



Peace Making in Afghanistan: Future Pathways

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Abstract

The much-awaited peace deal with the Taliban by the U.S. collapsed before its final approval by President Trump. This was hardly surprising given the roadblocks that existed to such deal making. This calls for the rationale behind the now-derailed peace talks, which had overlooked the fact of centrality of Afghans in an externally mediated peace deal, to be reviewed. A series of necessary conditions need to be met before another attempt is made to make peace with the Taliban. Till such conditions are met, hasty attempts at negotiations will only lead to increase in violence, insecurity, and chaos in the conflict-ridden country.

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Analysis

Deal Breakers

Peace talks with the Taliban ‘as far as I am concerned are dead’, declared U.S. President Trump on 9 September. Two days earlier, he had called off the plan to host the Taliban representatives and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at Camp David for signing the peace deal. Just a few days before the commemoration of 9/11 attacks and the election campaign of 2020, Trump ostensibly didn’t think a peace deal would go down well with the voters. The Taliban, in response, promised more bloodshed in the days to come. The U.S. reciprocated by unveiling plans to hit the insurgents harder. Afghanistan has witnessed bloodshed for the past decade and the future, sans settlement, will remain equally violent. This paper takes stock of how the ‘post-no deal’ scenario may unveil in Afghanistan and the conditions which must be fulfilled before another effort at arriving at a peace settlement is made with the Taliban-led insurgency.[\[1\]](#)

The Divisions: Lack of ‘unity of effort’

The reason cited by President Trump for his abrupt decision to cancel the deal, which had generated much speculation regarding the future of the war-ravaged country, is the death of an American soldier in a Taliban attack on Kabul’s Green Village on 5 September.[\[2\]](#) However, the real reasons could be a plethora of new and persisting differences over the ‘end game’ in Afghanistan among the many stakeholders inside and outside of Afghanistan.

Within the Trump administration, divisions and opposition had mounted to the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad-negotiated deal that hinged mostly on a promise made by the Taliban that it will deny space to international terrorists on Afghan soil. According to various sources in the U.S., the National Security Advisor (NSA) John R. Bolton, before his unceremonious sacking by President Trump, had refused to sign off the deal. The Taliban too had refused to be a part of the secret meeting at Camp David before a deal has been signed. “We accepted the invitation but said we would come soon after the signing ceremony of the agreement,” a Taliban official told.[\[3\]](#) The venue and the timing led to considerable consternation in the U.S. The President ‘faced a backlash from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle — as well as from some members of his administration’.[\[4\]](#)

Inside Afghanistan, exclusion of the National Unity Government (NUG) was problematic. An ‘externally mediated deal’ had brought to the fore issues of legitimacy of the incumbent government and challenges of implementation. The Afghan government was opposed to the deal that had not taken it on board. Till the finalization of the deal was announced by Khalilzad, the Ashraf Ghani administration had not even been given a copy.[\[5\]](#) After Trump’s announcement, Ghani’s office asserted that peace in Afghanistan will prevail only after Taliban enter direct negotiations with the Afghan government, announce a ceasefire and end to violence.

Further, the ‘deal’ had remained mostly ambiguous (lexicon varied from road map, peace agreement, peace settlement) as it had not addressed contentious issues like the number and timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal; counter-terrorism guarantees that the Taliban was supposed to have provided about keeping Afghanistan free from the presence of groups like al Qaeda; formation of an interim government in the face of a delayed presidential elections (scheduled to be held on 28 September); power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban; ceasefire and end of hostilities; constitutional and political reform; and the type of state that Afghanistan would emerge as— Islamic Republic or Islamic Emirate — after the deal.



Internal and External Realignments: Shifting sands

The net outcome of Trump's decision is a mixture of the obvious and also, internal realignment and geopolitical reconfiguration. That the Taliban would continue with its campaign of indiscriminate violence was on expected lines.^[6] The U.S. and the Taliban held nine rounds of talks in the past ten months before the finalization of the draft deal. This, however, did not deter the insurgents from carrying out incessant violence. The U.S. had lost 17 soldiers since the commencement of peace negotiations in Doha in 2018. In 2018 and 2019, there has been a spate of major attacks in Kabul and other places against public targets and events including attack on an ambulance (January 2018), voter registration centres (April 2018), two back-to-back suicide attacks (April 2018) that killed 11 journalists, Nowroz festivities (March 2019), and on humanitarian NGOs (May 2019). In 2018, civilian deaths jumped to 3804 people killed, an 11 percent increase compared to the year before. On 4 September 2019, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission confirmed that its acting leader in Ghor province, Abdul Samad Amiri, had been kidnapped by the Taliban while traveling and shot dead.

In addition, continuing its strategy of delivering intense violence along with a proclaimed commitment to negotiation, the group is likely to explore possibilities of seeking favours from countries that are not in tandem with the U.S. goals in Afghanistan. These could include Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan. On 14 September, after the collapse of the deal, a negotiating team of the group visited Moscow and held consultations with President Vladimir Putin's envoy for Afghanistan.^[7] Russia has made outreach and held such dialogues with the Taliban which have gained momentum last year. The Taliban also wants to explain its position on the peace process to countries around the world in "face-to-face meetings". Great power competition as well as rivalry is a reality in Afghanistan and such outreach moves by the Taliban may add pressure on the Trump administration to restart a fresh process of dialogue.

Renewed Attempts at Peace

Continuing violence and the Taliban reaching out to other countries, would make the U.S. goal of exiting Afghanistan almost impossible to accomplish in near term. That could possibly push the Trump administration to increasing military pressure on the insurgents or to make another try at reviving peace talks with the Taliban.^[8] Since 14000 remaining U.S. forces and 17000 NATO forces on non-combat roles are unlikely to swing the directions of the war with the Taliban decisively in America's favour, another attempt at a peace deal is more likely. Unverified reports have indicated that the U.S. officials are still preparing for the next round of negotiations with the insurgents.

The Taliban have also indicated that they are still amenable to peace talks with the U.S.. Given President Trump's past failed negotiations with North Korea, he might want to extract a better deal with the Taliban before the election campaign of 2020. However, it is entirely possible that any renewed attempt by the U.S. will merely be a replica of its past efforts and will continue to face the grim reality of a fractured political opinion in Afghanistan and increased external interference.

Political Stalemate: Elections vs 'Peace deal'

More challenging than the security situation, the delay in the conduct of the presidential elections and political challenges that the NUG is facing, is a cause of concern. The delay in holding presidential elections (originally scheduled to be held in April 2019) in pursuit of a peace deal has led to opposition groups reaching out to



the Taliban as part of bargaining strategy. Powerful ethnic leaders like Vice President Dostum and the governor of Balkh province, Atta Mohammad Noor, are in open revolt with the Ghani administration. Moreover, the delay in the conduct of elections and anxieties around the peace deal had also caused polarisation along ethnic lines and fraying of the post-Bonn consensus.

Internal power reconfigurations in Afghanistan are further compounded by political ambitions and political outlooks of elites. Politicking has brought out fissures and competitions among the political heavy weights during the elections held on 28 September. Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah is now in President Ghani's opposition camp. Amrullah Saleh (Green Trend Movement), a firm opponent to the Taliban, is the first vice presidential running mate with Ghani. Former President Hamid Karzai, who has turned a firm votary of a peace process with the Taliban, is bound to pose challenges to scenarios that reaffirm the position of Ghani and his cohorts.^[9]

Lessons Learnt

In the long run, insurgencies predominantly have ended through negotiated settlements. According to a study by RAND, "Military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups and nearly half of the terror groups analyzed ended as a result of a transition into the political process."^[10] Another study that reviewed 80 conflicts in the period 1990 to 2007, concludes that only 7.5 percent of them ended in a military victory.^[11] Likewise, the challenge posed by the Taliban-led insurgency will have to culminate through an appropriate use of force and process of negotiations.

In the Afghan context, however, necessary conditions essential for a peace settlement to succeed, are near absent. As a result, the peace process merely tantamounts to a process of abject surrender to the violence orchestrating potential of the insurgents. From the Afghan government's perspective, such negotiations, to succeed, need to occur from the position of strength. Such a condition does not exist on the ground. Suspension of the peace process constitutes a temporary setback to the Taliban.

Further, calls for negotiations evoke strong cautionary voices, on two counts. First, though negotiation may almost always be appropriate in principle, such talks need to be pursued in situations in which the belligerents have real incentives to consider accommodation and compromise, i.e., the conflict must be 'ripe'.^[12] Second, the need for belligerents to come to the table is provided by military pressure. A call for negotiations is, therefore, said to be incompatible with parallel calls for military withdrawal.^[13] The question is, do these two conditions apply to the current situation in Afghanistan? Ripeness for negotiation generally flows from military stalemate – a situation in which neither side is moving towards victory and both sides are suffering from a "hurting stalemate."^[14] In Afghanistan, neither of the parties have reached that hurting stalemate.

Pathways to Peace

For any meaningful peace process, the following conditions need to be met. It must be preceded by conduct of free and fair elections to elect a legitimate government capable of negotiating and implementing a peace deal/ settlement. This needs to be followed by an intra-Afghan consensus on the nuances of the offers and accommodations made available to the insurgents. The gains made in the last 18 years on women's rights, education, youth empowerment cannot be squandered away. Without Afghan government involvement and broad consensus inside Afghanistan any externally mediated peace process is less likely to succeed. Moreover, the talks should take place inside Afghanistan for building trust, transparency and accountability. The



indigenous peace-making High Peace Council needs to be strengthened to mediate, reintegrate, and rehabilitate the insurgents. The talks can take place only in an atmosphere of absence of violence. Thus, a ceasefire and end of hostilities are necessary conditions. For these to happen, the issue of sanctuary and external support that the Taliban enjoys must be addressed.

Lessons learned from other conflict theatres throw further light on the essential components of the peace and reconciliation effort.^[15] Such efforts do not merely amount to offering amnesty to dissidents or providing opportunities to elites and militia leaders to strike deals for control of territories and resources. It is essentially about engaging all sections of Afghan society to build national institutions that locals trust and respect. Such a process would call for a peace and reconciliation process based on 'inclusiveness' involving local stakeholders and regional actors.

Beyond a binary choice of military defeat of the Taliban or peace deal with the insurgents, there are other alternatives. Without a peace deal/ agreement, the international community needs to strengthen the Afghan state and create greater political unity as a means to either get to real reconciliation or achieve success through reintegration. The odds of this are not great but it's the last best hope to avoid a bloodier civil war.

Any long-term policy of transforming conflict-ridden Afghanistan is not mere a declaration of the end of hostilities, but the presence of national, political and social institutions capable of mediating conflict. The absence of credible institutions to mediate in various social, political and economic conflicts is a major factor providing impetus to the ongoing armed conflict. Establishing long-lasting and participatory institutions that involve a wide range of governance, security sector reform, anti-corruption measures, representational, and reconciliation imperatives, need to be the focus of the international community. In addition to institution building and forging an intra- Afghan consensus, a regional and international consensus is essential to bring in peace and stability. The UN with its good offices needs to play a proactive role in consensus building and peacemaking in Afghanistan. And lastly, Afghan people, government and security forces must be strengthened to negotiate peace on their own terms.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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References

- [1] The Taliban-led insurgency is not a monolithic organization of the pre-2001 era. It is presently a conglomeration of of Taliban guerrillas, followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's radical group Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, Al Qaida and its affiliates, religious clerics, narcotic traffickers, anti-government elements and tribal fighters in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. While most of these groups may not share the political goals of the Taliban, they do share a common agenda in preventing or limiting the writ of state authority. This inference was derived from interviews, briefings, and discussions with the locals, government officials, academics, media persons, aid workers in various Afghan provinces in May 2007-August 2017. For further details on the insurgency, see Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, (RAND Counterinsurgency Study 4, Arlington, 2008); Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2008); Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: How the war Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, (Penguin, London, 2008), pp. 240-261; and Ron Synovitz, "Afghan Insurgency Diversifies As Taliban Forges Alliances With Other Factions", RFERL, 29 August 2008, at http://www.rferl.org/Content/Insurgency_Diversifies_As_Taliban_Forges_Alliances_With_Other_Factions/1194808.html. Accessed on 20 September 2019.
- [2] Tameem Akhgar & Cara Anna, "Taliban blast kills US soldier, several civilians in Kabul", *Associated Press*, 5 September 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/874989f36e364304b757186340dc9e6d>. Accessed on 14 September 2019.
- [3] "Divided White House Prompted Trump to Call Off Taliban Talks", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-government-praises-trump-suspension-of-u-s-taliban-negotiations-11567956075>. Accessed on 20 September 2019.
- [4] Felicia Sonmez and John Wagner, "At 9/11 memorial, Trump vows to strike back with power the U.S. 'has never used before' if country is attacked again", *Washington Post*, 11 September 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-911-memorial-trump-vows-to-strike-back-with-more-than-nuclear-power-if-us-is-attacked-again/2019/09/11/60b12fec-d49e-11e9-9343-40db57cf6abd_story.html. Accessed on 20 September 2019.
- [5] According to the Associated Press, the Afghan president was shown the deal but not allowed to keep a copy.
- [6] Few days after the announcement the insurgents have indeed carried out a series of attacks.
- [7] Kathy Gannon & Jim Heintz, "Taliban visits Moscow days after Trump says talks 'dead'", *Associated Press*, 15 September 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/8c285a3bcaac4c978b5378db54ed9166>. Accessed on 15 September 2019.
- [8] Michael Kugelman, "Getting to 'Yes' Has Just Gotten a Lot Harder in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, 12 September 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/12/getting-to-yes-has-just-gotten-a-lot-harder-in-afghanistan-taliban/>. Accessed on 14 September 2019.
- [9] According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, out of 16 presidential contenders, President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr Abdullah, are the main contenders in the race. Only three have officially organised public campaign events. These included Ghani, Dr. Abdullah, and also Enayatullah Hafiz, a fringe candidate.



Apart from technicalities and security threats, the campaign has been so slow for a much larger reason: it was simply not clear to the candidates and their political allies whether the election would go ahead. Ali Yawar Adili and Thomas Ruttig, "Afghanistan's 2019 Election (7): Dithering over peace amid a lacklustre campaign", *Afghan Analysts Network*, 16 September 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistans-2019-election-7-dithering-over-peace-amid-a-lacklustre-campaign/>. Accessed on 20 September 2019.

[10] The Study suggests that "There is no battlefield solution to terrorism. Military force usually has the opposite effect from what is intended: It is often over-used, alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature, and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment." Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons For Countering Al Qa'ida", RAND Corporation, Arlington, VA, 2008, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741.pdf. Accessed on 15 August 2008.

[11] Roughly a third ended through negotiation and another 20 per cent were on their way to being resolved through a negotiation process. The remaining 40 per cent were still unresolved. See Vicenç Fisas, *Peace Process Yearbook*, (School for a Culture of Peace, University of Barcelona, 2008).

[12] A note of caution is required to avoid confusion that may arise from the fact that not all 'negotiations' appear to be the result of a ripe moment. Negotiation may be a tactical interlude, a breather for rest and re-arming, a sop to external pressure, without any intent of opening a sincere search for a joint outcome. It is difficult at the outset to determine whether negotiations are indeed serious or sincere, as motives may be indistinguishably mixed in the minds of the actors themselves at the beginning. Moreover, Ripeness is only a necessary but not sufficient condition, for the initiation of negotiations. It is not self-fulfilling or self-implementing. Not all ripe moments are so seized and turned into negotiations, hence the importance of specifying the meaning and evidence of ripeness so as to indicate when conflicting or third parties can fruitfully initiate negotiations. Discussions with Prof. William Zartman, Washington DC, November 2005. See William I. Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments", *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol.1, no.1, September 2001, pp. 8-18; Fen Osler Hampson, "Don't rush to the negotiating table," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 September 2007.

[13] Peter Jones, "Should we negotiate with the Taliban?" *The Ottawa Citizen*, 23 September 2007.

[14] The concept of a ripe moment centres on the parties' perception of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), optimally associated with an impending, past or recently avoided catastrophe. When the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons), they seek an alternative policy or way out. William I. Zartman, 'Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond', in P. Stern and D. Druckman, (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, (National Academy Press, Washington, 2000) and William I. Zartman, *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars*, (Brookings, Washington, 1995).

[15] Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, Talking to the Taliban: Will it Ensure 'Peace' in Afghanistan?, *Strategic Analysis*, March 2009, vol.33, Issue 2, https://idsa.in/strategicanalysis/TalkingtotheTaliban_ShanthieMarietDSouza_0309. Accessed on 20 September 2019.



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