

# THE SUM AND SUBSTANCE OF THE AFGHAN DEAL

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

The long-awaited [deal between the United States and the Taliban](#) was finally signed in Doha last Saturday by U.S. Special Envoy Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and former Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. On the same day, [U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper](#) visited Kabul to conclude the Joint Declaration for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the two governments. Gaps and inconsistencies between the two only add to the confusion. But two facts are clear. The U.S. is on its way out and second, this [does not ensure peace for the Afghan people](#). As former U.S. Defence Secretary General Mattis put it, "The U.S. doesn't lose wars, it loses interest." But since a major power cannot be seen to be losing a war, certainly not in an election year, a re-labelling of the withdrawal becomes necessary.

Nearly a half century ago, U.S. President Richard Nixon had faced a similar dilemma. With more than half-a-million U.S. soldiers deployed in Vietnam, it was clear that a military solution was out of question. Seeking an exit, his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, during his secret visit to Beijing in July 1971, assured Premier Zhou Enlai that the U.S. was prepared to withdraw completely from Vietnam in return for release of U.S. prisoners of war and a ceasefire lasting "a decent interval". Kissinger and Nixon knew that the deal would leave their ally, the South Vietnamese government led by President Thieu, vulnerable. In declassified 1972 White House tapes, Nixon and Kissinger acknowledge that "South Vietnam is not going to survive and the idea is to find a formula that can hold things together for a year or two". The ploy worked.

Nixon was re-elected with a record margin in November 1972 on the platform that peace was at hand. In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed, and by end March, the U.S. had completed its withdrawal ending direct military involvement. U.S. prisoners of war were released but by end-1973, the ceasefire was in tatters. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975. Approximately 20,000 U.S. soldiers died during 1972-73 (Nixon cemented the understanding during his visit to China in February 1972) and 80,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died after the collapse of the ceasefire, following the decent interval. To win his re-election, Nixon had promised an honourable peace and delivered a delayed defeat, but by then the world had moved on. Dr. Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 (joint winner). The secret assurances of 1971-72 only surfaced after four decades.

Mr. Khalilzad is no stranger to Washington politics having served in Republican administrations since the Reagan era. He understood his job perfectly when Secretary Pompeo appointed him the Special Envoy for Afghan Reconciliation in September 2018. An Afghan by birth (he came to the U.S. in his teens) and having served as U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan, he knew full well that he was not negotiating an Afghan peace deal; he was negotiating a "managed" U.S. exit. The time line too was clear. U.S. President Donald Trump had repeatedly declared that "great nations do not fight endless wars"; his re-election is due in the fall of 2020.

[Mr. Trump's 2017 policy](#) aimed at breaking the military stalemate in Afghanistan by authorising an additional number of up to 5,000 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 was clear that the policy was not working because no insurgency can be defeated as long as it enjoys safe havens and secure sanctuaries. Pakistan's help was necessary to get the Taliban to the negotiating table.

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A three-way negotiation ensued. First was the Doha track with the Taliban; a second was with Islamabad/Rawalpindi and the third was with Kabul to ensure that the Afghan government would accept the outcome. The dice was loaded because Taliban and Pakistan negotiated as a team. Within six months, they had whittled down Mr. Khalilzad's four objectives: a ceasefire, an intra-Afghan peace dialogue, cutting ties with terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, and finally, U.S. troop withdrawal—to just the last one, with some palliatives regarding the third.

The deal was ready to be signed last September when Mr. Trump abruptly called it off, stalling the process. National Security Adviser John Bolton's dismissal (he was opposed) and the release of three high-level Taliban militants including Anas Haqqani (Sirajuddin Haqqani's brother) in November helped smoothen issues.

The key features of the Doha deal are: i) U.S. troops to be reduced from the current 14,000 to 8,600 by June 15 (in 135 days); ii) withdrawal of all remaining U.S. and foreign forces by April 29, 2021 (in 14 months); iii) Removal of the Taliban from UN Security Council sanctions list by May 29; iv) Up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan security forces prisoners to be released from Afghan and Taliban custody respectively by March 10; v) U.S. sanctions against Taliban leaders to be lifted by August 27; vi) intra-Afghan talks to begin on March 10.

### Clouds of uncertainty over Afghanistan

Nothing reflects the fragility of the deal signed between the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha better than the title: "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognised by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America". This is repeated more than a dozen times in the agreement. Ironically, the U.S. has committed to getting UN Security Council endorsement for the deal with an entity that it does not recognise.

The leader of the Haqqani network and the number two of the Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who recently wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times*, remains on the U.S.'s wanted list with a reward of \$10-million for information leading to his capture or death. This hardly squares with the notion that the Taliban is now a U.S. counter-terrorism partner against the Islamic State.

The Kabul Declaration states that Afghan government will "participate in US facilitated discussion with Taliban on CBMs, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant number of prisoners on both sides". There is no reference to numbers to be released or a deadline of March 10 linking it to commencing intra-Afghan talks, as in the Doha deal. No wonder President Ghani angrily declared a day later that release of prisoners will be part of the agenda for the intra-Afghan talks, provoking the Taliban to declare that the truce would no longer cover Afghan security forces, creating the first of many obstacles ahead.

### No good options in Afghanistan

There is no mention of what will happen to the Taliban fighters whose numbers have suddenly inflated from earlier range of 30,000 to 50,000 to 60,000 to 1,50,000. Are they to be disarmed and demobilised; prepared for civilian life or integrated with the Afghan security forces? Who is expected to provide stipends to those opting for peace? Mr. Trump maintains that it is "time that the war on terror is fought by someone else" so it will not be the U.S.. The U.S. has described itself as a "facilitator", a responsibility that it will be glad to share with others.

The idea of a ceasefire, which is normally the starting point for any peace process, has been made an outcome of the intra-Afghan dialogue, together with a political road map for the future, but without any time frame. There is no reference to preserving the gains of the last 18 years

and with the Taliban intent on reviving the Islamic Emirate, the shape of things is clear.

Remember the duck test — if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck.

*Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat and currently Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation*

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