

Last week, without fanfare or scrutiny, the U.S. achieved a sobering milestone in Afghanistan – 12 months without a U.S. soldier killed in America's longest war. It is now close to two decades since the U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan, overthrowing the Taliban regime that had housed Osama bin Laden and his terrorist group, al-Qaeda. Since the war against the Taliban began in 2001, the US has spent over US\$1 trillion, while U.S. forces have suffered more than 2,300 deaths. Afghan civilian deaths are close to 200,000. With no end to the conflict in sight, in September 2018 President Trump appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. diplomat, to be the U.S. Envoy tasked with negotiating a peace agreement that would end the Afghan conflict.

The result of this initiative was the Doha Agreement, signed in late February 2020. The Doha Agreement sought to pave the way for an eventual peace in Afghanistan via a political settlement. Importantly, under the terms of the deal, the U.S. committed to withdrawing all of its military forces and supporting civilian personnel, as well as those of its allies, within 14 months. For the Taliban, the deal meant that they would enter into direct negotiations with the Afghan government, a previous red-line for the movement.

Last month U.S. officials conducted their final sets of meetings in Doha under the Trump administration. This week NATO allies, the Afghan government and the world will learn of the Biden Administration's policy direction for Afghanistan. The stakes could not be higher.

As noted above, under the terms of the February 2020 Doha Agreement, the U.S. committed to withdrawing all of its military forces and supporting civilian personnel, as well as those of its allies, within 14 months. That deadline will be reached on 1 May this year. The Taliban have stated in public that any change to the U.S. withdrawal date would constitute a violation of the agreement and pave the way for the Taliban to escalate the conflict and recommence its use of spectacular attacks, targeting of provincial capitals and coalition forces. In response to this sabre-rattling, the U.S. has made clear that its forces remain ready to retaliate and shift its current defensive posture back to a more offensive push.

In Kabul, President Ghani is in no mood to compromise and remains set on a ceasefire leading to a political settlement.

In light of this stalemate the Biden administration has three options to choose from:

1. Stick to the 1 May withdrawal timeline as stipulated in the Doha Agreement. The consequences of this option would be severe for the Afghan State and the U.S. legacy in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of forces in the coming months, in the absence of a wider political settlement between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban, would lead to a dramatic spike in violence and the Taliban likely taking control of key provincial capitals, possibly pushing the compass in the direction of civil war.
2. Ignore the May deadline. This option effectively kills the Doha Agreement. If the U.S. chooses this option, it should expect that the Taliban will plan a targeted offensive against international forces and the Afghan State, as well as recommence their use of spectacular attacks.
3. Try and negotiate some form of compromise that *de facto* extends the May agreement along the lines of pursuing a 90-day reduction in violence with concurrent negotiations on a temporary power sharing formula.

According to U.S. senior officials who have spoken to Dragoman, all options are in play and ultimately it will be Biden that will choose between 1, 2 or 3. However, whatever he decides,

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there will be blowback. Option 1 is ostensibly a 'rush to the exit' approach and hands the fate of Afghanistan to the Taliban and the region. Option 2 closes the door on a historic opportunity to end the conflict in Afghanistan and opens the door to an indefinite deployment of U.S. forces and further U.S. casualties. While Option 3 may appear the obvious choice for Biden, it is also a gamble. It is far from clear that the Taliban would acquiesce to the U.S. declaring a unilateral 'extension' of the Doha Agreement. Even if the Taliban were to agree, the U.S. military and its intelligence agencies, along with the Ghani administration fear that in the absence of any trust, the Taliban would use a 90-day reduction in violence to its strategic advantage by simply using this time to consolidate its forces before launching an aggressive Spring Offensive.

The only possible bright spot is that the famously divided Afghan elite (the likes of former President Karzai, Qanooni, Sayeff, Atta etc...) all recognise the opportunity currently available to achieve a peace agreement and all support the principle of a ceasefire and power sharing.

It is expected that Biden will make a decision this week. After there is an announcement of Biden's new policy on Afghanistan, Dragoman will distribute an updated note on the implications of the 46th President's approach to America's longest war.



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