



Afghanistan at a crossroads

The inauguration of the new Biden administration in Washington on 20 January 2021 is already being felt on the world stage, no more so than in Afghanistan.

At the conjunction of trade routes across central and south Asia, Afghanistan has been fought over for more than two millennia (Docherty 2007). The United States and its allies are simply the latest in a long line of foreign invaders to realise that there is no military solution to their Afghan problem.

With guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan at a stalemate after 18 years, the former Trump administration had sought to remove all American troops by the end of Trump's first presidential term. The administration negotiated a peace agreement with the Taliban which was signed in Doha on 29 February 2020. The Afghan government and the United States' allies (including Australia) were not parties to these talks.

The United States-Taliban agreement set out a provisional timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, providing the Taliban prevented international jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda, from using its territory to attack the United States or its allies (Fazl-e-Haider 2021). It also committed the Taliban to beginning direct negotiations with the Afghan government and other Afghan leaders to try to reach a political settlement.

Following the agreement, attacks on international forces stopped, but fighting with Afghan security forces continued in rural areas, but less so in major cities.

The provisional timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops provided for a full withdrawal of all foreign forces by 1 May 2021 if the Taliban kept its commitments.

By January 2021, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its partners had some 10,000 personnel still training, advising and assisting the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. They included some 2500 United States and 80 Australian troops.

Current Situation

A political settlement is dependent on the Afghan government/Taliban negotiations which began in Doha on 12 September 2020. The Taliban has been uncompromising, despite some government concessions, and a conclusion has not been reached. Human rights – including the right to education and political participation won by Afghan women after the former Taliban government was overthrown by NATO forces in 2001 – and prisoner exchange issues are proving intractable.

The Taliban appears to be pursuing a two-phase strategy: first, to remove all foreign forces from Afghan soil; and then, to overthrow the Afghan government and restore Taliban rule. If so, the current negotiations with

the Afghan government are irrelevant. It seems that the Taliban is following the proven strategy adopted by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War of 'talking while fighting' and they are unlikely to accept any form of power-sharing with their opponents.

NATO's European partners were never happy with the 1 May 2021 withdrawal deadline, being concerned that it would hand victory to the Taliban in a re-run of America's withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. Reuters reported on 31 January that several NATO member countries had expressed reservations about the deadline, with some in favour of prolonging their stay. Any unilateral decision by NATO, however, could have escalated tensions and restarted conflict with the Taliban, derailing the already fragile peace process.

A United States Congressional study group on Afghanistan recommended in February extending the deadline, noting that withdrawal should not be based on an inflexible timeline but on fulfilment of commitments to peace by all parties – the United States should not simply hand a victory to the Taliban (Kheel 2021).

On 18 February 2021, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO defence ministers had deferred their decision on troop withdrawal to enable the Biden administration to complete a policy review, reiterating that the withdrawal date was conditional on the Taliban meeting its commitments (Herszenhorn 2021). In response, the Taliban warned the NATO-led forces against extending their presence.

Having completed its review of the Doha accord, the Biden Administration announced on 13 April that all United States forces would be withdrawing unconditionally from Afghanistan before the 20th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington. This would finally end America's longest war, despite mounting fears of a Taliban victory. America's NATO allies and Australia immediately advised that they would conform to this timetable. While its allies received prior notification, it is probable that the United States' decision was presented to them as a *fait accompli*, rather than the withdrawal date and conditions being mutually agreed. This is a salutary lesson for future potential foreign entanglements with America.

The Future

While the Biden administration may have wished to revise the agreement with the Taliban, it also wanted to end the war in Afghanistan. The war will now end for the United States and its allies by 11 September 2021, but it will continue between the Taliban and the Afghan government and the fate of Afghanistan now hangs in the balance. Many observers predict that the Taliban will be the victors (e.g. Wright 2021) and will re-install its

Islamic fundamentalist government in Kabul in due course. Other observers (e.g. Kilcullen 2021) are less certain of the likely geographic extent of any Taliban victory.

Indeed, Kilcullen (2021) points out that, even at the height of their power, the Taliban never controlled the north-western third of Afghanistan, or held uncontested influence over the east and south. They are inflicting serious losses on government forces, and these will rise as coalition troops leave. Taliban troops may capture Kandahar and other capitals of Pashtun-majority provinces, but Kabul and the old Northern Alliance strongholds in Tajik-majority and Uzbek-majority regions of the north would be a different matter. Kilcullen also sees Biden's decision as potentially strengthening China's role in Afghanistan.

Further, while Western troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan in September, America may continue a proxy war there in support of the Afghan government. The war may morph from boots-on-the-ground stabilisation into a proxy campaign much like the wars in Yemen, Syria, Somalia or the Sahel region of Africa: light on ground troops, but heavy on drones, air strikes and the occasional long-range special operations raid – heavy, too, on civilian casualties (Kilcullen 2021).

The Cost of the War

Over 39,000 Australian service-people have served in Afghanistan since 2001. There have been 41 killed and 261 wounded so far. Uncounted numbers have experienced or are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and many more such cases may emerge. There are consequential impacts on casualties' families. Estimates of the direct financial cost of the involvement to date range from \$8.6 - 11 billion. The associated veteran welfare costs and pensions to be paid to widows and dependants will continue for some 90 years. There also has been reputational damage to the Australian Defence Force as a consequence of alleged war crimes committed by Australian special forces in Afghanistan.

The suffering and costs borne by the Afghan people remain unquantified but are estimated to exceed 150,000 dead combatants and civilians. If peace and survival are not part of the equation, many Afghans, especially women, will have no choice but to flee (Schmeidl 2021). Can the world accommodate another major refugee crisis, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic still rampant in Afghanistan and globally?

Comment – An Ongoing Proxy War

We agree with Kilcullen (2021) that the Biden administration will probably continue the war via surrogates on the ground, supported remotely by air and drone strikes. This would allow the United States to concentrate on domestic reconstitution and Indo-Pacific security. It is now inevitable that Russia and China will fill the void, at least to some extent. This may be a useful tactic, as they may be drawn into consuming large amounts of troops, dollars and focus in attempting to

deal with the quagmire of the Middle East region. In any case, in Yemen and elsewhere, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have recently demonstrated that they are now prepared to commit funds, aircraft and troops to stabilise the region.

It is unfortunate that repeated campaigns have shown that the United States does not have the tenacity and resilience to conduct successful stabilisation operations, especially as Australia has shown, albeit on a smaller scale, how to succeed in such operations in Bougainville, Timor and the Solomons. You have to deploy expecting to be there for at least 10 - 15 years and possibly 20+ years. You also need to have a ratio of 15 soldiers/policemen to every 1000 of the civilian population. Anything less than this level of commitment is strategically dysfunctional and inept, leading to the expenditure of vast amounts of funds and lives to no productive or ethical purpose.

The United States withdrawal also can be seen as a failure of moral and ethical leadership, as well as ideology, in that the immense personal suffering of the people in the region and by the United States and its allies will have been dishonoured. This is another tool that China and Russia can use to advance the argument that the West is ethically bankrupt, and that democracy simply does not function efficiently today.

In such a situation, sending Australian forces to participate in a new, never-ending, surrogate war in Afghanistan would not be viable. Rather, we should stay out of the region, but honour our commitment to the people who worked with our forces in the various countries, and give them and their families sanctuary, as well as priority status for expedited immigration to Australia. Otherwise, who in the future would work with us?

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