

The Doha Deal: The Bumpy Road Ahead to Afghan Peace

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

Summary

Afghanistan inched forward towards peace with the signing of the accord between the United States and the Taliban in Doha in Qatar on 29 February 2020. However, the road ahead appears very bumpy as of now, and fraught with many disparate issues. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the Taliban sense that an ultimate victory is a matter of time.

Since the ancient times of Alexander the Great, and through the ‘Great Game’ of the 19th Century, the strategic terrain of Afghanistan has been the bane of its many invaders. At present, the United States (US) has been fighting in Afghanistan for 18 years. However, after some initial successes, the Americans seem no closer to victory than at the beginning. Now President Donald Trump wants US troops back. It was an election pledge by him and has acquired some urgency now that the next presidential polls are due in November 2020. He managed to obtain the support of Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan, known to be close to the Taliban detractors, and appointed an Afghan-American Zalmay Khalilzad to lead the peace process.

On 29 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal in Doha, Qatar, the venue of the negotiations. While some elements of the agreement were kept secret, there were four major components of the agreement in the public documents. The first was the withdrawal of all American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) troops from Afghanistan within a specified period. The second was a Taliban pledge to prevent Al-Qaeda, the more extremist Islamists, from operating in the areas under the Taliban’s control. Third, the deal would immediately be followed by intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government as well as other key parties. The fourth was an exchange of prisoners – 5,000 Taliban fighters to be released by the Kabul government in return for 1,000 soldiers held by the Taliban. All these were conditional to the reduction of violence on the part of the Taliban.

The US acted swiftly. In order to bring the international community, particularly the United Nations (UN), on board, Washington introduced a resolution in the UN Security Council (UNSC). It was unanimously and enthusiastically adopted. The text welcomed the significant steps towards ending the war and opening the door to intra-Afghan negotiations. By getting the UNSC to approve such a resolution, the US and the other supporters of the peace deal, including NATO, were able to rope in the Afghan government, which was not a participant in Doha. Furthermore, to indicate the commitment to troops draw-down, the US vacated two bases in Helmand and in Herat as a part of the goal of reducing troop-numbers from about 12,000 at present to 8,600 by mid-July 2020, followed by full withdrawal, if the Taliban keep its commitments.

However, the political situation in Kabul has been chaotic. Both the contenders to the presidency, Ashraf Ghani, and his former deputy, Abdullah Abdullah, claimed victory at the polls held last September, though the Election Commission’s results gave Ghani a slightly higher margin. As Ghani was being inaugurated, Abdullah also swore himself in. To demonstrate that they were watching in very close proximity, the Taliban or, at any rate, their supporters, caused

a few explosions to occur in the vicinity of Ghani's ceremony. Piqued at being marginalised in Doha, Ghani initially balked at the prisoner exchange. However, in lieu of their support to his electoral victory claims, the Americans eventually managed to get Ghani to issue a decree to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for 1,000 of his own. The Taliban, however, continued their attacks just to display their military might and capacity to win at will, to which the Americans, intent that the deal succeeds, seemed to be turning a blind eye.

So, the Taliban are obviously on the roll, though the path to power in Kabul still threatens to be bumpy. The region appears reconciled to this fact. However, what of the Afghans, themselves, many of whom are young enough not to have known a Taliban rule? Will it mean an end to their aspirations for pluralist progress? Will it spell the doom of women's empowerment? Will it cut out all prospects of enlightened governance? One hopes not. The new Taliban should be different from the old. This time it will come to power largely through international acquiescence, including of the US. The Taliban's success in government, should they achieve that position, would depend on their recognition of this simple but incontrovertible fact that the Afghan people, after four decades of turmoil and tribulations, deserve the same chance as the rest of humanity in their journey along the inscrutable path of destiny. That is not too much to ask for!

.....

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in this paper.