

Afghanistan's Future: How can Pakistan help?

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the prospects of peace and stability of Afghanistan after the expected withdrawal of foreign forces from an unsuccessful war lasting 18 years. In fact, Afghanistan's troubles predate this war. For more than four decades, it has only seen strife and tension, while struggling with the building of modern political institutions and structure of governance reflecting its historical state and nation-building challenges. The Taliban were just one among many of these challenges the current war could not resolve. The United States (US) and the Taliban are now talking to end the war. However, for a lasting solution for Afghanistan, the countries in the region and the US have to remain committed for Afghanistan's sake and for their own sake. Pakistan has a crucial role to play to put pressure on the Taliban to share power. It will not do so without a new relationship with Afghanistan that accommodates its security and strategic interests. And Washington must remain engaged with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It should also develop some understanding with India, China and Russia. Without these arrangements, the Americans may leave but the conflict could continue with a different name.

Introduction

Nearly 18 years after it invaded Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban, the United States (US) is talking to them to seek their help to get out of the country.

Since December 2018, six rounds of talks have taken place between the US Special Representative Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban negotiating team. The talks have reportedly made good headway but where are they headed to?¹ Will they simply end the war as we know it enabling the American and other foreign forces to go home leaving the Afghans to settle the rest? Or will they steer Afghanistan towards peace and stability that has eluded it ever since the monarchy was overthrown in 1973? And what role can Pakistan play to help Afghanistan achieve peace for the good of both countries?

Pakistan and Afghanistan are not just two sovereign countries with bilateral problems. Afghanistan's history, culture, ethnicity, social institutions and religion link it organically to Pakistan. And the two countries face serious common challenges, especially the threat of extremism and terrorism to which both contributed. The problems of each are tied to policies and conditions in the other, and instability in Afghanistan leads to instability in Pakistan.

Graveyard of Empires?

There is a widely repeated myth that Afghanistan is a "graveyard of empires". In line with this, it is said that the US' war has been failing because Afghanistan is yet again proving to be a

¹ 'US-Taliban talks: As hopes rise of a deal, what comes next?', *The News*, 27 January 2019.

graveyard of empires. In reality, the view that Afghanistan is a land of fiercely independent people who have always defeated foreign powers may not historically accurate. The Afghans may have defeated the British and Czarist Russia but they did not defeat the Soviets, certainly not by themselves. It was a coalition of victors comprising a superpower, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence and, of course, the Afghans that defeated the Soviets. And the victory cost billions of dollars.²

This war was essentially the final battle of the Cold War. While the US won, the Afghans ended up as losers. They got rid of the communists but got stuck with the Taliban. The superpowers went home but regional powers walked in. And soon sneaked in the international *jihad*. It was only a matter of time before another Afghanistan war flared up. Arguably Washington did not invade Afghanistan as an empire. It intervened in a civil war for national security reasons. And the government that Washington helped establish does not want it to leave. It is worth noting that not every Afghan has been fighting the Americans. It is just a radical minority called the Taliban. America's failure in this war has been Afghanistan's failure as well. There have been no winners in this war.

The Myth of Reconciliation

There is another myth that discounts the complexity of the Afghanistan challenge by defining it as a search for reconciliation. The fact is that reconciliation is not the issue here. Reconciliation is with someone disaffected. The Taliban are not disaffected – they are rivals in power. And this is not the only rivalry for power in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's major ethnic and political factions are all vying for power and view any peace process as an armed conflict.

Long Search for Stability

It is a great irony that a trillion dollar war could not fix Afghanistan. There must be something terribly wrong with the country, not just with America's war. What we have is a country in search of stability.³

Afghanistan has serious power imbalances, deep fault lines – ethnic, tribal, regional and ideological – and an important rural and urban divide. This fractiousness lends itself to unending struggles for power. Moreover, the fact that it lies at the crossroads of regional and geopolitical rivalries and competition means that Afghanistan is prone to external intervention. This mix of internal conflicts and outside interference aggravates Afghanistan's potential for instability. Its democracy is superficial⁴ and dominated as it is by power structures that foster instability. And, the Americans have apparently lost patience with it.

US-Taliban Talks

The US wants to leave Afghanistan just like the Soviets had wanted to do so in the 1980s. There was an agreement in 1988 to facilitate the withdrawal of the Soviet forces but no deal

² Netflix, 'Afghanistan: The Great Game', Rory Stewart, 2012.

³ Daniel Byman and Steven Simon, 'Trump's Surge in Afghanistan – Why We Can't Seem to End the War', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 December 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

on the fate of the Afghan state. Are the Americans now negotiating a similar half deal with the Taliban?⁵

The US and the Taliban have found convergence on a limited aim. US President Donald Trump's has decided to withdraw most of the troops from Afghanistan to fulfill his campaign promise to end America's foreign wars. On its part, the Taliban calculate that the equilibrium in the military stalemate favours them and they should leverage it to seek a negotiated peace on their terms. The two have been in perfect fit.

The US-Taliban talks, so far, have centred on two issues: the withdrawal of foreign troops and the safeguarding of America's minimal security interests by getting the Taliban to agree that they would not allow the territory under their control for any acts of terrorism by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, among other. Apparently an understanding has been reached on these two issues.

The two sticking points are Washington's demand for a ceasefire and the insistence that the Taliban work out an intra-Afghan political settlement through a dialogue with the Kabul government. Ambassador Khalilzad says agreements on all four issues would eventually comprise a single comprehensive deal and the US would not withdraw its troops until that time. Meanwhile, he says "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed".⁶

Political Settlement

As a negotiator, Khalilzad is trying to keep everybody on-board. That is why he recently undertook an extensive trip⁷ to Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia and the United Kingdom from 21 April to 11 May 2019. He has also been in touch with China. Apparently, he has been assuring all of them that Washington is not planning a hasty retreat.

Yet, uncertainty and doubt over America's real aims and strategy remain. US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said in his testimony on the Hill on 12 April 2019 that Washington was focused on two major points: reducing the waste of US resources and risks to American soldiers, and to prevent future terrorist attacks "from that real estate". This will ultimately be a resolution that the Afghan people will have to achieve." America, he said, was looking for an agreement that leads to reconciliation and takes down the violence level. The negotiations he said will get a "framework".

Pompeo's remarks about the framework raise more questions than answers. Crucially, will the Taliban be left as a commanding force of change under the receding shadow of departing US forces? Or will the American military engagement and financial support be on hand to strengthen the negotiating hand of the Kabul government?⁸ The key issues are the relationship to be established by the "framework" between the time table of the withdrawal, negotiations for the final peace between the Taliban and the Kabul government, and the nature of the final settlement. In other words, what is the end goal and how to get there?

⁵ Ezzatullah Mehrdad, 'Can the Afghan State Survive the Peace Process?', *The Diplomat*, 19 March 2019.

⁶ 'Next meeting to focus on foreign troops' pullout: Taliban', *Dawn*, 22 April 2019.

⁷ 'Khalilzad Begins New Multi-Nation Trip On Afghan Peace', *TOLO News*, 2 April 2019.

⁸ Rustam Shah Mohmand Why Taliban would not accept a ceasefire offer, *The Express Tribune*, 27 April 2019.

It seems different stakeholders have different ideas about the end goal. The Taliban are aiming for the return of their lost Emirate and re-imposition of the Sharia law. Kabul wants the settlement not to undermine its legitimacy and monopoly of power. And the US,⁹ as well as Pakistan, may be hoping for some kind of power sharing.

A Sustainable Peace

Barnet Rubin feels the real danger is that, regardless of the negotiations, Trump will order an unconditional withdrawal and cut the assistance that sustains the Afghan state.”¹⁰ But there are serious issues waiting to be addressed in a search for the final settlement. How much do you revise the constitution and what would power sharing be like? How will the warlords and their militias be dealt with? What will be the political institutions and structures of governance and state institutions like? What about the fate of human rights and political freedoms?

According to the latest US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Report,¹¹ the gains from the American “investment in Afghanistan’s reconstruction face multiple threats...” Analogies with Vietnam are compelling where after a decent interval following the American withdrawal a civil war erupted in which regional countries got involved.¹²

Pakistan’s Role

This brings us to the discussion of Pakistan whose role as a facilitator, a spoiler or an arbiter in an “intra-Afghan political settlement” will be critical. In a recent media interview on a visit to the region, Khalilzad said, “Now, after a long wait, the Afghan peace process presents a historic opportunity for peace in the region and Pakistan is fully supporting the process.”¹³

We trivialise the challenges Pakistan and Afghanistan face in their mutual relations in terms of two vaguely defined words – “strategic depth”. The reality is that Pakistan and Afghanistan have a tortuous shared history that has left a complicated legacy of a divided ethnicity straddled along a disputed border through which have flowed invading armies in the remote past, and insurgents, terrorists and jihadists in modern times.

Back in the 1990s, the Taliban rule in Kabul may have eased Pakistan’s anxiety about an India friendly “Northern Alliance” at the helm. However, the spread of extremism and the rising tide of militancy, as a spillover of the two ‘jihad’ – first against the Soviets and then against the Americans, and the Afghan civil war in between – Islamabad may have learnt its lesson. It now appears to have abandoned any plan or desire of seeing the Taliban back in power.

There is little doubt now the Taliban in power in Kabul will create a reverse ideological and strategic depth in Pakistan. Yet, that is not the only dilemma facing Islamabad. It does not

⁹ ‘US offers safety and job security to Taliban’, *Dawn*, 27 December 2018.

¹⁰ Barnett R. Rubin, ‘Is Afghanistan Ready for Peace? – How Great Powers Can End the War’, *Foreign Affairs*, 30 July 2018.

¹¹ 2019 High Risk Report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

¹² George C Herring, ‘Lessons From Vietnam on Leaving Afghanistan’, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 April 2019.

¹³ ‘Khalilzad Welcomes Pakistani Premier’s Statement On Afghanistan’, *TOLU News*, 26 April 2019.

want to leave the Taliban disempowered because it fears that, if they do not get what they want in Afghanistan, they will go after Pakistan and tear away at least a part of it. Due to the Taliban's religious cultural and ethnic affinities with its tribal population, Pakistan may find it difficult to expel them. However, how does Pakistan ensure that a future Afghanistan will not be inconsistent with its security and strategic interests without the Taliban in power?

Pakistan is in an obvious strategic quandary. And so are Afghanistan and the US. All three have different interests and concerns but face a common challenge – the Taliban. Their core interests focus on that challenge. Afghanistan needs Pakistan to put pressure on the Taliban to come to an accommodation with Kabul. Pakistan needs Afghanistan to make sure its relations with India are not seen by Pakistan to be directed against it. This mutual help would only happen in the context of an entirely new Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. And since Washington has a stake in the stability of Afghanistan, Pakistan, by giving its help, understandably wants a return favour from the US. So, the US-Pakistan relations have to improve as well.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgencies are essentially a governance issue. Afghanistan needs to conciliate the areas under the Taliban control. Pakistan can help by making its lands inhospitable to them. An improved tribal areas integration policy by Pakistan – backed up by Afghanistan and Pakistan working on joint border management and resolution of the refugee problem – might help isolate both the Afghan and its own Taliban.

Other countries with stakes in Afghanistan's stability also need to get involved. Until Afghanistan is secure, Chinese economic and strategic aspirations cannot be fully realised. The US has important security interests in Afghanistan which the war could not fully resolve. The last thing Washington should do is to pull out and leave behind regional stakeholders whose interests would align with its own. That is why, apart from improving the US-Pakistan relationship, the US should also develop some understanding with India, China and Russia.

In the ultimate analysis, the solution to the Afghanistan conundrum is in the hands of the Afghans. Afghanistan cannot be fixed without outside help but that help alone will not be enough. Afghanistan's historical state and nation-building challenges were only partially addressed by this 18-year war. In the interest of Afghanistan's long term peace and stability, they need to be resolved fully even if there were no Taliban problem. The truth is that Afghanistan's troubles go beyond the Taliban. A focus only on the Taliban will neither defeat the Taliban nor solve Afghanistan's historical challenges. In that case, there is a good chance that the Americans will leave but the conflict may continue with a different name.

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