

In Afghan peace derailment, a wagon of hope

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"The suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the global community and India to reset the peace process."

In a characteristically mercurial tweet on September 9 morning (Indian Standard Time), U.S. President Donald Trump abruptly called off 'peace' talks with the Taliban — led directly by the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad — citing the killing of an American soldier just days before in a suicide bomb attack for which the Taliban claimed credit. He also revealed that he had secretly invited the Taliban and the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, separately to Camp David over the weekend to clinch a deal personally. The agreement had been in the making over nine rounds of talks, largely in Doha, Qatar, of which the Afghan government was not a part on account of a Taliban veto that the U.S. implicitly accepted, ostensibly to bring peace to Afghanistan.

The tweet capped a turbulent week during which Mr. Khalilzad briefed Mr. Ghani and the Chief Executive Officer of the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah on the interim agreement over several rounds of talks. They were shown but not given a copy of this. The salient details of the agreement were revealed on a private television channel on the evening of September 2. They centered primarily on an initial timetable for the withdrawal of around 5,400 out of nearly 14,000 U.S. troops from five Afghan bases in 135 days. Also included was a tight timeline of two weeks to kick-start intra-Afghan talks before the Afghan presidential elections scheduled on September 28.

The announcement was accompanied by a wave of violence that included offensives against strategic provincial capitals in the north and suicide bombings in Kabul, including one just as Mr. Khalilzad was wrapping up his TV interview. They were clearly intended to sabotage the elections. These were not allowed to affect the agreement.

The deal as negotiated was one-sided, partial and highly flawed. It was loaded heavily towards Mr. Trump's goal of a withdrawal of all U.S. troops by November 2020, weak in guarantees against terrorism aimed at the U.S., and lacking safeguards for the security and stability for Afghanistan. Unresolved differences over the withdrawal of the remaining troops (8,600) amid U.S. insistence on a residual counter-terrorism (CT) and intelligence presence, and a lack of trust in the Taliban at critical levels in the U.S., were among the reasons for Mr. Trump's decision.

Other elements of what the U.S. maintained was a composite agreement, were also seriously compromised. The comprehensive ceasefire was watered down to a limited 'reduction' in violence (observed more in its escalation). And, the intra-Afghan government talks effectively downgraded, under Taliban pressure, to talks with a non-official

delegation. The Afghan government, with which the U.S. has bilateral strategic partnership and security agreements, was sidelined and powerless, contributing to a public sense of helplessness that decisions regarding Afghanistan were being taken by foreigners. The government has gained from the backlash.

The most insidious aspect of the announcement was its timing and attempt to rush intra-Afghan talks just days before the presidential elections with the aim of undermining the elections and rendering them meaningless. The fear was that if successful, they could have undercut plans to instal an interim, transitional or power-sharing arrangement that could provide the fig-leaf of a mechanism and an illusion of peace to pull out U.S. forces. It would have paved the way for a dominant position for the Taliban in any future dispensation before they took over power altogether and pushed Afghanistan towards instability and even a civil war worse than the intra-Mujahideen fighting of the 1990s with unpredictable consequences.

More fundamentally, the agreement was also widely criticised in the U.S. and elsewhere. It was seen as a “negotiated withdrawal”, “abdication”, and even a “surrender” rather than a peace agreement, sacrificing the political, military and economic investments and civic gains of the last 18 years including democracy and the advancement of women, and creating the conditions for a likely descent into civil war, fanning radical extremism. In Afghanistan, the agreement was widely perceived as a sell-out and a betrayal of Afghanistan to the Taliban and Pakistan. These are concerns Indians share deeply.

Under the circumstances, notwithstanding the manner and reasons for calling off the talks for which Mr. Trump has been rightly lampooned — particularly the shocking invitation to the Taliban to Camp David just days before the 9/11 anniversary— his tweet at least had the virtue of pulling Afghanistan away from the brink of disaster foretold. Behind the decision was an instinct that it was a bad deal for the U.S. and exasperation with the Taliban’s attempts to extract maximum advantage for the meeting; the Taliban’s insistence on the announcement of the deal before the visit, deprived him of the limelight for sealing the deal.

However, while Afghans and the world may breathe a sigh of relief that the Khalilzad deal has been aborted for now, this may be short-lived. The mindset of a unilateral pullout unmindful of its consequences for Afghanistan and the region and the danger of Trumpian swings, remains. For now, Mr. Trump has proclaimed the talks to be “dead” and ordered offensive operations. But he still needs a counter-terrorism strategy for which he would have to look for options. The demand for a peace process will also remain. Things could change again in a few months. Nevertheless, the suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the holding of Afghan presidential elections and a window of opportunity for the international community and India to reset their approach to peace and withdrawal.

First, the Afghan election authorities and security forces should be supported in every way to conduct free and fair elections as an exercise of Afghan sovereignty. Concerns about misuse of government apparatus should be addressed. The Taliban will try to disrupt it. But a reasonably good turnout even if elections are held only in secure areas would be a barometer of support elsewhere, victory for the constitutional order and ‘Islamic Republic’, and a repudiation of the ‘Islamic Emirates’ of the Taliban.

Second, its outcome could provide a stronger foundation for talks with the Taliban that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled, and not as dictated from Washington, Islamabad, Doha or Moscow. India should be able to support such talks.

Third, free from elections, the Afghan government should take the lead in forging a national consensus behind

talks with the Taliban that it has failed to do until now.

Fourth, the international community should support this process and focus its efforts on the Taliban to demonstrate their 'nationalism' by distancing themselves from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, halting attacks against fellow Afghans, agreeing to a ceasefire, and negotiating directly with a representative Afghan delegation.

Fifth, resumed U.S. military pressure on the Taliban is not enough. The Doha talks dispel any doubt that the route to peace in Afghanistan is through Pakistan even though it was the U.S. that was making the concessions. Every possible instrument should be brought to bear on Pakistan to deliver on this. Crucial to Afghanistan's future is its ability to stand on its own feet economically, through investment in Afghanistan's mineral sector to generate revenues, and militarily, through a progressive 'Afghanisation' of security forces at a lower budget. India should be able to help in this.

Finally, India should be able to use Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rapport with Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to influence their policies and play a larger international diplomatic role in Afghanistan.

GS World Team...

US-Afghanistan War

Why in discussion?

- The talks between the US and the Taliban on peace in Afghanistan have been in full swing.
- President Donald Trump has said that the long-running dialogue with this terrorist organization was over without any conclusion.
- The conversation was to end with the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Donald Trump said, "As far as I'm concerned, that conversation is buried."
- The decision is attributed to an attack by the Taliban in the Afghan capital, Kabul, in which 12 people, including an American soldier, were killed in the attack.
- So far, Zalmay Khalilzad diplomat from the US side has held nine rounds of talks with the Taliban. But after this announcement by Donald Trump, this dialogue, which has been continuing for a year, seems to be broken.

The background

- The rise of the Taliban occurred in northern Pakistan in the 90s when the Soviet Union forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan.

The Taliban, led by Pashtuns, emerged on the Afghanistan scene in 1994.

- The Taliban is believed to have first emerged through religious events or madrasas, with most of the money coming from Saudi Arabia.
- After the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, there was a conflict between several factions and people were also disturbed by the Mujahideen.
- In such a situation, when the Taliban emerged, the Afghan people welcomed it.
- Initially the Taliban gained popularity because they curbed corruption, curb clutter and secure the areas under their control so that people can do business.
- The Taliban soon extended their influence in southwest Afghanistan. In September 1995, the Taliban captured Herat province bordering Iran.
- Gradually, the Taliban were accused of human rights violations and cultural abuse.
- Despite international criticism in 2001, the Taliban destroyed the world famous Bamiyan Buddha statues.
- Regarding the Pashtun area on the Pak-Afghan border,

the Taliban said that it would create an atmosphere of peace and security there and implement Sharia law after coming to power.

- In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Taliban either imposed punishment under Islamic law such as hanging the culprits in public, chopping off the hands of the culprits for stealing.
- The world's attention was drawn to the Taliban in the 2001 attacks in New York. In Afghanistan, the Taliban were accused of harboring Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, who were being held guilty of the New York attacks.

Why doubt Trump's decision?

- Even though Donald Trump is touting the attack in Kabul last week as the reason behind stopping the talks with the Taliban, his argument is not embracing the majority of the people.

- The reason for this is that the US has been talking to the Taliban for the last one year and during this period many American soldiers and diplomats were also killed in the Taliban attacks.

- According to a report, 16 US soldiers have lost their lives in Taliban attacks so far this year.

- NATO and several US officials were killed in an attack last month - raising questions, asking why the US did not stop talks with this organization when American soldiers were being killed in a Taliban attack for a year? In such a situation, it is now incomprehensible to stop Donald Trump's talks after a sudden attack.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. With reference to the recent US-Taliban talks, consider the following statements-

1. It could provide a strong basis for negotiations with the Taliban.
2. With this peace deal, the US Army would have withdrawn.
3. Any agreement without involving the Government of Afghanistan will prove to be the result of long term failure.

Which of the above statements are correct?

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

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q.** Has the failure of the US-Taliban peace talks for stability in Afghanistan presented an opportunity for India to play an international role? Give an argument in favor of your opinion. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 13 Sept. is 1 (d)