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At their meeting in New Delhi on September 19, 2018 President Ghani briefed Prime Minister Modi on initiatives by his government towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. PM Modi reiterated India's support to an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process. Source: MEA/ Flickr

From left, Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan on January 17, 2019. Source: Twitter/ @ForeignOfficePk

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by
Arun Sahgal and Hemant Krishan Singh

Introduction

The current US-Taliban dialogue underway in Doha (and Islamabad) is essentially driven by the perception within the US Administration that a decisive victory over radical forces represented by the Taliban is unattainable and a negotiated compromise is, therefore, inescapable. The dialogue is thus an attempt to end the 17-year-old conflict in Afghanistan on terms that allow the US to declare partial victory and pull out.

The broad agenda appears to be centred around two key issues, namely "scope and timeline of the US withdrawal" and a "ceasefire", which could together provide the basis for a negotiated settlement. Statements by the lead US interlocutor, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, indicate a tacit understanding on the withdrawal of US forces based on a Taliban guarantee that Afghanistan will not be allowed to become a staging ground for ISIS and other Islamist extremists against Western interests. However, the discourse from the Taliban is at variance, particularly on the issue of a ceasefire. As the negotiations progress, it is important to understand the interests of the principal players, possible scenarios that can emerge, their regional implications and, above all, the consequences for India.

There are three main players in the Afghan conflict: the beleaguered Afghan government, riven by infighting and divisions among various ethnic interests; the United States (US) and its NATO allies; and the Taliban, who have been waging war on "occupation forces" for two decades. Analysis of the statements and declarations made by the three players indicate a complete variance of their goals, objectives and the desired outcomes for Afghanistan.

United States (US)

Growing war fatigue among the US public and continuing casualties with no victory in sight provide the impetus for negotiations with the Taliban, which is also reflected in US President Donald Trump's announcement of a unilateral drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. In their discussions with the Taliban, US negotiators are focusing on the following issues:

- Categorical assurances from the Taliban that they will not provide Al Qaeda or the 'Daesh' sanctuary in Afghanistan.
- Intra-Afghan Dialogue, that is central to any possible ceasefire.
- Terms of a ceasefire that will provide the basis for a withdrawal of US forces.

Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban, on the other hand, have an entirely different agenda. They believe that the US having opened formal negotiations with the Taliban underscores acceptance of the Taliban as a "political entity" and a critical stakeholder in the ongoing conflict. Gleaned from various statements and interviews,[1] the essential elements of Taliban thinking are:

a) The Taliban are a political entity that seeks an inclusive political system (without clearly defining its elements) and will have an important role in the post-conflict political order that will emerge in Afghanistan.

b) The new Afghan Government coming to power post the pullout of foreign forces will be based on the tenets of "Shariah". While there is no direct mention of rewriting the constitution, there are enough indications in the remarks of the Taliban leadership that changes will be made to elements of the constitution that violate the teachings of Shariah.

c) The Taliban are not interested in a ceasefire during the currency of the present talks; their demand is the total withdrawal of US forces. The Taliban believe that military pressure alone will fast-pace the negotiations, leading to a US withdrawal.

d) Any talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban imply acceptance of an illegitimate regime propped up by occupation forces. They would also label the Taliban as a "rebel" insurgency rather than a "legitimate" political player. Therefore, while the country remains under occupation and is governed by a puppet government, there can be no Intra-Afghan dialogue.

e) The Taliban seek the dissolution of Afghan forces (ANA), which they claim were created only to fight against them; the complete

[1] "Will regard Pakistan as brother when in power, seek ties based on mutual respect: Afghan Taliban", Dawn Feb 11, 2019

withdrawal of US forces including soldiers, trainers, contractors; and that the US must leave behind all military hardware.

f) The only concession that is being offered by the Taliban is that they will neither support ISIS nor allow Afghan territory to be used for terrorist activities.

Afghanistan Government

The Afghan government has largely been kept out of the picture of the Doha Dialogue or the Moscow meeting between political actors (the Taliban and Afghanistan politicians outside the government). The US and Russia seem to have forgotten about the "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process" and are busy negotiating their own separate deals, much to the chagrin of the legitimate Afghan Government. Concerned with these developments, President Ghani has urged the US to ensure that Intra-Afghan dialogue is not abandoned at the altar of American expediency. He has also offered to cut the costs of the US presence by agreeing to a reduction in American military commitments. In short, a desperate Afghan Government is willing to go to any distance to prevent a unilateral US troop pullout, or to thwart a settlement that undermines the interests of an elected Afghan Government.

The reality, however, is that the US is unwilling to give any assurances beyond what the Acting US Secretary of Defence stated during his recent visit to Afghanistan on February 10, 2019, namely that the "US wouldn't desert the Afghan security forces". Acting Secretary Shanahan also reiterated that the presence that the US seeks in Afghanistan is intended to ensure "homeland defence" and support "regional stability". These US-centric remarks cannot be welcome for President Ghani and the Afghan security establishment. There are concerns that a hard won democracy, which has resulted in a less radical and more progressive Afghanistan, will slide back to the days of "ideological repression", with women and children being the worst sufferers. On the issue of an Intra-Afghan dialogue, the Afghan government viewpoint is that these should be "State-centric talks" in which the Taliban has to interact with the Afghan people's representatives for any meaningful end to the conflict.

Implications

The following perspectives emerge from the foregoing discourse:

a) The US is looking for an exit through a "plausible settlement", while retaining "sustainable structures" in place, a euphuism for some sort of bases

and a limited presence. Nonetheless, the contours of any settlement acceptable to the Americans have yet to emerge.

b) There is little likelihood of a ceasefire under the present terms of the negotiations. Sensing victory, the Taliban are unlikely to agree to anything short of a US pullout. However, they may eventually accept a conditional ceasefire linked to the pullout of 14,000 American troops (out of the total presence of approximately 21,000 NATO and US forces), including military personnel and training/logistics staff.

c) An Intra-Afghan dialogue is a non-starter given the Taliban position. Nor are the Taliban likely to accept taking part in the electoral process under the present constitution. This implies defining the Taliban's political role and induction into the Afghan political system through modalities like a Loya Jirga or other options being explored by former President Hamid Karzai.

d) The widespread perception that the Taliban are a homogenous group is entirely misplaced. In fact, there are several factions which appear to have their own interests and loyalties. The current negotiations are not being conducted with any harmonised and representative Taliban group, but are restricted to those predominant Taliban groups that enjoy Pakistani support and are acceptable to the US.

e) The position of Afghan Government forces is not as weak as is generally made out. Despite physical and territorial losses, they continue to hold all major towns and cities, which remain firmly under government control. This actually provides the Afghan Government some leverage to negotiate the terms of negotiations to end a long and bloody conflict.

f) The main issue for the beleaguered Afghan Government, however, is how to ensure economic sustainability if US and international funding were to suddenly dry up. Fear of this outcome will raise the spectre of desertions within the Afghan Army, further heightening regime instability.

g) In these circumstances, it would be preferable for US negotiators to maintain two core objectives: a ceasefire and Intra-Afghan dialogue. Attempts to sideline the Afghan Government will have serious implications that include Afghanistan's rapid descent into civil war.

From left, Ashraf Ghani, President of Afghanistan; Sher Mohammed Abas Stanekzai, chief Taliban negotiator; and Zalmay Khalilzad, the Americans' peace envoy. Source: The New York Times

Possible Scenarios

Based on these implications, the following future scenarios for Afghanistan appear plausible:

Scenario 1. Negotiations with the Taliban result in a broad-based ceasefire linked to the withdrawal of US troops, but without an agreement on the Intra-Afghan dialogue. A process to win over disgruntled and anti-Pakistan groups is initiated through various inducements. Over a period of time, fissures emerge within the Taliban, which obliges a weakened Taliban leadership to join forces with the government, changing the situation on the ground. This scenario requires continued US and international funding support and depends on the ability of the Afghan Government to project a united front. Essentially, it implies a continued power struggle but with the Afghan Government largely holding its own.

Scenario 2. This scenario relates to an inconclusive and indefinite conflict post the breakdown of talks. With a drastic scaling down of the US presence, there is likely to be an intensification of fighting and an incremental increase in Taliban control of the countryside and smaller towns. The Afghan Government would continue to hold most of the major towns. Cohesiveness of the Afghan military forces is largely maintained but comes under increasing pressure. This scenario presumes dwindling international support and financing for the Kabul government.

Scenario 3. This is a slide down from Scenario 2. The Taliban step up attacks. Under pressure, US forces begin to pull out, leaving at best a token presence. Afghanistan lapses into uncontrolled violence. Desertions among Afghan

forces increase, allowing the Taliban to take control of towns and cities and begin re-imposing Shariah laws. An unstable, violent and uncontrolled Afghanistan emerges, which is both increasingly radicalised and economically deprived.

Scenario 4. This is an extension of Scenario 3, in which the collapse of the Kabul regime does not result in a consolidation of power by the Taliban, but leads to fractionalisation within the insurgent movement and the emergence of local warlords. This results in the fragmentation of Afghanistan into competing ethnic militia groups, together with regional proxy interventions from Pakistan and Iran. A bloody, open-ended civil war ensues, with the potential for creating major regional instability. In this scenario, it can hardly be ensured that Afghanistan will not once again become a sanctuary for extremist groups like Al Qaida or Daesh.

Regional Implications of a US Pullout and Emergence of the Taliban as a Political Actor

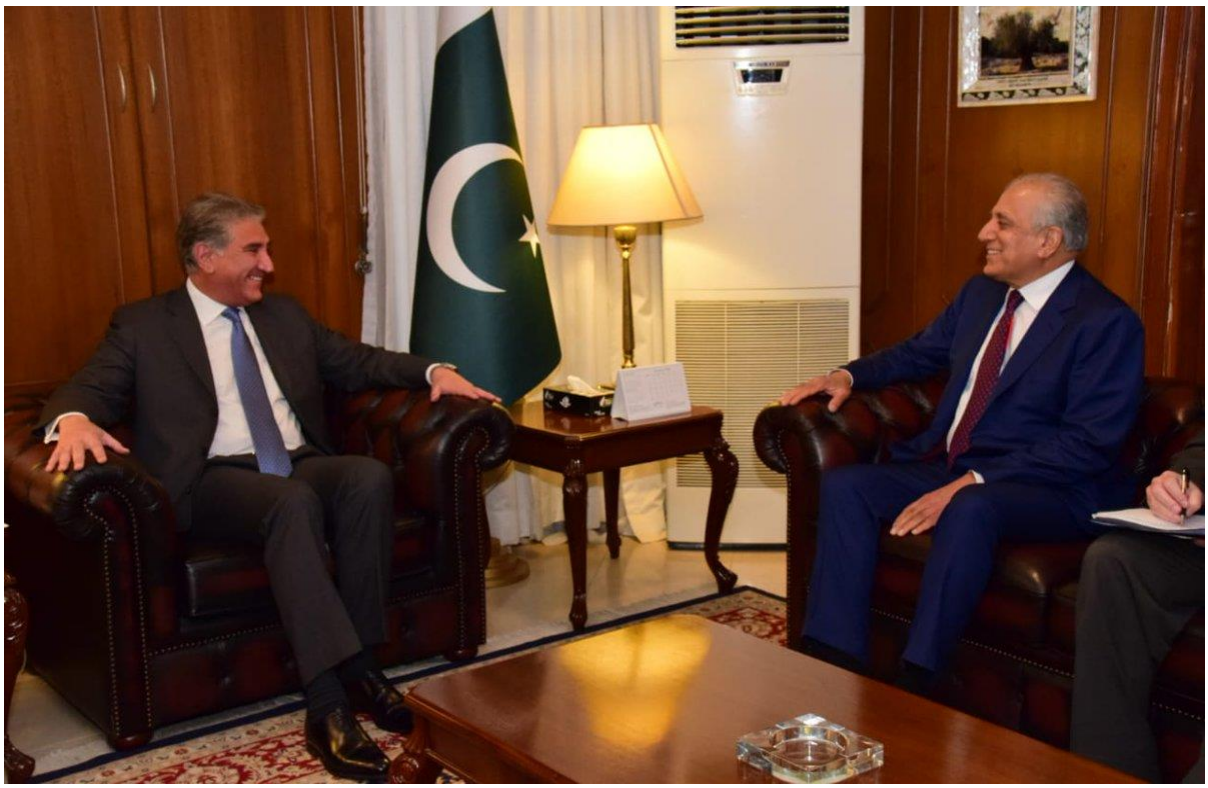
It is obvious that the US is seeking an "honourable" exit strategy like it did in Iraq. The situation is complicated both by the facts on the ground and the external support that the US is seeking in pursuit of its strategy. The various scenarios outlined above appear unlikely to secure lasting peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, let along secure some of the gains of the Afghan people's democratic aspirations. Whereas US peace overtures towards the Taliban are understandable, these should lead to a clearly outlined pathway to greater stability and must not result in what the New York Times has termed *"negotiated capitulation"*.

A precipitated or even phased withdrawal of US forces will certainly impact the fighting ability of the poorly equipped and partially trained Afghan forces. So what we are likely to see is generalised chaos in Afghanistan and a deeply destabilised West and South Asian region.

An even more questionable element of the US strategy is the central role once again being assigned to Pakistan in seeking accommodation with the Taliban, something that is making not just India but also Afghanistan and Iran uncomfortable. This only confirms that the US has maintained close contacts with both the Taliban and the ISI despite all along being aware of Pakistan's insidious role in promoting the Taliban as a regional proxy. The ease with which they have been able to produce senior Taliban interlocutors for the talks and the attempt to host the third round of talks in Islamabad underscores the shambolic nature of putting the onus of controlling terrorism on its actual source, the Pakistani military and ISI.

The US deep state has all along maintained this close relationship with Pakistan based on the doctrine of necessity. What Pakistan is unmindful of are the consequences of having a radicalised state and a civil war on its western front, or of opening up too many fronts. The consequences have already begun to unfold. In the last week, there have been two major attacks by Sunni radical organisations emboldened by the success of the Taliban. In Sistani Baluchistan (Iran), the terror group Jaish al-Adl attacked a bus carrying Islamic Republican Guards near the capital city of Zahedan and killed 27 Iranian soldiers. On February 14, a CRPF convoy en route from Jammu to Srinagar was attacked at Pulwama by Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists, leading to death of 40 Indian policemen.

The internal situation in Pakistan is already vitiated. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement is gaining strength, with their protests attracting large crowds. Baluchistan and Karachi are facing serious internal security problems, as evidenced by the attack on the Chinese consulate and others on security forces. Added to this is the deep mistrust and fear of the security establishment, with dissenting voices being picked up or simply eliminated in encounters. The idea of a "Naya Pakistan" lies in tatters.



From left, Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan on January 17, 2019. Source: Twitter/ @ForeignOfficePk

Meanwhile, the Pakistani deep state is continuing to pursue its long held grand strategy of creating strategic depth in the West through a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and undermining Indian and American influence in Kabul. To its East, Pakistan is encouraging anti-India extremists like the JeM and LeT to step up operations in J&K and elsewhere in India, to bleed the Indian state through a thousand cuts. The proxy war in J&K is an intrinsic part of this destabilising grand strategy, where Kashmiri Muslims are being led astray with the promise of Azadi and succumbing to Pakistan's designs to engage in secessionist activities. The final element of Pakistan's approach is to use CPEC to perpetuate Pakistan's occupation of POK by ensuring that any future conflict can no longer take place within the limited sphere of India-Pakistan relations.

Implications for India

Developments in Afghanistan have two serious consequences for India. Firstly, with Afghanistan emerging as the extended core of radical Sunni forces, their malevolent ideology will soon spread across the region. A radicalised Afghanistan will undermine India's regional interests, particularly in Af-Pak, Iran and Central Asia. The current Pakistani government, with its "Medina Model" and support for Sharia law, is already becoming increasingly Islamist, undermining any notion that moderate or progressive models of Islam might stage a comeback. Second, Pakistan will leverage this trend to mount even more pressure on India through the proxy war and increased militancy in J&K. We will see more horrific attacks against Indian forces like Pulwama, Uri, and Pathankot. Pakistan's deep state appears sanguine in its presumption that given the prevailing nuclear balance and Pakistan's "full spectrum deterrence", the democratic and secular Indian state will be averse to punitive retaliation, or at least keep it at a low key with limited impact on the Pak strategy of bleeding India.

Thus, an ill thought out US withdrawal that leaves a major power vacuum in Afghanistan will unquestionably have serious consequences. All regional actors, including India, Iran, China and the Central Asian countries, have vital stakes in Afghan stability and peace. A regional dialogue to which the Afghan Government and the Taliban are invited could provide a more viable framework for a negotiated settlement, an imperative that can no longer be left to the US alone. India cannot merely sit and watch Afghanistan's downward slide into chaos. It also needs to take concrete steps to try and forge a broader regional consensus to ensure that post the US withdrawal, Pakistan's proxy war strategy through the state sponsorship of terror does not escalate. Some of the steps India can consider include:

a) Take the initiative for a regional dialogue on terrorism and Afghanistan. Iran and Russia have already dealt themselves into the game. China must be included in this discourse.

b) Provide requisite assurances to the Afghan Government, including through an increased military commitment in terms of weapons and material support.

c) Step up training programmes for the Afghan security forces, including bolstering their anti-insurgency capability.

d) See what can be salvaged out of the erstwhile Northern Alliance in Panjshir to create a counter-Taliban option.

e) Make it clear to the US that the terms of its engagement with the Taliban should not undermine regional peace, and Pakistan's role in harbouring terrorist groups must be restrained. We must highlight the consequences of what could happen, pointing to the Pulwama terror attack and growing terrorist violence in the region.

f) Nominate a high level Special Representative for Afghanistan and bring regional players to the negotiating table on a shared platform for peace and stability.

At their meeting in New Delhi on September 19, 2018 President Ghani briefed Prime Minister Modi on initiatives by his government towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. PM Modi reiterated India's support to an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process. Source: MEA/ Flickr

Conclusion

Considerable effort has been made over the last two decades to put in place structures that address Afghanistan's economic development and security needs. Today, the country's future once again hangs in balance, between continued social progress and development, like all other developing nations aspire to achieve, or a return to a regressive and brutal Islamist ideology. Countries in the region, which will bear the brunt of developments in Afghanistan, are at an inflection point. It is in India's core interest to prevent the emergence of a Taliban dominated, Pakistan centric Afghanistan, whose consequences will be even greater regional radicalisation and destabilisation. India must step forward to play a meaningful role.

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