



US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Unfinished War and Endless Complexities



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23 May 2021

Two decades of the deadly Afghan war, which altered the regional security dynamics, has killed more than 240,000 people, including Afghan security forces, foreign military personnel, civilians and Taliban and affiliated insurgent groups. Twenty years of the unfinished Afghan war has seen - infrequent phases of hope, repeated despair, development of the Afghan society which was beginning to cherish civil and political rights, liberation of the Afghan women being nationally and internationally applauded, and (simultaneously) increasing Taliban influence and strengthening of its resolve to control Afghanistan on its ideological terms. As the tenure of the Trump administration was approaching its completion, the Taliban sensed the US desperation to depart from Afghanistan. Looking back into the past few years when the negotiations with the Taliban started on various platforms – official and unofficial -one fact was increasingly clear that the Taliban were not ready to compromise on their ideological positioning which drives their political standing and their position on societal norms.

Talks with the Taliban were initiated at multiple bilateral levels and major countries with strategic stakes in Kabul, ie; China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran hosted the Taliban for talks excluding the representatives of the democratically elected Ghani government. The Taliban not only managed to expand their influence in Afghanistan but also gained legitimacy in the last few years at the international level. This added to the group's confidence to dictate their terms and conditions in the resolution of the Afghan conflict. As the process of withdrawal of the foreign troops commenced, the level of violence intensified in Afghanistan. Not only were there splinter groups of Taliban which were keen to establish themselves, but also the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) started to battle for much-desired space and recognition in the competitive world of terrorism.

1 | <https://capsindia.org/>

The Trump administration started negotiating with the Taliban in 2018 and on February 29, 2020 the landmark US-Taliban agreement was signed. The agreement aimed at: *formalising the departure* of the foreign troops from Afghanistan (by May 1, 2021), *seeking assurances* from the Taliban to prevent militant groups- al-Qaeda and affiliates - from using the Afghan soil to raise funds or attack or train against the US and its allies, and lay the ground for *the Intra-Afghan talks*. The agreement was a much-awaited success for the Taliban as they saw it as the group's biggest victory over the world's strongest militaries. Pakistan was applauded for its role as facilitator of the talks. The intra-Afghan talks, after many glitches, started in September 2020 and failed to progress given the high level of violence in Afghanistan with increasing numbers of targeted assassinations. Although the United States have intensified their efforts to broker an intra-Afghan agreement, the chances of any political solution are seemingly bleak.

President Joe Biden is determined not to pass America's longest war to the next President and announced the US troops withdrawal by September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. Biden announced:

*"With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country and across the billions [of dollars spent] each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders.... We 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."*¹

Yes, for sure President Joe Biden does want to exit the unfinished war. However, the situation post US withdrawal will be extremely challenging for Afghanistan. The Taliban is stronger than ever before, both militarily and politically. The critical factor in the recent announcement of the US withdrawal is that the *Taliban have managed to achieve their key motive without offering anything in return*. Neither have the Taliban fulfilled their commitment regarding de-linking with al-Qaeda, nor are they committed for a reduction in violence. On the contrary, Afghanistan has experienced the most gruesome attacks in the recent past including the killing of young students and school girls. Young assertive voices, specifically women voices, have been targeted.

In a recent interview by President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the Chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, to *The Washington Post*² some crucial factors were brought to fore highlighting the complexity of the Afghan future:

- According to the Afghan leadership – President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the departure of the US is neither a surprise nor disappointing but the pace of the exit could have been different to ease the challenges of the Afghan government.
- Although the Taliban’s main demand was the US withdrawal, the trajectory of violence in Afghanistan is indicative of the Taliban’s intention of controlling the state of affairs by force. The elected regime is confident that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are quite capable of handling the Taliban militarily, however the government strongly feels ANDSF would require continued commitment and support from the US and NATO countries. US training of the Afghan national security forces is essential for the morale of the forces and needs to continue.
- If the Taliban ‘insists on violent takeover’, they have to counter the Afghan security forces and most importantly the people in Afghanistan and “*People don’t want the Taliban*”.

The US has been pushing the Taliban to negotiate a power sharing agreement since last year, and recently China has offered to mediate the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Taliban, in the last few years, have strengthened their control on Afghanistan. Reports suggest that out of Afghanistan’s 325 districts, Taliban controls close to 76 districts. The Taliban rejected Ghani’s earlier proposal of holding a re-election and they term the current regime as a ‘puppet of the US’. There are little signs that the Taliban are in the mood for a political solution.

There is immense panic and desperation amongst the Afghans who have assisted the US troops to leave the country as there is fear of being targeted by the Taliban as ‘traitors’ after the US forces exit Afghanistan. Reportedly, there are about 18,000 visa applications in waiting for slots of approximately 11,000.³

The scenario currently leaves us with multiple complex questions. Whether the Afghan security forces will be able to militarily deal with the Taliban in the complete absence of the US support? Afghans don’t want the return of a Taliban rule, but can people resist the Taliban assertion? Will the efforts of the international community be able to persuade the Taliban to settle for a political solution welcoming the hard-earned civil rights and liberties of the Afghans?

New Delhi, has significant strategic and economic stakes in Afghanistan and has adopted a developmental approach towards Kabul assisting economic and humanitarian development. Democratically elected regimes in Afghanistan -President Karzai and President Ghani and the Afghans do rely on India’s consistent support in rebuilding Afghanistan. Past experience indicates that the Taliban, who draw strong

support from Pakistan, have been against India's engagement. New Delhi will have to carefully calibrate its future steps in Afghanistan as the situation in Kabul unfolds with the US drawdown.

Notes:

¹ Terri Moon Cronk, "Biden Announces Full U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Afghanistan by Sept.11", *DOD News*, April 14, 2021, US Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2573268/biden-announces-full-us-troop-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-by-sept-11/>. Accessed on May 11, 2021.

² Lally Weymouth, "Afghanistan's president: People don't want the Taliban", *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/afghanistans-president-people-dont-want-the-taliban/2021/05/20/8ff14f6e-b910-11eb-a5fe-bb49dc89a248_story.html. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

³ Deirdre Shesgreen, "'They will slaughter us': Afghans who worked with US beg for visas as troop withdrawal looms", *USA TODAY*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/slaughter-us-afghans-worked-us-100150542.html>. Accessed on May 20, 2021.

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Keywords: US withdrawal from Afghanistan, US-Afghan War, President Joe Biden, Trump, Taliban