



# AIR Discussions (April 3<sup>rd</sup> Week)

## AIR SPOTLIGHT SUMMARY

### US TROOPS WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

#### CONTEXT:

- President Joe Biden announced that the **US will withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021**, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.
- Unlike the Trump Administration, which made its troop withdrawal by May 1 conditional – on Taliban taking steps to prevent al-Qaeda or any other group from sheltering in Afghanistan, and agreeing to a dialogue on power sharing with the Afghan government – the **Biden plan has no strings attached**.
- There are **about 2,500-3,500 US troops in Afghanistan at present**, plus a NATO force of under 8,000.

#### WHAT HAS THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DECIDED TO DO?

- The troop pull-out is now expected to begin before May 1, and will conclude before the symbolic date of September 11, reportedly the “absolute” deadline.
- Taliban “will be met with a forceful response” if they attack US troops during the withdrawal phase.
- The Biden administration is now expected to **reposition its troops in the region to maintain a watch on Afghanistan and the Taliban**, although it is unclear how it would effectively be able to do so without direct military involvement.
- The US, however, **will not withdraw all its troops- some will remain to provide diplomatic security, which is a standard practice**.
- Withdrawal **would help Washington move past its “9/11 fixation”**, in which counterterrorism had remained the most important foreign policy objective.
- An exit from the country would mean that the US could devote greater energy in dealing with China and Russia, as well as concentrate on domestic policy objectives.
- A “conditions-based” approach towards ending troop involvement would have meant that the US remained in Afghanistan forever.

#### BACKGROUND:

- The Taliban emerged in the early 1990s following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, before the demise of the Soviet Union.
- 2001 – US-led coalition marches into the Afghan capital after 9/11 attack.
- 2001– The **Bonn Agreement** is signed.
- 2001 – Karzai is sworn in as chairman of a **29-member governing council** established under the Bonn Agreement.
- 2004 and 2009 – General elections are held and Karzai is elected president.
- 2014 – U.S. negotiates a power-sharing deal for a so-called **Unity Government**, with Ghani serving as president and Abdullah as chief executive.
- 2014 – **American and NATO troops formally end their combat mission**, transitioning to a support and training role.



- 2015-2018 – The Taliban surge further.
- 2018 – President Trump appoints veteran Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as negotiator with the Taliban.
- 2018-2019 – Zalmay engages in on-again, off-again talks with the Taliban, mainly in Qatar. The Taliban refuse to negotiate with the Kabul government
- 2020 – The **U.S. and the Taliban sign a deal in Doha**, Qatar, laying out the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan; the deal also envisions intra-Afghan talks on a future political road map.
- 2021- **Blinken Proposal:**
  - United Nations will convene a meeting of the foreign ministers from China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the United States. It will develop a “unified approach” to peace in Afghanistan.
  - The peace plan has kept open the possibility that the 2500-odd US troops in Afghanistan might stay on for a while.
  - The United States has asked Turkey to convene a meeting of the Afghan government and the Taliban to finalise a peace settlement.
  - The US has asked the Taliban to accept an immediate agreement to reduce violence for 90 days.
  - US has asked the Afghan Government and Taliban to move towards a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and form an interim unity government.
- According to the Long War Journal, of **Afghanistan’s 325 districts, the Taliban are in control of 76, and government forces 127.** The remaining are contested.
- According to the Council of Foreign Relations, the Taliban are stronger now than at any point since 2001, when US forces invaded Afghanistan.

### HOW ARE DIFFERENT COUNTRIES PARTICIPATING IN THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS?

- The new Afghan peace process by the Trump and Biden administration of the US
- China had communicated with the Taliban long ago.
- Russia has hosted several rounds of talks with the Taliban.
- European powers have also shown interest in funding talks.

### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN?

- The **government of President Ashraf Ghani would undoubtedly face a tough task ahead.**
- Already over the past year, the Taliban have launched multiple attacks to bring more territory under their control.
- **Possibility of the Taliban being able to strike a peace deal with the Afghan government is low.**
- The Taliban have already said that they would not be attending a new round of talks to decide Afghanistan’s future scheduled in Turkey later this month.
- Critics of the decision fear that it could lead to a catastrophe for Afghanistan.
- It **may lead to a repeat of the 1975 Fall of Saigon**- when the capital of the US-backed South Vietnam fell to Communist-ruled North Vietnam two years after the withdrawal of American military presence of 19 years.
- **Taliban response:**
  - “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 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”.



- 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.
- **Concerns regarding Violence continuing unabated and threat to human rights.**
- **The Taliban wants to reimpose its version of Islamic law as the country's system of governance.**

## PAKISTAN: GAINS, CONCERNS

- This is a moment of both vindication and concern in Islamabad.
- **The Taliban are a creation of the Pakistani security establishment.**
- **But a US withdrawal also means Pakistan will need to shoulder the entire burden of the chaos that experts predict.**

## INDIA: TIME TO BE WARY

- **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.**
- **The Blinken proposal under Biden administration 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.**
- **In the 1990s and 2000s, India was steadfastly opposed to any dealings with the Taliban.**
- **In 2018, when Russia hosted Afghan and Taliban talks, India had sent a diplomatic delegation to Moscow.**
- **In 2020, at the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Mr. Jaishankar was present at the inaugural session via a video link, reaffirming the long-held Indian position.**
- **Since the fall of the Taliban, India has cultivated deep ties with the Afghan people and the government, with investments in multiple projects.**
- **Thus, its economic, strategic and security ties could be disrupted if the Taliban were to take over.**

### *India's stand on Afghan peace process*

- The peace process has to be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled.
- Afghanistan should build national consensus for talks with the Taliban.
- All initiatives and processes must include all sections of the Afghan society, including the legitimately elected government.
- Any process should respect the constitutional legacy and political mandate.
- Establishment of democratic process with respect for human rights, including women's rights.
- The peace process should not leave any ungoverned spaces where terrorists and their proxies can relocate.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA, CHINA & IRAN

- **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.
- **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.
  - Russia's growing links with Pakistan could translate into a post-US role for Moscow in Afghanistan.
- **Iran:**
  - 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.
  - 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.

## WHY IS AFGHANISTAN IMPORTANT FOR INDIA?

- **Security:** A stable Afghanistan is crucial for regional and domestic security and stability for India.
- **Connectivity:** The most important role of Afghanistan is always considered as India's gateway to Central Asia.
- **Energy ambitions:** Peaceful Afghan is essential to address the energy needs of India.
- **Regional Balance of Power:** Afghanistan is tied to India's vision of being a regional leader and a great power, coupled with its competition with China over resources and its need to counter Pakistani influence.
- **Natural Resources:** The country is home to resource deposits worth one trillion dollars, according to the US Geological Survey.



- **India's development initiatives:**



## WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA:

- **Continued Training and Investments:**
  - India should provide more military training to Afghan security forces and invest in longer-term capacity-building programs.
  - It should actively support and invest in the National Directorate of Security
  - Finally, given the continued levels of violence and the impact of the coronavirus on the Afghan economy, India should expand its development assistance.
- **Working With and Through Others:** India should look to broaden its engagements with Iran and Russia, explore opportunities for cooperation (as limited as they might be) with China, and find common ground with the United States on Afghanistan's future.
- **Establishing diplomatic contacts with a politically empowered Taliban** will be crucial to safeguard New Delhi's existing and future economic interests in the country. ○
- An amicable relationship with the Taliban will provide India with some leverage over Afghanistan's future.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/us-afghanistan-military-pullout-joe-biden-9-11-attacks-7275478/>

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-how-americas-troop-pullout-by-september-11-closes-its-afghanistan-chapter-7273760/>



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[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Chaudhuri\\_Shende - Afghanistan.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Chaudhuri_Shende_-_Afghanistan.pdf)

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/enter-the-peace-process-the-hindu-editorial-on-indias-role-in-afghanistan/article34209331.ece>

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## PRELIMS SPECIAL: NEWS IN BRIEF

### National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI)

- Three new initiatives of the National Internet Exchange of India inaugurated.
- **IPv6 Expert Panel (IP Guru):** IP Guru is a group to extend support to all the Indian entities who are finding it technically challenging to migrate and adopt IPv6.
- **NIXI Academy:** NIXI Academy is created to educate technical/non-technical people in India to learn and relearn technologies like IPv6 which are normally not taught in educational Institutes.
- **NIXI-IP-INDEX:** It is an IPv6 index portal for the Internet community.

<http://newsonair.com/Main-News-Details.aspx?id=414321>

### OCI Cards

- Government simplifies process for re-issue of OCI Cards.
- A person who has got registration as **OCI cardholder prior to attaining the age of 20 years will have to get the OCI card re-issued only once** so as to capture his/her facial features on attaining adulthood.
- If a person has obtained registration as **OCI cardholder after attaining the age of 20 years, there will be no requirement of re-issue of OCI card.**
- The OCI cardholders have to upload a copy of the new passport containing their photograph and the latest photo on the online OCI portal each time a new passport is issued prior to attaining the age of 20 years and once after completing 50 years of age.

<http://www.newsonair.com/News?title=Govt-simplifies-process-to-re-issue-OCI-cards&id=414347>

### National climate vulnerability assessment

- National climate vulnerability assessment released.
- The report is titled '**Climate Vulnerability Assessment for Adaptation Planning in India Using a Common Framework**'.
- It **identifies the most vulnerable states and districts in India with respect to current climate risk and key drivers of vulnerability.**
- The report has been **submitted by the Indian Institute of Technology Mandi and the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.**
- The **states with a relatively high vulnerability, Jharkhand, Mizoram, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, and West Bengal, are mostly in the eastern part of the country, requiring prioritisation of adaptation interventions.**
- Assam, Bihar, and Jharkhand have over 60% of districts in the category of highly vulnerable districts.



<http://newsonair.com/Main-News-Details.aspx?id=414501>

### World Heritage Day 2021

- World Heritage Day, also known as International Day for Monuments and Sites, is being observed on **18 April** every year.
- The day is dedicated to the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage through various activities undertaken by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).
- The theme for World Heritage Day 2021 is “**Complex Pasts: Diverse Futures**”.

<http://newsonair.com/News?title=Tourism-and-Culture-Minister-inaugurates-first-ever-online-exhibition-on-Ramayana&id=414579>

### Civil Services Day

- The Government of India celebrates **April 21** every year as ‘Civil Services day’ as an occasion for the civil servants to rededicate themselves to the cause of citizen and renew their commitments to public service and excellence in work.
- This date is chosen to commemorate the day when first Home Minister of Independent India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel addressed the probationers of Administrative Services Officers in 1947.
- As part of Civil Servant Day, Prime Minister’s Awards for Excellence in Public Administration are presented to Districts/Implementing Units for implementation of Priority programme and innovation categories.

<http://newsonair.com/News?title=Civil-Services-day-being-observed-today&id=414751>