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ByInvitation

Afghanistan: The elusive end game

President Donald Trump wants US troops out of a seemingly endless, costly war. This would likely draw more external players to the arena in a battle over strategic interests.

C. Raja Mohan

For The Straits Times

Every American military intervention in a distant land, it is said, begins as a great crusade and ends in a chaotic search for the exits. After 17 years, US$2 trillion (S$2.7 trillion) and thousands of lives lost in the Afghan war, US President Donald Trump wants out. Soon.

Mr Trump has reportedly decided to withdraw about half of the 14,000 US troops stationed in Afghanistan. Last September, he appointed a special envoy, Mr Zalmay Khalilzad, to look for an early political settlement. In pursuit of that quest, Mr Khalilzad has been shuttling between different capitals – from Abu Dhabi to Beijing, Qatar to Delhi, Riyadh to Islamabad and Kabul.

An Afghan-American, Mr Khalilzad knows the region well. He was then President George W. Bush's envoy to Afghanistan and Iraq following the Sept 11, 2001, attacks and the subsequent US occupation of the two countries. He also served as Mr Bush's permanent representative to the United Nations.

His latest mission is not an easy one. It will be hard for him to negotiate peace with the Taleban militants, ousted by US-led forces in 2001, when they know that America no longer has the will to continue the fight. What you can't win on the battlefield, as the old adage goes, you can't extract at the negotiating table.

DANGEROUS VACUUM

The Trump administration's rush to leave Afghanistan is stoking fears in the region. Beyond that the US troop pullout will embolden the Taleban, undermine the government in Kabul, create a new wave of blood-letting in the country and encourage a vigorous effort by Afghanistan's neighbours to fill the vacuum left by the Americans.

The fears are not unfounded but these considerations are unlikely to outweigh the domestic political dynamic in the United States, where frustration over the seemingly endless war has grown over the years.

When Mr Trump's predecessor Barack Obama came to office in 2009, he too was deeply pessimistic about the prospects for a military victory in Afghanistan. Rather than devote energies to fixing troubles in other nations like Afghanistan, he had argued, America should focus on nation-building at home.

But Mr Obama was persuaded by the armed forces to give them one more shot at winning the war. He agreed in 2009 to dramatically raise the number of US troops in Afghanistan to nearly 140,000, but set a deadline of 2014 to vacate the place. With no victory in sight by 2014, he agreed to keep a small number of troops in Afghanistan and leave it to his successor to decide the future course.

Mr Trump decried the waste of American blood and treasure in foreign wars while on the campaign trail. Once in the White House, he was persuaded by his initial security team – notably General H. R. McMaster, his national security adviser, and General James Mattis, his defence secretary, to renew efforts at winning the war.

In addition to a small increase in troop strength, a new South Asia strategy was announced in 2017 which intensified political and economic pressure on Pakistan to stop supporting the Taleban militants in an effort to get them to negotiate. But now, with both generals out of the administration, Mr Trump is reported to want a troop pullout by summer.

TALEBAN TALKS

Mr Khalilzad's efforts began with some promise – his first round of meetings with Taleban leaders in Abu Dhabi last December was said to be positive. But it did not take long for the process to stall.

In Abu Dhabi, the parties had sought to reassure each other on two issues – that the US will withdraw its forces eventually from Afghanistan and that the Taleban would not host terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the country when the troops are gone.

Translating these two general principles into reality was never going to be easy. Meanwhile, other issues are threatening to derail the talks. The US would like the Taleban to engage the Afghan government in Kabul on the important issues of political reconciliation, starting with a ceasefire and a period of transition and ending in an understanding of what a political new dispensation should look like and how it can be constructed in a peaceful manner.

There are many potential deal breakers, but right now the problem is a simple one – of direct talks between the government in Kabul and the Taleban. The Taleban refuses to engage the Afghan government, which it deems a "puppet regime" of foreign forces.

Last week, the Taleban cancelled a second round of talks with the US in Qatar. It accuses the Americans of raising such "extraneous issues" as direct talks, and insists that political reconciliation would take place only among Afghans after the country is freed from foreign occupation.

Put simply, the Taleban is telling the Americans: "You get out first and we will sort things among ourselves afterwards." One does not have to be a genius to figure out that the Taleban is utterly confident that it can run over Kabul soon after the international presence ends.

The jockeying among multiple external stakeholders will likely intensify should Afghanistan's political coherence and territorial integrity break down after the Americans leave. The Taleban might well prevail in Afghanistan after the American forces leave. But its victory will be short-lived.

Meanwhile, the Taleban and other insurgent groups have been stepping up attacks. On Wednesday, four Americans were killed by a suicide bomb attack in the city of Manbij. ISIS claimed responsibility for the strike, which targeted a restaurant used by US troops patrolling the area. Although the Afghan security forces have shown great valour, the odds for survival of the government in Kabul against the Taleban's military offensive are likely to lengthen with a US pullout. That brings Pakistan right into the picture.

PAKISTAN AND OTHER PLAYERS

Pakistan has an open border of nearly 2,500km with Afghanistan. The Durand Line drawn arbitrarily by the British Raj in 1896 runs through the lands of the Pashtuns, who form the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and a significant minority in Pakistan. The Taleban's strongest support is among the Pashtuns.

The American war against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s and the Taleban war against American presence since the end of 2001 could not have been fought without bases in Pakistan and a measure of support from its all-powerful security establishment. Any one familiar with Afghanistan will acknowledge that no peace in the country is possible without Pakistan's backing.

Mr Trump makes no secret of his deep disappointment with Pakistan, which is seen in Washington as playing both sides of the Afghan war – of allowing America to wage a war in Afghanistan while undermining the US by letting militants destabilise the Kabul government.

It is not clear if Mr Trump's decision to cut off aid to Pakistan and his repeated warnings to Islamabad against supporting terror have had the desired effect. What is clear, though, is that Pakistan's leverage with both Washington and the Taleban is now reaching a peak.

But it should also be noted that whatever course Islamabad decides upon, one cannot assume that the Taleban will merely follow. The group has a mind and agency all of its own.

India, which has consistently supported Kabul since the ouster of the Taleban, is concerned that the group's return to power would give a boost to religious extremism and terrorism in the region. New Delhi is certainly not enthused about Pakistan expanding its influence in Afghanistan during and after the American withdrawal.

Pakistan and India are not the only actors in the power play over Afghanistan. Neighbouring Iran, too, has a significant role in its future. Iran and the Taleban have little in common, but Teheran has sustained links with the group over the years.

As its conflict with the US deepens, Teheran has no reason to see Mr Trump succeed in Afghanistan. Neither does Iran want its regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are helping Washington and Kabul by nudging the Taleban to talk, to widen their role in Afghanistan. The Saudis and the Emiratis were the only ones, other than Pakistan, to recognise the Taleban government when it ruled Afghanistan in 1996-2001.

Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose ambition is to become the leader of the Islamic world, wants to broker the political future of Afghanistan. Separately, Qatar, which punches way above its weight in the Middle East, has inserted itself into the Afghan power play by hosting a Taleban political office in Doha. But the Taleban has learnt to take advantage of the regional rivalries in the Middle East.

The three Central Asian Republics – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – on the northern borders of Afghanistan are worried about the spillover of the renewed turbulence into their territories.

That is not all; Russia and China may not be unhappy to see Washington beat a retreat from Afghanistan; both have launched their own diplomatic initiatives to secure their interests in the region.

Moscow has emphasised the importance of working with the Taleban to prevent the spread of ISIS into the region and is cosying up to Pakistan as part of its repositioning in South Asia.

But it is China, with its deep pockets and huge political influence in Pakistan, that has the potential to be a powerful new player in Afghanistan. However, its experience in the region is quite limited and, for now, it is keeping a relatively low profile.

The jockeying among multiple external stakeholders will likely intensify should Afghanistan's political coherence and territorial integrity break down after the Americans leave.

The Taleban might well prevail in Afghanistan after the American forces leave. But its victory will be short-lived. The deeply sectarian Taleban, which has shown no change in its hostile attitude towards multiple ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan, will invite quick resistance from these groups that will be backed by external actors.

The bloodshed and chaos playing out in Yemen, Syria and Libya – civil wars along multiple axes and external intervention by many powers – could well be the future of Afghanistan; unless, of course, Mr Trump changes his mind and can come up with a better strategy to secure the nation. Don't hold your breath, though.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• C. Raja Mohan is director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at National University of Singapore.