

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



February 07, 2016

## Peace Plan: A Milestone in the Efforts

After weeks of diplomatic efforts, the so-called quadrilateral coordination group of the four-nation peace initiative has agreed on a roadmap for peace negotiations between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. Officials announced the agreement at the end of the third meeting of the four-way talks which was held on Saturday in Islamabad aimed at establishing a framework for peace negotiations with the groups of the Taliban. However, details of the plan are unknown yet. According to the statement of the Islamabad meeting, the participants of the group hope that a date would be specified for direct peace talks by end of the month.

The establishment of a roadmap to govern peace efforts for resumption of negotiations with the Taliban as well as the process of the possible talks is marking a milestone in the long-running efforts for bringing Taliban leaders to the table of peace negotiations. Though the details of the plan are yet to be known, the optimism suggests a major breakthrough in the efforts to set a framework for negotiations with the Taliban. The four-way group has set a bold time-frame for resumption of talks with the Taliban groups. However, it is premature to believe that there will be an early resumption of peace talks with the Talks, which the four-nation coordination group has predicted within one month.

The roadmap for peace talks has undoubtedly set mechanisms for bringing different Taliban groups to the peace process. One of the key expectations of the Afghan government from the peace efforts is a noticeable reduction in violence in Afghanistan. It is expected that the plan include ways for pressurizing the militant groups for negotiations and for dealing with those groups who refuse to come to the peace talks and continue waging war against the government. Afghan officials have recently been talking about a pledge by Pakistan to clampdown on the Taliban groups who refuse to come to the negotiations for peace. It would make a major difference, if the new peace plan of the four-nation initiative commits Pakistan to taking military action against those Taliban groups who refuse to enter the talks with the government of Afghanistan.

Reduction in violence across the country is one of the key objectives of the Afghan government from the peace process. Government officials have specified their expectations to see an apparent reduction in violence or even a possible ceasefire within two months from start of negotiations with the militant groups. It is time to see if there are sufficient measures envisaged in the peace plan for persuading the Taliban into an early ceasefire or reduction of violence. Sartaj Aziz, Pakistani Prime Minister's security and foreign affairs advisor has asserted that the efforts to join all Taliban groups into the process would help in considerable reduction of violence in Afghanistan. With the next Taliban's summer offensive looming, the government of Afghanistan needs to continue the efforts to raise the issue as one of its key demands in the process of negotiations. The government should take military actions against those militant groups who refuse join the negotiations for a peace settlement.

From now on, a very key question would be whether which Taliban groups would be persuaded to come to the table of negotiations. Mr. Aziz has said that the joint efforts should be focused on encouraging more of the Taliban groups to join the process. The statement suggests the peace roadmap aims to try to include as many Taliban groups as possible into the process. This will mean that the preference would be to open talks with all militant groups including the two main Taliban factions, the Haqqani network, Hekmatyar faction and other smaller groups. Apparently, the Islamic State group is excluded from the plan. The Islamic State is viewed as not having a suitable environment in Afghanistan to grow into a major and long-term threat. In addition, all parties including the Afghan government, Pakistan and the US have uncompromising stance over the presence and activities of the Islamic State in Afghanistan.

The efforts will now be focused on contacting the Taliban groups, making arrangements and setting a date for first direct talks between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. About three weeks ago, a delegation of Taliban's political office in Qatar, who is loyal to Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, participated in a meeting in Doha, in which they announced a number of pre-conditions for coming to the table of peace negotiations. Excluding names of the Taliban leaders from the UN blacklist, taking down awards set for arrest or killing of the militant leaders and releasing Taliban prisoners were among the demands. If the Taliban stand by their preconditions, it would create a short-term challenge to the efforts to persuade the group to come to the negotiations without setting any preconditions. In the midterm, the government of Afghanistan and the four-nation initiative would have no option but to accept many of the recently-stated preconditions of the Taliban. This will include providing some sort of immunity to the militant leaders to be able to travel and attend peace meetings.



## Third QCG Meeting

By Dilawar Sherzai

More than a decade of war in Afghanistan against Taliban insurgents has now reached to the point where everybody seems to agree that peace can only be restored through negotiations. Has not this realization come a bit late, or the realization was made earlier but the efforts were not genuine? And, what has been lost through this period? Moreover, who are ones who should shoulder the responsibility of the losses made during this period? Have they been held accountable? There are myriads of such questions which do not have clear answers for the people of Afghanistan, who seem to have received most of the losses. Anyhow, keeping these questions aside, and believing in the proverb: it is never too late; we can concentrate on the efforts that are being made to make the negotiations with Taliban a success now as for Afghanistan it is really imperative that a negotiated, fruitful and enduring peace should conclude years of fighting and violence. The people of Afghanistan have been waiting for such a conclusion but their dreams have not turned into reality. Previously as well, they were given the good news about such efforts but that could never materialize. The important factor is to observe what will be the outcome of new efforts that are being made.

To make preparations and pursue negotiations with Taliban a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), including Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China, has been formed that had its third meeting in Islamabad on Saturday February 06, 2016. The first QCG meeting was also held in Islamabad, which discussed the committee's work. While the second meeting in Kabul discussed the entire spectrum of renewable peace talks with the Taliban. And, in the third meeting, the roadmap for peace negotiations was discussed, following which, there are hopes that Afghan government can have direct negotiations with Taliban.

In yesterday's meeting there were clear indications by Pakistan that it would pursue true peace and would coordinate for the same purpose. Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz renewed Islamabad's commitment to long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan.

He emphasized that political reconciliation was the only viable option for promoting peace in Afghanistan and said that violent activities will have to be stopped for the success of the dialogue process. He also accepted that the people of Afghanistan have been suffering from an unending cycle of violence for decades and they need lasting peace and stability.

Though Pakistan has shown its commitments regarding cooperation in peace talks several times, Afghanistan has not been very confident about the role of Pakistan. The relations

between the two countries reached to their lowest point when the news of Mullah Omar's death was revealed after the Murree talks. However, since the Heart of Asia Conference, there seems to be a revival and it has been strengthened by the role and support of China and US as well. The Afghan delegation was led by Hikmat Khalil Karzia, the Deputy Foreign Minister, and it also launched the meeting. The Afghan delegation showed great hopes that the meeting would give a final touch to the strategy upon which future talks with the insurgents would take place and would pave the way for direct talks with Taliban. Hopefully, this hope may turn into a reality.

Afghanistan should take advantage of the change in the scenario, and must strive to pursue its main objectives. The important achievement for the Afghan government would be to make Taliban ready for a peace process and negotiate for a cease-fire.

If Taliban get ready for a cease-fire it would mean that they are really ready for negotiations. No peace process can succeed unless the clashes stop and the parties in the war are ready to lay down their arms. In addition as Afghanistan has spring and summer seasons ahead there are possibilities of rise in insurgency by Taliban. Therefore, a cease-fire before that would be a great achievement and would be great news for the common masses as they have been suffering from the offensive to a large extent.

Another important factor for Afghanistan would be to convince Taliban to accept Afghan constitution, which seems a bit difficult as Taliban have always strived for a Shariah-based law in the country. It is really a Herculean task to make them ready to respect Afghan constitution and abandon their demand for a Shariah-based law as they are gaining strength on the battle-ground. They are even insisting on their own terms and conditions for the peace talks. However, for Afghan government, it would be a great loss if it compromises on its constitution which is result of years of struggle for a democratic system and for which the Afghan people and the soldiers have given large number of sacrifices.

Afghanistan, as a top priority, needs to reach to a conclusive position regarding terrorism, if it wants to continue its journey towards a democratic and peaceful state. President Ashraf Ghani had clearly indicated that he is serious about the issue and has always called for a regional and global cooperation to eradicate terrorism. Nonetheless, it is more important that Afghanistan must have its own strategy bold and clear regarding the issue and must follow the same through actions, not words alone, as there is no more time for words.

Dilawar Sherzai is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at email.urya@gmail.com

## US Long-Term Commitment to Afghanistan

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With a fresh resurgence of the Taliban and the emergence of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan, the US is being encouraged to backtrack a previous plan to pull out most of the country's forces from Afghanistan by 2017 and leave a small contingent of troops for protection of US diplomatic premises in the country. Recently, Gen. John Campbell, top US general commanding the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan warned over the situation in Afghanistan, stressing that the US should delay withdrawal of thousands of troops and keep a larger force in the country in 2017. Last week, the Washington Post also reported that "Top U.S. military commanders... are now quietly talking about an American commitment that could keep thousands of troops in the country for decades." Other reports, though not confirmed officially, suggest that the US military wants to maintain at least the current number of troops, which is around 10,000, in Afghanistan for at least five years.

The shift of approach among American military commanders over the US mission in Afghanistan is sparked by the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the rising security challenges due to the increased activities of the militant groups in the country. In 2015, the Taliban waged the deadliest of their offensives against the government since the group's fall in 2001. Despite being unable to hold key areas for a longer time, the Taliban organized most audacious and complicated attacks and momentarily took the key northern town of Kunduz. The scale of the insurgency waged by the Taliban last year helped the group to have the upper hand in the conflict. The Taliban now is preparing for a similar large-scale offensive against the Afghan government in the coming fighting season which will start in summer.

On the other hand, expansion of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan worried many regional countries and world powers who have been closely watching the rise and expansion of the Islamic State group in the Middle East and South Asia. The US has been anxious over how the multi-facet crisis of the Middle East and the rise of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan would impact the long-lasting conflict in the country for which the US has paid huge price so far. In previous years, official assessments of the American military from capabilities of the Afghan security forces were much more optimistic, encouraging a sustained withdrawal of US forces from the country. The US committed to continue supporting Afghanistan's security forces through the Resolute Support Mission while ending its combat role in Afghanistan and taking a marginal role in the protracted conflict.

The United States considers the current mission of Resolute Support Mission as a long-term strategy to strengthen Afghanistan's armed forces to carry out the task of anti-insurgency campaign and maintain security in the country. However, the trend of developments in

last two years has increasingly been endangering the achievements of the last over-a-decade of the US-led international efforts. The spill-over of multi-facet crises of the Middle East into other regions such as the South Asia and particularly into Afghanistan has come as an alarm for Washington. The US is seems increasingly uneasy with the inevitable impacts of the Middle East crises on the Afghan conflict, for which the US has paid heavy prices in treasures and blood.

However, this is while many in the US argue that the country will not be able to achieve its objectives pursued through the current mission in Afghanistan. The critics of a US robust military role in Afghanistan argue that there is no sight of an endgame in the Afghan conflict while it would continue to cost heavily for the country. For them, the country's trouble in the unending conflict in Afghanistan is comparable to the US bogged down in the Vietnam War. They warn the US of committing military presence in the country for a longer period of time.

But the critics of the US presence in Afghanistan miss a crucial issue: the US cannot turn a blind eye into the conflict in Afghanistan after fourteen years of presence in the country with heavy tolls and prices. The United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars and more than two thousand American troops have been sacrificed as part of the mission. While the United States is already struggling to maintain interests in other parts of the world such as the Middle East and the East Asia, it is emerging cautious of underestimating the trends in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Afghanistan could again be propelled to the brinks of an abyss if the international community ignores the deterioration of security in the country and turn a blind eye to the development of security events in the country.

The prospect of the conflict in Afghanistan will remain intertwined with other regional crises and developments such as the crises of the Middle East and the relations between regional powers such as Pakistan and India. It is believed that there is now a regional consensus over a long term solution for the conflict in Afghanistan. Despite that most of the stakeholders are prepared for backing resolution of the Afghan conflict, there is a long way ahead for peace in the country. This is because the regional militancy developments will continue to fuel the insurgency while political wills of the regional countries for supporting a solution to the conflict will continue to teeter.

This justifies a long-term and robust American military presence in Afghanistan. Continued engagement of the US in the conflict in Afghanistan would play a key role in success any peace negotiations in the future. The government of Afghanistan will need more than sufficient ability to tackle the insurgency and contain groups that endangers long-term security and stability of Afghanistan. The government of Afghanistan needs to step up efforts to, on one hand, encourage the US for a more robust military engagement and, on the other hand, promote a regional consensus over the future of Afghanistan.

Abdul Ahad Bahrami is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at ahad.bahrami@gmail.com

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net



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