

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



July 22, 2019

Prospect for Fruitful Talks in Upcoming Qatari Meeting

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad is preparing for next round of talks with the Taliban leadership in Doha. He concluded the seventh round of talks citing it the "most productive".

Amidst the latest round of US-Taliban negotiations, at least 60 Afghan delegates met with 17 members of the Taliban in an intra-Afghan dialogue conference in Doha, co-hosted by Qatar and Germany. Issuing a resolution, the two sides agreed to reduce violence by stopping attacks on public infrastructures and civilians.

Since peace talks are a give-and-take process, the US-Taliban negotiators are urged to accept mutual prerequisites to end the 18 years of conflict in Afghanistan. In other words, the Taliban should not simply seek to impose their own demands without accepting those of their US interlocutors. Their push for US and NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan without declaring ceasefire is not rational. For example, the names of the Taliban negotiators were removed from the UN blacklist and a number of their prisoners were released from Afghanistan's prisons to catalyze the peace process, but the Taliban have accepted no demands from the negotiating side. If the Taliban seek a win-win result, they have to pursue give-and-take process and observe the rule of dialogue. In the talks, the agreement should come in a package including all issues and have to be finalized. A hasty withdrawal is unlikely to result in peace.

The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said that the United States and allies do not seek a leave deal by entering into negotiations with the Taliban political leaders. Adding that NATO is very involved in peace efforts, he said, "Because we went to Afghanistan together, we are going to make decisions on our future posture together, and when the time is right, we'll also leave together." He also said, "We hope Khalilzad will succeed. This is not a leave deal we are seeking, but a peace deal, meaning that it has to secure that Afghanistan doesn't once again become a safe haven for international terrorists." He reiterated securing intra-Afghan dialogue and maintaining the gains NATO and the US made saying "we have invested heavily, blood and treasure, in Afghanistan for many years."

The peace talks are the last glimmer of hope for Afghan people, who have been highly frustrated with conflict. Since Afghans have sustained heavy casualties in the wake of the Taliban's indiscriminate attacks, they pray for end of conflict and hope that the talks will come to fruition in near future. But the prolonged process and Taliban's intensified attacks left little room for public optimism.

Afghanistan has changed into a sacrificial lamb and the blood of Afghan soldiers and civilians is shed on daily basis. The Taliban chose to continue hit-and-run policy despite the ongoing peace talks. Human fatalities are the main concern as a result of the active engagement of Taliban militants in violation of humanitarian law. They show no respect to civilians' life. This issue prompted people to lose their trust in fruitful talks. So, describing the last round of peace talks as the most productive does not make sense for Afghans unless it puts direct positive effect on their daily life. Afghan people expect the negotiating sides to reach an agreement sooner so that civilians could no more fall victims to the Taliban's terrorist attacks and suicide bombings.

The eighth round of talks, to be held soon in Qatar, will be one step closer to truce and peace. The two sides are likely to agree on some major issues. To bring the country closer to peace, the Taliban have to accept to hold direct talks with the Afghan government. Reaching an agreement is highly difficult unless the government is engaged in the talks.

The US seeks to reach an agreement before Afghanistan's upcoming presidential election, in turn, the US-Taliban talks are held at brief intervals. If the two sides reach an agreement before the election, the level of public participation will be high in the election, as President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani said it will be held at any cost.

Haggling too much at the table will be frustrating. The two sides should start transcribing their agreement and finalize the issue. If talks continue, the Taliban must at least reduce violence and stop targeting civilians to show that they really seek peace not concessions. Since military deal has been proved abortive and negotiations are a win-win situation, the Taliban and their US and Afghan interlocutors should resolve their tension through dialogue and put an end to the conflict.

The Paradox of Ongoing Peace and War in Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

In spite of increasing peace demand and ongoing peace talks, at least 10 people were killed and another 33 people were wounded in the explosion after a bomb detonated near Kabul university premises in Afghanistan last Friday. Before this, on Thursday evening, the police headquarter was attacked in Kandahar province. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) through a statement as report quoted said the Kandahar attack was plotted in Chaman Baluchistan, having crossing points with Afghanistan. According to NDS the attackers were ordered and led by an individual named Mullah Agha during the attack. In this respect the NDS has sent to media an audio file which apparently shows a telephonic conversation between the attackers and the masterminds. However, Islamabad rejected the allegations.

Though no militant group claimed responsibility for the latest multiple attacks, especially the attacks on university students and visitors of highly credible and central university of Afghanistan, its disowning seems ironic. It is crystal clear that both the groups i.e. Taliban and the Islamic State extremists, often stage such large-scale bombings in the city. The Taliban and Islamic State generally target Afghan forces and government officials plus civilian areas. Violent acts is a parts and parcels of Afghanistan especially in capital Kabul and southern Kandahar provinces while the peace talks have accelerated more than ever. Violent acts are more frequently occurring in Western and Western-Northern parts of the country. These show that Taliban is not honest in peace talks and play a dual and paradoxical game in Afghanistan.

With launching deadly attacks and dual game, Taliban did not leave any place at the heart of people; many Afghan people say that they can accept any systems other than Islamic Emirate because they showed very unforgettable deeds in Afghanistan. In fact, Taliban have become more hated than ever and even those who, somehow, have sympathy with this group have been shocked by the frequent waves of violence. What is to be learned from all this hatred is that peace with such creatures is impossible. If we impartially and fairly judge about the depth of this issue, then the Taliban's attack on the innocent university students and dozens of national defense forces are not acceptable or justifiable in any principle.

Indeed, the intensified attacks which come after a few rounds of talks and even mutual agreement to prevent civilian casualties disappointed the public opinion on the ongoing peace process; this shows that the Taliban are not ready to enter into serious negotiations with the Afghan government. Probably the group is pursuing peace talks only for their political intentions. From one hand, they show themselves to the world's public opinion as a peaceful group that wants to negotiate and peacefully resolve the problems of Afghanistan; on the other hand, they tactically intensify the ongoing violence and killings in Afghanistan to win greater

privileges or impose the Islamic Emirate on the people of Afghanistan.

Now, in the wake of increasing violent and terror acts, responsibility rests with national and international organs and US as well to think about ways and means for its countering. As aforementioned, Taliban have agreed during intra-Afghan talks held in Doha, to reduce the civilian casualties to "zero" amid the rising death toll in the war-torn country. The joint statement which was released after the conclusion of the July 7-8 talks pledged to guarantee the security of public institutions, such as educational institutions, religious schools, hospitals, markets, water dams and other working locations. However, since that, Taliban group have intensified their assaults, and claimed responsibilities of a number of deadly incidents across the country.

According to some political experts, the war intensification links to the winning moral of Taliban and shortcoming of defense forces including the United States and its NATO allies as day to day things are getting worse than ever before. According to President Trump, the US has squandered trillions of dollars on military operations in the Middle East over the past two decades without any positive feedback for the US. The recent attacks in Kabul and Kandahar can also show that Taliban supporters do not have any ethical or political commitment to the promising words they state diplomatically.

Based on some analysis, no peace process would reach to fruitful result unless the Taliban supporters are pressurized. Given the next week visit of Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, to Washington it is expected the US President Donald Trump to put pressure on Pakistan during planned meeting between the two leaders. However, "the purpose of this visit is to press for concrete cooperation from Pakistan to advance the Afghanistan peace process... We are asking Pakistan to pressure the Taliban into a permanent ceasefire and participation in inter-Afghan negotiations that will include the Afghan government", report quoted from the US official last Friday.

The US official added that the US side will also encourage Pakistan to deepen and sustain its recent effort to crack down on militant terrorists within its territory. Moreover, the US official said Trump will communicate to Khan that the United States is ready to repair relations and build a partnership if Pakistan changes its policies to address concerns of militants and terrorists seeking safe haven in their country. The United States will also consider changing its suspension of security assistance to Pakistan if Islamabad meets Washington's concerns related to Afghanistan, report quoted from the US official.

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Costly Mistakes of US Terror Strategy in South Asia

By: Rajkumar Singh

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the result of a catastrophic intelligence failure in which different American agencies failed to connect the dots. In response, the George William Bush Administration launched not one but two wars, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The military sledgehammer, produced collateral gains and losses for the US-regime change in Kabul and Baghdad. The extraordinary situation which was placed forced the US to co-opt Pakistan-the fountain head of terrorist activities-into its crusade against global terrorism. Pakistan, once again, on account of dictates of geography, became a frontline state against Afghanistan for a second time in the last 10 years. Earlier the American interest in Pakistan somewhat declined after the breakdown of the Soviet and cessation of the cold war. But the event of 9/11 had regenerated the US interest in Pakistan because it was at the centre of the world's worst Islamist terrorist network. The Bush Administration lifted all the sanctions imposed in post-nuclear explosion period, and it became an essential partner in global war on terror. The US in its war against terror had, without hesitation strengthened General Pervez Musharraf, the then military ruler of Pakistan, who was not a democrat. Musharraf seized power in a coup, overthrowing a legally elected government of Nawaz Sharif. In addition his closest neighbour, the largest democracy accuses him of fomenting violence and sponsoring terrorism. The key feature of this strategy was that the US worked through the government of Pakistan and not in disregard of it. It strengthened Musharraf's capabilities, instead of weakening them.

Pak dilemmas

However, the US support of Pakistan had pushed the military regime in the biggest dilemma the country has ever faced. On the one side, the world's most powerful nation, wounded and angry, was bluntly telling the General that if he did not act as a friend now he would be considered as the enemy. On the other were the Taliban leaders of the most brutish police state in the world and their hordes who threatened Jihad against the very country that had nurtured them. At the juncture Pakistan with weak economy, a polarised polity, China backing Washington and the Islamic bloc a virtual non-factor all taking together made Pakistan to side with the United States of America's global strategy against terrorism. It was apparent that General Musharraf was in a difficult position torn between US demands for cooperation and demands by the Islamic clergy, and terrorist organisations. Ultimately, Musharraf decided to distance himself from the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and agreed to provide help to Washington in such key areas as intelligence and information exchange, use of Pakistan's air space and logistical support which involved tremendous risks for his regime. In a nutshell, to achieve its goal the US forcibly co-opted Pakistan and, through economic inducements, coupled with public praise and private admonition, made Musharraf turn on Pakistan's protégés, the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Once again the United States war against terror had changed Pakistan's destiny. Islamabad's profile in the eyes of the West, and particularly the Americans, had changed completely. General Musharraf had been courted and flattered by world leaders as the defender of the faith of the civilised world.

US terror war in Afghanistan

In post-9/11 period the first anti-terror war that the US had fought was in Afghanistan where ultimately a pro-terror regime was dethroned. By the time of the event in the USA terrorism has become a system with its wings in nearly sixty countries of the world and it was not wisely for the Washington to antagonise them all at one time. In Afghanistan alone there were 30 camps and the world was united to fight this international network of terrorism under the leadership of the United States. In addition, the terror networks in Afghanistan change their colours and mutate their names too fast and adapt to adverse and inclement conditions swiftly. The all Jihadis were united in and around Pak-Afghan border territory with different names, such as, Zamaut-ul-Islam, Harkat-ul-Ansar, Al Faran, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Laskar-e-Toiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Sipahi Sabah and many others of their local branches. These all terror organisations had bases and branches in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, Pakistan and Pak-occupied Kashmir. Their involvement in subversive activities across the border of many countries and beyond makes terrorism a cross-country problem to be addressed and tackled collectively.

The 'Operation Enduring Freedom' of the United States of America in Afghanistan

began on 7 October 2001 with the night bombing of Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad at 9 p.m. and all the NATO allies stood by the side of America. On the occasion President George Bush had claimed that 40 countries had pledged support to the US to stamp out terrorism from the face of earth, others have extended logistic support; still others have made encouraging gestures. But from the beginning there was a discernible difference between what the USA tried to protect and what the Taliban regime in alliance with Al-Qaeda sought to preserve. While the former wanted to restore democracy and preserve human rights in a country ravaged by over two decades of continuing war, the latter sought to defend their misuse and mal-administration under the guise of Islam. Despite the paradox, the US decision to co-opt Pakistan to fight Taliban was certainly a tactical move, strategic in nature.

The US anti-terror operation in Afghanistan lasted just two months. It is said to be masterful in both design and execution. The USA dropped more smart bombs on Afghanistan than the NATO dropped on Serbia in 1999. The Taliban forces, estimated at 50,000 to 60,000 strong and a few thousand Al-Qaeda fighters were crushed by the US troops numbering around 60,000 and the allied forces numbering approximately 15,000. War-ships of Japan, Italy, Britain and the Netherlands were deployed in the Arabian Sea. The bombers of the US armed forces operated out of Diego Garcia. Land-based aircrafts flew from Oman and planes from the American aircraft carriers, based in Arabian Sea provided the rest of the combat punch. The cost of the Afghanistan War reached \$ 3.8 billion, whereas the military cost of the Homeland Security efforts in the USA was \$ 2.6 billion. The US forces, which have claimed to have staged impressive feat of quickest possible military action, lost about only 30 personnel whereas 8,000 to 12,000 Taliban troops are believed to have died.

US felt cheated

As the war against terrorism in Afghanistan progressed, it became clear that Musharraf was not prepared to forsake the Taliban entirely. In fact Pakistan was playing a double game-helping the US offensive while trying to ensure that their old Taliban allies have a prominent role in post-war government. General Musharraf had opposed US support to the Northern Alliance (NA). Sections of the US media felt that Pakistan was not a reliable ally. The CIA had accused the ISI of playing a double-game of pretending to help yet allowing the flow of weapons into Afghanistan. On the other hand even after destroying all the suspected hideouts of Taliban-Al-Qaeda the leadership of neither of the two organisations were to be seen anywhere. They were neither captured nor killed. Further, in the post-Taliban scenario, one finds that the evidence of close ties Islamabad has had with the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, and these three had with terrorist militias like the LeT, JeM and HuM directly and through Pakistan's ISI, had destroyed its credibility with the US and other Western countries. Hence, Pakistan was under intense pressure to clamp down on these and reform the country into a moderate Islamic state. It was because despite the success of the United States-led coalition in the Afghan war, terrorism is alive and well.

Earlier the military action of United States of America in October 2001 was justified on the grounds that the then Afghan regime was harbouring people responsible for the terrorist atrocities of September 9/11, it however, was not supported by other analysts who propose that on the same grounds Britain could have bombed Boston or New York in the 1970s and 1980s as these cities certainly harboured and helped finance IRA terrorists, Cuba could attack Florida now, and at various times India could have claimed justification for an all-out assault on Pakistan. The second excuse on the issue was complaints by the US and British officials that the insurgents are hiding themselves among the populace, using civilians as "human shields" betray the dangerous logic characteristic of military intervention of this type. But above all, was the fact that the US intervention in the wake of 9/11 was primarily motivated by a petty concern for the US reputation as a country that knows how to get its way in the world. It endorsed a war on terror whose aims were frightening open-ended, whose methods were in essence lawless and disproportionate, and whose targets were to be defined as the convenience of the world most powerful nation. The US military intervention in Afghanistan had certainly eroded international support for America in its fight against terror.

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