

COMMENT 190 - Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Peace Agreement or a Mere Withdrawal Deal?

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Background

The United States and the Taliban have recently signed a peace agreement aimed at bringing the nineteen-year-long war in Afghanistan to an end. Negotiations between the two parties were broadly based on the exchange of a timeline for the withdrawal of foreign forces stationed in Afghanistan against an assurance from the Taliban on preventing the use of Afghan soil for any future attacks against the United States and its allies (US Department of State, 2020). However, the peace agreement left most issues concerning the future of the Afghan polity and society unresolved - to be taken up later by an intra-Afghan negotiation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The crucial issue concerns whether the 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan' signed between the US and the Taliban will help bring about the intended peace and stability in Afghanistan - or whether it will merely act as a withdrawal agreement allowing the United States to pull out troops from a long-stretched battle in a war-torn country.

The nineteen-year-long war in Afghanistan has come to a stalemate. The United States, which pledged to defeat the Taliban terrorist network after the horrific 9/11 attacks, finds itself in a deadlock against a long-drawn war against terrorism in the country. Despite America's major investments - both militarily and economically - in the Afghan war, Taliban forces are nowhere near defeated. Though the US has performed well in a few sectors (successes that can't be overlooked), it has overall failed to bring about any transformational change in Afghanistan or ensure sustainable and comprehensive peace in the country. The peace agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban can therefore be best explained through

William Zartman's theory of Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS). MHS is described as a situation "when the two parties find themselves, locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degrees or for the same reasons), they seek a way out." (Zartman, 2000). For Americans, the agreement with the Taliban was their way out from an endless war - and their decision to pull out forces was mainly guided by the growing unpopularity of the war among the American citizenry as regards the money spent and the increasing casualties and deployment of American personnel in a foreign land.

While political settlement and reconciliation with the Taliban served America's vital interests in Afghanistan (to prevent the state from becoming a safe-haven from which terrorist groups can plan and execute attacks against the US homeland), for Afghans, it has brought both fear and hope. With no guarantee of security, confusion and scepticism continues to reign among Afghans and engulf ordinary Afghan citizens as concerns the implications of the deal. Though some Afghans fear the return of the Taliban's reigns of terror and conservatism of the past, many are hopeful that the political settlement will bring an end to a 40-year long-stretched conflict in the country - for which Afghans have paid a heavy cost. In 2019, 88.7% of Afghans indicated that they either strongly or somewhat support efforts to negotiate peace with the Taliban. (Asia Foundation, 2019). However, the peace agreement is just the first step towards achieving lasting peace - and the bigger challenge lies ahead, in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks.

Challenges to the Afghan Peace Process

Since the signing of the peace agreement on 29, February 2020, efforts to reach the next phase in the Afghanistan peace process have faced many early setbacks. To begin with, the exclusion by the US of the Afghan government from the peace negotiations not only weakened the position of the government but also emboldened the Taliban's position on questioning and dismissing the legitimacy of said government. By acknowledging the Taliban as a legitimate political player in Afghanistan, Peter Bergen, a national security expert once noted, "the US made a huge category error with the Taliban, for treating them as a potential government in waiting." (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020).

The intra-Afghan negotiations that were to commence within 10 days of the United States-Taliban agreement encountered a few other challenges. Soon after signing the peace agreement, the two sides clashed over the proposed provision for a prisoner swap, a commitment made by U.S. officials to the Taliban on behalf of the Afghan government - despite their resentment. Decided as a confidence-building measure ahead of the intra-Afghan talks, the Afghan government remained reluctant to the proposed release of the 5000 Taliban prisoners – endeavoured without finalizing the date and modalities of a ceasefire. Objecting to the decision made by the US, Afghan President Ghani stated that “the government of Afghanistan has made no commitment to free 5,000 Taliban prisoners” and that “it is not in the authority of the US to decide, as they are only a facilitator.” (Aljazeera, 2020). However, succumbing to the pressure from the US, the Afghan government ultimately agreed for a phase-wise release of Taliban prisoners. The increased and consistent pressure from the United States on the Afghan government gave the Taliban the added leverage they required even before the start of the negotiations. Moreover, despite the signing of the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement, Afghanistan witnessed a spate of Taliban attacks. These fresh set of attacks were waged against the Afghan security forces, who the Taliban continues to see as its enemy. With no provision of a ceasefire in the peace deal, the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid stated, “We signed an agreement with the Americans. But our jihad is not over. The stooges who supported the invaders during the last two decades are our enemies. This might change after additional talks but at the moment we are still at war.” (Meier, 2020).

Adding up to the delay in the intra-Afghan talks has been the long-standing political crisis within the Afghan state. The internal political discord between President Ghani and the Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah over contested election results exposed the divided and conflictual nature of the Afghan government. However, fearing the risk of the collapse of peace negotiations, the United States threatened to slash 1 billion in assistance to Afghanistan and reduce all cooperation unless the two political camps agree to resolve their differences. Giving in to US pressure, the two parties have reported progress and finally concluded a power-sharing deal, giving Abdullah the leading role in the peace process with the Taliban and the right to appoint half of the Afghan cabinet (The National, 2020).

While the initial difficulties have thwarted and delayed the intra-Afghan negotiation process, the major challenge for Afghans lies ahead in deciding the course of the social and political fabric of Afghanistan. Finding a common ground between Kabul and the Taliban on key power-sharing and social issues such as the political structure of the country, the form of government and women and minority rights not only entails a daunting task but also runs the risk of reversing the gains drawn out from the two-decade-long war. The conflict between a republic and an emirate dominates the discussion on the future of Afghanistan. The Islamist fundamentalist group which claims itself victorious has not changed much ideologically - as is evident in the recent Eid-ul-Fitr statement made by the Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Haibatullah, who reiterated the Taliban's demand to rule Afghanistan and called in for the establishment of an "Islamic government". Moreover, showing no signs of integration within the Afghan government, the leader offered in his statement "general amnesty" to his opponents, urging them to take "full advantage of it by ending their opposition and not becoming an impediment for the establishment of an Islamic government which is the aspiration of millions of martyred, wounded, disabled, orphaned, widowed and suffering Afghans." (Voice of Jihad, 2020). Opposing the emirate model, the political leadership in Kabul remains resolute on remaining a Republic. President Ghani in a recent interview with Atlantic Council dated June 11, 2020, iterated that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will remain a "sovereign, democratic and united republic" and that he would not repeat the same mistake made by Dr. Najibullah by announcing his resignation and stepping aside from his Presidency at the behest of the Taliban. (Atlantic Council, 2020).

While ambiguity clouds Afghanistan's political future, serious concerns are raised not only within Afghanistan but worldwide as well as concerns the realisation of the intra-afghan negotiations' end objectives. Political uncertainty has created major challenges for regional stakeholders, especially the Indian State, in their quest to respond to a new political situation in Afghanistan. With the possibility of return by the Taliban leadership into Afghan politics and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, India runs the risk of losing its strategic presence in the country. The close and long-standing relationship between the Taliban and the Pakistani establishment, the historical use of Afghan soil for the training of Kashmir jihadi groups under Taliban rule, and the violent attacks by the Taliban on Indian interests

within Afghanistan have dictated India's position of not indulging in direct talks with the group. Diplomatically, New Delhi has remained committed to their principled position of support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process.

However, in the wake of a weak and divided political leadership in Afghanistan, the question of whether or not to engage with the Afghan Taliban directly has stirred up a new debate in India's policy circles. Many in India remain sceptical of and fear the strong nexus between the Taliban (especially the Haqqani network) and the Pakistani ISI. Others have argued that New Delhi should advance its legitimate security and economic interests within Afghanistan and engage in talks with the Taliban with no preconditions. (Financial Express, 2019). Shiv Shankar Menon, the former NSA, professed that "India should be clear about its role in Afghanistan and do whatever it can to encourage that the Taliban shun violent extremism and become mainstream." (The New Indian Express, 2019). While both positions hold merit in their arguments, the present situation needs to be read with caution.

Given the political ambiguity of the intra-Afghan talks, New Delhi remains fixated on not engaging with the Taliban directly until it joins the intra-Afghan dialogue. Former Indian envoy to Afghanistan, Amar Sinha, stated in an interview that "India will engage with the Taliban if they come back to power, join the mainstream and become a political force." (Haidar, 2020) New Delhi continues to be wary of the strong nexus between the Taliban and the anti-India Pakistani establishment as well as the continual presence of thousands of Pakistani nationals from LeT and JeM within Afghanistan - as indicated in the eleventh report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, and a situation which directly threatens India's security and strategic interests in the region. (UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report, 2020).

While the Taliban's proxy status remains the main irritant in its relationship with India, New Delhi's concerns are also validated against the spate of attacks by the Taliban against Afghan security forces - despite the signing of the peace agreement - and the group's unwillingness to announce a permanent ceasefire. Despite US insistence on engaging directly with the Taliban, India remains firm on its decision on not doing so until the group eschews violence and recognises the democratic forces in their country. India's decision is long rooted in a historical trust deficit, the unresolved issue of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, and the uncertainty involved

in intra-Afghan negotiations. However, India is closely watching developments in the country and is willing to both participate and seriously engage with the Taliban – raising its concerns within the democratic set-up of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

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