



CENJOWS

AFGHANISTAN: TOO HOT TO HANDLE

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Abstract

The 29 Feb 20 peace agreement between Taliban and the US came as a glimmer of hope in the war ravaged landscape of Afghanistan. However, it is going nowhere due to inherent contradictions in the agreement and the way it was arrived at, without involving anyone from Afghanistan other than Taliban. The intent of the US looks suspect right from the beginning of using the deal as a smoke screen to withdraw from Afghanistan being an election plank of Trump. ISIS Khorasan has fallen apart from Taliban as it doesn't favour Taliban to interact with US an apostate state. China and Russia seem to be waiting for an opportunity to intervene in Afghanistan to shrink

the strategic space of US with help of Pakistan. China – Pak axis hopes to install a Taliban rule to secure its western front and divert foreign militants to India. Khalilzad the US peace broker appears to be running out of options and reached out to India on 19 April. However, many see this as a veiled threat than a positive gesture towards India by the US.

Prognosis appears grim. Hope for India lies in supporting the anti-Taliban forces in retaining control of Afghanistan using Russian and Iranian influence. We must somehow dissuade Russia from joining the China – Pak axis. We may also look at raising Private Military Companies through Civilian Contractors to augment the US presence and support current dispensation. A whole of nation approach is recommended to prevent a pro Pak – China rule in Afghanistan.

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Fading Hoe of Peace

Afghanistan recently saw a glimmer of hope of peace when US and Taliban inked a deal at Doha on 29 Feb 20. [The peace agreement has four key elements](#):ⁱ first, guarantee by Taliban not to allow foreign armed groups such as AQ, ISIS and TTP to use Afghanistan as a Launchpad to conduct attacks. Second the complete withdrawal of the US-led forces over a period of 14 months. Third a ceasefire which also envisaged release of prisoners, five thousand of Taliban in exchange of one thousand government personnel. Fourth an intra-Afghan dialogue to arrive at an amicable solution for a long lasting peace. On all four counts the agreement has virtually fallen flat. Taliban is threatening to walk out of the agreement, ceasefire does not hold good as is evident from the spate of attacks including the attack on Gurudwara in Kabul in which 26 lives were lost. Though release of few prisoners was carried out by the Government Security Forces, Taliban was not happy with it. Taliban wants its important prisoners to be released in the first lot which Afghan government is unwilling to accede. Similarly, the people of Afghanistan other than the militants are not happy with the deal. [They suspect themotive of Taliban](#)ⁱⁱ based on the claims of victory made by Taliban on social media following the deal. In fact many Talibanis are touting the deal as a tactical pause which is causing anxiety amongst the common public of Afghanistan. There are also few people who feel that the deal may just be a cover for US to withdraw from Afghanistan. With hope of peace in Afghanistan fading rapidly some frantic moves were taken by firstly UN on April 17, 2020 when [China, Pakistan, US, Russia participated recently in a virtual discussion on Afghanistan](#).ⁱⁱⁱ *The discussions focused on a "comprehensive peace process in Afghanistan*

through intra-Afghan negotiations and on the importance of regional cooperation in support to Afghanistan", Stephane Dujarric, spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General, said. *But with the 29 Feb 20 US – Taliban agreement going nowhere, the meeting appeared to be a mere cosmetic exercise.* The time line of the peace talks is shown in figure below.



Afghanistan an Unexplainable Entity

Afghanistan as the proverbial saying goes has rarely seen peace and stability. The Afghan conundrum is so exasperating that many a times we want to leave it alone on its fate. A famous Kite Runner Khaled Hosseini has this to say about people of Afghanistan, “Afghans cherish customs but abhor rules. And so it was with kite fighting. **The rules were simple: No rules. Fly your kite. Cut the opponents. Good luck.**” This actually sums up the social fabric and geopolitical situation of Afghanistan.

Afghan Government leadership crisis is not getting resolved even in a catastrophic Pandemic crisis such as COVID19. We don't know who the President of Afghanistan is? Both Ghani and Abdulla Abdulla claim to be the duly elected President of Afghanistan post the recent elections. The country's Independent Election Commission has declared Ghani a winner, but Abdullah and the Elections Complaint Commission have charged widespread irregularities. Even the Americans seem to have abandoned Ghani government.

Militant groups such as ISIS Khorasan, Al Qaeda, TTP, IMU, various Shuras and tribal groups such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Pashtuns further complicate the socio-political landscape in Kabul by their radicalism and adherence to Salafi Jihadism. There are also reports of a rift between ISIS and Taliban with a number of Taliban fighters having shifted to ISIS. The recent blast on April 6th on Taliban's Quetta Shura was claimed by the ISIS as this tweet by [MunazaShaheed](#)^{iv} a VOA journalist suggests, "ISIS Khurasaan claims & takes the responsibility for the blast in Quetta, Pak today, where a meeting of Taliban's Quetta Shura was ongoing. They claim to have killed many of the leadership members of Taliban's Quetta Shura in the blast. Taliban earlier rejected any such incident." These reports of ISIS on war path with the Taliban are indicative of a mess that may follow post the withdrawal of the US.

Khalizad the US peace brokers appears to have run out of options to strike a lasting agreement with various factions of Afghanistan. The US President whose popularity ratings are rapidly going down as compared to his opponent Biden is in a hurry to show some results on ground. He was pinning on the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as his big ticket achievement. In order to convince Ghani to reconcile with Abdullah Abdullah US Secretary of State also announced a one billion dollar cut from the aid to Afghanistan but it seems to have had no effect.

Russia, China and other neighbouring countries appear to be waiting in the wings to enter the fray at an opportune time. Russia would be keen to enter Afghanistan to further shrink its strategic space in combination with Iran, China, favourable Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will also prevent US from using the Afghan territory for transporting gas from gas generously endowed Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan and thence to US through sea routes. China is also an energy hungry nation and will not mind joining hands with Russia in using this avenue for its own use given its all-weather friendship with Pakistan and new found bonhomie with Russia. [In fact there are reports that China and Pakistan are the only two nations which continue to maintain informal relations with Taliban.](#)^v It is probably a hedging strategy to exploit a possible future scenario of Afghanistan once again being ruled by Taliban. Maintaining good ties with Taliban also helps China in restraining the ETIM (East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement) terrorists who have an anti-Chinese orientation and support the Uighurs in China.

Pakistan feels that it can influence Taliban since their primary instrument of deep state the ISI has close ties with Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy leader of the Taliban of the Haqqani network. Pakistan it is believed also has considerable influence in the ISIS Khorasan and JeM operating in

Prognosis

US envoy for peace in Afghanistan **Zalmay Khalilzad** despite his best efforts has failed to achieve any success as is evident from the [6 Apr statement of Taliban](#)^{vii} accusing US of violating the terms of agreement and the Afghan government for not releasing the prisoners as agreed to. [Khalilzad reached out to EAM](#)^{viii} of India Mr. Jaishankar seeking India's engagement for a lasting peace in Afghanistan. This is the first time that Zalmay Khalilzad has reached out to India. While some may see this as an opportunity for India to become part of the negotiations and act as a counter weight to Pakistan, former Ambassador to Pakistan Mr. Dogra sees it as a veiled threat to India not to interfere into the peace process underway in Afghanistan. I tend to go by the second opinion that it is some kind of threat to India. It is a well-known fact that the Government of India does enjoys a fairly good relationship with India and Zalmay probably see the hesitation of the Afghan government in releasing hard core Taliban militants as coming on advice from India. Moreover one cannot expect such climb downs from US President who only last year had commented, ["I get along very well with India, Prime Minister Modi. But... he is constantly telling me he built a library in Afghanistan. \[...\] That's like \[...\] five hours of what we spent \[in Afghanistan\]. \[...\] I don't know who is using it."](#)^{ix} This after knowing fully well that barring sending combat troops India has virtually touched every aspect of Afghanistan. It has executed over 36 projects big and small including their Parliament building and road which will facilitate connectivity with Iran. Expecting any kind of positive communication on this issue at least to my mind is a wishful thinking. So where are we headed? I see a somewhat hasty draw down by US to enable President Donald Trump to claim some kind of mileage in the forthcoming Presidential election in US. Taliban is likely to go retract from the agreement and continue to seek more and more control over the Afghanistan. Taking advantage of the current serious COVID-19 situation in the US, Russia, China and Pakistan may actively prop up the Talibanis and further shrink the space and control of US in Afghanistan. In such an eventuality a Taliban dominated dispensation may very much be on the cards. This however, does not augur well for India as it will free up a host of international Islamic terrorist which may find their way in J&K. While these terrorists may also cause internal troubles in Pakistan but the current regime is in a make believe world that it will be able to control their activities in Pakistan and divert them to J&K and other parts of India to achieve their stated aim of Gazwa-e- Hind or a holy raid of India. I have my serious doubts on the ability of Pakistan to control these elements due to its own inter provincial and ethnic deep fault lines, emerging security challenges and a begging bowl dependent economy. These factors will get further accentuated due to the likely global recession having a direct

adverse bearing on Pakistan. To conclude, I see an even more troubled Afghanistan with Pakistan getting further entangled in the Af-Pak region. India has to keenly observe and monitor the situation and work through indirect channels essentially using the Russian and the Iranian influence to prop up a friendly government in Afghanistan to secure its economic and strategic interests. I see the US leaving behind civilian military contractors and some regular elements in training and advisory capacity to assist the Afghan Government. It may just be in our interest to take the suggestion of [Lt Gen Krishna](#)^x a former Army Commander to boost the residual forces of US by private military companies drawn from India through private security firms to keep our combat presence alive even if it is indirect. Given the Afghan history since ages I see only spells of conflict and wars in Afghanistan and we have to take the best out of it in our national interest using a whole of nation approach. But it is easier said than done.

ⁱ<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2020/02/war-afghanistan-2001-invasion-2020-taliban-deal-200229142658305.html>

ⁱⁱ<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/29/us-taliban-sign-peace-agreement-afghanistan-war>

ⁱⁱⁱhttps://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/china-pakistan-us-russia-participate-in-virtual-discussion-on-afghanistan-convened-by-un/amp_articleshow/75199961.cms

^{iv}<https://twitter.com/MunazaShaheed/status/1247945807556423680>

^v<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-odd-couple-china-s-deepening-relationship-with-the-taliban-28712>

^{vi}<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821>

^{vii}<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/taliban-warn-peace-deal-afghanistan-breaking-point-200405185652146.html>

^{viii}<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/khalilzad-reaches-out-to-jaishankar-on-troubled-afghan-peace-process/story-4AKXlb2jNbr6eBqVDhIrJK.html>

^{ix}<https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/36-things-india-has-done-for-afghanistan/>

^x<https://www.opindia.com/2020/03/america-taliban-treaty-meaning-for-pakistan-india/>

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