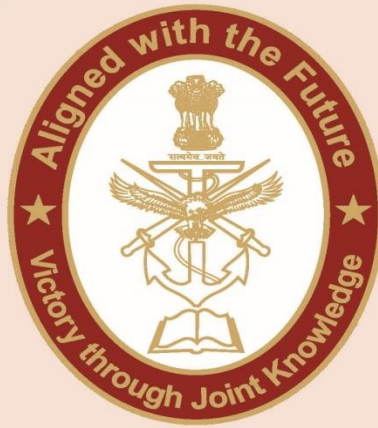


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

AFGHANISTAN: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE PORTEND?



Lt Gen PR Kumar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), former Director General of Military Operations. He continues to write and talk on international and regional security and strategic issues.

Oblivious Precepts. Before we analyse the future portends for Afghanistan, let me spell out some oblivious precepts, which have a bearing on the likely prognosis:-

- “War/confrontation is seen as an exception, an extreme and an aberration in international affairs; the paradox is that it is the invention of peace which is the artificial edifice”.
- Scenario building/forecasting difficult in geo-politics. The most vibrant characteristic of geo-politics is ‘uncertainty’.
- Why does the World ‘NOT’ leave Afghanistan alone, to decide their own future?
- India is gaining significant influence in Afghan peace process, but does not carry definitive political heft and capabilities to be a decisive/pivotal constituent in the peace process.

Background to Current Imbroglia. Four US Presidents have overseen the longest war being fought by USA starting 9/11/2001 which will soon enter its third decade. All without exception wanted a 'quick in and out' after achieving geo-political and strategic victory, but had no choice but to stay, with actual troop involvement forming a sinusoidal curve. Let us not forget that their initial aim was to eliminate Al Qaida from Afghanistan, which they largely accomplished in a very short period. The war has already cost more than \$1 trillion directlyⁱ, and its broader costs are at least double that figure. Ironically, in case of Afghanistan history seems to be repeating itself.

President Trumps Legacy. Following up on one of the main planks of his election policy of 'America First' and 'not fighting others wars', Trump favoured fixing 'time lines' for withdrawal and quickly announced the same. He subsequently backtracked on the above policy under domestic political compulsions and stoutly asserted that US Forces withdrawal from Afghanistan would be solely dependent on the security and stability situation prevailing in Afghanistan. As is his wont, he upended everything and everybody including his closest aides by reaching a "US-Taliban Deal (Doha Accord)" with the Afghan Taliban in February 2020, to withdraw all US and NATO troops by 01 May 2021ⁱⁱ. In exchange, the United States received security assurances and a commitment from the Taliban to begin peace talks with the Afghan government.

Real *Politik* has no Morals. Perhaps nothing reflects the challenges facing the Afghan negotiations more starkly than the title "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the USA which Is Not Recognized by the US as a State, and which is known as the Taliban"ⁱⁱⁱ! The leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the second-in-command of the Taliban is on the US wanted list with a reward of \$10 million for information leading to his capture or death. To top it all, the US considers the Taliban a partner in counter-terrorism (CT) operations against Al-Qaeda and IS and other terrorist groups.

Geo-Political and Strategic Rationale leading to Joe Bidens Afghanistan Peace Plan. President Biden was left holding the hot potato. He had three stark choices; follow the timelines agreed by Trump (01 May); stay the Afghan course; or “accelerate the peace process” and carry out a ‘responsible withdrawal’, leaving behind a small counter terrorism (CT) force. Biden and Blinken (US Secretary of State) felt the last option is the best way to advance the shared interests of the US and her allies, and people of Afghanistan (US-Taliban deal remains the pivot of the plan). The US assessment shared by most experts is that if American troops are pulled out of Afghanistan, the Taliban would make quick gains, clashes between Taliban and ANA (Afghan National Army) would escalate which would draw in US and allied troops, violence will spiral, talks between Taliban and Afghan National Government (ANG) will fail, leading to a very high probability of a civil war.

Biden’s Peace Plan. On 14 Apr 21, President Joe Biden, announced the withdrawal of all US troops including the civil contractors servicing them in a phased manner by 11 Sep 21. Interestingly, US completes two decades of intervention on that date (since 09/11/2002). It is a unilateral announcement and the Taliban is yet to respond. The Biden administration has proposed a modified peace plan to the Afghan government and the Taliban, seeking to bring violence to a halt and form an interim government. The proposal included many elements; first, an UN-led conference of representatives of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the US “to discuss a unified approach to support peace in Afghanistan”; share written proposals with the Afghan leadership and the Taliban to accelerate talks. It urges both sides to reach a consensus on Afghanistan’s future constitutional and governing arrangements (the Taliban and the Afghan government still disagree on fundamental issues, including whether the country should remain a republic or even retain any features of electoral democracy); third, find a road map to a new “inclusive interim government”^{iv}; and lastly, agree on the terms of a “permanent and comprehensive ceasefire”. The proposal recommends a senior level meeting of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Turkey to discuss power

sharing, reduction of violence and other specific goals. **Essentially, the Biden administration is attempting to embed the peace process in a wider regional framework.** The Biden administration has chosen a more decisive course in Afghanistan and has to make substantial movement on above aspects before final withdrawal.

Apathy of US Public assists Biden. Interestingly and surprisingly the Afghan issue is not in the US public eye, due to public apathy unlike other US military involvements, with majority of people thinking that the issue has been resolved, as also thanks to COVID, low casualties, volunteer army and hi-tech warfare being conducted (drones and missile warfare, aerial support both for logistics and warfighting). This will ease the domestic compulsions for Biden giving him time to activate the plan.

Afghan Govt stance: Geo-Strategic-Political Implications. The Ghani administration has consistently been critical of the US direct outreach to the Taliban. On the proposed plan, Ghani recently commented “My power rests on my legitimacy,” and “the moment that legitimacy is gone, the whole thing implodes.” Vice President Saleh emphasised that the US “can decide on their troops, not on the people of Afghanistan”. Mr Ghani will find it very difficult to resist the pressure by the US, EU and the five nations requested to negotiate a way forward. Interestingly stake holders except possibly for India want US troops out. If Pakistan foresees continuation of US troops it will increase its support to Taliban with the backing of China. One thing is very clear, if Ghani rejects the plan and refuses to talk to the Taliban, we are looking at a very bleak future where great power and regional games will continue forever, and in all probability so will the fighting. Ghani’s failure to take the initiative has created a void that other actors are filling with proposals for peace that address only their own concerns and do not grapple with the fundamental issues that hobble Afghanistan. The ANG’s inertia in this area has made it a mere spectator, while other stakeholders are getting poised to decide the fate of the country.

Some fundamental Non-Negotiables for Success of Peace Plan.

- 90 days immediate ceasefire between Taliban and ANA, followed by comprehensive ceasefire. No targeting of US and Allied troops.
- Non-interference by regional players in internal situation.
- Interim reconciliation government to be formed.
- Future of Taliban soldiers; absorption into ANA? Disarmament and demobilization methodologies and packages to be worked out.
- National bipartisan body to discuss Constitution and type of political structure to govern Afghanistan.
- Conduct of elections within a time bound period.

Stakeholders Stakes.

Cutting all rhetoric to the bone, ALL Nations want mainly two things, which need not necessarily be aligned to Afghan interests specially its people:-

- An Afghanistan aligned to their interests.
- Their strategic space, influence and economic payoffs are bettered, whatever the political dispensation, while ensuring 'no spread of jihadi culture leading to terrorism'^{vi}.

Taliban. The new agreement and the looming US exit places the Taliban in the strongest position they have ever been. The Taliban have demonstrated to the Afghan people, the world, and especially militant groups around the world, that they possess the (military) capability to resist a US invasion and outlast a superpower. They have made themselves an intrinsic part of any attempt to find a long-term solution for peace. As of March 2021, Taliban controls substantial real estate^{vii} which gives them significant leverage in negotiating with

the government: they are aware that Kabul will be forced to concede to most demands, if only to avoid the group from taking over more areas especially urban. Adding to the Taliban's leverage is the political legitimacy it has managed to gain as an international actor; one that the US has negotiated with, and now asking them to be part of an interim Afghan government^{viii} (and coercing Ghani!). The Taliban over the years has evolved its relationships with all regional stakeholders barring India. Here too Taliban has shown diplomatic finesse stating that it will not act nor allow any party to act against another country, specifically naming India^{ix}. The Taliban has also been an active participant in the talks hosted by Moscow in November 2018 and March 2021, as also increasingly with Iran. **A word of caution:** Taliban has always rejected the democratic ideals of universal suffrage, free and fair elections, and respect for minorities, all of which are prerequisites, as outlined in the draft agreement. It has also always considered the ANG an 'American puppet'. The Taliban are not pressed for time and can wait until they get what they want: a complete US withdrawal, a slow surrender of democracy, and a return to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that the group installed and commandeered in Afghanistan from 1996 until losing it to the US invasion in 2001.

China and Pakistan Commons. China and Pakistan want to keep India confined internally and externally, and constrict its strategic space. Once Taliban comes to power use jihad and terrorism to create trouble, and exploit the facade of ambiguity. The longer the conflict more clout China and Pakistan will have with Taliban and thus in Afghanistan. They will enhance their geo-strategic and political clout in the region and leverage it with Iran, CAR, and Russia.

China. In addition, integrate CPEC with Afghanistan (Pakistan may not be too pleased), enhance land route of BRI towards CAR, Russia and Europe. Already an ambitious five Nations railway connecting China and Iran via Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan is in the offing.

Pakistan. In addition, cement its notion of strategic depth against India, keep Durand Line issue quiet and formalise it, opportunities for trade, entry into CAR, access to Middle East, influence Iran and play power broker in Middle East especially KSA and Turkey.

Russia. Russia's own security and geopolitical interests make it an interested party in a stable Afghanistan and in putting an end to armed conflict in the region. Its concern is that in the event of heightening instability, violence could spill over into Central Asia and cause destabilisation close to Russia's borders. The threat of extremist and radical ideology spreading to Central Asia and onwards to South Caucasus and broader Russia is another worry, especially when it comes to the Islamic State (ISIS). The continued flow of illegally trafficked drugs into Russia is a major concern.

Iran. Seat of Shia Islam, Iran has historically been at ideological odds with a powerful Sunni Taliban. From almost going to war with the Taliban in 1998, to supporting the US invasion in 2001, today Tehran nurtures high-level contacts with the Taliban aimed at stopping the growth of the Islamic State-Khorasan in the region and get US out of its underbelly. Currently adopted two-pronged approach; one regional in nature, and second in the context of Iran's fractured relations with the US.

Flipside. There is also a flipside to Taliban usurping power or having a major say in geo-politics in Afghanistan. It can bite back like the proverbial snake:-

- Spread of jihadi culture.
- Taliban like others has never accepted the Durand Line (renewed demand for Pakhtunistan). It can cause instability as also interfere in China's handling of Uighurs in Xinjiang, by supporting them (a threat which China takes very seriously).
- Talibanisation of Pak

Indian Interests, Stakes and Capabilities: Limited Choices.

Indian stakes in Afghanistan are not existential. A lot has been spoken and written, and India too desires Afghanistan aligned to its national interests. The necessity is more due to geography as also the China-Pakistan adversarial collusivity, with scope to exploit the violent jihadist elements in Afghanistan using ambiguity as a cover, causing both external and internal instability in India. On a positive note, India can also use its strategic partnership (India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement in October 201) with a stable aligned Afghanistan to leverage geo-political and economic gains and entry into CAR, Iran and onto Middle East and Europe. Coupled with an active 'Look East' policy the 'Look West' will gain realistic traction. India has not yet opened official talks with the Taliban. However, India 'cannot let sleeping dogs lie' but be bold and less dogmatic, and navigate uncharted territory to exploit the geo-political situation emerging, as the consequences are strategic. Within this complex loop, India's USP, is that it is the only country that can engage with the US, Europe (EU) on the one hand, and China (commons: Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang and Kashmir), Russia and Iran on the other, and shares a relationship of trust with Afghanistan, which **MUST** be played to safeguard our strategic interests. We are well placed to play a pivotal role (despite being a low-key player so far) to form a consensus on how to shape the future of Afghanistan, which naturally depends on how we handle Taliban. Iran is wary of elements who are anti-Shia which suits India, as it places Pakistan in the opposite camp. India views Russia as a balancer in the regional security matrix, despite its proximity with China, due to its interests in CAR and Europe. India, Iran and Russia besides convergence on regional security, can develop cooperative mechanisms for commercial and economic ties with Afghanistan.

Strat Recommendation for India

- **Broaden Diplomatic Engagement/Appoint Special Envoy.** Appoint a special envoy dedicated to Afghan reconciliation. The envoy to safeguard Indian interests at every international, regional and internal forum, and reaches out to Taliban

representatives. While this will come at the risk of annoying the current Afghan dispensation, they are pragmatic enough to realise how the international and internal winds are blowing.

- **Further Enhance Multi-Dimensional Assistance.** Capacity and capability enhancement in defence, intelligence sharing specially of anti-India terrorist groups must be a priority. Given the unstable situation and impact of COVID on the economy India must spearhead developmental assistance.
- **Regional Cooperation.** Exploit own soft and hard power capabilities and become a lead player in coordinating and consolidating Biden's Peace Plan.

Multi-Dimensional Assistance to Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan and Government deeply appreciate India's assistance without baggage. India has made substantial contributions in terms of infrastructure development, financial support (\$2.2 bn), human capital (Over 15000 students in Indian Universities), security architecture (defence systems like 4 MI 26 helicopter, 285 vehicles, hospitals; basic and advanced military training) and numerous other fields towards nation building and prosperity of Afghanistan. To name a few major projects; constructed Parliament building in Kabul; restoration of the Stor palace; reconstruction of Salma dam now known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam; building strategically important Zaranj-Delaram road which connects the border town of Zaranj (leading to Iranian port of Chabahar) with the city of Delaram, thereby establishing better communication. In Geneva (Nov 2020) FM S Jaishankar announced that India had concluded with Afghanistan, an agreement for the construction of the Shatoot dam, which would provide safe drinking water to 2 million residents of Kabul city. He also announced the launch of Phase-IV of the High Impact Community Development Projects in Afghanistan, which envisages more than 100 projects worth \$ 80 million that India would undertake in Afghanistan. India's development portfolio in Afghanistan has to-date amounted to US \$ 3 bn. Developmental assistance are centered around five pillars: large infrastructure projects; human resource development and capacity building; humanitarian assistance; high impact community development

projects; and enhancing trade and investment through air and land connectivity.

Points to Ponder.

- **Impossible to separate counterterrorism from counterinsurgency.** US will not be able to hold bases in Afghanistan purely for CT, while withholding operational support from its host and counterterrorism partner, ANA. The US would need to continue providing the Afghan military some essential backup in its existential fight with the Taliban. Absent that support, the war would intensify and Kabul would lose ground. In other words, it is impossible to disentangle CT from CI in Afghanistan^x. In time, it will become akin to 'staying the course'.
- **'Is USA making a historic strategic mistake by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.** Undoubtedly withdrawal would imply letting go of its strategic advantage and leaving a strategic void in an extremely sensitive, volatile but important region, to be exploited by all the stakeholders. Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran would move in, and are geo-political and ideological rivals, possibly leading to their power consolidation and also more instability. Re-intervention could cost USA dearly and even jeopardise its position as the prime global power. Along with a peaceful deployment in Japan and South Korea, a kinetic deployment in Afghanistan of say 2500 to 5000 troops (low stakes and low key) may well be worth the strategic upper hand.

India is in a good place and can now influence Afghanistan's future more than ever before. The other stake holders have more to lose. The world waits and watches with bated breath.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication / web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

About the Author: Lt Gen PR Kumar (Retd) served in the Indian Army for 39 years, He was the DG Army Aviation, before superannuating from the appointment of Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) in end 2015. He continues to write and talk on international and regional geopolitical, security and strategic issues. He can be contacted at prkumarsecurity.wordpress.com and kumapa60@gmail.com.

ⁱNeta C. Crawford, Costs of War, United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated, November 14, 2018, accessed on 10 Apr 21, Link- https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf

ⁱⁱ Sarah Kreps and Douglas Kriner, '**In or Out of Afghanistan Is Not a Political Choice: Americans Won't Pull the Trigger on the Country's Longest War**', 22 Mar 21, Link - <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-03-22/or-out-afghanistan-not-political-choice>; accessed on 08 Apr 21

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>, accessed on 10 Apr 21

^{iv} Colm Quinn, "[Blinken Threatens May 1 Afghan Troop Withdrawal](#)", *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2021, accessed 08 Apr 21.

^vStanley Johny, 'Explained | Joe Biden's Afghanistan peace plan', 10 Mar 21, The Hindu International, Link- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-joe-bidens-afghanistan-peace-plan/article34036383.ece>

^{vi} Philip Holtmann, '**Terrorism and Jihad: Differences and Similarities**', Perspectives on Terrorism, Link- <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/352/html>, accessed on 10 Apr 21

^{vii}Difficult to assess, varying reports; 54% as per Wikipedia; 52 % in other sources; As per Pajhwok Afghan News, the country's largest independent news agency which carried out survey and report dated 13 Feb 21 (Link- <https://www.dnnext.in/News/World/2021/02/14204016/1276066/52-pc-of-Afghanistan-still-under-Taliban-control-Survey.vpf>) the Taliban controls 337,000 square.km of Afghan land and about 297,000 square.km is under government control, while 18,000 square metre is reported to have no influence over by any of the parties. The findings revealed that 27 districts are under Taliban control while 64 other districts are fully controlled by the government and the rest 297 districts are controlled by both of the parties.

^{viii} Kriti M Shah, '**The Taliban Play the Waiting Game**', a chapter in essay titled 'From War to Peace: The Regional Stakes in Afghanistan's Future' compiled by Kabir Taneja, ORF – Issue Briefs and Special Reports, 26 Mar 21, Link - <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-war-to-peace-the-regional-stakes-in-afghanistans-future/>

^{ix}Shishir Gupta, 'Kashmir is India's internal matter, says Taliban; denies plan to target Delhi', The Hindustan Times, 19 May 20, Link - <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmir-is-india-s-internal-matter-says-taliban-denies-plan-to-target-delhi/story-sOgG3yPsMenP4nZDKRbygL.html>

^x Laurel Miller, '**The Myth of a Responsible Withdrawal From Afghanistan: Counterterrorism Without Counterinsurgency Is Impossible**', 22 Jan 21, Link - <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-01-22/myth-responsible-withdrawal-afghanistan>, accessed on 07 Apr 21