



The man in question
Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, once a Columbia University academic and an oil industry operative, was chosen to lead the US peace talks with the Taliban
REUTERS/OMAR SOBHANI

STATES OF MATTER

Rest in pieces

The desperate US quest for withdrawal from Afghanistan is set back once again by strategic complexities beyond its control



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Afghanistan's new normal, scripted by an international cast of characters, involves continuing political discord, random acts of low-level violence and, far too often, the spectacular act of terror. A continuing haemorrhage of morale and conviction among the US armed forces — the midwives of Afghanistan's transition — is an accompaniment to this unfolding tragedy.

Early in September, the US announced the death of a special forces soldier in a Kabul bombing, supposedly by the Taliban Islamic militia. That marked the 16th US combat casualty this year, the highest number in five years with still another four months to run.

Late last year, even as strife intensified in anticipation of nationwide elections, the US yet again embraced the strategy of negotiating with the Taliban. Resurrected from obscurity to lead the US effort was Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, once a Columbia University academic. After being drafted into the US jihad against Soviet occupation in the '80s, Khalilzad became an oil industry operative before gaining a senior foreign policy role in the George W Bush administration.

Early September, Khalilzad's exertions seemed to earn their payoff, with an agreement "in principle" on the timetable for a US troops drawdown, preparatory to full withdrawal. There was an obvious intent to boost President Donald Trump's re-election chances, now recognised to be hovering in a region of uncertainty. The Taliban, for their part, would guarantee a de-escalation of violence and, from late-September, open a dialogue with other relevant groups in Afghanistan.

Trump's instinct for showmanship then took over. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was scheduled to visit Washington DC over a mid-September weekend, though his aversion to being lectured about the Taliban deal's merits was expressed in a unilateral postponement of the visit. Ghani's compliance was taken for

granted when Trump planned a trilateral meeting involving him and the Taliban, at the grand presidential resort of Camp David.

Planned in secrecy, the meeting was revealed only at the moment of its cancellation through an early morning tweet from the US President. Aside from Trump's impetuosity and his ignorance of diplomatic process, no possible intent could be read in the cancellation of a meeting never announced. The US administration also announced that Khalilzad was being recalled, signalling an end to the Taliban overture.

Every rational explanation fails to account for the mundane personal motivations that govern US diplomacy under Trump. Last March, Hamdullah Mohib, national security adviser to the president of Afghanistan, visited Washington DC and launched an attack on the man directing the peace initiative. Mohib recalled Khalilzad's "ambitions" and his plans to tweak Afghanistan's constitutional provisions to enable him a run for the presidency. Dissuaded by the complexity of the necessary legislative changes, Khalilzad, apparently, shifted focus to the pursuit of power without the strain of the election. The perception in Afghanistan, Mohib said, was that Khalilzad's entire gambit with the Taliban was to "create a caretaker government, of which he will then become the viceroy".

Mohib was severely censured for this public outburst. Yet, he had a point. In the mid-'90s, when the Taliban emerged on the battle-scarred Afghan political landscape, Khalilzad was their ardent advocate, extolling their rootedness in the soil and their power to channel basic loyalties of clan and tribe into a state of political order. The unspoken agenda was the urgency with which Unocal, the US oil ma-

yor that Khalilzad then served, sought to pacify warring groups to secure a pipeline project that would channel Caspian Sea oil towards the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

That plan floundered in the wilfulness of the Pakistan security establishment and, today, the US oil lobby no longer covets the resources of the Caspian as before. The new player in the Afghan strategic equation is China and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to knit the Eurasian landmass into a tightly integrated economic entity where Chinese capital will have a free run.

In June this year, Abdul Ghani Baradar, head of the Taliban political office in Qatar, was received with great fanfare and warmth in Beijing. No official record of the talks has been released, but the Taliban's negotiations with the US are believed to have picked up momentum since then. Aside from being a major aid-giver and investor in Afghanistan, China is neighbouring Pakistan's indispensable strategic ally.

Political advantage and perhaps some transient financial gains may have been the Trump administration's objective in entering into a dialogue with the Taliban. But the potential rewards are uncertain, since it is by no means clear that the Taliban is a cohesive force with a unified command centre. Entities invested in the floundering democratic process within Afghanistan, moreover, were deeply resentful at the prospect of being sold short in the grand bargain. But perhaps the biggest spoiler was the prospect that the strategic gains from the bargain would accrue in most part to China, today seen by the US as its greatest strategic rival.

The new player in the Afghan equation is China