



TALIBAN-US PEACE DEAL: AN APPRAISAL

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



After nearly two decades of protracted war, bloodshed and all the baggage that war carries, the US and the Afghan Taliban finally signed a peace agreement on February 29, 2020 amid hopes that the country returns towards normalcy. Signed between the US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in a ceremony attended by officials from over 30 countries and organizations, the agreement came after 18 months of extensive negotiations between the US and the Taliban, not to mention numerous hurdles including a brief collapse of the process in September 2019.

The deal itself revolves around four main issues: (i) temporary ceasefire, (ii) withdrawal of foreign forces within a fourteen month period, (iii) talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and (iv) assurances that the Taliban will not participate in or aid others in threatening the security of the US and its allies.¹

President Trump, congratulating his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper on the deal, noted that he had faith in this agreement since "everyone is tired of war." And yet, as some analysts have noted, despite popular parlance of a "peace deal", none of the stakeholders – i.e. officials from the US, Afghanistan government, and the Taliban – have referred to the Doha agreement as a peace deal. Yet, there is cause for some optimism.² The agreement has received mixed reviews. Although the deal has been welcomed by many quarters, it is imperative to note that it is only a first step in the right direction, because the most difficult challenge is to find

¹ Lindsay Maizland, "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know, *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2, 2020 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>,

² "Afghan conflict: Trump hails deal with Taliban to end 18-year war," *BBC News*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51692546>

common ground between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Far from perfect, the agreement remains vague on certain issues as many fear that a US withdrawal might lead to deterioration in the situation and to circumstances where the Taliban might regain control. However, the fact that the deal addresses the core issues of the Afghan conflict so pivotal for peace, makes this agreement the only genuine way to end the war.

Unfortunately, this agreement has come at a heavy price. The long drawn out war in Afghanistan has borne a huge material and human cost for Afghanistan, the international community as well as the region, resulting in death and destruction, thousands of casualties as well as millions of refugees. The agreement has highlighted what Pakistan has been saying since the beginning of the war, that peace could only be achieved through a negotiated settlement. Hence, it was refreshing when US Defense Secretary Mark Esper echoed this sentiment, noting: 'Peace will not come through military means; rather, safety and security for the United States, our allies and Afghanistan will be won when all Afghans lay down their arms, sit beside one another and decide their future together. A political solution is the best way forward..'. One only wishes the US had realized this 18 years ago when it invaded Afghanistan.

Core Issues of the Peace Agreement: A Glimpse

Temporary Ceasefire

From the very beginning, a reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire has been one of the main components of the peace deal. With the exception of a brief 3-day ceasefire in June 2018, the Taliban have continued to use violence as a means to further their goals. While the group did exhibit a reduction in violence between February 22 and 29 leading to the peace deal, immediately following the deal, there has been a comeback of violence. In a statement on March 2, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that, "the reduction in violence has ended now and our operations will continue as normal ... and that the group will not attack foreign forces but operations will continue against the Kabul administration forces."³ The Taliban's rigidity and refusal to cease attacks against Afghan security forces continue to be a major stumbling blocks in the way of long term peace. The Taliban rationale for attacking ANSF on the pretext that the deal was only limited to foreign forces does not hold weight. The Taliban will initially have to ensure a visible reduction and ultimately cease all means of violence. It remains to be seen whether the group will move towards a permanent ceasefire which will be a determining factor towards the completion of a future political roadmap for Afghanistan.

³ "Taliban say will resume operations against Afghan forces, "France 24.com, March 2, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200302-taliban-say-will-resume-operations-against-afghan-forces>

US Withdrawal

The entire premise behind the Taliban's insurgency has been the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which has been met in the agreement. Under the accord, during the next 135 days, US troops will be reduced to 8,600 after which a complete withdrawal will take place in the next fourteen months. However, this will depend on the state of affairs in Afghanistan, security situation, the Taliban's commitment towards the reduction of violence, ceasefire and the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. Moreover, while the Taliban have continued to emphasize the withdrawal of US forces, at the same time, the group has echoed that they would like to have friendly ties with the US and want the US to come back and help build the country through reconstruction and development - a clear departure from previous views.⁴ Hence, this clearly highlights that the Taliban are in fact open to some sort of US presence in the country.

Intra-Afghan Talks

A major sticking point and stumbling block in the way of a peace deal has been the Taliban's refusal to engage with Kabul, which they regard as a "puppet government" of the US. However, after the signing of the agreement, this narrative holds no substance since the group has not only engaged with the puppet master - but in fact has signed an agreement with them. Hence, the Taliban's rationale for refusing to engage with President Ghani is problematic. Inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue and reconciliation is the need of the hour, particularly in the current state of affairs where there is political uncertainty due to the election results. President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah simultaneously declared victory in September 2019.⁵ On March 9, 2020, both candidates held separate inauguration ceremonies, in which President Ashraf Ghani took oath as President for a second term from Afghanistan's chief justice in Kabul, whereas Abdullah Abdullah took oath from a senior cleric - thus plunging Afghanistan into deeper political uncertainty.⁶ This development, without a doubt has further put Afghanistan's future in serious doubt, especially in terms of the historic US-Taliban peace agreement, and Intra-Afghan talks which were scheduled for March 10, 2020. This shows that Afghanistan's dilemma has always been internal divides, stemming from lack of national and political unity. One only hopes that the political turmoil does not manifest itself in a bloodshed.

⁴ Secunder Kermani and Sami Yousafzai, "Taliban 'not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan'," *BBC*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47139908>

⁵ "Confusion as Afghan election frontrunners each claim victory," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/30/afghan-election-frontrunners-each-claim-victory-ashraf-ghani-abdullah-abdullah>

⁶ Frud Bezhan, "'Tremendous Uncertainty' As Competing Presidential Oaths Plunge Afghanistan Deeper Into Crisis," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tremendous-uncertainty-as-competing-presidential-oaths-plunge-afghanistan-deeper-into-crisis/30477968.html>

While the international community has stated that it is now time for Afghans to take ownership of their internal affairs, this is a recipe for disaster. For the past three decades or so, Afghanistan has suffered from internal divisions, be they political or ethnic. At this stage it would be highly irresponsible for the international community to leave it to the Afghans to solve a crisis that has been unresolved during an 18-year war.

The international community must play its role in ensuring intra-Afghan talks instead of shifting this onus onto the politically divided Afghans. Although President Ghani was not included in the peace agreement, whoever is sitting at the helm of affairs in Kabul must be included in future intra-Afghan talks to ensure that they are inclusive and representative; Ghani may be considered a puppet, but he does represent a segment of Afghanistan. Any leader calling the shots in Kabul has the potential to be a spoiler and can obstruct the peace process. Thus, one lesson that should be learnt from the annulment of the US -Taliban “agreement in principle” is that the inclusion of Kabul is a necessary condition for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, the aim should be to focus on an interim inclusive political setup where all the different political factions including the Taliban, Ghani and Abdullah are included.

The Taliban have been open to such an option, expressing repeatedly that (unlike the past) they do not want a monopoly of power, but want to find a solution through peaceful means and dialogue, with the aim that once foreign forces withdraw there should be no intra-Afghan conflict. This indicates that they may be open to a power sharing set up in the future. During the Moscow talks in February 2019, when the Taliban had been deliberating upon a possible interim setup, which had been supported by several other political figures, and which could have paved the way towards effective elections, President Ghani had opposed this notion. Such a setup could also have played a part in easing the Taliban’s rigid stances on other issues such as US troop withdrawal, and changes to the Afghan constitution. Ghani had played an instrumental role in 2018 when he offered a comprehensive peace plan to the Taliban and oversaw the Eid ceasefire of June 2019. Instead of creating hurdles, he should assume the role of a champion of peace and ensure the success of talks as well as an inclusive political setup where everyone gets a piece of the pie.

CT Assurances from the Taliban⁷

Attaining assurance from the Taliban has for the most part been achieved from the beginning. The Taliban have on several occasions stated that they will not allow their soil to be used against any

⁷ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>

country, including for attacks on the US and its allies.⁸ The Taliban have not been collaborating with any terrorist group, and this has been stated repeatedly by them. Just by wanting to become a political entity, in fact, the Taliban have signaled their intent to not host terrorist groups. Assurances have been given, such as those by Sher Abbas Stanakzai, that the Taliban will not tolerate any terrorist group or allow terrorism to harm its neighbors, including that by groups like Daesh. For the US, while there are reasons to doubt these assurances, there should be some comfort in the fact that hosting a terrorist organization will harm the goals of the Taliban who now see themselves as political actors in their own right. The Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), after all, has openly opposed the Taliban and preached an agenda of a global caliphate, which is contrary to the Taliban's local struggle. Both groups have been at war and many international stakeholders like China, Pakistan, Russia and the US, welcomed and encouraged the Taliban's fight against the ISKP.⁹

The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan, is probably the most lethal concern since it poses a grave danger to the survival of the Taliban as well as Kabul. Only a week after the peace deal, a Daesh group opened fire on a memorial ceremony in Kabul on March 6 killing 32 people and wounding dozens. Several politicians including Abdullah Abdullah who were also in the audience escaped unhurt.¹⁰ But if all the stakeholders including the US, Taliban and Kabul combine forces, they can resist the ISKP efficiently. Even after this peace agreement, it is the ISKP that has been responsible for violent activities.

Hurdles

Despite overwhelming optimism, there are still major stumbling blocks that show how fickle the situation in Afghanistan really is. The deal, in addition to discussing gradual withdrawal of 14,000 US servicemen¹¹ in exchange for Taliban commitment to shun dealings with terrorists, also dealt with an exchange of prisoners and for the Taliban to begin talks with the Afghan government. It stipulates that both the government and the Taliban will release political prisoners before talks begin on March 10 in Norway – with the numbers of prisoners in the thousands and the implications of

⁸ Amina Khan and Awais Ali Syed,, "Moscow And The Afghan Peace Process", Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 21, 2019, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/IB_Amina_Awais_Ali_June_21_2019.pdf

⁹ Daniel Brown, "The Taliban Reportedly Just Beat ISIS so Badly That More than 200 Fighters Surrendered to the Afghan Government," *Business Insider*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/talibanbeat-isis-so-badly-200-fighters-surrendered-afghan-government-2018-8>.

¹⁰ "At Least 32 Dead After Shooting In Kabul; ISIS Group Claims Responsibility," *NPR*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/06/812820310/at-least-27-dead-after-shooting-in-kabul-taliban-denies-responsibility>

¹¹ Shereena Qazi, "Afghanistan's Taliban, US sign agreement aimed at ending war," *Al Jazeera*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/afghanistan-taliban-sign-deal-america-longest-war-200213063412531.html>

freeing them, the Afghan government has shown its reluctance to proceed on this issue. This could then be a major stumbling block in the peace process.¹²

President Ashraf Ghani in fact has noted that this decision is to be made by Afghanistan and not the US. Kabul, effectively, simply does not see this condition as part of any agreement. The US has likely been aware of the effect such stipulation would have as well, with Mike Pompeo noting that talks between the government and the Taliban are necessary, but that they would be “rocky and bumpy.”¹³ In fact, the Taliban have since said that if the 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the government were not released, there will be no talks, even as the Afghan President has noted that release of prisoners is not a condition but will be a subject of discussion in the negotiations. The Taliban reaction has been strong, as they have noted that they will resume fighting Afghan forces.¹⁴

The Afghan state is notoriously weak, and the current government only came to power amid much hostility and a poor voter turnout. On the other hand, the Taliban have gained strength and power, and thus there are concerns that the conditions of this deal could lead to a further escalation of violence and show of Taliban supremacy.¹⁵ For its part, Pakistan has supported the peace process in Afghanistan, but warned of “spoilers” that could derail any such process, without elaborating on what entity he referred to. As Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi noted, swift talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are essential, since people desire peace.¹⁶

Despite the modest steps and lowered expectations, it is worthwhile to note that it took US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad more than a year to get this deal after several rounds of negotiations. That should be seen as a positive step in the end.¹⁷ As one commentator notes, the agreement between the US and the Taliban is, “both truly momentous for happening at all and severely modest for what it contains.”¹⁸ Perhaps that is all one could hope for at this stage.

This is the best option for peace the Afghans will get, and they should not let this opportunity pass by. The US also needs to ensure that it withdraws responsibly, without showing undue haste. It is

¹² <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/2/21161198/afghanistan-peace-deal-prisoner-exchange>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/world/asia/US-taliban-deal-reaction.html>

¹⁴ "Afghan conflict: Taliban to resume attacking local forces after deal with US," *BBC News*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51706126>

¹⁵ "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know."

¹⁶ Asad Hashim "Pakistan warns US of 'spoilers' on US-Taliban deal in Afghanistan," March 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/pakistan-warns-spoilers-taliban-deal-afghanistan-200302093650382.html>

¹⁷ Kathy Gilsinan, "The U.S. Once Wanted Peace in Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/united-states-taliban-afghanistan-peace-deal/607234/h>

¹⁸ Ibid.

the US responsibility to ensure some measures that contribute to peace and stability, such as the creation of an inclusive political setup. This is a fragile and long process, which requires the utmost care and commitment, and will depend on the outcomes of the upcoming intra-Afghan talks. These are baby steps, but baby steps that have given cause for cautious optimism.