

# Associate Paper

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## Afghanistan: Still too Early to Expect Peace

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### Key Points

- The proposal for a Transitional Government is an attempt to get past the 1 May deadline for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.
- The change of government in the US does not make it incumbent upon the Taliban to re-orient and conform to that new situation.
- The Taliban are driven by certain constraints that force them to reject most proposals.
- Passing the 1 May deadline without the Taliban's concurrence could provoke a hostile reaction from them.

### Summary

In the wake of the stalled intra-Afghan dialogue, on [28 February 2021](#), the administration of US President Joseph Biden presented a [Transitional Peace Government](#) proposal that suggested that the current government in Kabul be replaced by [an interim body](#) that includes representatives of the Taliban, that the 2004 constitution be upgraded, that elections be held and that a joint commission be created to monitor a ceasefire. The US wants, [as the proposal indicates](#), an intra-Afghan dialogue to take place. The proposal of the Transitional Peace Government implied that the Biden Administration was [determined](#) to engage with the Taliban further and to retain the US forces in Afghanistan after the declared [1 May 2021](#) deadline for their withdrawal. On 14 April, President [Biden announced](#) that he would instead withdraw US forces from Afghanistan by 11 September, this year.

## Analysis

After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan on 15 February 1989, Kabul remained victim to regionalism, as neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan and Iran, sought to maintain their interests in it. US President Barack Obama had tried to [disengage Afghanistan from](#) the regional players. Finally, on 17 February 2012, concluding [a trilateral counter-terrorism summit in Islamabad](#), both Pakistan and Iran agreed to an Afghan-led and Afghan-managed peace process. The summit heralded the end of regionalism and the beginning of the de-hyphenation of Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran. The next stage was to prompt an [intra-Afghan dialogue](#) in order to bring peace to Afghanistan. In 2013, [Obama hoped](#) that, apart from regionalism, he would be able to persuade the Taliban to settle their differences with the Kabul regime headed by President Hamid Karzai and take part in the presidential elections that were to be held in April and June 2014. Obama was of the view that the elections would help the Taliban become part of mainstream politics and permit the US to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by December 2014. The Taliban, however, remained averse to any intra-Afghan dialogue and refused to participate in the elections. On 29 September 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected as Afghanistan's President.

Afghanistan has been beset with three constants since then.

The first is that the Taliban are [unwilling to participate in the elections](#) for four reasons. First, they consider the electoral process to be antithetical to the version of Islam that they espouse, elections being a Western concept that is not in consonance with the Muslims' historical method of governance. Second, they are fearful of electoral defeat, which would damage their credibility, since they are a reactionary group and not a representative body of the Afghans by any measure. Third, they are bereft of any experience in contesting elections. Hence, they deliberately [avoided participating in the elections](#) whenever asked by Afghan Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Fourth, the Taliban, having been in power previously, do not believe that they should be returned to power by the people, it being their right to continue their government, which was ended abruptly – and illegally, in their opinion – by the US. It is demeaning to them to have to ask the Afghan people to let them have the power that they see as rightfully theirs.

The second constant is that the Taliban want Afghanistan to revert from the Islamic Republic to [the Islamic Emirate](#) of the pre-2001 era, driven by their version of Islamic Sharia. Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban's Sunni Islamic practices and dictates were inimical to the country's religious minorities, whom they persecuted. The Taliban resorted to the Islamic practices of medieval ages, with harsh punishment regimes. They did not permit girls to be educated or women to participate in daily life. It is known that the Taliban are determined to have an Islamic Emirate. For instance, when [the Pakistani version of the Taliban](#), which was founded in [December 2007](#), overcame the north and west of Pakistan in 2008, they demanded [that Sharia law](#) take precedence over Pakistan's constitution. In April 2009, US Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton visited Pakistan and warned it](#) of the consequences of acquiescing to the Pakistani Taliban; only then did Pakistan launch a war [against the Pakistani Taliban](#) in May 2009. The Pakistani Taliban either lost their lives or fled to Afghanistan.

The third constant is that the Taliban consider the Kabul government [a puppet of the West](#), unworthy of negotiations, let alone sharing power with it. That is why the Taliban has preferred to [talk to the US](#) in Doha since [June 2013](#) and rejected the intra-Afghan dialogue.

In short, the Taliban are not ready to compromise on these three constants.

Through [the Doha Accord](#) of 29 February 2020, the administration of President Donald Trump tried to appease the Taliban in three main ways. First, the US knew that it faced the challenge of holding the intra-Afghan dialogue but did not impose a pre-conditional ceasefire on the Taliban with the Kabul regime. Instead, it imposed the ceasefire as a pre-condition for the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan. That is, the US gave the Taliban latitude and sought to appease their ego. Washington expected that the Taliban would enter into a ceasefire with the Kabul regime as they did with the US. That did not happen, as the Taliban practised [a partial ceasefire](#): a truce with foreign forces but continued conflict with Kabul's. Second, the US asked the Kabul regime to release 500 Taliban prisoners to mollify the Taliban in the hope that the latter would change their attitude towards the Kabul regime. The Taliban did not soften their stance. Third, the US declared that it would reduce its forces to the extent of a full withdrawal in order to appease the Taliban in the hope that the latter would enter into an intra-Afghan dialogue by 1 May 2021. That did not take place, either.

Interestingly, the US has been trying to satisfy itself with the fact that the Taliban have respected the Doha Accord of 2020, as it has fought against the [Islamic State Khorasan \(IS-K\)](#). The US views the IS-K as the same organisation that wrought havoc in Iraq and Syria, but it overlooks the fact that, in Iraq and Syria, the emergence of [the Islamic State \(ISIS\)](#) was mostly due to the power vacuum that Washington had brought about, and ISIS filled that vacuum. That is not the situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban leave no space for any new organisation to emerge. The present conflict between the Taliban and the IS-K is not an ideological one. Intra-Afghan conflicts are driven mostly by tribal, ethnic and sectarian considerations. The IS-K is [a 2014 phenomenon](#) that arose after [the death of Mullah Umar](#), the Taliban chief. People joining the IS-K are mostly [Taliban dissidents](#) looking for sovereignty and a separate identity. The Taliban are not fighting against the IS-K to respect the Doha Accord of 2020 or to protect the Kabul regime; instead, the conflict between the Taliban and the IS-K is, for the most part, an intra-Afghan conflict between dissidents and existing Taliban. Compared to the IS-K, al-Qaeda was an outsider, although the IS-K also offers a platform to [foreign militants](#) hiding in Afghanistan, besides [the Pakistani Taliban](#). The IS-K can survive in Afghanistan only if it [submits to the dictates](#) of the Taliban, as al-Qaeda did. Otherwise, as a competitor to the Taliban, the IS-K is inevitably bound to suffer, no matter how much ideological uniformity exists between the two groups.

On 28 February 2021, by presenting the proposal of a Transitional Peace Government, the Biden Administration tried [to ensure that](#) any intra-Afghan dialogue that took place did so in the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan and not after they left. The US cannot [withdraw its troops](#) without putting into place a system that ensures the survival of the democratic constitutional process that was re-introduced into Afghanistan. The US has asked several countries, including [Russia](#) and [Turkey](#), to persuade the Taliban to submit to the new

agreement for the Transitional Peace Government. The Taliban are indisposed to compromise as the proposal carries modifications to their three constants, which they cannot transgress.

To elaborate, President Trump's strategy to leave Afghanistan before the finalisation of the intra-Afghan settlement was deficient. It is possible that he devised the strategy to woo American voters in order to win the election. On the other hand, President Biden wants the settlement of the infra-Afghan conflict before any declared date of departure and even then his administration would like to leave behind a small [counter-terrorism force](#). The Biden Administration is [even ready to](#) upgrade the existing 2004 Afghan constitution, install an interim government and hold new elections under international supervision to ensure the inclusion of the Taliban. In principle, this is a good strategy, but there are three drawbacks for the Taliban: elections, democracy and sharing power with what they perceive to be a puppet government. The Taliban are not ready to abandon their three constants.

Biden is determined not to leave the Kabul regime at the mercy of the Taliban. If he withdraws the US forces before an intra-Afghan peace settlement is put in place, the Kabul government would quickly collapse and the Taliban would take over. That would be a nightmare scenario for the US and its allies. All their past efforts, time and money spent to build Afghanistan and purge it of undesired elements would have been wasted in that case. The Biden Administration will not readily give up the US's gains. According to his 2020 electoral oratory, Biden wants to prevent a repeat of the Vietnam imbroglio and wants to [end the war responsibly](#). Even though the Transitional Peace Government proposal has met with resistance from both the Taliban and the Kabul regime, the Biden Administration is unwilling to relent on enforcing it.

On 14 April, President Biden announced that it was [difficult for the US to respect](#) the 1 May deadline and [withdraw the remainder of its troops](#), whether 2,500 or [3,500](#), from Afghanistan, besides the [7,000 NATO troops](#). Biden announced the withdrawal by 11 September this year. Therein lies the rub. Without the concurrence of the Taliban, that situation would lead to the Taliban accusing the US of violating their agreement. The Taliban will not accept the reasoning that the change of administration in the US requires a new agreement with them. The Taliban see the US as a monolithic body against which they will observe a ceasefire until 1 May. Second, the [Taliban's request](#) to restore the Doha negotiations has not been honoured. Third, they have emphasised the need for the US-NATO alliance to [respect the deadline](#). Hence, once past 1 May, there is every chance that the US-Taliban confrontation could restart. That would revitalise the coming [Spring Offensive](#) and small, localised skirmishes by autonomous and disparate Taliban groups could transform into fully-fledged conflict.

The Biden Administration might well intend to engage with the Taliban via a third party – even under the tutelage of the United Nations – to make the Taliban agree to the announced new deadline for the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the constraints for the Taliban are the three constants that they adhere to devotedly. The Biden Administration has to bring the Taliban around to accept the new deadline, 11 September. Afterwards, if the Biden Administration helps the Taliban overcome

the three constants, a smooth transition of power would likely take place and peace could finally return to Afghanistan.

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