

TALIBAN-US TALKS: THE FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN AND IMPLICATIONS ON INDIAN SECURITY

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INTRODUCTION President Donald Trump has directed US diplomats to hold direct talks with the Taliban. The stated objective is to narrow the gap between opposing positions and hold broader, more formal negotiations to end the war. The Taliban have long maintained that they would negotiate only with the US, which toppled their regime in 2001. However, the US has insisted that the Afghan government should be involved in the process. Several attempts at holding discussions to end the war have, therefore, not progressed. Trump's decision to hold direct negotiations was, therefore, a significant policy shift. US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad has met with Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Islamist movement who is believed to be close to the Taliban emir, Maulvi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Khalilzad and Baradar are reported to have agreed in principle on a framework for a deal last month.

1. Under the framework agreement, the United States is required to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban are required to never use Afghan soil for carrying out terrorist activities. After the last set of discussions in January, Khalilzad had said in an interview to The New York Times: "The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals." More recently, the Taliban negotiating team has claimed the discussions were progressing, and that the technical groups were working a draft agreement. However, several complications continue to stand in the way, including the continued violence in Afghanistan. Last week, Taliban fighters had attempted to storm a US-Afghan military base in the southern Afghanistan province of Helmand. There are international factors as well. Enmity between host country, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, as well as ongoing tensions

between India and Pakistan have thrown a cloud of uncertainty over the outcome of the talks.

2. The very fact that the US is talking to the Taliban legitimises their role in Afghanistan's present and future. They are currently the most important player in the benighted country, able to carry out attacks almost at will, and President Ashraf Ghani's government is widely believed to be in power in Kabul only because of US support. All of this is worrying for India — a Taliban government in Afghanistan in the near future will mean a hugely increased leverage for Pakistan in that country.

THE GENESIS Against the backdrop of the retrenching United States, which is whittling down its commitments and retreating inward, the country's special envoy to Afghanistan, ZalmayKhalilzad, has arrived in Pakistan for a fresh round of talks with top civil and military officials. Khalilzad is expected to seek Islamabad's help to convince the Taliban to return to the negotiating table to end the seventeen-year-old Afghan war. One context to "suing for peace", so to speak, in Afghanistan, is the United States' withdrawal from Syria and laying conditions in the Middle East that suggest that the country is taking recourse to what is called "offshore balancing" in the region.

3. The major inference that can be drawn here is that the United States no longer wants to be the world's "policeman" or, in other words, hegemon. The country is gradually veering toward quasi-isolationism and focusing on what the Trump administrations deems its "core interests". This, in the main, explains to a large extent the United States' Syrian withdrawal and attempts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. The country no longer has the appetite to take on militarily a resurgent Taliban which now appears to hold the aces in Afghanistan

In the equations that accrue from conditions that obtain in the region and in the United States, Pakistan assumes significance, given the country's influence and leverage over the Taliban. The question is: will the United States' new approach work?The answer lies in the realm of probabilities. That the Taliban is a force to reckon with now is to state the obvious. But, from a military perspective, and a hypothetical negotiating scenario, given its primacy in the conflict and the fact that the United States, a "wounded hegemon" wants to retreat against the backdrop of a review of its foreign policy and diminishing absorptive capacity for war, why would Taliban's strategists

want to negotiate? There is no reason for them to do so because, in one way or the other, its “winner take all for the Taliban”.

4. It is here that Pakistan’s role becomes important yet again. The country is in the midst of a balance of payments crisis which has far-reaching consequences and implications for its economy. The CPEC has run into assorted troubles and is not yielding the desired returns at the moment. Amidst this economic uncertainty and grave issues thereof, Pakistan has to turn to the IMF and thereby the United States. The conundrums and dilemmas that flow from this condition might make Pakistan amenable to use its influence over the Taliban to negotiate with the United States. If this scenario comes to pass, then the Taliban might yield and even form the next government in Afghanistan. From a grand geopolitical perspective, this would constitute a defeat for the United States whose animating premise to attack Afghanistan after September 11 was to “cleanse” the country of both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. But, now with Taliban ascendant, and the United States seeking to negotiate with it, the country has obviously failed in its objectives. Against this backdrop, what general lessons can be drawn both about foreign policy and security?
5. First, foreign policy is about or should be about aligning means with ends. The United States, after September 11, in its “wars of choice” in Afghanistan and Iraq, driven by unipolarity induced hubris, appeared to elide over this cardinal insight. The misalignment between means and ends meant that it got involved in open-ended, long drawn-out wars from which it is attempting a messy exit. Complemented by structural trends and developments, these wars and other thematic issues have led to a different system polarity wherein China, Russia and the United States are the major contenders in international relations and politics. The United States is neither alone at the pinnacle of power nor does it have the ability to convert power into influence. All this has implications for and on Afghanistan. The jostling and jockeying between China, Russia and the United States will, in all likelihood, mean that Afghanistan will become an arena for these powers. Or, in other words, the country, also known as the “graveyard of empires” is all set for a “new Great Game”. This, more than anything else, will be the abiding legacy of the blighted country.

6. **INDIA'S SECURITY INTERESTS.** India will have to do whatever is necessary to shield its vital interests in Afghanistan, or else developments there would adversely impinge on Indian security, including in the Kashmir Valley. By promising a terrorist militia a total American military pullout within 18 months and a pathway to power in Kabul, the US, in essence, is negotiating the terms of its surrender. This year is Afghanistan's 40th year in a row as an active war zone. Betrayal, violence and surrender have defined Afghanistan's history for long, especially as the playground for outside powers. The US-Taliban "agreement in principle" fits with that narrative. By promising a terrorist militia a total American military pullout within 18 months and a pathway to power in Kabul, the US, in essence, is negotiating the terms of its surrender. It is worth remembering how the US got into a military quagmire. The US invasion in October 2001 ousted the Taliban from power in Kabul for harbouring the Al Qaeda planners of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, the key Al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Abu Zubaida and Ramzi Binalshibh, were later found holed up inside Pakistan. Yet, paradoxically, the US, while raining bombs in Afghanistan, rewarded Pakistan, as President Donald Trump said last year, with more than \$33 billion in aid since 2002
7. The quagmire resulted from the US reluctance to take the war to the other side of the Durand Line by targeting the Taliban's command-and-control bases in Pakistan. In modern world history, no counterterrorism campaign has ever succeeded when the militants have enjoyed cross-border state sponsorship and safe havens. This also explains why terrorists remain active in the Kashmir Valley. Rather than take out the Taliban's cross-border sanctuaries, the US actively sought "reconciliation" for years, allowing the militia to gain strength and terrorise Afghans. The protracted search for a Faustian bargain with the Taliban also explains why that ruthless militia was never added to the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations. This approach counterproductively led to an ascendant Taliban expanding its territorial control and killing government forces in growing numbers. Now, desperate to exit, Trump has sought to accomplish what his predecessor, Barack Obama, set out to do but failed — to cut a deal with the Taliban. It was with the aim of facilitating direct talks with the Taliban that Obama allowed the militia to establish a de facto diplomatic mission in Doha, Qatar, in 2013. Then, to meet a Taliban precondition, five hardened Taliban

militants (two of them accused of carrying out massacres of Tajiks and Hazaras) were freed from Guantánamo Bay. The five were described by the late US senator, John McCain, as the “hardest of hard core”.

8. Instead of the promised Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, the Trump administration clinched the tentative deal with the Taliban without prior consultations with Kabul and then sought to sell it to a sceptical Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. In doing so, it has unwittingly aided the Taliban effort to delegitimise an elected government. Given that Ghani was blindsided by the “framework” accord, it is no surprise that Washington did not care to take India, its “major defence partner”, into confidence either.
9. Let’s be clear: The Taliban do not represent most Pashtuns, let alone a majority of Afghans. Many in their ranks are Pakistanis recruited and trained by Pakistan’s rogue Inter-Services Intelligence, just as ISI teams up with Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed against India. The US-Taliban deal nullifies the then US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis’ promise that “we’re not going to surrender civilization to people who cannot win at the ballot box”. Indeed, the deal represents not only a shot in the arm for the resurgent Taliban but also a major diplomatic win for its sponsor, Pakistan, which facilitated the accord. Contrary to speculation that US reliance on Pakistan is on the decline, the interim deal, and the imperative to finalise and implement it, underscore the US dependence on the Pakistani army and ISI. In effect, Pakistan is being rewarded for sponsoring cross-border terrorism. All this holds important implications for India, which, as Mattis said in October, “has been generous over many years with Afghanistan”, earning “a degree of affection from the Afghan people”. Once US troops return home, America will have little ability — especially if it does not leave behind a residual counterterrorism force — to influence events in the Afghanistan-Pakistan belt. If the Taliban were to again capture power in Kabul with Pakistan’s assistance, the benefits for Afghans from the more than \$3 billion in assistance that India has given since 2002 would melt away. Despite growing US strategic cooperation with India, Washington, by its unilateralist actions, is paradoxically increasing the salience of Iran and Russia in India’s Afghanistan policy. India will have to do whatever is necessary to shield its vital interests in Afghanistan,

or else developments there would adversely impinge on Indian security, including in the Kashmir Valley.

10. **CONCLUSION:** Pakistan has been demonstrating its clout in different ways. A formal meeting of the Taliban negotiating team was held with the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. The Taliban spokesperson Zaibullah Mujahid said there had been “comprehensive discussions about Pak-Afghan relations and issues pertaining to Afghan refugees and Afghan businessmen”. Clearly, Pakistan was trying to bring itself formally in to the peace process. It wants public acknowledgement of its role, as Imran Khan made it clear in his statement in Parliament. It is looking at a reversal of the effects of Trump’s bad-mouthing and cut in aid. Further, by putting Imran Khan in front, the army wants to try and reinforce deniability of its own Afghan policy. Even relatively informed western journalists see an elected government in Pakistan with a benign eye, ignoring its lack of real autonomy or agency. The Pakistani army’s game plan becomes obvious when one looks at the topics discussed, which were purely ones that sovereigns discuss. In the bargain, it sought to delegitimise the Afghan government, and put Taliban in its place.
11. Even Russia was in the act of demonstrating its relevance. It convened an Intra-Afghan conference in Moscow. The Taliban and a whole host of anti-Ghani participants, led by Karzai, Atta Mohamed Noor, Hanif Atmar, Mohamed Mohaqeq (deputy chief executive), attended. The Afghan government was absent. The Taliban aim was simple, to present a more moderate version of itself. It said that a future Afghan government would not just comprise the Taliban, but would include others, and women would have full rights envisaged in the Koran. The irony of the situation was lost on the Taliban that rejects the present Constitutional set-up and hence legitimacy of the government, but accepted the legitimacy of the opposition, including of chief executive. Paradoxically, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the chief executive, is a candidate in the presidential elections but remains the number 2 in the Ghani government.
12. Earlier, when the peace talks were at its initial stages, the Taliban had informally announced a framework agreement, which included the withdrawal of foreign troops and, more important, interim governance arrangements. However, the backlash within its ranks was so strong that the statement had to be withdrawn. Mujahid denied its

existence and had to mollify their ranks by saying that sacrifices of the jihadis would not go in vain.

13. The common perception in the region is that the US wants to get out, honourably. The acceptable fig leaf is that Afghanistan would not be used to launch attacks on the US, so no Al Qaeda and no ISIS. But will the Taliban honour it if and when it comes to power? Even more importantly, would the Pakistani army allow the Taliban enough leeway to act independently in Afghanistan's interest?

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