

**"India attending, US and Taliban have signed a peace deal. What are the takeaways for the Afghan government and for India, given its bitter equations with Taliban and closeness to Ghani regime?"**

ON Saturday, the US and Taliban signed an agreement for "Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", which will enable the US and NATO to withdraw troops in the next 14 months. India attended the signing ceremony in Doha, and was represented by Ambassador to Qatar P Kumaran.

The pact is between the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban" and the US. The four-page pact was signed between Zalmay Khalilzad, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, political head of the Taliban.

Separately, a three-page joint declaration between the Afghan government (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) and the US was issued in Kabul.

### The key elements

Former Acting US Special Representative for Afghanistan & Pakistan Laurel Miller pointed out the following elements in the US-Taliban deal:

**TROOPS WITHDRAWAL:** The US will draw down to 8,600 troops in 135 days and the NATO or coalition troop numbers will also be brought down, proportionately and simultaneously. And all troops will be out within 14 months — "all" would include "non-diplomatic civilian personnel" (could be interpreted to mean "intelligence" personnel).

**TALIBAN COMMITMENT:** The main counter-terrorism commitment by the Taliban is that "Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies". While Miller said the reference to al-Qaeda is important, the pact is silent on other terrorist groups — such as anti-India groups Lashkar-e-Toiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed. Again, India, not being an US ally, is not covered under this pact.

**SANCTIONS REMOVAL:** UN sanctions on Taliban leaders to be removed by three months (by May 29) and US sanctions by August 27. The sanctions will be out before much progress is expected in the intra-Afghan dialogue.

**PRISONER RELEASE:** Miller identified it as a "possible trouble spot" because the US-Taliban agreement and the joint declaration differ, and it is not clear whether the Ashraf Ghani-led government is on board with this "pretty big up-front concession to Taliban". The joint declaration says the US will facilitate "discussion with Taliban representatives on confidence building measures, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides". While there are no numbers or deadlines in the joint declaration, the US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from "the other side" held by Taliban "will be released" by March 10 —

which is when intra-Afghan negotiations are supposed to start, in Oslo.

**CEASEFIRE:** Identified as another potential “trouble spot”. The agreement states ceasefire will be simply “an item on the agenda” when intra-Afghan talks start, and indicates actual ceasefire will come with the “completion” of an Afghan political agreement.

### **Challenges ahead**

The joint declaration is a symbolic commitment to the Afghanistan government that the US is not abandoning it. The Taliban have got what they wanted: troops withdrawal, removal of sanctions, release of prisoners. This has also strengthened Pakistan, Taliban’s benefactor, and the Pakistan Army and the ISI’s influence appears to be on the rise. It has made it unambiguous that it wants an Islamic regime.

The Afghan government has been completely sidelined during the talks between the US and Taliban. The future for the people of Afghanistan is uncertain, and will depend on how Taliban honours its commitments and whether it goes back to the mediaeval practices of its 1996-2001 regime.

Much will depend on whether the US and the Taliban are able to keep their ends of the bargain, and every step forward will be negotiated, and how the Afghan government and the political spectrum are involved.

“This is only the first step towards peace... Peace in Afghanistan will be predicated now on how the Afghans talk to each other, independent of outside pressures. Like in 1989, 1992, 1996, and in 2001, Pakistan has the opportunity to play a constructive role. It frittered away the opportunities in the past. The most point is, will this time be any different?” said former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan Jayant Prasad.

### **India and Taliban**

For New Delhi, too, it is a tough task ahead. Quite predictably, Mullah Baradar did not name India among the countries that supported the peace process, but specially thanked Pakistan for the “support, work and assistance” provided.

India and the Taliban have had a bitter past. New Delhi nurses bitter memories from the IC-814 hijack in 1999, when it had to release terrorists — including Maulana Masood Azhar who founded Jaish-e-Mohammed that went on to carry out terror attacks on Parliament (2001), in Pathankot (2016) and in Pulwama (2019). The Taliban perceived India as a hostile country, as India had supported the anti-Taliban force Northern Alliance in the 1990s.

India never gave diplomatic and official recognition to the Taliban when it was in power during 1996-2001. In recent years, as US-Taliban negotiations picked up momentum, New Delhi has been in touch with all stakeholders. But its foreign policy establishment has shied away from engaging with the Taliban directly. Even when former envoy to Afghanistan Amar Sinha and former envoy to Pakistan T C A Raghavan were sent as “non-official representatives” to talks with the Taliban in Moscow in November 2017, they went as “observers” and did not engage in direct talks, although some conversations are learnt to have taken place on the sidelines.

### **New Delhi and Kabul**

India has been backing the Ghani-led government and was among very few countries to congratulate Ghani on his victory. India’s proximity to Ghani also drew from their shared view of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. The government sent Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla to Kabul on Friday and Saturday to meet with Ghani and the senior political leadership, while its envoy in Doha went for the US-Taliban ceremony.

Shringla has reiterated India’s consistent support for an “independent, sovereign, democratic, pluralistic and inclusive” Afghanistan in which interests of all sections of society are preserved. He also conveyed India’s support for “enduring and inclusive” peace and reconciliation which is “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled”. His reference to an “end to externally sponsored terrorism” is a signal that the state and non-state actors must keep Pakistan-sponsored terrorism at bay.

To convey India's commitment, agreements for road projects in Bamyan and Mazar-e-Sharif provinces with Indian development assistance were signed during the visit.

Many Indian diplomats say although there has not been formal contact with top Taliban leaders, the Indian mission has a fair amount of access to the Pashtun community throughout Afghanistan through community development projects of about \$3 billion. Due to these high-impact projects, diplomats feel India has gained goodwill among ordinary Afghans, the majority of whom are Pashtuns and some may be aligned with the Taliban as well.

So, although Pakistan military and its ally Taliban have become dominant players in Kabul's power circles, South Block insiders insist that it is not all that grim for New Delhi.

#### Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

**Q. Recently, a peace treaty was signed by the US-Taliban. Consider the following statements in this context:**

1. This agreement was signed in the absence of India.
2. Under this treaty only American soldiers will be withdrawn.
3. Under this treaty, the Taliban will not harm the security of America and its allies.

Which of the above statements is/are correct ?

- (a) Only 1                      (b) 1 and 2  
(c) Only 3                      (d) 1 and 3

**Note:** Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 29 Feb., is 1 (b)

#### Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

**The US-Taliban historical Peace Treaty reinforces India's prospects of establishing a balance of power in Asia. In this context, discuss the opportunities and challenges in front of India. (250 words)**

**Note:** - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.