

WAR AND TALKS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON TALIBAN CEASEFIRE

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

The Taliban's decision to [cease fire for three days](#) during Id-ul-Adha has come as a relief for Afghans who have seen unabated violence despite a peace agreement between the insurgents and the U.S. This is the third official respite since the war started in 2001. In June 2018 and May this year, the Taliban had briefly ended hostilities to mark the end of the holy month of Ramzan. On both occasions, it refused to extend the ceasefire, returning to war as soon as the celebrations were over. This time, however, hopes are high that the truce could be extended as Kabul and the insurgents are preparing to launch the intra-Afghan talks that were promised in the U.S.-Taliban deal. According to the pact, talks were to begin in March. But both sides failed to reach an agreement on prisoner exchange, which the U.S. had agreed with the Taliban. The insurgents complained that the government was not complying with the terms of the agreement, while officials of the Ashraf Ghani administration said the Taliban's demands were unacceptable. Finally, President Ghani decided to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, which was followed by the Taliban's ceasefire announcement. Both sides have now agreed to kick-start talks after Id and they could do it in a peaceful environment if the ceasefire is extended.

While the cessation of hostilities is welcome, there are underlying issues that continue to plague the peace process. When the U.S. entered into talks with the insurgent group, it did not insist on a ceasefire. So the Taliban continues to engage in war and talks simultaneously. Worse, the Americans, badly looking for a way out of the conflict, kept the Afghan government out of the peace process. After the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed in February, according to which the U.S. agreed to pull out its troops in return for security assurances from the Taliban, the onus was on a weakened Afghan government to start talks even as the Taliban continued attacks. According to the government, 3,560 government troops and 775 civilians have been killed in conflict since the deal was signed. Also, infighting made matters worse for the government. Last year's presidential election saw a record low turnout. The results, announced months later, were contested by the main Opposition candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, who formed a parallel administration. He backed off, but only after being appointed the head of the High Council for National Reconciliation that will lead talks with the Taliban. These factors allowed a resurgent Taliban to maintain the upper hand — in war and in talks. This will be the government's key challenge when its representatives and that of the Taliban, which sees itself as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan and has not recognised the country's Constitution, would be holding talks.

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