

Biden Faces Stay or Go Dilemma in Afghanistan

Biden plans to 'review' Trump's withdrawal plan and could seek to keep 'residual' presence until a government-Taliban settlement is reached

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As new US President Joe Biden works to undo many of his predecessor Donald Trump's foreign policies and legacies, the outgoing administration's war-ending Afghanistan policy is likely to endure - albeit it with a potential deal-breaking tweak.

Speculation is rife that Biden will seek to delay America's troop drawdown - currently scheduled for a complete withdrawal of 2,500 remaining troops by May, as per a February 2020 agreement with the Taliban - for what some are calling a slower, “more responsible” departure.

It's a risky gambit, one that some say is necessary to prevent a reversion to the multi-sided civil war and anarchy seen in the 1990s, but also one that could blow up the US-Taliban pact as well as talks between President Ashraf Ghani's government and the Taliban on a war-ending political settlement now ongoing in Doha, Qatar.

Advocates of a delay say the Biden administration should seek to leave a “residual” counterterrorism force in Afghanistan beyond this May and until a transitional government is in place, which depending on its size, shape and scope could irretrievably scupper the US-Taliban deal. Biden advocated such a force in a *Foreign Affairs* article he penned last spring.

There is little risk that Biden himself will abandon outright Trump's troop withdrawal plan. Still, his administration has already indicated it intends to “review” the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement that put the withdrawal timetable in place in exchange for a Taliban commitment that anti-US terror outfits like al Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) would not be allowed to use Afghanistan as a base for future attacks.

Biden's review will no doubt include a deep reading of the “secret” annexes to the US-Taliban agreement, which Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged he hadn't yet seen during his Senate confirmation hearings on January 19.

For now, Biden's position is informed more by the futility of continuing the almost two-decades-old war, where after years of fighting the US has been unable to force the Taliban into submission.

Biden was intimately involved in an earlier phase of the conflict as vice president in the Barack Obama administration and is known to be an advocate for ending a conflict now known Inside the Beltway as the “forever war.”

Trump’s withdrawal agreement, which sent some 2,500 of 4,500 troops home in mid-January, was borne of a broad consensus in the US defense establishment that the best way to end the conflict is through some sort of political settlement with the Taliban.

This was evident in a recent meeting between the US Joint Chiefs chairman and the Taliban in Doha, marking the first time a high-ranked US military official sat with the Taliban to discuss peace.

While the meeting showed the US military’s active involvement in the Afghan peace process, it also showed a lack of appetite for continuing the conflict.

That comes as criticism swirls that the Taliban has leveraged the February accord to ramp up violence and win tactical and geographical advantages vis-à-vis Ghani’s state forces.

The Pentagon no doubt realizes that a mere 2,500 troops cannot defeat the Taliban, which is now wreaking violent havoc across the country including around the capital of Kabul. The US previously had over 100,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan in a war plan that aimed to defeat al Qaeda in retribution for its brazen September 11, 2001 terror attacks on US soil.

Against this backdrop of violence, the Taliban and Afghan President Ghani’s administration are now engaged in slow-moving peace talks in Doha, Qatar, where the two sides are still debating over the agenda of future meetings. The Biden administration could thus seek to better calibrate the pace of troop withdrawal and align it more closely with actual progress in Taliban-Ghani peace talks and an eventual political settlement.

Biden’s policy team, many of whom worked on Afghanistan policy under Obama, also wants to take into account the view of NATO, which is among those advocating for a “responsible withdrawal” to ensure that post-withdrawal Afghanistan does not become a free-for-all battleground among the Taliban, Afghan military forces and various other militant and terror groups including Islamic State (ISIS) and al Qaeda.

Since the February agreement was struck, the US military has largely eschewed active combat, which has opened the ground for the Taliban to mount more potent attacks on state forces. While the US-Taliban agreement stipulates a full US troop withdrawal by May, there are no unambiguous clauses that prevent the Taliban from attacking Afghan forces.

The Taliban has actively leveraged this to their advantage, arguably tipping the balance of battlefield power in its favor through ramped up violence and territorial advances. As their own statements show, the Taliban do not feel bound to stop or slow the attacks while peace talks are ongoing.

Ghani’s good faith release of some 5,000 Taliban fighters from state prisons has arguably added to that rising threat. As such, Afghan political elites now hope that Biden will “correct the course” set by the Trump administration and review the withdrawal plan.

High-ranking Ghani administration figures have recently told international media that the

Taliban has not fulfilled its commitments in the US agreement.

In a recent interview with the BBC, Afghanistan's First Vice President Amrullah Saleh argued that despite securing a "massive concession" from the US, the Taliban have not severed their ties with al-Qaeda and are unlikely to genuinely deliver on such assurances.

Reminding the US of its original war mission, Saleh argued that "The question is not the fate of Afghanistan...The question is the fate, reputation and standing of the Western civilization. They came to assist a small country to prevail against terrorism, against radicalism, against al Qaeda affiliates" and that mission remains unfinished.

The situation is complicated by the fact that international support for the Afghan war has waned significantly. Apart from NATO's emphasis on a "responsible" withdrawal, the broad international community has largely reduced its financial commitments to Afghanistan. That was evident during the recently-held Geneva conference on Afghanistan.

Compared to the \$15.2 billion pledged four years ago in Brussels for 2017-20, the latest virtually-held conference pledged only \$12 billion. This amount is not only smaller but doesn't meet minimum projections set by the UNDP for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development needs.

The US, for one, would not even commit for a full four-year period, indicating once again America's diminished appetite for Afghanistan-related commitments. The Afghanistan conflict to date has cost the US \$800 billion and 2,400 lives, according to official data.

For Biden's proposed residual force and apparent delayed withdrawal plan to work, his diplomats and agents will need to quickly revive channels of communication with the Taliban to sell them on a revised plan without scrapping the agreement altogether.

Afghanistan is therefore likely to become Biden's first major foreign policy test. As vice president, he did not have to deal with tough questions of this sort, including the potential of playing a role in returning the hardline Taliban back to power. Back then, the Taliban were still branded as "terrorists" and there was no question of negotiating with them.

The Taliban's ultimate goal is still to make Afghanistan into an Islamic emirate under their domination with other political forces and non-Pashtun ethnic groups playing subservient roles. For Biden to end Afghanistan's endless war, he will need to convince the Taliban to share power and pursue peace, neither of which the extremist militant group has shown a penchant for previously.

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