

Confused in Afghanistan: The Biden Administration's Latest Trick

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*The Biden administration continues to engage in that favourite activity White House Press Secretary **Jen Psaki** can only describe as “circling back”. And much circling is taking place in the context of Afghanistan.*

The cupboard of calamities is well stocked, with the US facing an emboldened Taliban keen to hold Washington to its word in withdrawing the last troops by May 1. In doing so, there is little chance that the US sponsored government in Kabul would survive. But dithering past the date will also be an open invitation to resume hostilities in earnest.

As things stand with the Afghanistan Peace Agreement, the Taliban have every reason to chortle. “There is little sign that this particular peace process,” [opines](#) Kate Clark of the Afghan Analysts Network, “has blunted the Taliban’s eagerness, in any way, to pursue war.” Not only have they been brought into any future power sharing arrangements with Kabul; they are also entertaining a new constitution with a good dose of Islamic policing. A powerful Islamic Jurisprudence Council with veto powers over laws is contemplated. All of this comes with the departure of US troops provided the Taliban prevent Al Qaeda and other designated terrorist groups from operating within the country’s borders.

Cadres of the security establishment in Washington are worried at easing the imperial footprint. Left with few options, the Biden administration has resorted to delaying tactics, hoping for the creation of an interim power-sharing government that would lead to a more comprehensive peace settlement.

Policy wonks are not impressed. Madiha Afzal and Michael E. O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institute [take a withering view](#) of the Taliban: they are not to be trusted on any reduction in violence or constructive power sharing. The only question for them is whether US forces remain, or leave. As with previous justifications for keeping up the pretence for foolish, bloody and failed interventions, the argument is a familiar hoary old chestnut: to extricate yourself from the nightmare would see the perpetration of a bigger one. “As difficult as it is to remain in this longest war, the most likely outcome of pulling out of Afghanistan would be very, very ugly, including ethnic cleansing, mass slaughter and the ultimate dismemberment of the country.”

Afzal and O’Hanlon acknowledges the bill to be considerable, though they do so with cool regret: the cost to the US taxpayer could be up to \$10 billion annually; 10 to 20 casualties would also be added to the accounts “if the Taliban resumes its previous use of force against US forces.” Not taking up the burden would encourage the troops of other countries to leave while seeing conflict move to the cities, “which have generally remained under government control throughout the past two decades.”

With the interim government plan taking shape, US **Secretary of State Antony Blinken** has decided to further baffle allies in Kabul. In a letter to Afghanistan’s **President Ashraf Ghani** seen by TOLONews, Blinken [states](#) that, “Although we have not yet completed our review of the way ahead, we have reached an initial conclusion that the best way to advance our shared interests is to do all we can to accelerate peace talks and to bring all parties into compliance with their commitments.”

To this waffle, Blinken has a suggestion: “pursuing a high-level diplomatic effort with the parties and with regional countries and the United Nations.” The Foreign Ministers of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the United States should be convened by the UN. Written proposals to the Taliban and Ghani are also promised “aimed at accelerating discussions on a negotiated settlement and ceasefire.” While they are not meant to “dictate terms to the parties,” the Afghans have every reason to assume the opposite, given that they involve “foundational principles that will guide Afghanistan’s future constitutional and governing arrangements”, “a new inclusive government” and “terms of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.”

Then comes the insertion of Turkey, which would have come as a delight to **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, busily shredding the remnants of liberal democracy in his country. Senior-level meetings of both sides would take place in Turkey “in the coming weeks to finalize a peace agreement.” Hardly a vote of confidence for supporters of constitutional strength and sobriety, and striking coming from an individual who [enjoys berating](#) states such as China for their human rights blemishes.

The rest of Blinken’s points resemble a counselling session: a revised proposal for a Reduction-in-Violence strategy that will take 90 days; the need for all Afghan leaders to remain united and, in doing so, “build consensus on specific goals and objectives for a negotiation with the Taliban about governance, power-sharing, and essential supporting principles”. Blinken then falls into that unfortunate habit prevalent in the advertising school of thought in US foreign policy. Tactics and “public messaging that will demonstrate unity of effort and purpose” should be pursued. Public relations should do it.

The tone of the note, with its Quiet American theme, did not impress various Afghan advocates. Kabul-based lawyer Kawun Kakar [found](#) the “prescriptive nature and context of the letter disturbing.” He acknowledged that the US was “frustrated by the ‘endless war’” and the lengthy talks in Doha but imposing “complicated substantive” and “procedural conditions” and “deadlines do not seem realistic.” The parties, as things stood, were simply too far apart to guarantee any durable peace, while letting in other major powers into an already messy picture was ill-considered.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh [did little](#) to hide his dissatisfaction.

“They [the Americans] have the right to decide on 2,500 US soldiers and sign deals with the Taliban as they please. But it is also our right to make decisions

about 35 million people of Afghanistan not based on anyone else's calendar."

Biden's Afghanistan policy risks fouling up even before anything solid is minted. "US forces will stay," [worries](#) Eli Lake, "risking a new round of attacks from the Taliban. But they will not stay long, depriving the US of its already dwindling leverage to force the Taliban to adhere to the 2020 deal." The worst of all worlds.

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