

Afghanistan: US Exit Is with Caveats

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The United States and NATO are yet to begin the withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan but the eyes are cast over the horizon at what lies after the ‘forever war’ formally ends. The US exit strategy in Afghanistan assumes the look of that random arbitrariness of a lottery that was the case with its Iraq war ending inconclusively in 2011.

Evidence is piling that the US president Joe Biden’s declaration of April 14 on total troop withdrawal by September 11 may not be the last word on that topic. The Pentagon commanders and the CIA seem to be “tweaking” the decision.

On the day after Biden spoke, the [New York Times reported](#) under the byline of two of the paper’s noted senior correspondents that “the Pentagon, American spy agencies and Western allies are refining plans to deploy a less visible but still potent force in the region to prevent the country (Afghanistan) from again becoming a terrorist base... Pentagon is discussing with allies where to reposition forces.”

The report mentioned that although NATO forces would formally withdraw, Turkey, a member of the alliance, “is leaving troops behind who could help the C.I.A. collect intelligence.” Besides, some of the Pentagon contractors (mercenaries) who include 6000 American personnel could also be redeployed.

The Times report also disclosed that “Pentagon actually has about 1000 more troops on the ground there than it has publicly acknowledged. The murky accounting results from some Special Operations forces having been put “off the books” ... to include some elite Army Rangers, who work under both the Pentagon and the C.I.A.” Pentagon might even slip these undisclosed troops into Afghanistan after the departure deadline of September 11.

On the same day as the Times report appeared, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking from Kabul, confirmed to the media after talks with Afghan government officials that “even when our troops come home, our partnership with Afghanistan will continue. Our security partnership will endure. There’s strong bipartisan support (in Washington) for that commitment to the Afghan Security Forces.”

Blinken sidestepped the scale of future CIA presence in Afghanistan — the tricky part. But Moscow solved the riddle when the [Russian Foreign Ministry](#) spokesperson Maria Zakharova alleged on April 17 that “there are persistent reports that the US is itself giving support to

terrorist groups, including ISIS, in Afghanistan, and that Washington plans to build up the presence of its intelligence service in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as it withdraws its troops from that country.”

Zakharova said, “these circumstances are giving rise to serious concern not only in Russia but in other countries of the region as well. We are looking forward to receiving explanations from the American side.” Indeed, this is not the first time that Russia has alleged a nexus between the US intelligence and ISIS to destabilise the Central Asian region.

In fact, on April 19, Russia [conducted a major air strike](#) at a remote region near Palmyra in Syria against camps for terrorists in which 200 terrorists were killed. The Russian statement alleged that terrorists were being trained in the US-controlled al-Tanf zone in the border region in southeast Syria straddling the Baghdad-Damascus highway.

Earlier, in January, Shanghai Cooperation Organization officials were also quoted as [voicing concern](#) over “growing” numbers of ISIS fighters being transferred from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan.

Suffice to say, even as the US and NATO are preparing to formally withdraw forces from Afghanistan, Pentagon and CIA are calibrating their future operations in the country, notionally to assist Afghan security forces but in reality, in pursuit of the larger regional interests of Washington, which today narrow down principally to the containment of Russia and China. The Afghan state structure is in meltdown and the US special forces and CIA operatives would have operational freedom to do they want.

Interestingly, after his return from Kabul, Blinken [announced](#) on Tuesday an “additional civilian assistance” of \$300 million to the Kabul set-up “as part of our commitment to invest in and support the Afghan people.” This is laughable, coming as it does at a juncture when, as Washington Post [reported from Kabul recently](#), “The scramble for peace in Afghanistan is fracturing Kabul’s political leadership and undermining the U.S.-backed government.” Is Blinken so hopelessly out of touch with the situation in Kabul? In reality, this appears to be Washington’s gift to the power brokers in the Afghan security establishment.

The bottom line is that the CIA is pushing ahead with its blueprint to use Afghanistan as a staging post to destabilise Russia, Iran and China. On the other hand, the [postponement](#) of the high-level conference in Istanbul from 24th April to 4th May means that the peace process has been derailed and the Doha Pact’s May 1 deadline for US troop withdrawal stands erased. Put differently, Washington has shifted the goal post and has also in the bargain granted a fresh lease of life to the Ashraf Ghani regime.

Perhaps, India is the only friend Washington genuinely has in the region today to lean on. Blinken telephoned External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Monday “to reaffirm the importance of the US-India relationship and cooperation on regional security issues.” The [White House readout](#) claimed that the two ministers “agreed to close and frequent coordination” over the Afghanistan situation.

Indeed, at a [hearing at the House Armed Services Committee](#) in Washington on Tuesday, the commander of the US Central Command Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr. has said that for conducting future operations in Afghanistan, the US will “firstly require heavy intelligence support” and American diplomats are working now “to find new places in the region” to base the intelligence assets.

Surely, Pakistan cannot be one of those “new places”. Against this complicated backdrop, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi arrived in Tehran on Wednesday for talks with the Iranian leaders. The press reports from Tehran speak of Iran’s willingness to cooperate with Pakistan ([here](#) and [here](#)). But it is no secret that the two countries have different outlooks, interests and priorities in Afghanistan.

Having said that, both countries might also sense today a certain congruence of interests in the emergent situation, with the Afghan peace process in suspended animation, the Doha Pact in cold storage and the Taliban resentful, and the US finessing its future options. The extent to which Tehran and Islamabad can reconcile their approaches and coordinate will no doubt impact the future course of events. Conceivably, that is also what Moscow and Beijing would expect.

As things stand, the continuing instability in Afghanistan and the derailment of the peace process can only work to Washington’s advantage to reset the clock and rearrange its pawns and proxies on the chessboard for a fresh game to begin. The prospect for an inclusive interim government in Kabul has receded lately. Certainly, Pakistan has been under pressure to restrain the Taliban.

Can it be mere coincidence that terrorists chose this moment to stage a well-planned, professionally executed [attack in Quetta](#), shattering the country’s internal situation? Who stands to gain? There are no easy answers. A sense of déjà vu would only be natural.

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Featured image: Raider Brigade Soldiers with 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division conduct a foot patrol in Afghanistan, Dec. 22, 2018, in support of Operation Resolute Support and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel. (Source: [Army/defense.gov](#))

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