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## **Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Former US president Richard Nixon had very aptly remarked that one cannot seek peace with the enemy at any cost who is out to seek victory at any cost. Making peace is the acme of skill and the job of the true statesman. The US was not willing to make a negotiated peace settlement with the Taliban nor were the Taliban ready to come the negotiating table with the US-installed Kabul government in the first few years following the fall of the Taliban regime. Peace talks between the US and the Taliban thus took a long way and both sides who wanted to twist each other's arms. Sanity, however, prevailed and the peace parleys started afresh. The regional powers also welcomed the peace and it is hoped that peace would lead to the amelioration of the hapless Afghans on one hand the arrival of stability in the region on the other. But the US unilateral decision to cancel the peace deal at the nick of time took the world in surprise and brought forth the harsh realities of realpolitik. However, peace process was again resumed and signaled the message that the US is determined to leave Afghanistan. The question here is not of the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan but the way the US is withdrawing from the country and the situation that would follow in the post US withdrawal environment. The element of precipitousness on the part of the US is mind boggling and this issue has been highlighted in this paper. The US decision to withdraw from a highly volatile zone of war inconclusively may deepen instability in the region that may foil all the efforts of searching peace instead. This has happened in Afghanistan time and again in the past as well and the same may be repeated once again. If that happened, it will lead to strengthening the belief that we learn from history that we do not learn from history. This hypothesis has been dilated upon in this paper.*

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, the US withdrawal, Peace talks, Terrorism, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISKP, Intra-Afghan Dialogue.*

### **Introduction**

The US had outlined three policy objectives at the eve of its entry into Afghanistan in October 2001 in the context of Global War on Terror (GWoT). These included wiping out the scourge of terrorism, eradicating the cultivation and trafficking of drugs from and establishing a democratic governance structure in Afghanistan. Seen in its totality, the US graph of success on the first two counts is not impressive, though it has made some progress in establishing a quasi-democratic structure in the country, albeit cosmetically. What else is then left of the substance of the US policy

towards Afghanistan in the post 9/11 period is a big question mark. After the US drawdown from Afghanistan in the fall of 2014 and the bolstering of Afghan security forces subsequently, one is left with the impression that the US designs in the region might be greater than the ones envisaged immediately after 9/11.

The 2019 peace talks between the US and Taliban in Doha, capital of Qatar, were the continuation of the peace initiatives undertaken by the National Unity Government (NUG) under the Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani. His predecessor President Hamid Karzai had also established the High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010 urging the Taliban to give up military campaign and transform itself into a political entity. Hamid Karzai's peace deal with the Taliban included removal of their names from international terrorists' blacklist if they relinquish their ties with Al-Qaeda, abandoned violence and pursue their political goals in accordance with the Constitution of Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's continued rejection of the peace deal with the Kabul administration led to the prolongation of the conflict, turning it into the longest US war in its history.

Whether the US pulls out of Afghanistan sooner or later, its inconclusive withdrawal will have serious repercussions for the entire region. This will be the reverberation of the Soviet withdrawal from the land of stones and mountains in 1989 which left the war torn country as a land free for the international terrorism and which is now the "Harvard of terrorists", to quote the US president Trump. Today's Afghanistan is the hot bed of regional powers' strategic interests which are extremely complicated and intertwined in nature. The hurriedly arranged US withdrawal will only worsen the already precarious situation and if not properly insulated, it will dwarf the early 1990s bloodshed the Afghan country had witnessed after the inconclusive Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

### **Afghan Imbrolio in Retrospect**

At the time of his release from the British captivity in 1838, the Afghan Amir Dost Muhammad Khan had an audience with the British Governor General. The Amir remarked, "After arriving at India, I have seen remarkable forts, bases and ships which are worth appreciating. There are lots of markets, buildings, printing houses and all that speak of your wealth and resources. But I am surprised to notice that a nation as intelligent and rich as the British is still trying to go up to Kabul where there is nothing available except stones and mountains" (Hussain, 2018). Being a land of nothing more than stones and mountains, Afghanistan has always been an attraction for the great powers right after its formation in 1747.

However, the US intervention at the dawn of the 21st century is markedly different from those of other powers, namely the Soviet Union and the Imperial Britain, prior to it. In the past, major powers' intervention in Afghanistan would be contested by the other rival major power for one reason or the other. But this time Russia and China have not only agreed to but also actively supported the UN-backed and US-led international coalition involvement in Afghanistan. It is believed that the US presence in Afghanistan is the continuation of the US-led global drive against terrorism. The US is opting for securing a strategic presence in the Central Asia, which has traditionally been the soft underbelly of Russia (Saikal, 2004).

While every sane person is in favour of peace in Afghanistan, no sage person is ready to ponder on the observation of the late Afghan Amir Dost Muhammad Khan

## Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

which he made in 1838. For all practical purposes, Afghanistan had evolved into a nation state after the World War I and its rulers were vying for modernization with the help of foreign help. Afghan King Aman Ullah Khan's modernization drive and his goodwill gestures towards the West during 1920s proved unsuccessful due to the fluid situation in the Europe. The King's reforms agenda had also been rejected by the clergy and the ethnic-tribal leaders of Afghanistan in the countryside and the effect of the reforms was limited only to the city of Kabul. Wide spread revolts against the reform agenda in the south and southeast of Afghanistan had rendered the reforms practically ineffective (Saikal, 2004, p.80-81). On the other hand, the US did not see the Afghan state as a strategic asset.

Afghan leaders had tried to convince the world in 1948 that if backed by the US arms and assistance, Afghanistan would be able stall the Soviet advance in Hindu Kush and afford the US the required opportunity and time so that they are able to defend the Middle East and South Asia (Saikal, 2004, p. 119). However, the Afghan Prime Minister Daoud did not join the US-proposed Baghdad Pact (later on CENTO) in 1955. Afghanistan's aim behind this policy was to maintain its neutral posture in its international relations. Also Afghanistan wanted that its border dispute with Pakistan (the Durand Line issue) should remain active. Joining the Western-sponsored alliances with Pakistan as a sovereign state would have compromised Afghanistan's stand on Durand Line. Afghanistan was also having some border dispute with Iran. It was because of these realpolitik issues that Afghanistan opted for friendship with India which was more amenable to its foreign policy adventures. The Indian leaders also inched closer to Afghanistan because they were also interested to make Pakistan a permanent enemy of Afghanistan. That would relieve pressure on India because Pakistan had engaged India politically and diplomatically on its conflict over Kashmir.

Afghanistan was trying to play upon its neutrality to the Soviet Union and its countrymen's loath to Communist ideology to the US. During 1953-54, Daoud showed his desire to get Washington's nod for arms and assistance and the resolution of Afghanistan's border problem with Pakistan. But during the Cold War years, Washington was helping only those countries which were ready to accept openly the US anti-Soviet stance. Afghanistan's neutral foreign policy under Daoud did not match with the US drive. Thus Daoud turned to the Soviet Union by playing his 'Soviet card' for aid. Washington's refusal to honour Daoud's request had serious repercussions, leading ultimately to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Saikal, 2004, p.122).

By mid 1960s, the Soviet Union began espousing the Communist elements in Kabul. The competing Islamists also reinforced their position in the Afghan capital. The US found it worthwhile to support the Islamists against the Soviet proxies. This led to the Communist takeover of Kabul in 1978 and that changed regional geostrategic scenario drastically in the framework of Cold War politics.

The Communists took over Kabul in 1978 and a power wrangling between the Khalq and Parcham factions of Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) ensued. This polarization alarmed and subsequently caused the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan in 1979. By mid-1980s, the Soviet leaders had come to the conclusion that invasion of Afghanistan was not a prudent decision and they were seriously

considering withdrawing from Afghanistan. The United Nations (UN) had initiated Afghan peace talks in 1982 and the US consent for the peace process was secured in 1987. The Geneva Accords of 1988 facilitated the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan but the civil war between the Mujahideen and the remnants of the Communists continued in the country. When the Soviet-backed Communist government of President Najibullah fell in 1992, an internecine civil war broke out in Afghanistan among the various Mujahideen factions that had joined their hands in the earlier Resistance against the Soviet forces. Taliban Movement was the product of this environment that prevailed in Afghanistan from 1992-1994. The religious students' movement emerged by the end of 1994 and by the fall of 1996, they (the Taliban) had formed their government in Kabul.

America's involvement in the region during 1990s was at its lowest, bearing in mind the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. However, Al-Qaeda (the new extremist militant organization) had garrisoned itself in the land of mountains and stones. The Taliban were fighting against the warlords in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda had announced a war against the US interests around the world. Both these forces had now contracted a marriage of convenience.

### **9/11 and its Aftermath**

The US considered the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as a challenge to its supremacy of the world. As Al-Qaeda had claimed the responsibility of these attacks, the US demanded handing over the Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden but the Taliban leadership refused to budge led to the UN-sanctioned US counterattack on Afghanistan in October 2001.

Why did the Taliban regime confront the US for the sake of a single non-Afghan individual? When this fundamental question was posed to Abid Ehsas, the News Manager of Shamshad TV and News in Kabul, he replied that, "the Taliban leadership was mindful that the US was determined to attack Afghanistan in any case. So Mulla Muhammad Umar, the Taliban leader preferred to keep his national honour by not providing his protected guest to his enemy and resolved to face the US onslaught" (Ehsas, 2018). To the same question, Abdur Rahim Ayubi, member of Afghanistan parliament from Qandahar, replied that, "the Taliban were originally launched in Afghanistan with the US support. All this manipulation of the Al-Qaeda chief's arrival to Afghanistan and the subsequent events were manipulated by the US itself. So, when the Taliban government refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the US, the latter found an excuse to invade Afghanistan to make preparations for the realization of its subsequent designs in the region." Ayubi further elaborated that, "whenever a stronger country wants to attack a weaker nation, the stronger one makes some excuses and tries to show to the world that its invasion of the intended target is in the larger interest of the entire mankind. The US did the same and she brought a large number of European states along with her in order to achieve legitimacy for its action in Afghanistan" (Ayubi, 2018).

Samonwal (retired) Banaras Kaliwal, has been witness to the power wrangling of Khalq and Parcham factions of PDPA during 1970s and 1980s. He argued that, "the former Soviet Union manipulated the events in Kabul in late 1970s and then invaded Afghanistan in order to use it as a launching pad for its further drive towards the Gulf region. Towards the fall of the twentieth century, the US did the same. The US invaded Afghanistan along with a huge army of dozens nations. America also plans

## Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

to use Afghanistan as a launching pad in order to check the expansionism of Russia towards the Caspian Sea region and apply brakes to Chinese economic opportunities in Afghanistan and Eurasia” (Kaliwal, 2018). Before making intervention in Afghanistan, the US had secured the UN backing and amassed the active support of dozens of states. It was because of this war machine that the regional great powers like Russia and China acquiesced the US action. Tehran cooperated with the CIA’s operations in Afghanistan in collaboration with the Northern Alliance and Islamabad provided logistic support to the US. Intelligence information sharing between Washington and Islamabad was also carried out.

When the US attacked Iraq and halted its operations in Afghanistan for the time being in 2003, it caused serious dents to the Pak-US war cooperation. The US offensive against the Taliban regime and Al-Qaeda fighters led to their dislodging and these fleeing forces retreated to the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) of Pakistan. Since Pakistan was not ready to provide an effective safety valve to the influx of these forces, the FATA (now merged with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) became their safe haven. Pak-US relations further deteriorated when Pakistan refused to commit its troops to Iraq to bolster the NATO forces there. Pakistan was required to toe the US line in establishing Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan and replace the white banner of the Taliban with the black banner of ISIS. The surge of terrorism in Pakistan during this time period may be seen as the consequence of the refusal on the part of Pakistan to cooperate with the US (Ayubi, 2018).

A prominent Afghan journalist revealed, on the condition of anonymity, some secrets of the US policy on ISIS and Afghanistan. “Immediately after the Iraq war, Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi resistance forces led by Abu Mas’ab al Zarqawi joined their hands and the latter agreed to carry out his activities under the command of Al-Qaeda. The alliance between Al-Qaeda’s deputy chief, Aiman Al-Zawahiri and Masa’b al Zarqawi renewed the war efforts of Iraqi resistance forces against the US. Since both the organizations (Al-Qaeda and Zarqawi’s organization) comprised the Sunni fighters, they readily welcomed the ISIS in Afghanistan (in Federally Administered Tribal Area, FATA, also). Al-Qaeda leadership issued a Fatwa (a religious decree) which supported ISIS struggle in Iraq and Syria. The US was in hurry to launch ISIS forces in Afghanistan as well and Pakistan was demanded to cooperate in this regard. As per the US designs, the FATA region would be used for raising, training and equipping the ISIS fighters (keeping in view the specific nature of FATA’s constitutional status and its proximity to Afghanistan) but Pakistan squarely refused. This refusal became a question of prestige for the US policymakers and the subsequent wave of terror in the various cities of Pakistan particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the practical manifestation of this US indignation” (xyz, 2018).

The US invasion of Iraq led to the international community’s resentment against the US as no Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) were recovered from Iraq. After installing an interim political setup in Baghdad, the US again diverted its attention to Afghanistan. It seems that the US presidential election in 2004 might have played its role in changing the US foreign policy. The US president Bush had declared bringing Al-Qaeda leadership to justice and wiping out the organization’s terrorist network around the globe. However, after attacking both Afghanistan and Iraq,

neither terrorism was wiped out fully nor were the war torn countries reconstructed and rehabilitated.

### **The Peace Talks 2018-19**

The current peace talks between the US and Taliban were the continuation of the long process that was in progress ever since the US president Obama took office in 2009. A little before hunting down the Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011, the US had secretly started negotiations with the Afghan Taliban. The talks revolved around the broader understanding that the US was ready to talk to the Taliban, separate them from Al-Qaeda and coax them in power sharing in the Afghan political dispensation (Steve, 2018). On the other hand, Taliban tried to adopt a tough stand in the negotiation and prolong the process in order to effect a cleavage in the NATO partnership and isolate the US. There were also reports that Karzai administration had also established its own links with the Taliban and wanted to use that process as a counterweight to the US peace talks with the Taliban. This move on the part of Afghan President Karzai was meant to show to the US that the real problem in Afghanistan was not Taliban but the machinations of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), mysteriously tolerated by Washington (Steve, Directorate S. p. 633, 2018). Thus the drawdown of the US forces that followed in the fall of 2014 was the partial implementation of the election manifesto of the President Obama.

There is an earnest realization among various players in the region that peace in Afghanistan is the absolute need of the hour and that "politics is the art of possible." In the world of realpolitik, there are no permanent friends and permanent enemies, the permanent remains only the interest. New developments in the region and given the geopolitical and the socio-economic conditions-particularly the geographical position of Afghanistan at the junction of several nuclear powers who are aspiring to be regional leaders-peace is essential. With shattering of the violent capacity of Al-Qaeda, the emergence of ISIS notwithstanding, the US wants to walk out of the Afghan quagmire. But the economic imperatives are so vital for the other regional players like China, Russia, Central Asian States, Pakistan, Iran and India that they are trying to stay committed in Afghanistan. It is interesting that all these players are not only parties to the parleys but are ready to be the guarantors of the peace deal, though with few exceptions (Shah, 2019). At the same time the US president Donald Trump intends to end a "slowly deteriorating stalemate" in Afghanistan where there is "no military victory" possible in the near future. He aims at withdrawing the US troops in return for peace with the Afghan Taliban (Skorka, 2019).

### **Pros and Cons of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

After assuming office, the US president Trump had showed an earnest desire to pull the US forces out of Syria and Afghanistan as soon as feasible. This decision was taken in the backdrop of the economic meltdown that was being faced in America due to perpetuation of war in Afghanistan. Geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the Gulf regions (Russian activism in Syria and the Saudi-Iran tension respectively) demanded that the US readjust its position accordingly. A little prior to the peace talks between the US and Taliban in the fall of 2018, the US president Trump had instructed then Secretary of Defence James Mattis to reduce by half the US troop presence in Afghanistan. Following this, The US think tank, the RAND

## Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

Corporation issued a policy perspective in January 2019 on the prospective US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The researchers deliberated upon the issue and outlined the following consequences of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan unrelated to a negotiated peace settlement.

With the US decision to leave Afghanistan, other NATO forces will also withdraw from the country. As of now, in addition to the US forces, some 7500 troops from 38 other NATO members and partners are stationed in Afghanistan. The US forces are carrying out training and assistance missions in support of the Afghan forces in the south and east of the country, the same is done by the Germans in the North, by the Italians in the west and the Turks do the same in and around Kabul. With the withdrawal of the US and other NATO member and partners, the training and assistance support to the Afghan army and police will come to a halt.

The US and other NATO forces' withdrawal will also lead to the departure of foreign diplomats, aid workers and other civilian officers. This will also lead to the withdrawal of the US intelligence community that is involved in collecting valuable information on Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan/region.

The absence of the US presence in the country will drastically reduce the economic and security assistance to Afghanistan on the plea that there is no interest of the US left in the country. Same will be followed by other donors. And if at all economic assistance kept pouring in into Afghanistan, it would require the presence of the foreign technical personnel to check the economic activity properly. The dearth of technical personnel in Afghanistan will encourage corruption and misuse of these funds.

Without the visible support of the international community, the government in Kabul will lose its influence and the factors needed for legitimacy. Furthermore, about 50 percent of the Afghan state budget and 90 percent of its military and police expenditures are borne by international donors. Reduction in this budget will drastically compromise the capacity of the Afghan government to ensure the security and governance issues.

Authority of the central government and the national economy will decline following the withdrawal of the US and that will shift the power from centre to the periphery. Not only that the trickle-down effect of the economy will cease to function but also warlords in the countryside will reorganize and assert themselves more vehemently in the wake of a power vacuum in the country. Regional militias and local warlords will reemerge. There will be a scramble to gain control of the strategically and economically important parts of the country, including the Shomali Plain where Bagram Air Base is located, Sheberghan, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, electric power stations and all major border crossing points in the country.

At the time of the US invasion, all of the Afghanistan's neighbouring powers had supported the US-led intervention and the resultant Afghan government. But now Russia and Iran are under mounting US sanctions and US has opened a trade war with China. In these circumstances, the US precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan will entice these regional powers to opt for influence in the war-torn country through proxies who are claiming to national power.

The field will be left open for Taliban after America leave the country and they will be least interested in peace negotiations either with the US-backed Kabul government or any other contender for power, bearing in mind Taliban capacity for sustaining violence. This will lead to another deadlier and bloodier civil war than the one witnessed during 1992-94 in which civilian deaths would be far greater. In 1990s, population of Afghanistan was around 15 million. Today it is 35 million. So, the more the population in the towns, the more the casualties in the civil war.

Extremist groups including Al-Qaeda and ISIS will regroup and reorganize themselves for a renewed offensive against the US interests around the world. As the US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Joseph Dunford puts it, "If the US loses the capacity to contribute to suppressing these groups within Afghanistan, and if they cannot rely on a trusted indigenous partner, the pressure on the terrorist groups will be reduced, allowing them more time, space and resources to organize far-flung attacks" (James Dobbins, Jason H. Campbell, Sean Mann, Laurel L. Miller, 2019).

Despite these repercussions which have been outlined by the RAND Corporation, the US president Trump has made it clear that he is committed to ending the costly Afghanistan war which has been causing the US \$47 billion per year in the last 18 years (James Dobbins, Jason H. Campbell, Sean Mann, Laurel L. Miller, 2019). In juxtaposition to this scenario, the decade old observation of Leon Panetta, when he was heading the CIA, is also worth pondering,

"We have seen no evidence that they [the Taliban] are truly interested in reconciliation where they would surrender their arms, where they would denounce Al-Qaeda, where they would really try to become part of that society. We have seen no evidence of that and very frankly my view is that with regard to reconciliation unless they're convinced the United States is going to win and that they are going to be defeated, I think it is very difficult to proceed with a reconciliation that is going to be meaningful" (Tapper, 2010).

And then comes the assessment of the US Department of Defence in July 2018 which says,

"The al-Qa'ida threat to the United States and its allies and partners has decreased, and the few remaining al-Qa'ida core members are focused on their own survival... Some lower- and mid-level Taliban leaders provided limited support to al-Qa'ida; however, there is no evidence of strategic ties between the two organizations and the Taliban likely seems to maintain distance from al-Qa'ida" (Defense, 2018).

In a nutshell the original US military objective in Afghanistan was to eliminate Al-Qaeda, not the Afghan Taliban. The US has achieved its main objective.

In Trump's obsession with the peace deal with the Afghan Taliban resonated the peace plan of the former US president Richard Nixon in early 1960s when he was equally obsessed with pulling out the US troops from Vietnam. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have asserted in their classic, *Thinking in Time*, there are conspicuous similarities between the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars (Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, 1986).

"The Taliban have no backing of any super power but the US is again fighting on the ground in Asia, the US is largely ignorant of the history of Afghanistan, the US



## Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

is supporting a corrupt Afghan government, the US is negotiating with the adversary without the inclusion of the Afghan national unity government, the US is underestimating the Taliban determination to reach its fundamental objective, the US is protecting segments of the Afghan people whose nature is unknown to them and the US is training an Afghan army which is unsuccessful to stand to the Taliban”.

In other words, there is no need to negotiate seriously when you are winning.

### **The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and its Impact on Pakistan**

Former Defence Secretary of the US Mattis had said that, “the United States does not lose wars, it loses interest” (Utlely, 2014). Turns and twists in the US policy towards Afghanistan show that Americans are tired of the Afghan war but still ending it is not their top priority. Costs are high but bearable and domestic resistance to the war is not formidable. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Communist government had survived till 1992 when the Soviet money dried up after its dismemberment. Mindful of the mess that prevailed in Afghanistan in the past, the US is trying to avoid the collapse of the system it has evolved in the past 18 years, i.e. democratic face of Afghanistan and denying the Afghan soil to be used by the terrorists in future. For this end the US seems to be pursuing the following steps:

To install in Kabul an indigenous democratic government which is amenable to strive for the realization of the US interests in the region. The primary US interest would be to perpetuate the democratic government edifice in Afghanistan.

To keep providing training facilities to the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) so that they are capable enough to thwart Al-Qaeda and ISIS designs to regroup on Afghan soil.

To setup an intelligence community in collaboration with Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) to keep gathering valuable intelligence on the designs of the major neighbouring powers of Afghanistan besides having an access to the updated information on the activities of Al-Qaeda and ISIS and other militant extremist groups which have ambitions far beyond the Afghan land.

It is premature to say something definite as to how far the US will succeed in achieving its objectives in the region following its withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, it is certain that chaos will follow the US inconclusive withdrawal and that will have serious consequences for the regional countries. Those who weren't in favour of peace deal between the US and the Taliban have termed Trump's decision to halt the peace process in August 2019 as right. But the regional powers who are interested in the peace process are surprised to see the peace process halted at the moment so closer to an official agreement. The cancellation of the peace talks would have had its impact on Pakistan's interests in the region. The US unilateral decision may have soared Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban because Pakistan had pushed the Taliban towards reconciliation. However, it was important to notice that Trump's tweet that cancelled the peace talks 2019 didn't take the name of Pakistan's for the failure of talks. That was indirectly an acknowledgment of Pakistan's hard work for the peace process and this an important development.

The second phase of the peace deal (intra-Afghan negotiation) would be a victory of Pakistan's principal position over the Afghan imbroglio. It also led to the belief that Pakistan's role is crucial at a time when the US is withdrawing from Afghanistan. Presently, there are two aspects of Pakistan's help in the Afghan peace process. One is the immediate domestic and regional interest of Pakistan and is related to the dialogue between the US and Taliban. The other is the long term and far complex interest of Pakistan which is related to the dialogue between the Afghans themselves.

### **Mechanism of the Peace Process**

Afghan peace process revolves around two mechanisms, i.e. the US-Taliban peace deal and the intra-Afghan dialogue. Agreement of the first phase was inked on 29th February 2020

In October 2019, exactly 17 years after the first US troops entered Afghanistan, negotiations between the US and the Taliban were resumed. The American delegation was led by the Afghan-born former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad. The Taliban delegation consists of a group of Taliban leaders led by Mulla Baradar, a co-founder of the group who was released from a Pakistani prison last year at the request of the US government. The Taliban maintained the same position they've held since 2001: All foreign troops must leave Afghanistan, the Afghan government in Kabul (which the Taliban consider an American "puppet" regime) must be destroyed or dismantled, and a new Islamic Emirate must be installed.

When negotiations began, the American delegation called for a unilateral ceasefire, a framework peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and a conditions-based timeline for a US troop withdrawal.

The US government has refused to allow the Afghan government to directly participate in the talks in Doha, a move that the Taliban have said would immediately derail any progress made with the American team. The last closest contact between the Afghan government and the Taliban came in July 2019, when a delegation of Afghans sat down with the Taliban for an "intra-Afghan dialogue" in Doha (Khan, 2020).

### **Intra-Afghan Dialogue**

The US-Taliban peace process and Afghanistan presidential election in September 2019 progressed simultaneously but the peace deal was signed after election was over and Dr Ashraf Ghani had won the polls. Afghan government was out of the peace negotiations and the US was out of the election process. The US saw their interest in the conclusion of a successful peace deal with the Taliban and Dr Ashraf Ghani's survival lay in the presidential triumph. The US and Dr Ashraf Ghani were both successful in the short run but it is difficult to predict who will outweigh whom in order to maximize its gains in the longer run. The precondition set by the US-Taliban peace deal to release prisoners before the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue is being met with delaying tactics by the Afghan government. The announcement of a negotiating team by the Afghan government for intra-Afghan dialogue faced heavy odds. This situation was further complicated by the non-compromising attitude of the Afghan opposition forces who were divided on the issue of presidential election and the peace process. Mr Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for Afghan peace

## Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

deal, struggled very hard to strike a deal between president elect Dr Ashraf Ghani and the Dr Abdullah Abdullah for a consensus government, though both have conducted their presidential oath-taking ceremonies and sworn themselves in. In the meanwhile, there have been acts of violence from the Taliban, the US and reportedly ISKP in the past months which have claimed lives of the civilian population. In this whole scenario, one thing is abundantly clear that the US is serious to leave Afghanistan but how leave behind a stable and all-inclusive government in Afghanistan seems to be out its capacity or at least its priority. What implication this scenario will have for regional stability is any body's guess.

Dr Ashraf Ghani and his team is totally dependent on the US support and the latter withdrawal from Afghanistan in a position when the US has acknowledged the Taliban as a genuine actor/substitute in Afghan politics will seriously jeopardize his future. In this scenario, Dr Ashraf Ghani will try to seek support from any quarter that may guarantee his future.

It is in Pakistan's favour that the intra-Afghan peace talks resume as quickly as possible. So far, the Taliban are not being termed as a terrorist group by the Trump administration nor are they being isolated again. Unless Washington decides to leave Afghanistan permanently with no intention of ever coming back, Pakistan's Afghanistan impact will remain central for the US.

### Conclusion

It was a Herculean task for Pakistan to bring the Taliban leaders to the table to negotiate with the US and effect a peaceful settlement of the Afghan imbroglio. After coming so close to sign a peace deal, it was hard to understand why the US president Donald Trump backed off. The plea that the US used was the killing of an American soldier in an attack by the Taliban along with a Romanian soldier and 10 Afghan civilians a few days before the US decision to back off. But irony of the issue is that fifteen US soldiers have been killed since the Doha talks began in the fall of 2018, and the Taliban had claimed the responsibility of all these attacks. They had yet to formally renounce violence. So the killing of one US soldier and halting the peace talks as a consequence hardly makes any sense (Mustafa, 2019). The US decision of halting the peace talks, however, needed to be seen in the wider context.

It seems that the corporate circles of the US business community and political elite have made up their mind to wind up their Afghan adventure and relieve the US public of the economic, political and psychological backlash of the longest US war in its history. But the defence establishment and the intelligence community still require some time for the realization of certain objectives to be fulfilled in the backdrop of the strengthening of ISKP in Afghanistan and the wave of extremism that has engulfed the region following the US announcement to withdraw from Afghanistan. Timing of the US withdrawal also needs to be borne in mind. When the talks centered on the specifics of the agreement, eighteen months-time frame was fixed for the complete withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. It was not a coincidence that the culmination of the eighteen month was the almost the exact date of the US presidential election scheduled in November 2020. One of the motives of the withdrawal schedule might have been accruing political expediency out of the peace talks on the part of the US president Trump. However, the decision

of a precipitous withdrawal did not match the designs of those who matter in effecting the strategic decisions in the US system of administration.

A distant speculation might have been the influence of the Indian lobby in the US policy circles which would not have liked the peace talks become a success and Pakistan's role receive an applause thereof. This hypothesis is further augmented keeping in view the impending decision of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) decision to decide Pakistan's fate in November 2019. The success of the peace talks between the US and the Taliban would have absolved Pakistan of the blame of supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan and would have eased the FATF potential suffocating regime against Pakistan.

Bearing in mind the objective situation in Afghanistan, there is all the likelihood that once the internal adjustments are made between the US political administration and the defence and intelligence establishment and some broader consensus is achieved, the US may push the intra-Afghan dialogue to resume between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Till the writing of these lines, US special envoy for Afghanistan Mr Zalmay Khalilzad has manoeuvred smartly and the prisoners' release issue by the Afghan government is in encouraging pace. In all likelihood, it seems that the US might withdraw from Afghanistan but it will be a tactical disengagement from Afghanistan in search of an illusionary peace followed by a wide array of uncertainties which might deepen instability in the region.

Searching Peace or Deepening Instability in Afghanistan: An Assessment of the US-Taliban Peace Talks

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