

U.S. DECLARES IT HAS AGREED UPON PEACE FRAMEWORK WITH TALIBAN

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The way forward: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, centre, with U.S. special representative Zalmay Khalilzad, top left, during a Cabinet meeting in Kabul on Monday. AFPHANDOUT

American and Taliban officials have agreed to the framework of a peace deal in which the insurgents guarantee to prevent Afghanistan from being used by terrorists, and that could lead to a full pull-out of U.S. troops in return for a ceasefire and Taliban talks with the Afghan government, the chief U.S. negotiator said Monday.

“We have a draft of the framework that has to be fleshed out before it becomes an agreement,” the American envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, said in an interview in Kabul. “The Taliban [has] committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals.”

After nine years of halting efforts to reach a peace deal with the Taliban, the draft framework, though preliminary, is the biggest tangible step toward ending the two-decade war.

Talking to Afghan govt.

A senior American official said that the Taliban delegation had asked for time to confer with their leadership about the U.S. insistence that the insurgents talk with the Afghan government and agree to a ceasefire as part of any finalised deal. The official said they had made it clear to the Taliban that all the issues discussed were “interconnected” as part of a “package deal”. The official’s account was supported by details that have been leaked by some Taliban and Western officials in recent days.

Although other Taliban sources said that more concrete details of a U.S. troop withdrawal had already been agreed upon, American officials said on Monday that those details had not yet been hashed out.

Mr. Khalilzad returned to Afghanistan on Sunday to brief the government in Kabul after conducting six days of talks with the Taliban delegation in Doha, Qatar.

In an address to the nation after being briefed by Mr. Khalilzad, President Ashraf Ghani expressed concern that a peace deal would be rushed. He highlighted previous settlements that ended in bloodshed, including when the Soviet Union withdrew from the country in the late 1980s. Despite a promise of a peace deal at the time, Afghanistan broke into anarchy. “We want peace quickly, we want it soon, but we want it with prudence,” Mr. Ghani said. “Prudence is important so we do not repeat past mistakes.”

Appointment of Baradar

During the talks last week, the Taliban signalled its seriousness by appointing one of its most powerful officials from the original movement, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, as their chief peace negotiator.

Senior American officials said new talks would start in late February, but suggested that teams

from both sides could start on technical details before then.

As the first step in the framework, Mr. Khalilzad said that the Taliban was firm about agreeing to keep Afghan territory from being used as a staging ground for terrorism by groups like al-Qaeda, and had agreed to provide guarantees and an enforcement mechanism. That had long been a primary demand by American officials. The next set of contingencies would see the U.S. agreeing to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan, but only in return for the Taliban's entering talks with the Afghan government and agreeing to a lasting ceasefire. Those last two points have long been resisted by Taliban officials, and could still provide trouble with the process, officials said.

But the agreement in principle to discussing them at all was seen as a breakthrough after years of failed attempts, American and Afghan officials said. NY Times

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