

The mission in Afghanistan is far from accomplished



US President Joe Biden and US Vice President Kamala Harris (L) (AFP) 4 min read . Updated: 22 Apr 2021, 07:49 AM IST [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

US President Joe Biden has justified his decision to unconditionally and fully withdraw American troops from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021 on grounds that the original objective of preventing that country from being used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the US has been accomplished

US President Joe Biden has justified his decision to unconditionally and fully withdraw American troops from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021 on grounds that the original objective of preventing that country from being used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the US has been accomplished. US defense secretary Lloyd Austin and secretary of state Antony Blinken have delivered similar choreographed comments that the mission of stopping anti-US attacks using Afghanistan as a base has been a success, and that there was no point in sustaining America's longest war anymore. These statements have been buttressed by the US intelligence assessment that there was no longer an immediate threat of Al Qaeda, ISIS or other terrorist groups sheltering in Afghanistan and carrying out a strike on the American homeland.

There does seem little likelihood of another 9/11-style terror attack on the US being imminently plotted from Afghanistan. But it is an error to assume that no pressing terrorist challenge exists for Afghanistan's extended neighbourhood in South Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia. Having failed to build a viable state and a durable peace in Afghanistan, the US is packing up and leaving while the threat of regional terror remains lethal.

A 2020 United Nations report highlighted how, two decades after the US demanded that the Taliban delink themselves from Al Qaeda, they were still closely interconnected via the notorious Haqqani

network. It also found that “the Taliban regularly consulted with Al Qaeda during negotiations with the United States and offered guarantees that it would honour their historical ties.”

Besides Al Qaeda and ISIS, which are salivating at the prospect of capitalizing on vast ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan likely to expand after the US withdrawal, there are also region-focused jihadist networks such as the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, as well as the Central Asian outfits Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, which have strong ground presence and links to terrorist and criminal groups across the Afghan-Pakistan border.

With the Taliban all set to acquire some amount of state power through bargaining in the intra-Afghan peace process and by means of its continued insurgency against the weak regime of President Ashraf Ghani, there are forebodings of another all-out civil war, like in the early 1990s. That kind of chaos— where the Taliban, a crumbling Afghan state and a variety of regional and ethnic warlords vie for influence in various pockets of the country—would allow terrorist groups to flourish and proliferate throughout the neighbourhood.

Recall that after the end of the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan in 1989, foreign fighters were redirected across the Durand Line eastward to fight in Kashmir Valley. The Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus facilitated this transfer of fighters, weapons and funds from Afghanistan to India as part of Islamabad’s proxy war against New Delhi.

Once again, with the US decamping from Afghanistan, there is the danger of Pakistan acting as a conduit for jihadists looking to go after ‘infidel’ targets like India, Shia-majority Iran, the secular Central Asian republics, and Russia. Even China, which shares a short border with Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor, cannot rest assured there will be no jihadist spillover into its restive Xinjiang region, and is mulling deployment of a peacekeeping force under the United Nations’ auspices.

India’s external affairs minister S. Jaishankar has highlighted the menace of foreign fighters and transnational terrorists emerging from the ‘Af-Pak’ region as a result of the American exit and the compromised power-sharing deal that would give jihadist groups umbrellas to flourish under. His call for a ‘regional process’ and ‘collective endeavour’ by all affected countries to keep these fighters from criss-crossing borders and spreading mayhem is worth attending to. His formulation of a ‘double peace’ in Afghanistan, wherein there is no state collapse or civil war within that country, and also no externalization of hardline jihadist violence throughout the region, lays out the key challenge for the future.

It is essential for India, Iran, Central Asian nations, China and Russia to forge a joint plan of action to monitor the movement of refugees, drugs and jihadists in the ‘Af-Pak’ theatre, and to apply

pressure on Pakistan's establishment to avoid repetition of its old destabilizing games. Without pressure from regional players, Pakistan and its jihadist proxies could repeat the disasters of the 1990s and wreak havoc in the region.

For the departing US, encouraging the regionalization of an Afghan solution is worth investing in. Washington, which aims to maintain an offshore 'over-the-horizon' counter-terrorism strike capability to swoop into Afghanistan and take out jihadist targets, would be freer to carry out raids on Pakistani soil and punish Pakistan through international financial institutions, once all US ground troops leave Afghanistan. Military, intelligence and diplomatic coordination between the US and like-minded regional powers can help avert worst-case scenarios and keep the jihadist activity under check.

The need of the hour is a regional coalition assuming the role of 'guarantors of peace' and taking the lead to ensure Afghanistan's neutrality and Pakistan's restraint. A functional external shield against extremism and terror will complement the internal political settlement in Afghanistan. The alternative is a region on fire and an Afghanistan trapped in perpetual war.