

US-Afghan Talks: Myths and Realities

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Abstract This article focuses on US-Taliban talks in the context of intra-Afghan talks. The talks provide for the restoration of peace in Afghanistan and withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan after a period of about 19 years. It also provides for the swap of 5,000 Taliban held by the government and 1,000 Afghan in the custody of Taliban. The agreement cannot be put into practice on account of mutual distrust by both the Afghan government and the Taliban. Though there is pressure from the US over the Afghan government for resumption of talks with Taliban yet no fruitful result has been obtained. The government of Afghanistan is not only faced with threat of insurgency from Taliban but also the ISKP or ISIS. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and failure of the US-Taliban talks is testimony to the fact that 'Realism' has failed to shape the politics of the smaller states.

Key Words: US, Taliban, Afghan, Talks, Security

Introduction

February 29, 2020 marks the beginning of a new era in the history of Afghanistan and the United when peace agreement was signed between the two countries through their representatives. The agreement paved the way for a series of deliberations between the government of Afghanistan and Taliban with its particular emphasis on the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. The events that followed, resulted in the increase of violence in Afghanistan which created deadlock over the nature of release of prisoners by the government of Afghanistan, raised questions in the mind over the US policy in Afghanistan that may continue even in the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US –Afghan talks seem to bear fruit and would bring positive prospects for the future of Afghanistan but that does not seem practical since beaches at the very initial stages have come from the Afghan government by not releasing the Taliban prisoners.

In 2017, President Trump in his speech dilated upon a revised strategy for Afghanistan by referring to a 'Political Settlement' as an outcome of 'Effective Military Effort' but could not explain the US goals and conditions for the putative political process in Afghanistan. But after a period of a few months, the US administration focused on entering into parley with the Taliban, while ignoring the government of Afghanistan or any of its nominees (Thomas, 2020). It was not a good decision to ignore the Afghan government in the talks since the basic issue is between the Afghan government and the Taliban but President Trump soon realized participation of the Afghan government is *sine qua non* to the agreement. The reversed approach by the US administration, centered around an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process" that resulted in the US-Taliban direct parley occurring in July 2018 in Doha, Qatar (Marshal, 2019). Great role has been played by Zalmay Khalizad, Afghan born former US Ambassador to Afghanistan.

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In order to carry on the peace process, Khalilzad, was able to have a series of talks with the representatives of Taliban in Doha, while taking into confidence the representatives of Taliban, Pakistan and some key actors at the regional level. In January, Khalilzad expressed the view that Taliban have agreed to their contentment by showing their devotion that Afghanistan will never provide any stage for the activities of terrorism on its soil in return for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan (Khalilzad, 2019). A series of deliberations that followed in March 2019, Khalilzad revealed that an accord has been concluded with Taliban over the counterterrorism assurances and US withdrawal from Afghanistan. He further added that after the finalization of the draft, negotiations between the Taliban and nominees of the government will commence in the form of intra-Afghan talks for reaching a peaceful political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire (Lamothe, Hudson, & Constable, 2019). By August, the process of agreement was coming to a culmination but on September 7, 2019, the peace negotiations were called off by the US President when an attack by Taliban in the city of Kabul resulted in the murder of many people which also included a US soldier (Trump, 2019). US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo stated that “we were close” but the “Taliban failed to live to the commitments they had made with us” (Pompeo, 2019). In rebuttal of this statement, the Taliban representative stated that the US would “regret” abandoning talks while maintaining at the same time that “our doors are open for negotiations” (BBC, 2019).

According to unofficial reports, after a month or so, talks between Khalilzad and representatives of Taliban began in Pakistan (Asif Shazad 2019). This gained great momentum when on November 12, 2019; President Ashraf Ghani released three high-profiles Taliban from the custody of Afghan government in lieu two personnel from America and Australia, taken into custody by the *Haqqani Network* (Thomas 2020). President Ashraf Ghani added that the release was made in the best interest of the public so as to facilitate face to face talks with the Taliban (Spokesman, 2019). This move by the Afghan president paved the way for carrying on the peace talks between the US, Taliban and the Afghan government for a permanent settlement of the Afghan issue and withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan.

Peace Talks and Reduction in Violence

There has been a tremendous decrease in the violence in Afghanistan as a consequence of the initiated peace talks. This was testified by a senior US official on February 14, 2020 that the US-Taliban negotiations have arrived at a “very specific” contract to mitigate violence in the whole country. The reduction in violence was appreciated by the US officials as ‘a test of Taliban’ future prospects and command of the group over its armed forces for complying with their orders. This ran counter to the statement of Khalilzad, who, in the advance of the agreement, told the US Senators that withdrawal of the US forces will stop if the violence did not cease in Afghanistan (Ignatius, 2020). It is indeed praiseworthy that there was a gradual decrease in the violence in Afghanistan as a result of the peace talks. The reduction in violence was praised by the US Commander General Scott Miller on February 22, 2020 who showed his satisfaction with the effect that “Taliban made good-faith effort” while referring to episodes of violence “sporadic” (Lamothe, 2020). In order to check the reduced violence, Miller intermingled with the Afghan people in February 2020 without a bodyguard and discussed with them the reduction in the violence. The US sources as well as the Afghan official are of the view that there has been a decrease in violence as much as 80%.

US-Taliban Agreement

After the reduction in violence to about 80%, Khalilzad Zalmay, Special Representative to the US, had to sign the peace agreement between the US and Taliban with Mullah Beradar on February 29, 2020 in Doha. The signing ceremony was also attended by observers from across the world and Pompeo, US Secretary of State. As per the terms and conditions of the US-Taliban Agreement, the US would drawdown its forces from the current strength of 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days. This will be coupled with a proportionate decrease in the strength of the allied forces and withdraw all of the US forces from Afghanistan within 14 months (Thomas, 2020). So, the timeframe for complete withdrawal of US forces has been determined

to be 14 months, enabling the Afghan government to decide all matters of importance and maintain security of key installations in the country. Another important clause of this agreement is the swap of war captives between the Afghan government and Taliban and the resultant removal of sanctions on Taliban by August 27, 2020. As per the terms of the agreement sanctions can be removed only provided the intra-Afghan parley commences. The Taliban has shown commitment not to allow other groups, particularly the Al-Qaeda for using the Afghan soil to intimate the security personnel of the United States or its allies ([Thomas, 2020](#)). This guarantee from the Taliban is a sign of good omen for the long lasting peace and stability of Afghanistan. This will also ensure improvement in the law and order situation in Afghanistan and will bring about an end to the civil war in some parts of the country and above all the withdrawal of the US troops from the country. This agreement has also made one point more clear that Taliban are stakeholders in the Afghan set up but they have been ignored since long by giving them their due representation in the governmental machinery.

Obstacles to Intra-Afghan Talks

One of the greatest obstacles in the way of intra-Afghan talks is the exchange of prisoners which is necessary to resolve the issue of war in the country. The US-Taliban Agreement provides for the release of 5,000 Taliban and 1,000 Afghan security personnel captured by Taliban. The exchange of prisoners is to take place by March 10, 2020. It was also agreed that the US-Afghan government in collaboration with the Taliban would jointly work for the release of significant number of prisoners on both sides. In continuation of this move, President of Afghanistan had to sign a document on March 11, 2020 in which he showed his intention that the government is going to release 1,500 captives within a period of fifteen days upon production of the written assurances by the Taliban, with 500 more prisoners to be released every two weeks provided the Taliban keep away from the battlefield, engage in talks and reduce violence ([Shalizi, 2020](#)). However, the spokesman of the Taliban discarded swap of prisoners based on any conditionality as, "against the peace accord that we signed" and urged that 5,000 prisoners are going to be extricated from the Afghan prison prior to the commencement of the talks between the government and Taliban ([Reuters, 2020](#)).

Another great impediment in the way of intra-Afghan negotiations is the resurgence of violence across the whole nation since the agreement was signed between the US and Taliban. Sources of the Afghan government say that at least 76 attacks have been carried out by the Taliban across Afghanistan in 24 provinces out of 34 provinces and that two during the four days since the agreement between the US and Taliban was signed. The sources further stated that the Taliban took recourse to assaults as more than 42 attacks became the fate of Helmand Province in just a single day on March 3, 2020. In retaliation to this, the first airstrike was conducted by the US after a period of 11 days ([USFOR, 2020](#)). According to the spokesman of the Taliban the US airstrikes are not in violation of the accord provided these attacks are carried out in reprisal of attacks by Taliban. But the views of the Afghan government is quite contrary to it, according to it, security situation deteriorated as a result of the Taliban's eleven attacks on March 4, 2020 followed by three attacks on March 5, 2020. The Taliban have been denying these attacks but the occurrence of a large scale attack on March 6, 2020 resulting in the death of 32 people at the mausoleum of a Shia leader in Afghanistan while another attack of the same nature was shouldered by the ISIS ([Press, 2020](#)).

Security Situation in Afghanistan

As of June 2020 the current strength of US forces under the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan stands at 16000 out of which 8,000 belong to the US while the rest form part of the form part of the coalition forces. The RSM has played a very significant role in Afghanistan since its existence in the early 2015 by providing training and assistance to the Afghan National Forces when the security forces of Afghanistan took control of the security measures ([Tariq, 2018](#)). As has been mentioned earlier, the US

has a commitment to withdraw all the US Forces from Afghanistan within a period of 14 months, which has been viewed as a strategic stalemate by most of the US military officials since 2017 ([Milley, 2019](#)). As a result of the increased civilian casualties, the US made a huge supply of weapons and ammunition to Afghanistan during 2019 than any other year since 2010. It is an admitted fact that the 3rd quarter of 2019 received the huge number of civilian casualties since 2009, where round about 4,301 civilians fell victim to death or injury from 1st July to September 30th 2019 ([UNAMA, 2019](#)). The US forces also retaliated by conducting 3,257 strikes in 31 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

US Adversaries in Afghanistan

Haibatullah Akhunzada, the present head of Taliban is said to be a great religious scholar than his predecessors. He is considered as a great religious scholar than a military diplomat ([Sentinel, 2018](#)). Under his charismatic management, the Taliban have remained a cohesive force and has more military successes and seems less vulnerable to any fragmentation and segmentation ([Watkins, 2019](#)). The Taliban still has the potential of cohesiveness and has the potentiality of conducting high-profile attacks at the urban level by showing considerable strength ([Tariq, 2018](#)). According to an estimate, there are 60,000 full time Taliban fighters. According to a report of the SIGAR, during January 2020, the fourth quarter of 2019 saw the greatest number of attacks by the Taliban ever since 2010 ([Worsnop, 2018](#)). It is also a fact that during the recent months the fatalities of ANDSF have averaged 30-45 a day. President Ashraf Ghani made it clear in the first month of 2019, stating that more than 4,500 men of the law enforcement agencies had paid “the ultimate sacrifice” since the time of his taking over charge in September 2014 ([Ghani, 2019](#)). These attacks by the Taliban show that they are still a stimulant force and can hit hard when they find any opportunity anywhere in the country. One of the greatest plus points of their strength is the leadership qualities of their leader where no segregation emerges inside the parent group.

Another headache for the US forces' operations in Afghanistan is the ISKP or ISIS. The strength of the ISKP ranges from 2,000 to 4,000 armed forces until it was shattered in the late 2019 by the joint operations of the US and Afghan forces and Taliban separately ([Times, 2019](#)). The role of Taliban in fighting against the ISKP was highly appreciated by the special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad but also warned that they have not been completely eliminated from Afghanistan ([Khalilzad, 2019](#)). Both the Taliban and the ISKP have been at daggers drawn on most of the occasions by fighting over territories on account of their political differences ([Jadoon et al, 2018](#)). It is also reported that the ISKP has been conducting attacks in the western parts of the country having claimed liability for most of these attacks, particularly focusing on the country's *Shia* minority. In January 2020 the US also reported that Al-Qaeda is concerned about the US-Taliban talks but now consensus seem to have developed between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, with the Al-Qaeda to concentrate on the supply of wherewithal and preparation for war in lieu of protection ([Report, 2017](#)).

The Current Status of ANDSF

The ANDSF is the joint name for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. It comprises the Afghan Armed Forces, Afghan National Army, Afghan Air Forces, Afghan National Police, Afghan Local Police and National Directorate of Security. The ANDSF is very effective to the security of Afghanistan. The United States appropriated \$86.4 billion for the security of Afghanistan during Financial Year, FY 2002 to FY 2019, as per report of the SIGAR ([SIGAR, 2020](#)). Since 2014 when the drawdown scenario was initiated, the US has been allocating 75% of the appropriated \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year. As of October 2019, the total strength of the ANDSF stood at 273,000, up to 19,000 from the previous quarter. The US military provides for the increase in the strength of the ANDSF with changes in the enrollment verification process from quarters concerned ([SIGAR, 2020](#)). Besides increasing the number of security personnel, the US is also urging the Afghan government to improve the quality of security and adopt modern strategies for combating terrorism and insurgency.

Failure of the Intra-Afghan Talks

The US-Taliban talks failed as the Afghan officials show their reluctance to release the high-ranked Taliban leadership during the very first batch of captives to be released. The peace parley that lasted for a week between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan over the swap of prisoners, don't seem to produce any fruitful results as Taliban pulled out of the deal ([Mashal, 2020](#)). The agreement for the exchange of prisoners between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban was signed in February 2020, calling for the release of prisoners from both sides. Future power-sharing in the set up of the Afghan government was also part of the agreement between the two sides. This agreement is a landmark in the history of Afghanistan as this will facilitate the withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan as the Americans have given a period of 14 months for the total withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan (Mashal, 2020). Now, since the agreement has been called off by Taliban, this will lead to another dilemma between the government and Taliban. President of Afghanistan, Ghani had shown his agreement to set free the 5,000 Taliban captives as a small technical team of the insurgents visited Kabul for the verification and identification of prisoners before their release but this process collapsed since the two sides accuse each other of insincerity (Mashal, 2020). Suhail, a spokesperson of the Taliban states that "the release of prisoners has been delayed for one reason or the other but their technical team will not participate in the fruitless discussions". Despite Taliban's detaching themselves out of the negotiations, the government functionaries expected another scheduled convention with the Taliban but that was not materialized.

Javid Faisal, a spokesperson for the National Security Council of Afghanistan, expressed his views by saying that deliberations on setting free of the law enforcement agencies of Afghanistan and Taliban had reached a culminating point of release of prisoners but withdrawal from talks by the Taliban at such a crucial time shows the lack of interest on part of the Taliban. He further added that they tried their best to trust them but they (Taliban) need to trust them too so as to work together for a joint action by creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and harmony. The Afghan government has been trying hard to resume talks with Taliban as the United States has been pressurizing them for cutting \$1 billion over the ongoing internal conflict in Afghanistan. The US also blames the Afghan government for undermining the peace deal. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo while announcing the cut in aid went to the extent of saying in clear terms that in case they failed to resolve their dispute meant for prioritizing the peace talks, the American will withdraw all their troops from Afghanistan.

Matin Bek, head of the Afghan local government to President Ashraf Ghani said that the talks suffered a deadlock since Taliban were demanding in the very first batch of release of at least 15 senior commanders convicted of major attacks which the government is not ready to release at this stage of the agreement. According to some of the Afghan officials who are aware of the discussion say that the government is very sincere in its efforts and has even involved the international Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) but the Taliban accuse the government of creating pretexts for not proceeding. The government is bent upon making them understand that the release will take some time since confirmation of the prisoners is of utmost importance for the government as they have to make proper arrangements for their extrication. Taliban are of the view that the release of the high-ranked leadership could help in identifying and verifying the rest of 5,000 prisoners. The government officials are of the view that they could not be released at this stage of the agreement but could participate in the identification and verification process of the prisoners.

In the wake of gravity of the situation, Zalmay Khalilzad also had a meeting with Pakistan's Military Chief to discuss the US-Taliban peace deal. The meeting was attended by Gen. Scott Miller, chief of the US martial in Afghanistan while statements were issued from the US Embassy in Islamabad and the US, military in Kabul urging that Washington is very much concerned with the restoration of peace after years of rentals war ([Press, 2020](#)). Taliban's spokesman Suhail Shaheen also referred to their chief negotiator, Mullah Baradar who protested against the attacks conducted by the security forces of the United States while targeting Taliban in Afghanistan. These attacks are very much in contradiction to the spirit of the February

2020 agreement. Mullah Baradar remarked that “our men have been targeted in their residential areas while there is no room for such attacks in the agreement, either by the US or their internal (Afghan) supporters” (Press, 2020). The US refused to address the specific complaint of the Taliban but rather urged that it was binding upon them to come to the help of the Afghan government in maintaining law and order. Pakistani military leader Gen. Qamar Javid Bajwa, in a meeting with Zalmay Khalilzad, reaffirmed Pakistan’s support for US efforts in their pledge by playing a significant role to reach a permanent resolution to the Afghan imbroglio.

It is significant that Taliban are not attacking the US troops and NATO forces in Afghanistan in the post signing of the US-Taliban agreement but their attacks are usually directed towards the Afghan forces in the far-flung areas of the country. The main concern of the US is the reduction of violence in those attacks. Taliban’s spokesman is of the view that they are all set for negotiations with the government in order to bring about cease-fire across the country and that subject to the initiation of the intra-Afghan dialogue. In the intra-Afghan talks, it is difficult for Taliban whom to talk with as the government has been dueling over the office of the president-ship since no candidate has emerged with a clear majority. The deal is awaiting its practical manifestation in when 1000 government officials will be released while 5,000 Taliban will be released. The main causes for the failure of the intra-Afghan talks are:

- i) Taliban are mainly concerned with the release of the 15 Taliban key commanders at the first stage of the agreement, contending that they would help in the verification and identification process of the Taliban to be released.
- ii) The government is not in a position to release those 15 Taliban commanders at the initial stage but they be allowed to verify and identify the Taliban to be released.
- iii) Taliban are engaged in fighting against the Afghan force in the outlying areas and not against the US forces as per terms of the agreement.
- iv) The US wants a reduction in the attacks against the Afghan forces by Taliban
- v) Each part is accusing the other of insincerity in the peace process.
- vi) The Americans have been putting pressure on the Afghan government to expedite the peace seal with Taliban otherwise they would withdraw their forces from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The efforts made by the various actors in bringing peace and stability will a very significant role in the history of Afghanistan. In this regard, the peace parley reached between the US and Taliban and the government of Afghanistan and Taliban will lead towards making necessary arrangements for the resolution of the Afghan conflict. Coming to terms with Taliban is another area of concern for the United States and the NATO forces that everything cannot be subdued in the world through the use of force and violence. Sitting for table talks with the Taliban is proving the fact that “Realism” has failed as a theory because the non-state actors need to be given share in the power politics of the country. It also leads to another point that war is not a solution to all the problems of the world. Terrorism, insurgency and other social evils can better be tackled through diplomacy, negotiation and peace deal. The United States and NATO forces during their long stay of 19 years could not subdue Afghanistan and their drawdown and complete withdrawal in a period of 14 months gives the lesson that they have not succeeded in defeating the Taliban but are facing another faction in the name of ISKP or ISIS. Now, Taliban are not the only threat to the Afghan government and the US troops, rather the ISIS pose threat of a more serious nature. Moreover, the Taliban and the ISIS are also not on the same page but they are too poles apart and have been engaged in fighting against each other on many fronts. For long lasting peace and a sustainable Afghanistan, durable peace is the cry of the day in which all the stakeholders of Afghanistan including the Afghan government, the Taliban and the ISIS, the United States, representatives from the NATO forces and regional actors such as Pakistan, India, Iran and China must be taken into confidence.

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