



US exit from Afghanistan

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(Mains GS 2 : India and its neighborhood – International relations & Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting the Indian interests).

Context:

- The announcement by President Joe Biden that the US will withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, has sent tremors through the region's fault-lines.
- The impact of this announcement on various actors within Afghanistan and outside is bound to be far-reaching and certainly no country in the region will remain untouched.

In Afghanistan, Taliban get edge:

- Biden's announcement has removed all incentives for the Taliban to agree for a dialogue with the Afghan government.
- In a statement on Thursday, the Taliban indicated as much: "The Islamic Emirate will under no circumstance ever relent on complete independence and establishment of a pure Islamic system, and remain committed to a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem following the complete and certain end of occupation.
- The proposal by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in March is now almost certainly dead in the water.
- It included a 90-day ceasefire; talks under the auspices of the UN for a consensus plan for Afghanistan among the US, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India.
- Proposal also includes meeting in Turkey between the Taliban and Afghan government towards an "inclusive" interim government, an agreement on the foundational principles of the future political order and for a permanent ceasefire.

Scheduled talk and Taliban:

- Turkey has scheduled the talks for April 24, and the Biden Administration has said it remains committed to finding a political solution. But the Taliban are now in a different zone.

- The Taliban declared in the statement that the “American officials have understood the Afghan situation” but as the withdrawal had been put off “by several months” to September, rather than stick to the Doha Agreement (signed between the Trump Administration’s special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban last March) date of May 1, America had violated the agreement.
- This had “opened the way” for the Taliban to take “counter-measures”, and the American side “will be held responsible for all future consequences, and not the Islamic Emirate”.

Strength of Taliban increasing:

- According to the Long War Journal (a project of the US-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies), of Afghanistan’s 325 districts, the Taliban are in control of 76 or 19%, and government forces 127 or 32%.
- According to the Council of Foreign Relations, the Taliban are stronger now than at any point since 2001, when US forces invaded Afghanistan.
- After the full withdrawal of troops, Taliban are likely to see the war, which they believe they have already won, to its completion.
- The recently published US Threat Assessment Report, an annual US intelligence briefing, said prospects for a peace deal are dim, the Taliban are confident of victory in the battlefield, and the Afghan government will struggle to hold them at bay.
- President Ashraf Ghani tweeted the stoic message that his government “respects the US decision and we will work with our US partners to ensure a smooth transition”.
- But he and others who have invested in a democratic Afghanistan know the country is close to losing all the gains of the last 15 years.
- There is deep apprehension of a return to the 1990s, although there is also a view that the Taliban too have changed over 25 years, and would not want to alienate the international community as they did when they ruled Afghanistan during 1996-01.

Pakistan gains are concerning:

- This is a moment of both vindication and concern in Islamabad. The Taliban are a creation of the Pakistani security establishment.
- After the US invasion of Afghanistan, they removed themselves to safe havens in Pakistan territory, and the Taliban High Council operated from Quetta in Balochistan.
- It was Pakistan that persuaded the Taliban to do a deal with the Trump Administration.
- For the Pakistani Army, which has always seen Afghanistan in terms of “strategic depth” in its forever hostility with India, a Taliban capture of Afghanistan would finally bring a friendly force in power in Kabul after 20 years.
- India, which has had excellent relations with the Karzai and Ghani governments, would be cut to size.

India: time to be wary:

- New Delhi, which was hoping to be part of the Blinken initiative, would be nervous about the US withdrawal.
- India was on the outer edges of the Trump drive to exit Afghanistan that culminated in the Doha Accord, and was a reluctant supporter of the “intra-Afghan talks” between the Taliban and Afghan government.
- When the Biden Administration came in, India was hopeful of a US reset.
- The Blinken proposal gave India a role, by recognising it as a regional stakeholder, but this proposal seems to have no future.
- The Haqqani group, fostered by the ISI, would have a large role in any Taliban regime.
- Another concern would be India-focused militants such as Laskhar- e-Toiba and Jaish- e-Mohamed, which the Indian security establishment already believes to have relocated in large numbers to Afghanistan.

Bigger role of China:

- China would have much to lose from instability in Afghanistan as this could have an impact on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.
- A Taliban regime in Afghanistan might end up stirring unrest in the Xinjiang Autonomous region, home to the Uighur minority.
- Conversely, as an ally of Pakistan, it could see a bigger role for itself in Afghanistan.

Role of Russia:

- The US exit is for Russia a full circle after its own defeat at the hands of US-backed Mujahideen and exit from Afghanistan three decades ago.
- In recent years, Russia has taken on the role of peacemaker in Afghanistan.
- But both the Taliban and the Afghan government have been wary of its efforts.
- After a conference in March of Russia, US, China and Pakistan, along with Taliban and Afghan delegates, a joint statement by the four principals said they did not support the establishment of an Islamic Emirate, leaving the Taliban angry. Russia’s growing links with Pakistan could translate into a post-US role for Moscow in Afghanistan.

Iran too has role to play:

- As a country that shares borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran perceives active security threats from both and a Taliban regime in Kabul would only increase this threat perception.
- But Iran, with links to the Hazaras in Afghanistan, has of late played all sides.
- Despite the mutual hostility and the theological divide between the two, Iran opened channels to the Taliban a few years ago, and recently, even hosted a Taliban delegation at Tehran.