Afghanistan: The United States-Taliban Deal and Beyond

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Summary

The United States (US) withdraws from wars it initiates as thoughtlessly as it enters them. Policy dominates the decision to start a war but, as policy fails, politics dictates the decision to get out. This paper looks into the future of Afghanistan in the wake of the US-Taliban deal that brings an end to America's war but leaves uncertainties behind. In effect, the Americans have solved their problem and are leaving it to the Afghans to solve theirs.

The United States (US) and the Taliban signed a peace deal in Qatar at the end of February 2020. The Afghan peace deal addresses two issues, and comprises two documents. One issue is the US' decision to disengage from Afghanistan, and the other is the future of Afghanistan. The two documents are the US-Taliban "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" and a bilateral US-Afghanistan declaration. The first document sets out the terms of the US' withdrawal. The second document, along with the first, tackles the issue of the future of Afghanistan, which is supposed to be worked out in an intra-Afghan dialogue that was to have begun on 10 March 2020.

However, unlike the terms of the US disengagement, the terms of the intra-Afghan dialogue are vague, and lack timelines, guarantees and enforcement mechanisms. The biggest weakness is that the Afghan government has been sidelined. The Doha agreement sees no role for the government. It only says that the "Afghan sides" should participate in talks with the Taliban. It is little wonder that the deal immediately ran into snags, including uptake in violence, feuds among Afghan political rivals and a dispute over the release of prisoners that has delayed the start of the intra-Afghan talks.

It is a war the Taliban did not win; it was lost by America. The Taliban have achieved at the negotiating table what they failed to get on the battlefield. Mullah Za'if, former Taliban Ambassador, said in Doha after the signing ceremony that "all" their demands had been fulfilled. In a statement issued on 7 March 2020, the Taliban said the Doha agreement aimed at ending 19 years of war in Afghanistan, but it "will have no impact" on their "legitimate claims", a euphemism for setting up an Emirate.

Washington's 19-year long war was lost, but the Americans probably learnt two lessons – peace in Afghanistan is too complicated, and the Taliban may be the worst option for Afghanistan's stabilisation except that other options are no better. US President Donald Trump had a long telephone conversation with Mullah Bradar, co-founder of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, on 5 March 2020 and, a day after, made public remarks with an air of resignation that the Taliban could "possibly" overrun the Afghan government after US troops leave. Washington's calculation may be that the Taliban would emerge as the dominant force and, like in the 1990s, could be the centre around which Afghanistan could get a modicum of stability.

The Doha agreement foreshadows the future relationship between the US and the Taliban who have agreed to "seek positive relations with each other and expect that the relations between

the United States and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government, as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations, will be positive."

Clearly, the Americans do not want chaos and would need the cooperation of not only the Taliban but also Pakistan to prevent it. Chaos, caused by a civil war, would mean the resurgence of terrorist threats, a major refugee crisis and humanitarian disaster. The Americans may have failed to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan but can still help to prevent instability. Whoever governs Afghanistan would need foreign donor assistance, so the US influence will remain as will that of Pakistan. US-Pakistan relations should, therefore, improve, especially as the American establishment may want to retain some presence in Afghanistan; hence, the two secret annexes – secret so as not to dilute the political capital of the US withdrawal on Trump's electoral prospects and also not to sabotage the intra-Afghan talks.

What will be the Taliban strategy to realise their aims? Of course, they will enter into an intra-Afghan dialogue but will not agree to a ceasefire. There are so many issues to resolve at the talks – the political set-up, governing institutions, the status of the Afghan National Security Forces, rivalry and competition among the Afghan sides, power sharing, ethnic balance, women's rights, civil rights, etc. There are bound to be disagreements that may have to be settled on the battlefield.

However, the military situation would be different from the 1990s. The Taliban will not have a walkover. Neither side is going to give in easily. The civil war will be fiercer. The Taliban will have more freedom to operate out of Pakistan than in the last 19 years as a departing Washington may not make an issue of the so-called sanctuaries. Pakistan will face a dilemma. Its best bet is still to make whatever government that emerges in Kabul, interim or otherwise, the focal point for stabilisation of Afghanistan, but in the event of the failure of the intra-Afghan dialogue, Pakistan may have no choice but to support the Taliban. In either scenario, the fallout will be grim.

India too will face a dilemma. It should reach out to the Taliban. The priority for India and Pakistan should be peace in Afghanistan and regional stability and they should support whatever solution works. They should avoid their own little 'great game'. The stabilisation of Afghanistan comes first. Once stabilized, it can search for a suitable system.

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