

CLOUDS OF UNCERTAINTY OVER AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

“The Afghan government has lost credibility.” A suicide attack on Amrullah Saleh, the candidate for vice president, at his party office in Kabul marked the beginning of the campaigning period in Kabul. NYT

After Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's 'successful' visit to Washington last month, another round of Doha talks between the U.S. and the Taliban has started. U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad was in a hurry to go to Doha via Islamabad to ensure that Pakistan will deliver. On July 31 he tweeted, “In Doha, if the Taliban do their part, we will do ours, and conclude the agreement we have been working on”.

U.S. President Donald Trump has reversed his Afghanistan policy over the past two years. The 2017 policy aimed at breaking the military stalemate in Afghanistan by authorising an additional 4,000 soldiers, giving U.S. forces a freer hand to go after the Taliban, putting Pakistan on notice, and strengthening Afghan capabilities. Within a year, it became clear that the policy was not working. The U.S. failed to understand that no insurgency can be defeated as long as it enjoys sanctuary. Direct talks with the Taliban began with the appointment of Mr. Khalilzad. But soon, the U.S. realised that it needed the Pakistan army's help to get the Taliban to the negotiating table. A politically savvy Khalilzad understood that his negotiating time frame was governed by President Trump's re-election due in 2020; therefore any deal had to be concluded before the end of 2019. This reality wasn't lost on either the Taliban or the Pakistan army; time was on their side.

While the U.S. maintained that the seventh round of Doha talks would cover four issues — a cessation of hostilities; an intra-Afghan peace dialogue; assurance from the Taliban that Afghan territory would not be used for attacking U.S. interests; and U.S. troop withdrawal — the Taliban made it clear that its priority was the last issue. It rejected a ceasefire, instead launching its spring offensive, Operation Fath, as well as talks with the Afghan government, describing it as a “puppet regime”. The Taliban provided some assurances on the third issue but kept demanding a firm date for U.S. troop withdrawal.

The Taliban relented on the second issue, an intra-Afghan peace dialogue, when pushed by Pakistan. In early July, it met with an Afghan delegation, which included some officials who were present in their personal capacity.

The quid pro quo for Pakistan for delivering on this soon emerged in Mr. Khan's meeting with Mr. Trump on July 22. On January 1, 2018, Mr. Trump had accused Pakistan of “lies and deceit”. He tweeted that while the U.S. had given Pakistan “\$33 billion in aid”, Pakistan was providing a “safe haven to terrorists”. He conveyed his displeasure by cutting off \$1.3 billion of assistance. Nearly 18 months later, with Mr. Khan standing beside him, Mr. Trump told the world that “Pakistan is going to help us out to extricate ourselves”.

Mr. Khan cleverly tickled Mr. Trump's ego by suggesting that as the leader of the “most powerful country in the world”, he could “play an important role in bringing peace in the subcontinent”. Mr. Trump lapped it up and offered his mediation skills to help resolve the Kashmir problem, adding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had himself suggested it during their exchange in Osaka, a claim that was promptly rejected by the Indian authorities. As a downpayment for the next round of Doha talks, the U.S. also cleared a \$125 million support package for Pakistan's F-16 fleet.

Meanwhile, elections in Afghanistan have been postponed twice and will now be held on September 28 to give time for the Doha talks. The Afghan government has lost credibility and there is little support for its term being extended. A deteriorating security environment makes it difficult for a credible election to be held. Afghan security forces are losing 25 to 30 men daily, a toll that is depleting ranks and dampening morale.

Campaigning kicked off on July 28 and was marked by a suicide attack on Amrullah Saleh, the candidate for vice president as Ashraf Ghani's running mate, at his party office in Kabul. Mr. Saleh had a narrow escape but the suicide attack claimed over 20 lives. Mr. Saleh has been among the most vocal critics of the hasty reconciliation process and the U.S.'s gullibility at reposing faith in the Pakistan army. A close aide to the former Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, Mr. Saleh has long been targeted by the Taliban.

The Taliban is not going to take part in the election, and once a deal is concluded, its demand will be for an interim government. Even if elections take place, an elected government would soon find itself at cross purposes with the interim government. Further, a number of promised electoral reforms are yet to be implemented.

An interim government would prepare the ground for fresh elections after constitutional amendments and electoral reforms that would be decided by the traditional Loya Jirga process over two years. However, this approach is strongly opposed by the more secular and liberal Afghan groups, including women, who see it as a step back from the democratic rights and principles enshrined in the 2004 Constitution. There is a deepening sense of unease and betrayal in the Afghan government which feels that its legitimacy is being eroded by the U.S. tacitly making deals and leaving it in the lurch.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has already indicated September 1 as a deadline for concluding the Doha process. Instead of a messy and contentious election, an interim government would provide a better environment for the U.S. to manage its exit in keeping with the 2020 election calendar.

The reality is that there can be no peace unless the Taliban and Afghan security forces de-escalate, and this will require talks between the Taliban and the government. The Taliban wants to bypass this by entering government through the back door, using the interim structure. Such a move is likely to create strains within the Afghan security force which needs a clear chain of command to function. There is a rise in ethnic polarisation in Afghanistan. With the emergence of the Islamic State, there is growing evidence of sectarian polarisation. Any dilution of the cohesiveness of the Afghan security forces, which are dependent on external funding (primarily the U.S.), would dramatically increase the risks of fragmentation of Afghanistan.

All Afghans are tired of conflict, want peace, and accept that this requires reconciliation. But not all Afghans want peace on the terms of reconciliation dictated by the Taliban. Today 74% of the Afghan population is below 30 years and has lived for most part in a conservative but open society. That is why there is no national consensus on reconciliation. In the absence of a national consensus, external actors are able to intervene to support their own favourites. But that is not Mr. Trump's problem. The U.S.'s exit will end its long war in Afghanistan but growing political uncertainties will only exacerbate Afghanistan's ongoing conflict.

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