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PERILS OF US-TALIBAN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

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Overview:

Much of Washington's efforts since 2009 have been centred on how to bring America's longest war in Afghanistan to an early end. President Barack Obama even set a deadline for military withdrawal in July 2011. Since then, violence has escalated and spread to relatively peaceful parts of the country.

For this purpose, the first public face-to-face meeting was held between Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Alice Wells and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, on 23 July 2018. This, and possibly other similar covert meetings, marked an aberration of the stated US policy of not negotiating directly with the Taliban, the insurgent group that the

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United States-led NATO has been fighting arguably unsuccessfully for nearly two decades since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Previously, the US had been insisting that Taliban negotiate with the Afghan government directly.

Most recently, a US delegation led by State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban representatives from the Taliban Political Office – the headquarters in Qatar – held six-day peace talks between 21 and 26 January in Doha and reached an agreement on a draft peace deal.

Under the agreement, which reportedly has four parts, namely ceasefire, counter-terrorism, troop withdrawal, and intra-Afghan talks. According to Reuters report on 26 January, the US has apparently agreed to pull out its troops from Afghanistan 18 months after the agreement is signed. In exchange, Taliban have reportedly committed to preventing international terrorist groups, including Al-Qaidah and the Daesh from using Afghan territory against the US.

Both Khalilzad and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo seem pleased with the progress made in talks. In a message posted on Twitter, Khalilzad informed of his plan after the talks to meet Afghan officials for consultations and to “build on the momentum and resume talks shortly”. He also emphasised on the need for “intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire”. Pompeo described the result as “encouraging” on Twitter.

Having played a key role with Pakistan in facilitating the talks, the Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani described the developments as “a significant step in the history of peace and reconciliation”. Also writing on Twitter, he urged all regional and international players to “unify and coordinate efforts and support Doha in its endeavour to facilitate successful negotiations”.

No parties have so far officially provided concrete details about what the "momentum" or “success” actually entails.

US and Taliban Commitment to Ending the War

US officials have admitted publically there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict. During his visit to Kabul on 13 March 2018, former Defence Secretary James Mattis spoke of

looking forward to a victory in Afghanistan, but he explained that the victory would be a “a political reconciliation”.

Later, in order to develop “opportunities to get the Afghans and the Taliban to come to a reconciliation” Pompeo named veteran diplomat Khalilzad as the US envoy for Afghan reconciliation in September 2018.

Khalilzad played a key role in Afghanistan’s transition into the post-Taliban era following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. He served as US ambassador to Kabul from 2003 until 2005 before serving as US ambassador to Iraq and later the United Nations. In Afghanistan, his knowledge of the Afghan languages, cultural fabric, political terrain and warring factions and his ability – in his former capacity as US ambassador to Kabul – to influence senior Afghan officials is widely acknowledged. He, therefore, knows what the stakes are in Afghanistan.

Although he has been a critic of Pakistan, a major player in Afghan peace, he has met key Pakistani civilian and military actors and understands their needs and concerns.

Highlighting the importance of US legacy in Afghanistan, a US official who wished to remain anonymous recently told Reuters on 28 January the US “goals is to help bring peace in Afghanistan and we would like a future partnership, newly defined with a post-peace government.” Khalilzad’s appointment can, therefore, be interpreted as a sign of renewed US intent to seek a negotiated settlement to the Afghanistan imbroglio.

While the talks were continuing, Taliban also announced the appointment of the group's co-founder and second-in-command under the late Mullah Muhammad Omar, Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar as the head of Taliban political office in Qatar. “This step has been taken to strengthen and properly handle the ongoing negotiations process with the United States,” the Taliban said in statement on 24 January.

As a Taliban spiritual leader and co-founder who battled hard to establish the movement, Beradar enjoys considerable legitimacy within the Taliban even after years of incarceration in Pakistan. Because of his relatively dovish record, Beradar’s appointment injects fresh hope for a negotiated settlement in nearly two decades and can be seen as a sign of Taliban

seriousness of purpose in peace talks. Because of his seniority, his appointment also elevates the status of the Taliban political office enabling the Taliban side to make decisions faster.

Angered Pakistani security forces arrested Beradar in 2010 allegedly for reaching out unsuccessfully to the Afghan and US governments for a negotiated settlement to the Afghanistan imbroglio. He was released from Pakistani prison in October 2018 after Khalilzad's visits to the region to discuss peace talks.

Reactions to Peace Talks

- The Afghan Government's Reaction

Unlike former President Hamid Karzai who scuppered similar attempts in 2011 fearing they were undermining his government's authority, President of the National Unity Government Ashraf Ghani initially did not object to preliminary US-Taliban talks.

However, he has grown sceptical of the US plan since the Afghan government has been increasingly sidelined in the process and the US and Taliban have reached agreements bilaterally. President Ghani insists that the government of Afghanistan is the party with whom the Taliban must negotiate to reach a final agreement.

Taliban have repeatedly refused to enter direct talks with the government of Afghanistan citing its lack of legitimacy as the reason and denouncing it as a "puppet regime". Despite his assurances, Khalilzad has been unable so far to convince the Taliban to enter into negotiations with the government of Afghanistan.

The government-formed but independent body with the mandate to undertake peace efforts, the High Peace Council (HPC), has also been excluded from the process.

Although Khalilzad has denied any agreements or discussions with Taliban on an interim government, President Ghani remains particularly concerned that the Americans might strike important deals with the Taliban, including one on an interim administration, bypassing the upcoming presidential election in which Ghani would be running as a candidate. President Ghani has strongly rejected the idea of an interim administration, instead, stressing on the need for elections. The Afghan government speaks of never going back.

Ghani is concerned about the consequences of an abrupt US withdrawal both for himself and ostensibly for Afghanistan. In a brief address to the nation on 28 January he said, "Prudence is important to prevent a repetition of past mistakes". He was referring to hasty Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 leading to the collapse of the Afghan state, which led to a bloody civil war and the emergence on the Afghan horizon of the Taliban and their al-Qaida allies. Ghani recently sent a letter to President Donald Trump to propose reduced costs for US troops in Afghanistan.

President Ghani also differs with Khalilzad on the roadmap for peace. Ghani's roadmap for peace will take five years, essentially arguably necessitating his re-election to implement the roadmap. Khalilzad, however, is in a rush to make gains and broker a peace deal before the upcoming presidential polls in Afghanistan.

However, the president's standing among Afghans is nothing like what it was in 2014 when he won the election, albeit amid allegations of widespread fraud, which led to the creation of a national unity government with his election rival Abdullah Abdullah who now serves as the Chief Executive (CE). Poverty, unemployment, unprecedented ethnic divisions and rising insecurity have seriously undermined Ghani's public image.

The Afghan government's peace efforts made in the past one decade have largely failed. Despite their slogans of peace, the Afghan government and politicians have failed in practice to achieve much. President Ghani offered unconditional peace offer to the Taliban in February 2018, but the Taliban showed little interest.

The Taliban, however, have shown that they can not only force the United States to come to the negotiating table on Taliban terms but also lure non-government prominent Afghan players into talks in conjunction with countries of the region.

- The Political Elite's Reaction

Taliban have expressed its preference for intra-Afghan dialogue on a number of occasions. Most recently, Taliban representatives said they were open to talks with Afghan political groups and personalities.

Responding to Taliban interest in, some of Afghanistan's main political players, including several most powerful regional and ethnic leaders including former President Hamid Karzai,

took the step of meeting Taliban representatives on 5 January for “intra-Afghan” talks at a meeting in Moscow, which is widely seen as carrying Russia’s stamp of approval.

The first similar conference hosted by Russia was held in November 2018. Taliban sent their representatives to the conference, but, as in the most recent Moscow meeting, the Afghan government refused to participate. It did send an HPC delegation, but no formal negotiations took place between Taliban and the HPC delegation. The United States initially criticised the Russian effort, but later reportedly sent a US representative to the event.

Many of the participants of the most recent meeting in Moscow including Yunus Qanooni, Atta Muhammad Noor, and Ismail Khan were key members of the anti-Soviet jihad in the 80s and have held positions of power in the post-Taliban administration formed in 2002. They are now united mainly by their desire to stop President Ghani from staying in power for another term. Their participation in the Moscow meeting is an indication that President Ghani has failed to build a domestic consensus around his stance on peace talks with Taliban and about participation in the Moscow meeting.

- The Afghan Public’s Reaction

There is widespread support for peace in Afghanistan regardless of US presence in the country. The vast majority of Afghans want lasting and comprehensive peace. They have suffered for 40 years facing cruel and horrific events of different consecutive wars. The most recent war has lasted for 17 years with unabated suffering. Afghans, both civilian and military, are carrying the bulk of the burden of the human cost of the war. According to President Ghani himself, fatalities among Afghan armed forces have reached a colossal 45,000 troops since the national unity government came to power in 2014. US fatalities are low in contrast. In 2015, 10 American troops lost their lives; nine were killed in 2016, and 11 were killed in 2017. In 2018, 12 US soldiers died in combat in Afghanistan.

All Afghans warmly welcomed the unprecedented ceasefire during Eid holidays in June with Taliban and Afghan security personnel candidly posing for selfies when thousands of Taliban fighters entered the city centres.

However, there are also worries, especially among the educated and urban class. The concerns are largely three-fold – that the Afghan government has been, and is being,

sidelined in the peace process; that the talks could lead to a hasty US pullout, which ends up leaving large chunks of territory under Taliban control; and that a deal with Taliban may involve going back to an era of curtailed civil and political liberties.

The 2018 Asia Foundation survey of the Afghan people shows that whereas the slightly more than half of ethnic Pashtuns think peace with the Taliban is possible, much lower percentage of non-Pashtun ethnic groups share this view.

A similar pattern emerges when the data is divided by region and gender. As a vulnerable group, women are especially worried about their rights if the Taliban come to power again. The Taliban's recent assurances that they would soften their ultra-hardline stance if they "return" have also not convinced many.

The Perils

It is becoming increasingly clear that the United States plans to end America's longest war and pull out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible. For the Americans, the objective was to eliminate the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan. For Afghans, dignified peace is of paramount importance. They are caught between powerful warring forces that they cannot control. They do not approve of Taliban violence, but they have also grown impatient with foreign military forces who are no longer seen as "liberators" if they ever were.

However, the perpetual discussions on the length of the war have failed to note if the collective objectives of both Afghans and the international actors, including the United States, were achieved. It appears that the pursuit for those objectives and aspirations is coming to an end mid-way.

- Novelty of the Taliban Offer

Taliban have assured Khalilzad, according to Khalilzad's own Tweet, they would "do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals."

However, there is nothing new in the Taliban offer. Taliban have offered similar concessions for a long time on the condition that the Americans pull out of Afghanistan. In addition, they are already at war with Daesh. Reports of skirmishes between Taliban and Daesh abound in

Afghanistan. In one incident in July 2018, upto 250 Daesh fighters turned themselves in to Afghan government after a fierce two-day battle with the Taliban in in the northern Jawzjan province. As for Al-Qaida, though arguably potent, does not pose the same degree of threat that it used to prior to the so-called war on terror.

Taliban and the United States justifiably do not trust each other. In the absence of a clear and robust framework and plan B, there is little to nothing they can do if one of them reneges on their commitments.

- The Chasm in US-Taliban Worldviews

Discussions have also failed to focus on the different worldviews of the Taliban and the United States. History of US-Taliban negotiations undermined by the chasm between the two goes back to the 90s. Taliban and the United States have fundamentally different views of the Afghanistan war. While the Americans are in a hurry to cut costs, minimise casualties, and secure a face-saving exit, the Taliban, motivated by their ideology of jihad against what they see as a foreign occupation force, are playing the long game. They are hoping to wear the Americans out before defeating the Afghan forces, which Taliban negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai on one occasion said should be disbanded, a statement he retracted in Moscow, instead, stressing on the need for changes that would ensure Afghanistan can fund the armed forces through its own internal revenues.

Taliban believe they have won the war and forced foreign forces to leave Afghanistan. In their view, while upholding their values and ideology, they are negotiating with a defeated enemy whose “puppet regime” in Kabul must also go. Many feel that since the group currently has, or believes it has, an upper hand in the battlefield in many provinces, it seems unlikely that it would commit to a ceasefire before hammering out a deal with the US, see the US forces off the battlefield and then continue the war.

Taliban and other militant groups control or contest about half of the country and continue to stage attacks on military and civilian targets. The most recent “retaliatory” attack was staged on a National Security Directorate (NDS) training centre in Maidan Wardak province killing at least 43 and injuring 54 people in January this year. With considerable support from Pakistan, which the United States has mostly sought to incentivise or pressurise to facilitate US withdrawal, Taliban are unlikely to be defeated militarily. On the contrary, they are likely

to sustain their campaign to wear down Afghan armed forces and add to the US government's frustration.

Concerns about balanced governing arrangements that protect the hard-earned freedoms of the Afghan public in the event of hasty US withdrawal also remain unaddressed. No guarantees exist that the Taliban will compromise their domestic agenda after the withdrawal of international forces and that another civil war will not breakout despite the assurance by Taliban political office spokesperson Suhail Shaheen that they want an inclusive Afghanistan and are looking for ways to "coexist with Afghan institutions".

The strategy of war and violence has proven to be a failed recipe, so compromises will need to be made for peace to be restored. The constitution must be amenable to amendments. Although it is not and should not be necessary to dismantle the entire constitutional order, the government must also be prepared to make way for an interim administration if dismantling the process, which has been relatively successful, would pave the way for durable peace. However, some form of order will need to be maintained during the transition process. Equally importantly, the institutions of the state, especially the armed forces of Afghanistan, must not be compromised in a peace deal.

- Parameters of Khalilzad's Powers

As an experienced diplomat, Khalilzad may be the right man for this job, but even he will face difficulty to align Taliban and US outlooks. In addition, President Trump appears to be unpredictable and in a hurry. Khalilzad must, therefore, also rush to meet Trump's expectations.

The range and scope of Khalilzad's powers are also not clear. Operating under tight deadlines, he may not be able to impose the condition that Taliban eventually negotiate with the Afghan government, a legitimate government in the eyes of most educated Afghans and the entire international community, and agree to a permanent ceasefire.

Unless the process is managed well and safeguards put in place for future assurances, a breakthrough and even a potential peace deal may not lead to durable peace.

- **The Multiple Dimensions of the War**

The Afghanistan war has domestic, neighbouring, regional and international dimensions. The US diplomacy is currently oriented toward the domestic element. Even that, has, at least until now, excluded a key party to the war – the Afghan government. This is not a sufficient condition for comprehensive peace. The US must broaden its diplomatic engagement to include all key actors including Russia, which has been reasserting influence in Afghanistan partially because of its distrust of and rivalry with the United States. US officials have previously accused Russia and Iran of destabilising Afghanistan by providing arms to the Taliban. The “intra-Afghan” Moscow conference demonstrates lack of consensus vis-à-vis the Afghan peace not only among Afghans but also among international players.

Afghans may be doing the fighting, but it is the external players that are facilitating and prolonging the war. Agreement among major powers will have a positive and determining effect on stability in Afghanistan. As part of the peace plan, an international consensus similar to the one in 2002 needs to be forged to ensure the legitimate needs, aims and aspirations of all parties, internal and external, are met satisfactorily.

If the government of Afghanistan wants to be taken seriously, it will have to develop a genuine counter-narrative of unity of position among key Afghan actors as soon as possible. Unless Afghan politicians, political groups and the government of Afghanistan align their interests, external actors will set the agenda for negotiations and peace. In the midst of dread and confusion, Afghans have much at stake.

What is Next?

A new round of talks between Khalilzad and Taliban has reportedly been set for 25 February in Qatar. It remains to be seen if Washington would scale down its expectations and give the process more time. In a statement released after the culmination of the Qatar talks, the Taliban representative said "unsolved matters" would be discussed in "similar future meetings".

It is still unclear whether these discussions would lead to direct talks with the Afghan government. The absence of the Afghan government is a reminder that not all parties were present at the negotiating table, just as the Taliban were not present at the negotiating table at

Bonn, Germany, in 2001. This absence has dealt a blow to the reputation and authority of the Afghan state.

The deal, as it stands, seems more like a diplomatic cover for a negotiated withdrawal, that too on Taliban terms. While peace is imperative, haste must not result in a destabilised Afghanistan that poses a threat to itself and the world. Vigorous mechanisms including a hard talk with Pakistan to eliminate safe havens on its soil would need to be put in place to guarantee that all parties would deliver on their end of the bargain. Critically, the aim should be resolving the conflict and not simply ending it.

It is important for the credibility of the United States to continue to support Afghanistan during the peace process and beyond the peace agreement for the democratic state-building exercise to come to full fruition, for Afghanistan to build its economy and for the United States to maintain its leading role in the world.

Whether the US has lost the war or simply lost interest, the most wrenching irony would be for Afghanistan to relapse into the state it was prior to the US invasion and after the loss of life – directly and indirectly because of causes related to conflict – of hundreds of thousands of Afghans. The newfound hopes of the Afghans for peace in their country must not be dashed.