

AN UNEASY PACT

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

The agreement signed in Doha on Saturday between the United States and the Taliban marks the beginning of a potentially dangerous phase in the unfortunate recent history of Afghanistan. Although it has been billed as a “peace agreement” it is more a phased “withdrawal schedule” for the 12,000 US forces currently stationed in Afghanistan. The promise to end America’s “endless wars” in the greater Middle East region was one of the central themes of US President Donald Trump’s election campaign in 2016. He is eager to demonstrate progress on that front in his bid for re-election later this year. Although he deployed additional troops in Afghanistan during 2017, Trump’s conviction that America’s longest ever war in Afghanistan is unwinnable was reinforced by the continuing US inability to put the Taliban under serious military pressure.

In agreeing to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan over a period of 14 months, Washington has got Taliban’s promise to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any group that threatens the security of America and its allies. The Taliban has also agreed to join talks with various Afghan groups, starting later this month, to discuss a permanent ceasefire and a road map to install a new political regime in Kabul. The US has certainly made its promise of withdrawal conditional upon the Taliban holding up its commitments. This conditionality is unlikely to survive the diminishing political support in Washington for further military involvement with Afghanistan. The biggest casualty of the US withdrawal is the Kabul government that was kept out of the US talks with the Taliban. Growing internal squabbling in Kabul has further marginalised the government. The imminent intra-Afghan talks will involve many Afghan groups but the Taliban will be the most powerful player at the table and is bound to set the terms for the final agreement.

The Taliban, whose strength lies among the Pashtuns, is not known for a politics of accommodation with other ethnic groups that constitute more than half of the Afghan population. The return of a unilateral Taliban could set the stage for the next round of civil war that has hobbled the nation since the late 1970s. The lifting of the US military footprint and the uncertain political future of Kabul provide a fertile ground for meddling by other regional actors, especially the Pakistan army, which sees Afghanistan as its backyard. India, which has seen its influence grow in Afghanistan since the US intervention at the end of 2001, has never been enthusiastic about Washington’s engagement with the Taliban. It has chosen to keep its political lot with Kabul, which is growing weaker by the day. Delhi has also held itself back from any formal contact with the Taliban. Critics say this policy is too rigid to cope with the dynamic Afghan situation. Supporters, however, argue that it is better to hold on to the allies you have rather than looking for new friends among the Taliban. Either way, Delhi must prepare for prolonged turbulence in Afghanistan as the curtains fall on Kabul’s moderate political order.

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