

(1) Afghanistan's...

But even among regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan or Russia that have long been suspicious that the United States wants permanent military bases in South Asia, there is no appetite for a sudden U.S. withdrawal, say analysts.

"While the news of a potential U.S. drawdown may be a reason for cautious optimism in the region, they don't want an abrupt withdrawal," said Graeme Smith, a consultant for the International Crisis Group.

"All sides recognise that a precipitous pullout could spark a new civil war that destabilises the region. The neighbours do not enjoy surprises, and the uncertain signals from Washington are causing anxiety."

The United States, which sent troops to Afghanistan in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington and at the peak of the deployment had more than 100,000 troops in the country, withdrew most of its forces in 2014, but still keeps around 14,000 troops there as part of a NATO-led mission aiding the Afghan security forces and hunting militants.

The top U.S. general in Afghanistan said 2019 was going to be an interesting year.

"The policy review is going on in multiple capitals, peace talks out there, regional players pressing for peace, the Taliban talking about peace, the Afghan government talking about peace," said General Scott Miller, the U.S. commander of Afghanistan's NATO-led force, at the Resolute Support mission headquarters in Kabul.

BORDER SECURITY

Pakistan, which was already working to fence its 1,400 km (870 miles) frontier with Afghanistan and deploy a 50,000-strong paramilitary force along the border, is preparing for a fresh influx of refugees in the event of disorder. "Camps will be set up near the border to manage a fresh wave of Afghan refugees and illegal migrants and Afghans will not be allowed to set up illegal homes in Pakistan," said an official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Afghanistan, which shares borders with Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China, is already the world's second biggest source of refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that approximately 1.4 million undocumented Afghans live in Pakistan and possibly 1.2 million in Iran.

While thousands of undocumented Afghans were driven out of Iran by recent political and economic turbulence, Iranian officials in Kabul said they fear a sudden U.S. troop withdrawal could reverse that trend.

"We are working closely with the Afghan government to stop Afghans from entering our country. We don't want to use violence to stop them, but a sudden U.S. pullout will lead to a crisis," said an Iranian official.

Afghanistan does not share a land border with Turkey, but Afghans enter Turkey from Iran to work as shepherds, farmers or in the construction sector. Many use it as a transit point to try to enter Europe.

"We have not closed our door but the number of illegal migrants is increasing on a daily basis," said Mehmet Ozgur Sak, the second secretary at the Turkish embassy in Kabul.

In 2018, Turkish police say they intercepted 90,000 Afghans who were trying to enter the country with fake documents or with the help of traffickers, double the number in 2017.

As negotiations over the future of the country gather momentum, the Taliban have been trying to reassure Afghans that they have nothing to fear after foreign forces leave. But there are Afghans who refuse to trust the Taliban's new stance. Sayed Rafi Sadat, a student in western Herat province, said the Taliban would impose harsh laws to destroy democracy.

"If U.S. troops withdraw then there is no hope for the future and we will have to leave the country," he said. (Reuters)

(2) Kabul Residents...

At the same, CPAG urged the warring sides not to target areas that could endanger lives of civilians.

CPAG, which is comprised of 20 civil society organisations, releases monthly reports on civilian casualties and advocates for justice to war-affected families.

Based on the CPAG report about civilian casualties, 213 people were killed and 212 others injured in December 2018. (Pajhwok)

(3) Taliban...

are designed to set parameters for negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, Iranian media reported.

"A Taliban delegation was in Tehran yesterday (Sunday). They had comprehensive negotiations with the Iranian deputy foreign minister," Ghasemi said in a news conference aired live on state television on Monday.

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said on December 28 that Iranian officials have met with the Taliban and that its details were shared with the Afghan government in Shamkhani's trip to Kabul last week.

Last year in December, US and Taliban officials held meetings in Abdu Dhabi to discuss a political settlement and ways to facilitate direct talks between the militants and the Afghan government.

Taliban said they also held meetings with officials from the UAE, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, but the group refused to meet a delegation from the Afghan government. (Tolo news)

(4) China Calls for...

could help end the hostilities, Lijian noted.

"If a civil war broke out after the U.S. withdrawal, the first countries affected will be Pakistan, will be China, and it will be the immediate neighbors. So, we have to sit together with the parties concerned so that we start a peace process," he said.

The U.S. has recently engaged in direct talks with the Taliban to convince them to engage in peace negotiations with the Afghan government. But reports of a potential U.S. withdrawal from the country have worried critics who say the move would reduce the incentive for insurgents to halt fighting and negotiate a deal.

Terrorism in Xinjiang

Lijian reiterated Beijing's worries that a volatile Afghanistan would encourage terrorists linked to the outlawed East Turkistan Islamic Movement, or ETIM, to foment violence in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang.

The militant group claims to be fighting for the rights of the Uighur Muslim community in Xinjiang, which shares a border with both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"They are still in Afghanistan. They are still posing a threat to the national security of Xinjiang, of China. What they want is to establish a separate state, to separate Xinjiang out of China. This is totally unacceptable to China. So, we will work with the Afghan government to try to eliminate this group," Lijian pledged.

The Chinese diplomat rejected as "groundless Western propaganda" reports that his country was suppressing religious freedom

and the rights of Uighur Muslims in the name of fighting terrorism. Rights issues in Xinjiang International human rights groups have expressed concerns that China is forcing Uighur and other Muslim minorities to quit their religious beliefs in internment camps set up in Xinjiang under the guise of vocational education centers.

Lijian noted that ETIM is declared a terrorist organization by the United Nations. He said that Chinese authorities, particularly those in Xinjiang, have taken measures against terrorists linked to the group, which has resulted in "zero" incidents of terrorism in the last two years.

The Chinese diplomat lamented that Western media describe counterterrorism moves in other parts of the world as "actions for maintaining peace," but they become human rights issues when China undertakes similar actions. "This is totally [a] double standard and Western propaganda. They are just badmouthing about China," Lijian said.

The Chinese diplomat asserted that Xinjiang is open to international visits, and people can go there to see for themselves that the rights of Uighur Muslims are fully protected. (VoA)

(5) Election Delay...

According to Mehwar-e-Mardum-e-Afghanistan, the delay in the elections has not been made to bring reforms to the election commission, but to provide context for interference in election affairs by government.

"The delay is made more to provide the context for interference and engineering the presidential elections, rather than bringing reforms in the commission. If reforms were the issue, the National Unity Government had lots of time to bring them about in the election commission and electoral system," Daud Ali Najafi, head of electoral committee of Mehwar-e-Mardum-e-Afghanistan said. The Wafaq Millie Party meanwhile warned of negative consequences in delaying elections and blasted the election commission over lack of plans for managing electoral affairs.

They insisted that the upcoming presidential elections should not have the same fate as the October 20 and 21 parliamentary elections and 2014 presidential elections.

"People of Afghanistan are concerned with this commission and this government, and are in a legal vacuum as to how this election will be conducted and whether people can accept the results," Ahmad Wali Massoud, head of the Wafaq Millie Party said.

The spokesman for the office of Mohammad Hanif Atmar, the former national security advisor and a possible presidential candidate, meanwhile said in a statement that the work of National Unity Government after May 2018 does not have political and legal legitimacy.

According to Atmar's office, delaying elections will increase people's distrust, adding that the election commission does not have the capacity to hold four elections together.

The election commission this week said they would hold the presidential elections, district council elections, Ghazni parliamentary elections and the provincial council elections together in July.

The Presidential Palace meanwhile has said that determination of the elections schedule is the authority of the election commission and the government has not interfered in the commission's decisions.

The election commission also said they make decisions independently and accept no interference.

"After seeing our problems and

prolonging of October 20 and 21 parliamentary elections and the lessons that we learned for this election, we (felt that we) need more time. We shared the issue with government, donors, political parties and politicians and consulted them on the issue," Sayed Hafizullah Hashemi, a member of the election commission said.

The political mainstream said the presidential elections will be full of problems unless reforms are brought in the electoral commissions and electoral systems and that such challenges will take the country into crisis. (Tolo news)

(6) Presidential Vote...

The association suggested the creation of inclusive political consensus on electoral reforms and a program for implementation of reforms in the leadership and membership of the election bodies.

It also asked for a review and correction of the voter lists based on biometric system in coordination with the Department of Population Registration, as well as publishing the voter lists before the Election Day.

The association also asked government officials to be committed to non-interference in election affairs and misuse of resources and authority in elections.

The election oversight institutes asked the international community not to hesitate from technically or financially supporting the election commissions and support the government and the people for full implementation of democracy in Afghanistan. (Pajhwok)

(7) NATO Troops...

talking about peace," Miller said. Spokesman for US and NATO Forces in Afghanistan Colonel David Butler meanwhile said this year brings a unique opportunity for peace in Afghanistan.

"2019 brings a special and unique opportunity in Afghanistan. I think we have all seen the progress of peace talks and the Afghans and the Taliban have a real serious opportunity ahead of them, an opportunity for peace. Think of this -- 40 years of war has a possibility of coming to an end," he said.

"I think we all have the same vision as far as peace and the Afghan people that we work with, the soldiers, I think we are all on the same page as far as what we want. We want to leave here on the right foot and make sure they are going down the right path," said US Sergeant First Class, Justin Moore.

A White House spokesman last week said US President Donald Trump had not issued orders to the Pentagon to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. But the administration has not denied reports that the United States plans to pull out almost half of the 14,000-strong force currently deployed.

The reports come amid an intensification of moves towards peace negotiations in Afghanistan.

US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met Taliban representatives last month and discussed issues around a future troop withdrawal. (Tolo news)

(8) 11 Women Appointed...

Mahan has been appointed as deputy municipal chief of the 2nd district of the city. She has completed her Bachelors and Masters degree in the reputable higher education institutions of Kabul. Muzhgan Hajizada has been appointed as deputy municipal chief of the 11th district of Kabul. She has completed her higher education in the field of administration and management from the faculty of economy and has work experience in various organizations including UN Habitat.

Similarly, Eng. Habiba Sadeqi has been appointed as deputy municipal chief for the 6th district of the city. She has obtained her Masters degree in the field of renewable energy from India and Bachelors

degree in Polytechnic University of Kabul.

According to Kabul Municipality, Fahima Behzad has been appointed as deputy municipal chief of the 17th district of the city. She has completed her higher education in the field of religious studies in Kabul University.

Husnia Haseen has been appointed as the deputy municipal chief for the 5th district of the city. She is a graduate of medical faculty and has obtained her Master's degree from India. Ms. Haseen has also worked with various organizations including UNHCR, SDO, SDE ACTD, MCL.

Razia Arefi has been appointed as deputy municipal chief for the 13th district of the city. She has obtained her Bachelor's degree in the field of economy from Kardan University in Kabul.

Sweeta Naseri has been appointed as deputy municipal chief for the 9th district of the city. She is a graduate of the faculty of administration and diplomacy and has obtained Masters degree from Bakhtar University in administration and business.

Massouda Ferdaws, a graduate of Kabul University in the field of Visual Arts, has been appointed as deputy municipal chief of the 8th district.

Nazifa Orya Khel has been appointed as deputy municipal chief of the 12th district of the city. She has completed her higher education in the field of economy from Maryam University and has worked with various international organizations including JICA, UN Habitat, and IRC.

The Kabul Municipality also added that Nasima Hamidi has been appointed as deputy municipal chief for the 16th district of the city. (KP)

(9) Afghanistan Directly...

group stage will advance to the Super 12s.

Of the top 10 sides on the rankings table, top-ranked Afghanistan, India, England, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, the Windies and Pakistan will start their campaign directly in the Super 12s.

In 2018, Afghanistan defeated Bangladesh One-Day International and T20 series and got the eighth position in the ICC ranking. Meanwhile, Afghanistan National Cricket Team succeeded to keep their place in the ICC ranking. (Tolo news)

(10) A Gang of 4...

before obtaining the demanded money from the doctor's family.

The doctor who was in captivity of the gang rescued and joined his family, the statement added. Two Kalashnikovs along with 158 bullets and five mobile phone sets were also seized from the kidnappers, the statement concluded.

However, the NDS did not provide information about the date of the detention. (Pajhwok)

(11) Over 20 Soldiers...

to capture an oil-rich area in the province," he said. "The enemy also suffered heavy losses in this attack. We also suffered casualties. We had more than 20 martyrs and 23 wounded, which includes the Afghan National Police, the local police and the NDS forces." The governor said the attack in Sayyad district ended after six hours.

"People have to be concerned. The Sar-e-Pul province has been forgotten," he added.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Noor Rahmani, head of Sar-e-Pul Provincial Council, said thorough attention is required on the province, in terms of providing more facilities to security forces and ensuring new measures in this respect.

This comes after Taliban attacked security outposts in Chintal district on Monday night.

Local officials said both sides suffered casualties. (Tolo news)