremist group taking charge.¹⁴

At the moment, the intra-Afghan peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are in abeyance, which has removed the opportunity for establishing a transitional political structure. In Afghanistan, violence persists with more intensity in several places, particularly in the south against Taliban forces, and here the ANDSF are supported by US air power.¹⁵ The Taliban are still on the offensive right across the country and are refusing to open negotiations until they get a response to their demands for prisoners' release and de-listing from UN sanctions. They have captured nine districts and are encircling provincial capitals and seeking to block some significant routes to facilitate city sieges. But, despite the ANDSF's many faults and the Taliban's successes, the Taliban cannot assume victory; it relies heavily on defectors from the Afghan forces. So, in this critical environment the very survival of the ANDSF is the key to governmental success in more ways than one, once international forces leave Afghanistan.

¹² Najmuddin A Sheikh. Challenges Ahead. The Dawn. April 23, 2021.

¹³ Rahimullah Yusufzai. The Certain Uncertainty of Post-War Afghanistan. May 3, 2021.

¹⁴ Michael E. O'Hanlon and Omar Sharif. The Hail Mary of power-sharing in Afghanistan. The Brookings Institute. March 29, 2021

¹⁵ Maleeha Lodhi. Afghanistan on the Edge again. The Dawn Newspaper, June 7, 2021.

The Taliban's military power is its key asset. They have captured several provincial capitals. Kabul's claim to control certain districts and provincial capitals is often illusory; the Taliban hold on some provincial capitals, such as Kunduz and Ghazni, was only prevented by the US Air Force. If the Taliban prove able to conquer several provincial capitals at the same time the ANDSF will struggle and may well start to disintegrate.¹⁶

There has been some concern expressed that the Taliban will try to march on Kabul on the heels of the departing foreign forces. The fall of Kabul to a fundamentalist regime again¹⁷ would be a real blow to the already fragile democratic structures of government. But in fact, the Taliban does not yet have the capability to march into Kabul and take over the government. Prior to taking Kabul in 1996, the Taliban had already taken several significant Afghan Pushtun cities, including Kandahar, Ghazni, Herat and Jalalabad with hardly any resistance. Moreover, Kabul today is not the exhausted, ruined city of 600,000 or 700,000 that it was in 1996, after four years of Mujahidin misrule, internecine conflict and mayhem.

Kabul certainly has all the problems of a rapidly expanding city into which the rural population has been pouring in thousands over the past twenty years. Traffic is an uncontrolled nightmare, air pollution is appalling, the power supply imperfect, the water supply a serious issue and urban crime a problem. Nonetheless, it has regained its dynamism. In the past twenty years, Kabul has been rebuilt and expanded; it has grown into a thriving city of between 2 and 3 million, with flourishing high schools and universities that educate girls as well as boys. For all its faults, there is a working government with ministries. There is a functional banking system, modern communications and a vibrant and remarkably free and open press and media. There are foreign Embassies, UN Agencies, World Bank / Asian Development Bank, EU / EC, flourishing businesses, international aid agencies, etc. This is a real deterrent, even though the international institutions and their staff are almost all living behind defensive barricades. One way or another, this city would be a tough nut to crack.

¹⁶ Vanda Felbab-Brown. Afghanistan After American Withdrawal: Part 1. Internal Factors Shaping Developments . Brookings Institute. June 16, 2021

¹⁷ Jennifer Hansler. Secretary of State Blinken visits Afghanistan day after US announces plans for withdrawal . CNN. Updated 1535 GMT (2335 HKT) April 15, 2021

It must also be borne in mind that, not only is there is little support for the Taliban among the non-Pushtun Afghan population; they are not universally supported by the Pushtun population either, particularly the rapidly growing numbers of the better educated, who would prefer a more enlightened form of government.

So the fall of Kabul is not a foregone conclusion. The city will fight and could win, not least because they Taliban have done nothing to endear themselves to the population of Kabul by their regular acts of terrorism and atrocity. Taking and holding the capital and setting up a government would not be an easy undertaking, and the Taliban undoubtedly know it. Government forces would try to stop any Taliban march on Kabul and would confront them. Unless the desertion rate from the government military increases, the Taliban will not find it easy to take most major cities, let alone Kabul. Failure will create the possibility of deeper factional fighting within the Taliban, further weakening it.

The other main challenge is that, as things stand, collaboration between the official Afghan government in Kabul and the Taliban does not appear to be on the cards; at the moment, neither side is prepared to recognise or enter into dialogue with the other. It is not that Ashraf Ghani is very popular, but he is very stubborn. If an interim government were established, the current leadership would have to go, which they would not accept unless the US threatened to cut off financial assistance. Since the US invaded, the Afghan political elite have not hesitated to create disorder and violent conflict in pursuit of their own personal ends. This has resulted in political polarisation and weak governance, and this greed and capriciousness has given the Taliban strength.¹⁸

Creating an environment for convening the 'Loya Jirga' to create a new government will, therefore, be a crucial US role; but with the economy crumbling, the government losing control of large swathes of the country, drug use and unemployment rising, hopes for a peaceful outcome without conflict are declining.¹⁹

¹⁸ Vanda Felbab-Brown. Afghanistan After American Withdrawal: Part 1. Internal Factors Shaping Developments . Brookings Institute. June 16, 2021

¹⁹Rustam Shah Mohmand. Prospects for Peace Diminishing, Arab News. May 6, 2021

Conclusion: What are the possible scenarios for establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan?

We can envisage only two optimistic scenarios. Firstly, a Loya Jirga is convened for formulating a plan to install a transitional government, led by the Taliban but inclusive of all other factions; the Jirga would also recommend suitable amendments to the constitution to make it more Islamic. The government thus formed could last for two to three years, with elections to follow.

Alternatively, the Taliban continue their advance. There would be large-scale fatalities and civilians would bear the brunt of the human cost. In the worst case, after a bloody confrontation the Taliban might overcome resistance, take Kabul and establish an Emirate. If then they were to include other groups and give representation to all ethnic groups, most people would accept this as long as they delivered peace and improved governance.

The bottom line is that, at some point in the near future, the Kabul government will have to confront the grim reality of whether ministers want to line their pockets and protect their positions in government or whether they are more focused on saving the country from the pains and sufferings of the chaos that could overwhelm its fragile institutions and infrastructure. Ultimately, it is that choice which will determine the future of Afghanistan.