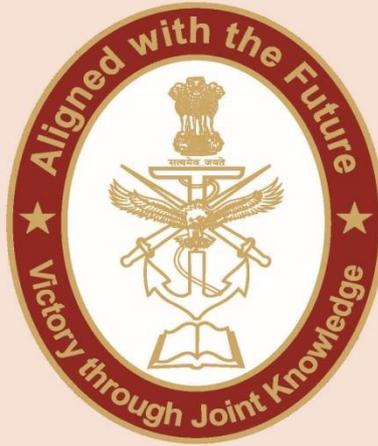


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AFGHAN PEACE TALKS MUST INVOLVE THE UN

By

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The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo stated that 'notable progress' had been made during the ongoing talks between the US and the Taliban. Talks had almost concluded in Sept last year, when Trump pulled out of the deal. This time the deal nearing acceptance is a replica of the previous. It is based on the Taliban announcing a 'reduction in violence' for about a week and appears to have been implemented. This would enable the basic deal to be signed on 29th of Feb. Talks between the Taliban and Afghan government would commence later.

There is no mention of a permanent ceasefire, implying that it is the US which has backed down, rather than the Taliban. The deal is also aimed at evaluating differences between Taliban negotiators in Qatar and their factions on the ground, which have defied the leadership and continued with violence, desiring to retake Kabul by force. The US is only seeking no attacks on its troops as its definition of 'reduction in violence'. What would happen subsequently remains a mute question.

Afghanistan's National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib, during his visit to New Delhi for the Raisina dialogue, requested the Indian government to consider the deployment of Indian troops in a peacekeeping role, ahead of intra-Afghan talks. Kabul is hoping for a United Nations led contingent of troops as it fears reduction of US troops would create a void. Within India there are few who believe that India

should accept the offer and deploy troops in the country, while majority oppose it, except possibly under the UN flag.

Historically, India has never showed an interest, apart from the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka, to deploy troops except under a UN charter. For peace to reign in Afghanistan, one brigade or division is insufficient. If India is to deploy in Afghanistan, it should be under the UN flag, terms of which must be acceptable to the Afghan government and Taliban. This would ensure requisite force levels. Deployment under UN aegis will ensure peace and simultaneously continued contribution by nations for the development of Afghanistan.

The US has been in direct talks with the Taliban and there has been no mention of any peacekeeping force deployment nor the involvement of the UN. This implies that the US is willing to dump Afghanistan while reducing its troops solely for political gains of Trump, enabling him to fulfil his promise of withdrawing from trouble spots. It is willing to leave the Afghan populace at the mercy of a power-hungry Taliban backed by Pakistan, which wants the country as its backyard.

The only reason Pak is supporting talks is because it does not want any development in the country, post US withdrawal. It prefers a weak, economically destabilized Afghanistan whom it can strangle financially and militarily. Hence, it has been insisting only on US-Taliban talks, never once mentioning involvement of the UN. SM Qureshi, the Pak foreign minister stated, 'The deal will be signed in the presence of Pakistan because it was impossible for the deal to come through without our efforts.'

The current deal appears to be simple, but it is not. It has a collection of secret annexes, which both parties would never mention publicly. One of these states that the US would reduce its troop deployment from the current 13,000 to around 8,500. This force is meant for countering terrorism. Another permit the US CIA to continue operating in the country.

If truth of US forces remaining is leaked, ground Taliban factions may not accept the deal and violence would resume. All through the conflict it has been the local population which has suffered. Civilian casualties have mounted because of air strikes by the US and ground operations by the Taliban.

Trump should realise the repercussions of his rushed deal. His limited vision only seeks withdrawal of US troops. This is the third

country which the US would leave in a mess after its interference in their internal affairs in recent decades, earlier nations being Iraq and Libya. It has destabilized West Asia, now it would repeat its actions in South Asia.

The deal under consideration will become a wasted piece of paper the day US commences partial pullout or the truth of US troops remaining is revealed. The Taliban ground forces would enhance violence levels. It would likely end in an internal civil war leading to mass casualties. Nations which have contributed to the development of Afghanistan in the two decades of US involvement would find their efforts wasted as the Taliban would destroy the edifice of the country. In all probability the Pak army would officially launch operations in support of the Taliban.

If the US seriously seeks peace in the country, then the UN must be involved in talks and UN peacekeeping troops deployed till a final peace agreement between the Taliban and Kabul government is signed. If the same is being resorted to in every country where an internal strife exists, why is Afghanistan being considered differently. Involving the UN and pushing in peacekeeping troops would have multiple benefits.

Firstly, it would force the Taliban to negotiate under UN charter and supervision, ensuring human rights are respected. It will also result in reduction of violence.

Secondly, if violence continues then evidently, Pakistan is behind it and could be hauled up by the UN Security Council for acting against international interests.

Thirdly, development within the country would continue and attempts by the Taliban to push the country back into stone age and bring in regressive policies would be stemmed. Democracy would gain root.

Fourthly, it would ensure that the country does not become a haven for terrorists to threaten the global community.

Pakistan hopes to be the nation controlling Taliban-Afghan talks. Qureshi stated, 'After February, we will try to build a delegation to promote intra-Afghan peace process and we have also decided when and how those talks will take place.' This implies it is seeking to hand over Afghanistan to the Taliban, which could jeopardize the entire region.

There is also a possibility that Trump, during his visit to India, may request Modi to deploy Indian boots on the ground in Afghanistan. This would lead to Indian soldiers serving under US command in Afghanistan. This would be against Indian ethos of only operating under the UN flag and should not be accepted. Further, Indian deployment would not be acceptable under US command by the Taliban. UN peacekeeping forces are deployed post an agreement by both sides to ensure peace while talks progress and hence remain effective.

Trump should not consider himself to be above the UN and only seek to reduce US troops for his personal political gains, dumping the nation to the mercy of the Taliban and Pakistan. If he seeks to project himself as a peacemaker, capable of a Nobel Peace Prize as his predecessor, then he must bring the UN into Afghan negotiations and push for deployment of a peacekeeping force. Failure to do so would result in Trump as an individual being listed in history as being responsible for the death of millions of innocents and the loss of a nation. It is still not late for him to act.

Only in the event of a UN force deployment, India could consider sending troops into Afghanistan.

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