

On April 14th, President Biden announced his decision to fully withdraw US forces from Afghanistan by September 11th this year – the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Practically, the announcement means the departure of 3,500 US troops and an additional 7,000 foreign (largely NATO) troops. As noted in my previous commentary, Biden was facing three difficult policy options to choose between:

1. Stick to the May 1st withdrawal timeline as stipulated in the Doha Agreement;
2. Ignore the May 1st deadline – effectively killing the Doha Agreement and committing to fighting an ongoing war against the Taliban;
3. Or, try and negotiate some form of compromise that de facto extended the May agreement.

In the end, it became clear that option one, the quick withdrawal, was no longer practically possible given the months of logistical preparation required to exit. Option two was also fraught, it would essentially be a declaration of an ongoing war against the Taliban and may have heralded another 20 years of fighting. The focus, therefore, quickly fell on policy option three – an extension.

24-hours after Biden's announcement, the Taliban released its statement in response and framed the US decision as a clear violation of the Doha Agreement and an act of non-compliance with its commitments. The Taliban used its statement to note very strongly that 'America cannot be trusted nor is it committed to its pledges and promises'. It also claimed that it had complied with the terms of the agreement. While the Taliban did not announce an offensive, it used the statement to open the door to the possibility of escalating violence, stating that the US 'breach' of the agreement 'in principle opens the way for the Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate to take every necessary countermeasure, hence the American side will be held responsible for all future consequences, and not the Islamic Emirate'. The statement ends noting that the Taliban 'remains committed to finding a peaceful solution'.

Despite the strong language, this is quite a measured response and reflects recent conversations with officials and representatives Dragoman has had in Doha, Oslo, Kabul, and D.C. – that the US had been clear with the Taliban from late last month that it was no longer practically possible to meet the May 1 deadline. Having said this, US allies, the Afghan government, the UN and the Taliban were not pre-briefed on the announcement and the news has generated a series of shockwaves. The Government of Afghanistan was caught by surprise and had continued to lobby as late as this week for a tougher US approach and a conditions-based withdrawal.

US Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad returned over the weekend to Washington D.C. to consult with his leadership on how to use the next 5 months. The US, somewhat optimistically, sees the announcement as providing more space for a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan Republic, for the Istanbul Process – a meeting of regional capitals – to get up and running, and for the UN to 'step-up'. In private, many acknowledge that it is most likely that the Taliban will simply wait out the next 5 months, possibly with some diplomatic engagement to test the waters – a 'talk but wait' approach.

As noted in the February Commentary, the Doha Agreement's focus on a reduction of violence had narrow definitions on violence. For example, it did not include targeted assassinations that have continued unabated. It did, however, deliver on curtailing Taliban efforts to attack and control district or provincial centers, and on the use of spectacular attacks (truck bombs in Kabul for example). It should be assumed that the Taliban will maintain that these limits are

Dragoman

no longer in place and one should expect an escalation over late Spring and Summer. The US have yet to decide internally how it will respond to such an escalation, unless of course the US military were targeted.

What this means for certain on the ground is more instability in currently contested areas. We should also expect new areas, including district and provincial centers, to become new frontlines. Where Taliban control is currently uncontested there is likely to be little change on the ground, save for a more confident Taliban movement.

In the short-term, the Taliban will remain heavily distracted by battlefield dynamics and the diplomatic chess game involving Kabul, the region and international partners. It is too early to speak about civil war, but that is obviously one step closer this week than it was last week. Having said this, all Afghans, including the Taliban, still talk of a peaceful settlement and the US decision may actually force key regional capitals to align and engage in a way that has not been possible over the past 20 years. Teheran, Moscow, Beijing, Islamabad, Delhi, among others, all have a vested interest in avoiding state collapse in Afghanistan. The UN for better or worse, is also about to become more relevant than it has been since the conclusion of the Bonn process in 2005/06. Whilst only time will tell, this could yet prove to be an important brace against a slide into war.



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