

SPECIAL REPORT

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From War to Peace: The Regional Stakes in Afghanistan's Future

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INTRODUCTION

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United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken's letter to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani, leaked to the press in March 2021, set forth a spate of diplomatic statements as the Joe Biden administration sought to clarify their stance on ending the war in Afghanistan. At the time of writing this report, multiple processes were being undertaken with urgency to find a resolution to the conflict. The long-running Doha process—where much headway has been made since 2013 between the Afghan government and others, and the Taliban, seems to be dissipating. New forums in Russia and Turkey are taking shape to take the conversations further, and more regional and international actors are getting involved. As these cogs attempt to work in concert, the Biden administration is attempting to embed the peace process in a wider regional framework. This report looks into these regional stakeholders and their geopolitical stakes.

The US–Taliban deal, signed in February 2020 under the administration of Donald Trump, is today the bedrock of all negotiations around the Afghan conflict. The agreement requires the US to withdraw its military forces from the country by 1 May 2021. While President Joe Biden's new

plan for Afghanistan involves a wider role for regional players such as India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China, the US–Taliban agreement will remain the pivot around which any bilateral or multilateral system can be constructed. This, by default, means that while regional players could help Washington, D.C. hedge some of its risks, the February 2020 agreement will remain either the deal-maker or deal-breaker in the negotiations.

The US war in Afghanistan, now in its 20th year, has become a virtual shrine for the follies of American interventionism, the internal complexities of Afghan politics, and regional wrangling over parochial interests in South Asia. From the beginning of the conflict in the aftermath of 9/11 and the start of America's 'war on terror' campaign, the Afghan war moved towards an ad-hoc plan. The narratives that carried it forward—of defeating Al Qaeda, diminishing the Taliban, and institutionalising democratic political systems in Kabul—have met with limited successes. Even

within these limits, however, the progress made is more than worthy of being protected: women's rights to education, democratic values, and elections.

Throughout the international negotiation process with the Taliban, India has mostly been an outlier, refusing to join the table and preferring to back the democratic process and government in Kabul. New Delhi's support in Afghanistan has largely taken the form of institutions, from building dams and supporting education, to training members of the Afghan military and providing them with equipment and training in policing and diplomacy. These have had their limitations, which are revealing themselves today as regional and international actors mould policies to cement their interests as a cloud of uncertainty hovers around the future Afghan political architecture. Even as it is clear that the Taliban will have an influence on Kabul's power-sharing system in the time to come, the relationship that different stakeholders will develop with the group could determine their own view of regional and international security. While one of the critical provisions of the US-Taliban deal is for the latter to cut all ties with Al Qaeda and deny them refuge, most analysts agree that the chances of this happening are slim.

The sidelines of the Afghan negotiations could determine other regional stories. The recently announced ceasefire between India and Pakistan is being viewed from a US-led Afghan lens. The India-Pakistan rivalry is also critical to peace in Afghanistan, where both New Delhi and Islamabad preside over a game of critical strategic, tactical and political one-upmanship. While the Taliban has its historical, ideological and political mooring in Pakistan where most of the Shuras are based, New Delhi has backed the democratic processes in Afghanistan. India has publicly supported the government of President Ghani despite increasing hostility towards his presidency, both from within the Afghan polity and certain quarters in Washington, D.C.

As the May 1 deadline looms, this report trains the spotlight on some of the most critical regional and international actors that could help pave the way to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. In the first chapter, Ibraheem Bahiss analyses the nucleus of the issue—the Ghani government in Kabul, and how it is poised to deal with the pressures of coming to a conclusion with the Taliban. In her piece, Kriti M Shah focuses on the Taliban itself, and its strong position that allows it to play its cards the way it wants to. Kashish Parpiani follows with an essay on the superpower, the US, beleaguered in Afghanistan and looking for a plausible exit from the quagmire of a two-decade long war. In the fourth chapter, Sushant Sareen looks at the position of perhaps the most important foreign actor, Pakistan, and how the Pakistani establishment is looking for an outright victory for its interests via the Taliban. Kalpit A Mankikar, in his chapter, examines China's interests in Afghanistan from the view of regional security and Beijing's overall approach towards the Muslim world as it continues its crackdown on the Uyghur Muslims in restive Xinjiang. In the sixth piece, Nivedita Kapoor surveys an old player in the Afghan contemporary history—Russia, and how it continues to play a role despite its limiting historical baggage. In the last chapter, I look into one of the most underrated players in the Afghan crisis, another neighbor—Iran, and how its fractured relations with the US could exclusively shape its Afghan policy.

The aim of this report is to offer a quick but incisive analysis of regional views on Afghanistan. These explorations should help clarify the Indian perspective through the vantage points of some of the potential partners (or even foes) that New Delhi will have to engage with for its own future policies on Afghanistan and the region.

THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT: CHASING PEACE

Ibraheem Bahiss

The intra-Afghan conference held in Moscow in March heralded a new approach to the Afghan conflict – one that could threaten the very survival of Ashraf Ghani’s government. The government’s current predicament is the accretion of factors both outside and within its control.

The Doha accord, signed between the United States (US) and the Taliban in February 2020, has put the Afghan government in a difficult position.¹ The agreement required sacrificing negotiation leverage in return for having the Taliban sit at the table. As the Doha agreement was not predicated on the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the government had little capacity to extract concessions from the insurgents. Considering that he would not be able to gain a favourable deal under such circumstances, President Ghani took a gambit, and arguably, delayed the peace process by refusing to release Taliban prisoners as per the agreement.² This ultimately proved counterproductive. For one, it fuelled perceptions among donor states that the current government was hindering the peace process. Top US officials, for example, continued to stress that peace talks were the only path forward to finding a resolution to the enduring conflict in Afghanistan.³ Presumably, this also incensed regional powers such as Iran, Russia and China, who view the peace process as an opportunity to compel the US to withdraw from their strategic underbelly.

Capitalising on regional support for an interim arrangement, the Joe Biden administration propped up the notion of an interim “participatory peace government”, according to a leaked draft US proposal.⁴ This call for an interim government was part of a broader strategy of the new US administration, as announced by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a letter to President Ghani leaked to the press.⁵ The letter highlighted three crucial steps aimed at accelerating a settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. First, it asked the United Nations (UN) to convene a summit of leaders from the US, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India to form a unified approach to the peace process. Second, it hinted at the creation of an interim government in the form of a “written proposal aimed at accelerating discussion on a negotiated settlement and ceasefire.” The letter also mentioned a senior-level meeting in Turkey “in the coming weeks to finalize a peace agreement.”

The Afghan government has objected to the plan. For his part, the chairperson of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, has expressed cautious support for the plan. Others, including former President Hamid Karzai and some powerful Afghan politicians, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Noor, have also tentatively endorsed the plan.

Ghani has stated that he is willing to step down from the presidency before the end of his term, but only to a duly elected successor. This was a significant shift from his previously stated position of completely rejecting an interim government.⁶ Senior US officials, according to some reports, however, continue to insist that the government must agree to step down even without the holding of a new election.⁷

With an increasing chorus of states throwing their weight behind the formation of an interim government, the Afghan government looks increasingly beleaguered. In a joint statement, the ‘Expanded Troika’—consisting of the US, Russia, China and Pakistan—endorsed the plan, albeit couching it in diplomatic language.⁸ Should the UN succeed in securing the support of the European Union (EU), as well as of Iran and India for an interim government, the Afghan leadership will have little room to manoeuvre diplomatically.

Two shortcomings of the current government have contributed to its current predicament. The first is its Machiavellian approach to domestic power-brokering. Powerful warlords like Atta Noor and Marshal Dostum were quickly courted by the government and then just as easily abandoned for short-term gains. Where the government has negotiated political pacts, such as the National Unity Government agreement, the Hezbi Islami Gulbuddin agreement, and the 2020 political participation agreement, the government has consistently been followed by accusations of violating the terms of these agreements.⁹ Today, other than a close and loyal clique of President Ghani’s followers, the overwhelming majority of Afghan political actors appear indifferent to the fate of this government.¹⁰ Given this climate of distrust, there is little that Ghani can do to build a unified front to deflect the growing pressure.

Perhaps the most fatal flaw of the Afghan government has been its failure to present an alternative vision for a peace settlement that could rally domestic and international support. Displeased with the current mechanism, the government has haphazardly sought to undermine the current talks without providing a viable alternative. Indeed, the government’s calls for protecting the constitutional order ring hollow as it has itself circumvented the Constitution several times in political pacts with rivals. Its promises of protecting women’s rights or other “gains” are seen as mere lip service given that the government has failed to build a broad-based initiative for peace.

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To be sure, however, even at this 11th hour, the government can still take remedial steps. If it can present a viable and realistic alternative to the proposal for an interim government, the government could get some support from strong allies such as the EU and India. This would arrest the growing diplomatic momentum towards the formation of an interim government. Given that many regional countries including India, Iran and Russia do not want a Taliban-dominated government, there may be room to present a plan that shares power with the Taliban but does not give them the level of dominance that current proposals are suggesting. It can also introduce certain prerequisite principles for a future government with the aim of increasing regional buy-in, such as principles of non-alignment in regional disputes and actively combatting terror groups.

Similarly, the government can embark on foundational structural changes that will address the demands of key actors and constituencies. Given the

bitter historical relations between President Ghani and his rivals, the government would need to offer more substantial concessions than vague political promises based on presidential decrees that can easily be revoked. It is time for the government to defer to the non-ideal for its very survival.

Its failure to take the initiative has created a void that other actors are stepping in to fill with proposals for peace that address only their own concerns and do not grapple with the fundamental issues that hobble Afghanistan. The government’s inertia in this area has made the government a mere spectator, while other stakeholders are getting poised to decide the fate of the country.

THE TALIBAN PLAY THE WAITING GAME

Kriti M. Shah

Over a year since the Taliban and the United States (US) signed the withdrawal agreement in Doha, the Joe Biden administration's proposed peace agreement gives Washington a renewed opportunity to leave Afghanistan, but not before attempting to finally settle matters of governance. The new agreement and the looming US exit places the Taliban in the strongest position they have ever been.

The Taliban have shown the Afghan people, Washington and militant groups around the world that they possess the military capability to resist a US invasion and outlast a superpower. For nearly two decades, they have fended off attempts by NATO forces to annihilate their ranks; indeed, they have made themselves an intrinsic part of any attempt to find a long-term solution for peace in the country.

As of March 2021, the group controls 19 percent of all districts in Afghanistan, with at least 47 percent of them being contested:¹¹ in more than 66 percent of Afghanistan's districts, the Taliban controls either the entire district or large areas of it, or else all areas outside of the district centre. This gives them significant leverage in negotiating with the government: they are aware that Kabul will be forced to concede to certain demands if only to avoid the group from taking over more geographies. Adding

to the Taliban's leverage is the political legitimacy it has managed to gain as an international actor—one that the US remains committed to not only negotiating with, but now encouraging to be part of an elected Afghan government.

The Taliban preens with this legitimacy before the international community. For example, in June 2020, the group released a photograph purportedly showing Taliban negotiator Mullah Baradar Akhund in a call with then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—preempting any statement from the US regarding the nature of the interaction.¹² It demonstrated not only that the US and the Taliban were in contact at the highest levels of government, but that the Taliban knew the importance of displaying their direct access to Washington. In an effort to sound more like a political party, the militant group also clarified false claims circulating in social media with the spokesperson for the Taliban, stating that it would not join the jihad in Kashmir as it did not interfere in the internal affairs of other nations.¹³ While this does mean that the Taliban and New Delhi will turn into reluctant allies anytime soon, it does give credence to the view that the group

does not see India as their enemy. The Taliban has also been an active participant in the talks hosted by Moscow in November 2018 and March 2021, with Russia's mellow stance towards the group, as an integral 'military-political movement', helping strengthen ties between the two.¹⁴

The evolving relationship between the Taliban and Iran also demonstrates how the group has been able to build its political credibility through the years. 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. Similarly, China has made deep inroads with the Taliban, fueled by concerns that a withdrawal of Western troops would lead to a rise in violence, that in turn would threaten China's restive Xinjiang province.¹⁵

Taliban derives its political legitimacy from the knowledge that they are no longer seen only as an insurgency movement. Indeed, nations in the region are viewing them as either a threat to their own interests in Afghanistan, or as an alternative political solution to the enduring civil war.

The current Biden peace plan does not appease the Kabul government nor the Taliban leadership.¹⁶ While it gives a glimpse of the nature of a potential Taliban power-sharing government, it is nowhere close to what the Taliban want. The group has always stated its rejection of 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 seems unlikely

that the Taliban leadership and its lower-rung fighters will agree to share power under this deal, as it stands, given that they have always voiced their belief about the Kabul government being an "American puppet".¹⁷

The group will likely refer back to the Doha agreement (or the 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan') to make all their future demands.¹⁸ The crux of the agreement is that the US will withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by 1 May 2021. This is how the Taliban have always defined "peace"—the absence of foreign military forces from the country. For the Taliban, the US has been the main driver of the conflict in the country, not them; therefore, it is when the US completes its promise and leaves, that the Taliban will declare themselves victorious, for having brought much awaited "peace" to the country.

Resistant to change and stagnant in their moral underpinnings, the Taliban in all probability will squander the best chance they have ever had of being in an internationally recognised position of power. The Taliban are not pressed for time and will 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.

“The Biden peace plan is nowhere close to what the Taliban want.”

BIDEN'S 'DIPLOMATIC HAIL MARY'

Kashish Parpiani

The May 1 deadline for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is fast approaching, and President Joe Biden faces a challenge that stems from his predecessor's foreign policy of retrenchment. While analysts anticipated Donald Trump's fait accompli on Iran or North Korea to immediately preoccupy the Biden administration, his plan to extricate the US from Afghanistan has assumed precedence.

Biden is the fourth US President to commit to ending the war in Afghanistan, which is now in its 20th year and has cost 2,400 American lives and over US\$ 2 trillion of the public coffers.¹⁹ However, Trump's deal with the Taliban, which was signed in Doha in February 2020, poses a quandary as peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have stalled.²⁰ Without a buy-in from both, a withdrawal of troops could lead to Afghanistan drifting into a civil war and becoming a terror haven once again.

Therefore, in what is being termed as "a diplomatic Hail Mary",²¹ the Biden administration is struggling to broker a power-sharing arrangement between the two sides. In replicating the format of the 2001 Bonn conference, which established a provisional government in Kabul after the ouster of the Taliban, the US is seeking "an interim power-sharing government, which would buy time for more comprehensive peace talks thereafter."²²

This attempt to reassert control over the Afghan peace process, however, is hampered by the Trump administration's precedent of direct negotiations with the Taliban in 2018. This constituted a departure from the US' traditional insistence on an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" process.²³ The consequent decline in US leverage over Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has been apparent. In response to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's push for Kabul to work towards "a road map to a new, inclusive government" with the Taliban, Ghani has categorically stated: "The transfer of power through elections is a nonnegotiable principle for us."²⁴ In mid-March

this year, to rekindle its relationship with Kabul and underscore US credibility on jointly preventing a downward security spiral, the Biden administration even ordered airstrikes on Taliban fighters that were “actively attacking and manoeuvring on” Afghan troops.²⁵

Similarly, a year after the conclusion of US-Taliban talks that underscored Washington’s commitment to withdraw its remaining 2,500 troops from Afghanistan, Biden can hardly convey any US resolve on holding the Taliban accountable if it does not accept “the demand for a 90-day reduction in violence.”²⁶ This has been apparent with the Taliban expanding its on-ground initiative against Kabul, in clear violation of its commitments under the Doha agreement. Reports suggest that the Taliban has encircled “cities in the country’s south, and even kept up attacks near Kabul during the unusually mild Afghan winter, a time when fighting historically has subsided.”²⁷

Thus, Biden has been left with the task of brokering an arrangement with diminished leverage over both Kabul and the Taliban. Any failure to oversee a withdrawal would also defy Biden’s 2020 campaign promise to end America’s “forever wars”.²⁸ With more than seven of every 10 Americans (76 percent) supporting the return of troops from Afghanistan,²⁹

opposition to protracted military conflicts has emerged as an odd point of convergence between the progressive ‘new Left’ and the conservative nationalist Right on the two extremes of the American political spectrum. Thus, during the 2020 campaign, both Biden and Trump vowed to end US wars, albeit using slightly different catch-all phrases of “forever wars” and “endless wars”.³⁰

Beyond political sloganeering however, Biden’s position is not absolutist, since he supports narrowly defining the scope of operations to continue a focus on counterterrorism.³¹ On Afghanistan, in particular, Biden has been an advocate for maintaining a residual force for counterterrorism purposes since the Barack Obama administration’s 2009 Cabinet review.³² The already daunting task of selling this minimal (yet status-quoist) proposition to an anti-war electorate now only stands compounded with the pressures posed by Trump’s timeline.

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Moreover, Biden, as Obama’s vice president, witnessed firsthand the politically-expensive turnaround that the president had to endure, when Obama had to recommit US forces to fight the Islamic State less than three years after withdrawing from Iraq.³³ Such an eventuality repeating upon a precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, is certain to figure in Biden’s calculations. A withdrawal could also trigger the pullout of the roughly 7,000 NATO and other coalition troops from Afghanistan.³⁴ If the US were to return to Afghanistan to stem the resurgence of al-Qaeda, for instance, chances are slim that the US can cobble another “coalition of the willing” due to its diminished credibility. While America’s European partners have fought alongside it since the beginning of the Afghanistan war, their

memory of being alienated due to Trump’s ‘America First’ approach to extricate the US may not be short-lived.³⁵ Not to mention, recent reports of European leaders also being in the dark about Blinken’s proposed power-sharing arrangement.³⁶

These challenges will therefore likely inform the postponement of US troop withdrawal beyond the May 1 deadline. After having already termed Trump’s timeline as “tough”,³⁷ Biden could make a case for postponing it by citing the Taliban’s violation of the Doha agreement. The challenge for the Biden administration would then be to keep its eye on the ball as it devises a more prudent withdrawal timeline, lest the impending Spring offensive by the Taliban³⁸ entrap the US in another cycle of the “forever war”.

WILL PAKISTAN HIT A HOME RUN?

Sushant Sareen

The Biden administration's announcement in late January of a review of the February 2020 peace deal with the Taliban raised anxieties in Pakistan. Pakistani officials were not sure what the "review" meant, as in their view, there was little room to amend the provisions of the deal. The Taliban were clear that they would not accept the presence of US troops in Afghanistan after the May deadline. With the review being called for by the US right on the cusp of what Pakistan was anticipating as a victory, it cautioned the US against backtracking on the deal.

Pakistan views the ultimatum given by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as the US' way to exit and push the Afghan government to capitulate to the Taliban.³⁹ Even as there are proposals to push the peace process, it is unlikely that these will be acceptable to either the Taliban or Pakistan.⁴⁰ The most that can be expected

at this stage from Pakistan is to get the Taliban to agree to a skeletal US force remaining for some more months. If the Taliban remain undaunted, however, it is unlikely that the US will decide to stay on in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

To be sure, Pakistan is trying to assuage fears that the Taliban will succeed in capturing Kabul, or that Pakistan will support them in this mission. The assurances are not being believed, however.⁴¹ For nearly two decades Pakistan has defied the United States and has sustained and provided a safe haven to the Taliban.⁴² Today the militia that Pakistan has supported for a long 20 years, appears set to score a victory, and there is no indication that Pakistan will prevent it from happening.

Pakistan will neither let go of the Taliban, nor change its strategy on Afghanistan, of which the Taliban are a lynchpin. Pakistan will not be averse to an interim government—less because they see it as paving the way for a longer-term political solution, and more as they feel that once the Taliban get a share in the power in Kabul, it will only be a matter of time before they capture the entire Afghan state. For Pakistan, there is no downside to their support for the Taliban. Over the years, the US has done nothing more than urging Pakistan to “do more”. There has been neither significant economic sanctions nor coercive diplomacy to force Pakistan to give up the Taliban option. There is no indication that things will change in this regard.

Pakistani scholars and policymakers have been assiduously arguing that the US will eventually “outsource” Afghanistan to Pakistan—that the US will not only stay engaged with Pakistan, but will also give economic dividends.⁴³ The theory has found resonance among certain circles in the US.⁴⁴ The report of the Afghanistan Study Group, which seems to have been the guiding document for Blinken’s letter to Ghani, also recognises Afghanistan’s continuing dependence on Western assistance.⁴⁵ The US feels that this factor can be leveraged to exert a certain degree of influence on future developments in Afghanistan. For their part, Pakistan believes that for the right price, they will be able to deliver on some critical preconditions set by the US, particularly those on security and terrorism issues.

Over the years, Pakistan has developed a significant leverage over the Taliban which it thinks will help it exercise a fair bit of control in the Islamic Emirate. They have even inserted their most favoured terror group, the Haqqani Network, in the top echelons of the Taliban. Already, they have managed to convince the Taliban to provide assurances on some connectivity and energy projects that will run through Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Pakistan anticipates that once things settle down, they will reap enormous economic, political and strategic benefits by becoming the regional hub and the main trade and transit route to Central Asia.

Pakistan had made similar calculations in the 1990s. At the time, however, their plans fell through. It remains to be seen whether they will hit a home-run this time around, or get run out.

“The militia that Pakistan has supported for 20 years appears set to score a victory; there is no indication that Pakistan will prevent it from happening.”

CHINA'S LITMUS TEST OF POWER AND INFLUENCE

Kalpita A Mankikar

The impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan—the so-called “heart of Asia”—presents China with an opportunity to extend its influence in a country of such strategic importance.

Beijing's approach to the American initiative to work out a compromise between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban forces will be calibrated by factors including its own geopolitical ambitions. Under the peace plan, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has proposed a conclave—comprising the US, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India, and under the United Nations' auspices—to deliberate on a coordinated approach for peace in Afghanistan. China's envoy to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, has assured that as their most trustworthy neighbour, China looks forward to the realisation of “stability, reconstruction and development” in Afghanistan.⁴⁷

China has deepened relations with the Afghanistan government led by President Ashraf Ghani, who has been seeking Chinese assistance in peace talks and in promoting economic development.⁴⁸ At the same time, ties between the Taliban and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have grown in the run-up to protracted negotiations between the Trump administration and the fundamentalist

outfit. A Taliban delegation met China's special representative for Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, in September 2019 after the US called off talks following a bomb explosion in Kabul near a security post where two NATO soldiers were killed.⁴⁹ China's engagement with key power centres in the country indicates its intention to play an important role in Afghanistan after the American withdrawal.

Two opportunities stand out.

Incentivising military cooperation: Over the last few years, China has been ramping up its military presence in the region. Reports emerged in 2019 of a Chinese base in Tajikistan near the strategic Wakhan Corridor, which connects Afghanistan to China.⁵⁰ Afghanistan has also revealed that China is helping it set up a unit for mountain combat.⁵¹ The eventuality of a US troop withdrawal from the territory could deepen military cooperation between China and Afghanistan. Getting such a foothold in a strategic region that borders West Asia and Central Asia, will help China with its hard-power projection beyond its borders.

“China’s engagement with key power centres in Afghanistan indicates its intention to play an important role in the country after the US withdrawal.”

Changing narrative on Muslims: China’s human rights record has come under increasing scrutiny for its policy in Xinjiang. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused China of carrying out a genocide against the Muslim Uyghurs in the region. The US is not alone in its outrage, and there is an emerging clamour for a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.⁵² China is certainly trying to shape opinion in the Muslim world and attempting to create a narrative that it can champion causes dear to it. A case in point was China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Lijian Zhao tweeting an image of an Australian combatant holding a blood-soaked knife to the throat of an Afghan child (@zlj517, November 30, 2020). This followed the release of the Brereton report in 2020 on the killing of Afghan civilians by Australian special forces soldiers.⁵³

Since the killings occurred at a time when peacekeeping efforts by the US and other allies were ongoing in the war-torn nation, the events helped China underscore its accusation that the West was waging wars on the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of combating terrorism and promoting human rights and freedom.⁵⁴ China’s propaganda

war is being fought on two fronts in the media and via diplomatic channels, while its state media have kept the issue of human rights violations alive.⁵⁵ At the institutional level, the foreign affairs office of the Xinjiang provincial government has been spearheading the propaganda narrative. Heading the office is Yao Jing,⁵⁶ whose stints as an envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2015 and 2020 will be useful in promoting China’s side of the story.

China’s moves in Afghanistan will be carefully examined by the international community, and therefore they present both a challenge and an opportunity. After all, one of the hallmarks of a great power is that it is able to mediate in geopolitical disputes of third countries. While China has been able to establish a working relationship with both power centres—the Afghanistan government and the Taliban—its lack of experience in the process of conflict resolution is visible. Pursuing closer military engagement with the Afghan armed forces will give China exposure in terms of hard-power projection. At the same time, however, China runs the risk of getting mired in a possible future conflict. This is therefore a test case for Chinese peace-making in its backyard.

THE RUSSIAN VIEW

Nivedita Kapoor

On March 18, Moscow hosted a meeting of the extended troika on Afghanistan (Russia, China, Pakistan, the US), which was also attended by representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban.^a The joint statement that followed, urged the parties to the conflict to work towards a negotiated peace settlement and to reduce violence; it called upon the Taliban to refrain from pursuing a Spring offensive.⁵⁷ Engaged in parallel efforts⁵⁸ to encourage a deal, the US State Department has noted that Russia's efforts "complement all other international efforts" towards the Afghan peace process.

This is an argument that has been repeatedly advanced by analysts, who have said that talks led by two countries are not "contradictory"⁵⁹ and that Moscow's efforts can help make any US deal "sustainable and long-lasting." Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has on record expressed⁶⁰ not only support for the Doha talks but willingness to help continue the process. Moreover, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council,⁶¹ Russia has committed itself to the US-Taliban agreement of 2020. Moscow and Washington agree on the need

to work⁶² with *all* Afghans, including the Taliban, and both insist that the Taliban ensure that Afghan territory will not be used as a base by any terror group for launching attacks on other countries.

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.⁶³ 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 Asia⁶⁴ 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 also a continuing problem. These factors make Moscow invested in the ongoing talks regarding the future of Afghanistan, even as it maintains its position against non-intervention through military means.

a The US was represented by its special envoy for Afghanistan Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad. Other attendees included members of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, other prominent Afghan political figures, as well as representatives from Qatar and Turkey.

“Russia’s concern is that in the event of heightened instability in Afghanistan, violence could spill over and destabilise Russia’s borders.”

Russia only began taking a more active approach in Afghan affairs in the mid-2010s, driven by an impending American drawdown and reports of the emergence of ISIS in the country.⁶⁵ In November 2018 it hosted talks in Moscow, bringing together for the first time regional powers, an Afghan high-level peace council delegation, and the Taliban. The following year, Russia was the venue for an informal intra-Afghan dialogue comprising representatives of the Taliban, a delegation of Afghan politicians and the Afghan diaspora – which was criticised by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. The US special envoy for Afghanistan Amb. Zalmay Khalilzad, for his part, saw the talks as a positive development.

These developments highlight Russia’s role as an important interlocutor, and signal the Kremlin’s willingness to engage with the Taliban.⁶⁶ As the Taliban have not been militarily defeated, it is necessary to politically engage them for a stable future for Afghanistan. At present, this translates to discussions on a transitional government where the Taliban has a place alongside other Afghans—the aim is to deny the group a scenario where it seeks to “seize all power.”⁶⁷

The same aim has necessitated an engagement with other stakeholders – China, Pakistan, India, and Iran – as well as outreach to factions within Afghanistan, which has strained Russia’s relations with the Ghani government. In the past decade, Moscow expanded its contacts beyond traditional linkages with the Uzbeks and Tajiks—characterised by close ties with the Northern Alliance—to include Afghan Pashtuns. Since Pashtuns make up about 42 percent of the Afghan population and also dominate the Taliban ranks, this move by Russia constituted a “more diversified and national-level approach.”⁶⁸

Russia also has good relations with the regional players, and in this context has intensified its outreach to Pakistan in recent years. Islamabad’s links with the Taliban and its leverage over them⁶⁹ was one of the key factors in Russia increasing its association with Pakistan. Given that Russia is only one of the many players in Afghanistan, it will need the cooperation of various interested parties, including the US, to “strike a balance”⁷⁰ among different domestic Afghan actors to preserve its interests and influence.

This is not to say that Moscow wants to see an indefinite presence of US/NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan. Such a prospect worries Russia about the expansion of US influence in Central Asia.⁷¹ At the same time, however, Moscow remains aware of the perils associated with a sudden, complete withdrawal that raises the prospect not only of Taliban gaining control of the country but also of creating widespread instability.⁷² Russia is aware of the necessity of US efforts to keep the situation stable and ensure that a deal is reached.⁷³ This will also help Russia preserve its security and geopolitical goals, while simultaneously expanding influence in the region through its own efforts and geopolitical design.⁷⁴

IRAN: THE NEIGHBOUR UNDER A CONTESTED U.S. CLOUD

Kabir Taneja

In the various iterations of discussions and diplomatic engagements around the question of peace and stability in Afghanistan, little attention has been paid to Kabul's immediate western neighbour, Iran. Tehran, in fact, has high stakes in Afghanistan's future, and its diplomacy towards the war-torn country, while arguably less overt, will be critical.

Tehran's approach to Afghanistan is two-pronged: one that is regional in nature, and a second that is in the context of Iran's fractured relations with the US. With US Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggesting a UN-led regional system involving the US, Russia, China, Pakistan, India and Iran to develop a future plan for Afghanistan, Tehran will play a greater role as a border-sharing neighbour. Indeed, Iran may have a more pragmatic approach on the issue than Afghanistan's neighbour on the other side, Pakistan—which would rather have an unstable Afghanistan than a stable one that is under a heavy influence of India.

Iran, the seat of Shia Islam, has historically been at ideological odds with a powerful Sunni Taliban. However, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan that brought US military might closer to Iran's borders, has driven the way Tehran ultimately has dealt with both the Taliban and the incumbent

government in Kabul. To put this in perspective, while Tehran has good relations with the Afghan government, to balance the same, the Taliban appointed a Shia Hazara, Mawlawi Mahdi, as a shadow district chief.⁷⁵

Over the past four years, the “maximum pressure” policy applied by the US on Iran under President Donald Trump has forced Tehran to view the Afghanistan crisis, and an impending US withdrawal, as a tactical opportunity to free up a key theatre in its neighbourhood of US military influence.⁷⁶ Today, Iran and the Taliban find themselves on common ground when it comes to US presence in Afghanistan. Married into this reality, Iran—which in 2001 supported the US intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11—is hedging its bets between the Taliban, and whichever negotiated political eventuality in Kabul may look like. Scholar Maysam Behravesh identifies Iran's tactic as an “unpopular policy of strategic hedging”, where the strategic gains and losses are questionable.⁷⁷ For their part, scholars like Colin P. Clarke and Ariane M. Tabatabai argue that Iran is viewing this as an opportunity to exert influence in Afghanistan. They refer to

Tehran’s construct of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Iran-backed Shiite group in Afghanistan made up of Shia Hazaras which fights on behalf of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in Syria.⁷⁸ Still other analysts, such as scholar Kanishka Nawab, see the Fatemiyoun as Iran’s very own “good Taliban” in Afghanistan.⁷⁹

Iran’s blinkered view on foreign policy almost exclusively revolving around the US is also highlighted by the fact that Tehran has allegedly given refuge to Al Qaeda hierarchy over the years. Iran has refuted these reports. Clamping down on Al Qaeda and denying the group safe refuge is a fundamental part of the deal signed in Doha between the US and the Taliban in February 2020. While Al Qaeda has suffered significant losses in leadership, presence and stature, it has found some common ground with Iran, despite the ideological and theological crevasses between the two. For one, they are both motivated by the aim of undermining US presence in the region. To be sure, however, this has been historically designed by Iran in a careful manner, making its relationship with the Taliban as fractious as the one with the US.⁸⁰

Iran’s approach to the Afghan question reveals that while it is not averse to a multi-faceted political settlement in Kabul—one that involves all parties, including the Taliban—it will actively work to subvert a constant US military presence. The Biden administration has brought in Iran into the fold for discussions on Afghanistan, despite tensions, and in clear departure from the Trump administration’s policy. Scholars Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins have called Iran’s strategy towards Afghanistan, “coldly pragmatic, multifaceted and often seemingly

contradictory,” and it gives Tehran multiple options of navigating the question of Afghanistan. Iran uses both hard and soft power to make sure that its neighbourhood, as challenging as it could become, is free of American intervention.⁸¹

All these facets of Tehran’s approach make its long-term goals towards Afghanistan difficult to ascertain. Much of Iran’s current take on the Afghanistan crisis will ultimately circle around a quick withdrawal of US forces, expedited by Iran’s foreign policy endeavours across the larger Middle East region, including Iraq and Syria, where it has made significant strides on the ground to use its influence. While Tehran arguably may not become a big player in the Kabul-Taliban-Washington dynamic, it offers partnership to other regional players working towards peace in Afghanistan, or at the very least, a ceasefire to the decades-long conflict.⁸²

“Both the Taliban and Iran are motivated by the aim of undermining US presence in the region.”

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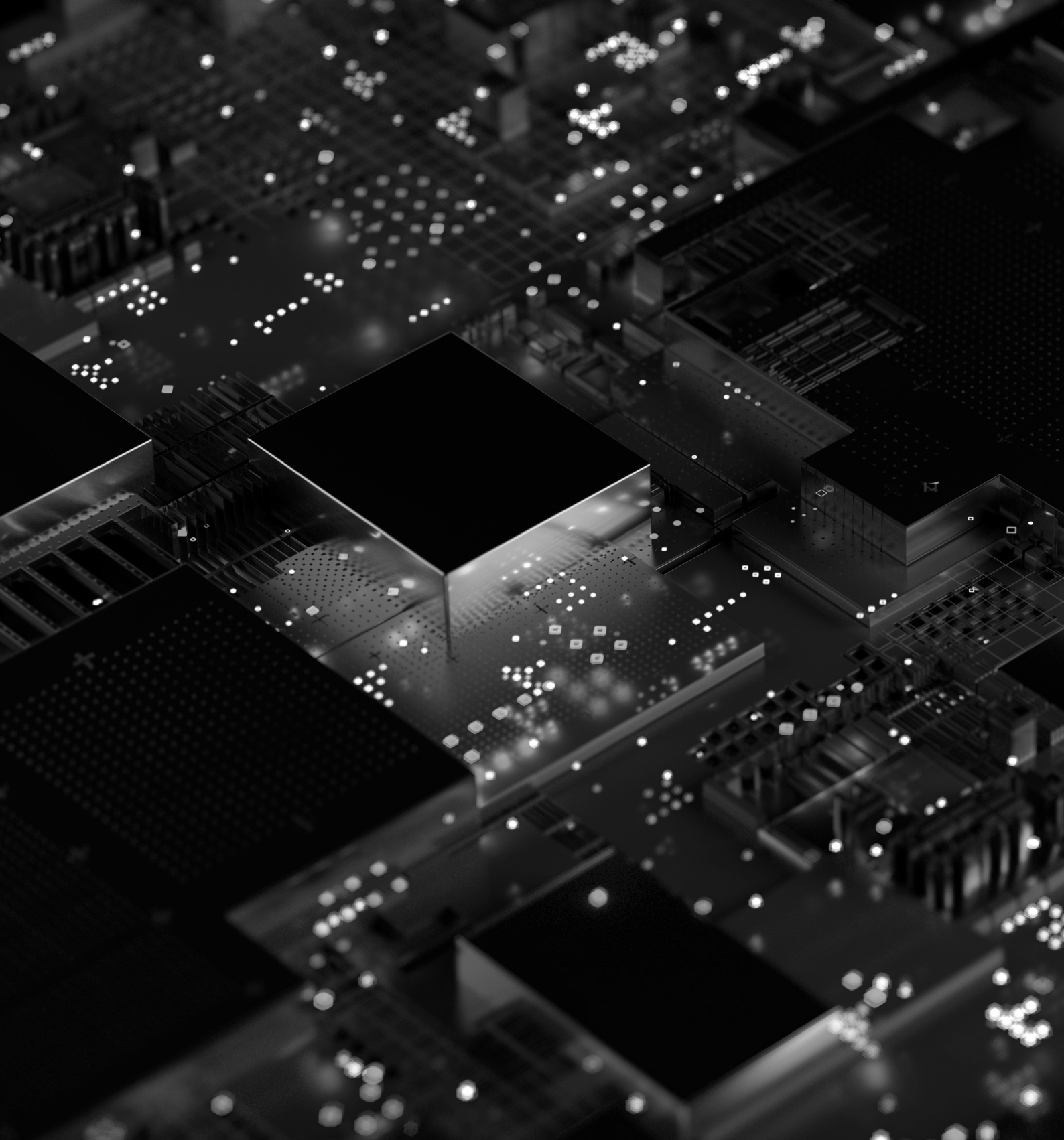
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