



US-TALIBAN TALKS: HURDLES IN THE WAY OF PEACE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



July 2018 marked the beginning of the first official and direct US-Taliban talks in Doha, Qatar,¹ igniting hopes for a peaceful settlement to end the Afghan war.

After nine strenuous rounds of direct talks between representatives of the Taliban headed by Sher Abbas Stanakzai and Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, it appeared that both parties had reached an “an agreement in principle”² to finally end the Afghan conflict, which included the “withdrawal of 5,000 troops within 135 days,” if the Taliban honored their conditions (in the agreement).³ However, neither side spoke about the two other core issues so pivotal for peace, namely: a ceasefire and intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. While optimism had been generated for imminent peace, it did not last long. On September 9, 2019, in a sudden move of events, President Trump declared that the talks with the Taliban were effectively “dead”, due to the killing of a US soldier.⁴

President Trump’s rationale for cancelling the talks has been surrounded in ambiguity. Since 2001, the group has openly been engaged in a bloody conflict against foreign and Afghan forces. Moreover, the agreement itself was signed amidst an atmosphere of ongoing violence and in the

¹ Anwar Iqbal, "Khalilzad Holds Direct Talks with Afghan Taliban in Qatar," *Dawn*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1438880>.

² Anisa Shaheed, "US And Taliban Reach Agreement In Principle: Khalilzad," *Tolo news*, September 2, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-and-taliban-reach-agreement-principle-khalilzad>

³ Mujib Mashal, "To Start Afghan Withdrawal, U.S. Would Pull 5,400 Troops in 135 Days," *New York Times*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/asia/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-taliban.html>

⁴ "Trump says U.S.-Taliban peace talks are 'dead,'" *PBS*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4DQU4cGX-Y>

absence of a ceasefire, thereby clearly indicating that the cessation of talks was far beyond the death of a US soldier.

Despite a temporary pause, prospects for a negotiated settlement were revived once again, when US-Taliban talks resumed on December 7, 2019.⁵ Since then, US-Taliban interlocutors have been engaged in discussions that have continued to revolve around four interconnected stumbling blocks, namely: counter terrorism assurances from the Taliban; a reduction in violence on part of the Taliban; US troop withdrawal; and intra-Afghan talks.

The cessation of talks in September 2019 elucidated the complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process, as well as the urgent need to address them in order to attain peace in Afghanistan.

Lack of Clarity Regarding the "Agreement in Principle"

Ambiguity continues to surround the "agreement in principle." While issues pertaining to counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban (since the Taliban have not been collaborating with any terrorist group i.e. their ongoing fight against ISKP) and US troop withdrawal were more or less agreed upon⁶, there was lack of clarity regarding a declaration from the Taliban on a ceasefire, as well as their commitment to engage with Kabul in intra-Afghan talks. Moreover, the fact that the "agreement in principle" reached without the involvement of Kabul was expected to collapse. President Ghani may be regarded by the Taliban as a 'puppet of the US', but the fact remains that he does have the mandate of the Afghan people. Furthermore, whoever is sitting at the helm of affairs in Kabul also has the nuisance value factor, and can obstruct the peace process. Thus, one lesson that should be learnt is that the inclusion of Kabul is a necessary condition for attaining peace and stability in Afghanistan.

US Ambiguity

Differences, divisions and infighting between President Trump's internal body of advisors regarding Afghanistan and which path to take - the military or diplomatic route - has left the US foreign policy

⁵ Pamela Constable, "Conflicting reports over a Taliban truce offer Afghans the first chance for a glimpse of peace since a 2018 cease-fire," *Guardian*, January 1, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/conflicting-reports-over-a-taliban-truce-offer-afghans-the-first-chance-for-a-glimpse-of-peace-since-a-2018-cessate-fire/2020/01/01/826af6d8-2bea-11ea-bffe-020c88b3f120_story.html

⁶ "U.S. envoy says agreement "in principle" for Afghanistan peace deal reached with Taliban," *CBS News*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-taliban-afghanistan-agreement-in-principle-partial-withdrawal-forces-zalmay-khalilzad-today-2019-09-02/>

in a state of utter confusion.⁷ Moreover, according to the recently published papers on the US war in Afghanistan by the Washington Post,⁸ the US policymakers "were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan." They sent "personnel into Afghanistan who did not know the difference between al-Qaeda and the Taliban ... lacked any substantive knowledge of Afghan society, local dynamics, and power relationships."⁹ Thus clearly indicting that even after 18 years of bloodshed, the US continues to remain divided and lacks clarity on the Afghan issue to say the least.

Kabul

Differences and divisions within the Afghan government have also been a major spoiler in the peace process, with many refusing to recognize the Taliban as a stakeholder, let alone share power with the group. President Ghani himself has created hurdles in the way of intra-Afghan talks by nominating his supporters in the list of participants instead of including participants from other political factions, thus leading to delays in the process.¹⁰ Hence, political and national reconciliation continue to be major hurdles in pursuing peace talks with the Taliban.¹¹ Moreover, Afghanistan's uncertain political future due to pending election results is also playing a role in delaying the peace process.

Taliban

The Taliban's rigidity regarding reduction in violence and talking to Kabul have been major stumbling blocks in the way of peace. While the group continues to justify their ongoing violence "to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control",¹² it is no longer justifiable for them to do so as they are not fighting a foreign enemy but fellow Afghans who make up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Hence, the Taliban must ensure a visible reduction in their attacks. Similarly, Taliban's refusal to engage with Kabul as a "puppet government" of the US is conflicting to say the least since the group is engaging with the alleged 'puppet master' but not the puppet.

⁷ Aee Amina Khan, "Afghan peace talks at a standstill yet again," September 13, 2019, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/IB_Amina_Khan_Sept_13_2019.pdf

⁸ As part of a Federal 'Lessons Learned' project by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

⁹ "U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan," *SIGAR*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-20-19-TY.pdf>

¹⁰ Arif Rafiq, "To secure peace and preserve the Afghan political system, Ghani has to go," *TRT World*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/to-secure-peace-and-preserve-the-afghan-political-system-ghani-has-to-go-33141>

¹¹ See Amina Khan, *Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan*, Strategic Studies journal, 2016, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2-Amina_Khan_SS_Vol_36_No.1_2016.pdf

¹² "Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamatenglish.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-ofmujahideen/>

Hence, every stakeholder needs to play its part, especially the Taliban. The fact remains that through this deal, the Taliban, for the first time since their ouster in 2001, had an opportunity unlike before, to not only put an end the war, but also secure a legitimate place and position for themselves within the future political dispensation of Afghanistan. Although the group lost that opportunity temporarily with the cessation of talks, now that the talks have resumed the group should not let this opportunity pass by.

While the US-Taliban continue to engage in talks in Doha, it appears that the stumbling blocks continue to pose hurdles in the way of a peace deal. Another factor that could possibly affect the US-Taliban talks is the recent downing/crash of a US military aircraft in Deh Yak district, Ghazni province in January 2020, which is a stronghold of the group.¹³ While conflicting reports have been coming out regarding the cause of the incident, the Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid stated that "a special operations US aircraft crashed over the Ghazni province." While he stated that "a number of enemy aircrafts and helicopters have been downed by Mujahideen in Helmand, Balkh and other provinces of the country in recent days," the group did not explicitly take responsibility for this crash.¹⁴ Moreover, there are doubts whether the Taliban possess any anti-aircraft missiles needed for such an attack, indicating that the group may not be behind the attack after all.

With rising insecurity and instability in Afghanistan, the aim now more than ever, should be to focus on achieving peace in Afghanistan. As a starter and positive gesture, the Taliban could exercise restraint and demonstrate a visible reduction in violence, enter into a brief ceasefire, not as a means of weakness or surrender, but rather as an opportunity to further their cause through political engagement. This should be followed by intra-Afghan talks, leading to a timeframe (gradual) for troop withdrawal, and lastly, a sustained and credible ceasefire that is not prone to collapse.

¹³ Sayed Sharif Amiri , "Speculation continues about ghazni plane crash, " *Tolo news*, January 28, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/speculation-continues-about-ghazni-plane-crash>
Speculation Continues About Ghazni Plane Crash

¹⁴ "US aircraft crashes in Ghazni, multiple senior officers killed," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, January 27, 2020, <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=32051>