

Afghan Quandary: Peace Talks Amidst the New Great Game

By Mona Thakkar,

US President Donald Trump ended the year-long painstaking negotiations with the Taliban which began in last October in Doha, the capital of Qatar. In a series of tweets, he revealed that he is cancelling “a secret meeting” and calling of the peace talks after he learnt that the Taliban claimed responsibility for the Kabul attack that killed a US soldier and 11 others. Trump’s backpedalling comes less than a week after Zalmay Khalizad, Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, said that the peace agreement was ready in ‘principle’ which would end US involvement in the 18 years of Afghan war. Khalizad said that as per the accord, 5400 troops would be withdrawn in 135 days; but he was still uncertain of what he would get in return. He said that the “troop withdrawal” will be condition-based; i.e., if the Taliban adheres to nation-wide ceasefire. The Taliban on the other hand vowed to reduce violence only around American bases. These disagreements were reflected when they were taking on each other on the battlefield. While the Taliban launched attacks in the Green zone in Kabul, the US forces were retaliating against the Taliban offensive launched in Kunduz, Farah and Nangarhar provinces.

The Taliban’s lack of commitment to the ceasefire gave Trump an ideal pretext for cancelling the talks. But there were other disagreements behind the scenes. Trump bowed down to the domestic pressure as the Republican leaders openly criticised his plan of hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and his invite to Taliban leaders at Camp David just before the anniversary of 9/11 attacks. The calling of the peace talks can also be attributed to differences over the significance of the venue. The Taliban pushed for signing the deal in Doha, a neutral venue. However, Camp David has its own historical significance. The Camp David Accords had witnessed the signing of the peace deal between Israel and Egypt in 1978. Egypt turned out to be the first country to normalise its relations with Israel after the Arab–Israeli conflict of 1967.

Trump is infamous for his capricious policies. After his declaration of the peace talks as dead, Pakistan saw its chance of playing a central role in the peace talks. Last week, Khalizad arrived in Pakistan to discuss the revival of the peace talks with the Pak leaders and a possible meeting with the Taliban delegation led by Mullah Baradar. But any prospect of the revival of the talks would be hindered by the Taliban’s shaky pledge of security guarantees and the internal strife of its various factions.

Can Taliban’s Division Derail Talks?

The Haqqani network (HN) is a Taliban faction based in Pakistan’s North Waziristan which borders Afghanistan. Since 9/11, it has emerged from a tribal-based group to the most influential terror outfit. The Sirajuddin-led HN has forged closer links with Al Qaeda and provided refuge to the senior Al Qaeda Leadership. It masterminded 2011 attack on the US embassy in Kabul and in 2009 on the US airbase in Khost Province. Further, the growing nexus of Pakistan’s

ISI and Haqqani network has hindered the elimination of Al Qaeda hideouts under Haqqani patronage. Also, Sirajuddin Haqqani, after being deputy commander of the group since 2015, controls the day-to-day operations of the insurgency. While he prefers a military solution to the conflict, the Taliban's chief Hibatullah Akhundzada is open to the peace talks with Kabul. Unlike the Haqqani network which closely co-ordinates with ISI, the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban, aims to overthrow the Pakistan government and push the US out of Afghanistan. The group also maintains close relationship with Al Qaeda. The Rasool Shura, a breakaway faction of the Taliban active in Western Afghanistan, claimed responsibility for the mosque attack in Quetta which had targeted the Taliban chief Akhundzada. Though the Afghan Taliban enjoys ideological authority and support, it does not have the privilege to wield control over its Taliban partners or factions. Further, the UN's monitoring team reports reaffirm that Al Qaeda-Taliban ties are deeper than at any time in 18 years. Thus, the fragmented nature of the Taliban and the internal fissures will complicate the chances of success of any peace negotiations. Therefore, the US should involve either the splinter factions in the negotiations or push the Taliban to abandon its allies – which is a dim possibility.

Taliban-Pakistan Bonhomie

The stalled peace talks found a new lease of life with the presence of Khalizad and Taliban leaders in Islamabad. In short, if Islamabad is chosen as the venue for the revival of the talks, this will again strengthen Islamabad's role in facilitating negotiations between both parties. This central role stems from Pakistan's backing for the Taliban since 1990s. It was one of the only three countries to recognise the Taliban's rule when it was in power from 1996 to 2001. Over the years, Pakistan held a sway over the Taliban by sheltering its leaders and its faction Haqqani network, if not outright support. Through the Taliban, it carved out a strategic depth inside Afghanistan trying to undermine India's influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan thinks that the Taliban's outsized political role will decrease the prospect of any India-friendly government coming to power in Kabul. Further, in return for acting as a 'mediator', Pakistan will expect increased military aid and the US's backing at the FATF meeting scheduled for October, where it could be blacklisted for its failure to root out terror funding. The talks also gave Pakistan an impetus to internationalise the Kashmir issue.

China and Taliban – A Pragmatic Relationship?

Pakistan's ally China has also been very active in the peace process in a bid to expand its influence. Along with participating in the Moscow format peace talks and Kabul Process led by Ghani, it has also hosted the Taliban leaders and Afghan political figures. China felt that the withdrawal of foreign forces could create an instable corridor and provide a safe haven for Turkmenistan Islamic Party's Uighur militants fighting in Syria. A non-stable Pak-Afghan border also threatens China's billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Afghanistan sits at the heart of the ancient maritime silk route and any insecurity there might impede China's Belt and Road Initiative. These security concerns led to the deepening engagement of China with all the

parties in the conflict – including the Taliban. Further, if the peace talks pave way for a political solution of the conflict, it will also open many economic opportunities. China is one of largest foreign investors in Afghanistan and has shown interest in Afghanistan’s mineral-rich sector. It has expanded its economic footprint in Afghanistan by winning rights to Amu Darya basin in the north and massive Mes Aynak copper mine in Kabul. It is surprising to see China’s increasing involvement in Afghanistan considering its refusal to send troops when the US declared war on Afghanistan in 2003. China is not interested in facilitating a political settlement between the Taliban or Afghan leaders. Its burgeoning diplomacy in Afghanistan with all the parties will shield its economic and security interests, irrespective of any government which comes to power.

Russia’s Embrace of Taliban – A Sincere Strategic Move?

Unlike China, who has tried balancing its relations with all the parties, Russia like the US has sidelined the then Ghani-led government from the Afghan peace process by hosting the Taliban delegation and Afghan opposition figures like Hamid Karzai. In response, Ghani denounced the Moscow format peace talks and Russia’s intervention in Afghanistan. This will ultimately impede the formation of the united Afghan political bloc which could counter the Taliban’s rising posture in Afghanistan. Russian move can be seen as a disguise to ruin the US-led peace talks and establish itself as an active player in Afghanistan. But at the same time, even Russia might not want the complete withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. As a withdrawal would not only expose Russia to the attacks of the Chechen separatists from Afghanistan and Central Asia but would also require its boots on ground to protect its backyard. Russia will have to depend on the Taliban for security guarantees. Any Afghan party that comes to power cannot provide security promises due to the Taliban’s dominant footprint, which is the strongest since 2001. The best alternative for Russia will be the US’s decision of drawdown of its troops in Afghanistan without any peace deal. Trump’s erratic diplomacy has decreased the US’s standing in the Middle East, which has enhanced Russia’s position as a regional peace broker in Syria and now in Afghanistan. Also, Russia’s engagement with the Taliban is a remarkable policy reversal given that the Taliban are the descendants of the Mujahedeen who fought the 1979 Soviet invasion.

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend

In Afghanistan, there is an increasing co-ordination between the strange bedfellows Iran and the Taliban. The former is the hub of the Shia Islam and the latter is an anti-Shia Sunni militant organisation. Over the years, this marriage of convenience has deepened due to the emergence of the ISIS in western Afghanistan along the borders with Iran. Unlike the Taliban whose ambitions are restricted to Afghanistan, ISIS’s trans-national nature poses a real threat to Iran’s interest. Iran is thus using the Taliban as a strategic instrument to counter the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and stymie the US military effort in Afghanistan. As the US sanctions continue to decay Iran’s economy, Iran’s growing military support for the Taliban can be anticipated as an

act of reprisal against the US. This strategy has translated into military victories for the Taliban and intense clashes with the Afghan forces in western Afghanistan. Further, Iran's backing of the Taliban offensive on the government forces aims at derailing the dam building projects in Herathand Farah provinces which could deprive Iran of the important water resources. This co-operation also extends to the drug smuggling on Iran–Afghan border which is a profitable business to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. About 90 per cent of the world's opium production comes from Afghanistan poppy fields. The US Treasury department highlighted that in return for the Iranian business, Afghan traffickers smuggled weapons to the Taliban. But at the same time, Iran is hedging the bets by maintaining its outreach to the Afghan government for the development of US\$ 31 billion projects of Chabahar port. Thus, the presence of the US and ISK provides Iran with a useful pretext to maintain its presence in its unstable eastern neighbour. Iran would want to see the creation of the heterogeneous government to prevent Afghanistan from becoming an anti-Shia hotbed.

The Indian Question in Afghanistan

While all other major stakeholders are engaging with the Taliban, India has taken a different approach. India pushes for the idea that marginalisation of an elected government in the peace negotiations would not only end the democratic normalcy but also erode the progress of women's rights achieved over the years. India's concern is true as the Taliban has committed to govern as per the rigid Sharia law which will subvert the rights of minorities and women. It has further not hinted at what sort of proposed power-sharing agreement or constitutional arrangements they are willing to accept. If a deal is made, ironically, they will be a part of power structure, they had deemed illegitimate. Considering all these aspects, the major international players are negotiating with the Taliban for the sake of their national interests. India has a lot at stake in Afghanistan. The Iran, India, Afghanistan trilateral agreement of Chabahar port is pivotal to India's security and economic interests. It allows India to bypass Pakistan and provides direct gateway to the energy-rich Central Asia and beyond. Finally, the US troop withdrawal can give Pakistan a free hand in launching attacks through its terror proxies in Kashmir, thus compromising India's security interests. The securing of national interests demands a country to even diplomatically engage with the enemy. Following this basic principle, India should also proactively engage in the peace talks and consider talking to all parties to the conflict, including the Taliban.

Further, India deems itself as an important stakeholder in Afghanistan. It claims to exercise soft power in Afghanistan by being one of the largest aid donors and contributing handsomely to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Despite this, it had been excluded from the four-party meeting held in China comprising the US, Pakistan, Russia and China. In the Moscow format peace talks, only two former Indian diplomats participated at a non-official level. India should be alarmed by the visits of Khalizad and the Taliban in Islamabad as they aim to resume the peace talks. The rigorous involvement of China, Russia and other parties at the turning point of the conflict

makes India's future role in the peace talks uncertain. It is thus time for India to reassess its Afghanistan strategy and prove itself as a heavyweight in the peace talks.

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