

The Imprudence of the US Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

[Arjun World](#) 25/11/2020

The new likely US president Joe Biden when he assumes charge would have to address the question of US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan. With increasing attacks by Taliban in Afghanistan and inroads by Islamic state it would be a hard decision. In a political turn of events, Trump's decision to further drawdown thousands of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq by the 15th of January 2021, has caused a stir in Kabul and startled the Pentagon as well. Senior U.S military commanders have reckoned that reducing the troop strength to 2,500 in Afghanistan would be inadequate to conduct military operations against the Taliban. Although, the U.S commanders are in favour of a withdrawal, they have recommended that the time is inappropriate for such an action, as there is significant surge of violence across the country by the Taliban. More importantly, the real concern for the U.S military is that the Government of Afghanistan and its security forces would be incapable of withstanding the Taliban on its own and require the assistance of the US military.

The Afghan peace negotiators have been critical of Trump's decision to pullback from the country, fearing the return of the Taliban. Overlooking the Afghan peace negotiations with the militants, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), stated in an interview that there is tangible apprehension and confusion over Trump's resolution. He indicated 'Nobody has given any clarity' and 'that if the US withdraws then they (Taliban) can come back by force... they might see it in their advantage.' Echoing Dr. Abdullah, a Pakistani official from the Foreign Ministry, opined that 'This would be a big disaster. The Taliban who welcomed Trump's remarks will then consider Afghanistan to be free to conquer and install an Islamist government.'

A number of high-ranking US military officials have cautioned and suggested that a hasty decision of this nature could sabotage the US-Taliban peace accord and further weaken Kabul's disposition. Mindful of the consequences, Dr. Abdullah has sought Islamabad's succour to mediate with the Taliban political representatives to oversee the mitigation of hostilities in the country. He pressed the officials in Islamabad to 'encourage the Taliban to show flexibility on those areas of differences where we are not making progress, including a reduction in violence.' Similarly, he has requested New Delhi to actively participate in the peace process, in the same manner as Russia and China have. 'I asked them [Indian Officials] to be more active in the efforts in support of peace, to keep the engagement today and increase it and energise it. It's important for Afghanistan and it's important for India,' stated Dr. Abdullah, as New Delhi is unwilling to communicate and is disinterested to hold any diplomatic ties with Taliban, maintaining that it is a 'terrorist proxy' of its arch-rival Pakistan.

The antecedence to the Intra-Afghan peace dialogue is the U.S-Taliban Agreement, formally signed on February 29, 2020, ensuing over a year-long parley between the two parties. In July 2018, Washington initiated negotiations with the Taliban without involving Kabul, in a radical shift of its long-established policy of an 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process.' According to a U.S Government official, negotiators from either party reached a consensus and formulated a 'very specific' objective - the Taliban must abate the quantum of violence perpetrated

across the country and also, mitigate attacks on the Government forces. Only upon meeting this condition, would the US agree to sign the US-Taliban Agreement. Honouring the condition, the Taliban abated violence for a week, and as a result the American Special Representative Khalilzad inked the Agreement with his compeer, the Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, on February 29, 2020 in Doha. The key objective of the US-Taliban pact to establish peace in Afghanistan and to end violence through the declaration of a ceasefire.

More importantly, in compliance with the clauses of the Agreement, America was to withdraw its military presence from the country. It was to downsize its troop strength from 13,000 to 8,600 in a span of 135 days, and eventually pullback all its forces by April 2021. Besides, the drawdown of troops, America was to administer the successful exchange of prisoners between the Taliban and the Afghan Government while revoking its sanctions on the Taliban members. In reciprocation, the Taliban was directed to ensure that no terror organisations use Afghan soil to target the U.S and its allies, while also promising to deter any form of recruitment, training or fundraising for terror activities.

Intra-Afghan Talks

The U.S-Taliban Agreement was principally envisaged to terminate the U.S military engagements and presence in Afghanistan but however, did not cater to establish a ‘comprehensive peace’ architecture among the Afghans. This peace agreement could be only achieved through a series of political dialogues involving the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Subsequently, the Intra-Afghan talks were organised in September 2020 in Doha, with the purpose to achieve a political resolution and understanding between the Government of Afghanistan with the Taliban. The latter’s growing political aspirations including its history of violence against women, Shi’as and the Hazaras has caused apprehension among the Afghan Government officials since the Taliban is dismissive over the idea of power distribution and as a result, has cast doubt on the minds of the government officials, over its true intentions. The two parties are also divided over other matters, such as determining the model of governance, on issues of women’s rights and social equality. Political Experts and security analysts opine that the peace talks would stretch over a few months until two issues are resolved- the mitigation of violence and the decision over the political structure and the future political direction in Afghanistan.

The recent escalation of violence against the Afghan security forces and on its citizens by the Taliban has unnerved the government and has raised several questions over the country’s future, amidst the power-hungry Anti-Coalition Militia (ACM). Ever since the commencement of the Intra-Afghan talks on September 12, 2020, the ACM has continued to intensify its strikes on the Afghan security forces. In fact, according to a recent Afghan Ministry of Defence report, the Taliban had carried out attacks in 18 out of the 34 provinces, on the very day of the commencement of the peace dialogue. Although the Taliban has not violated the terms of the U.S-Taliban Agreement by staging attacks on the U.S forces or its allies, America has called out the recent ongoing attacks in the Helmand province as “inconsistent” with the Agreement, and had conducted an offensive airstrike on the Taliban in October, on behalf of the Afghan security forces. International observers are of the view that the Taliban would be unwilling to renounce the use of violence immediately, as it harnesses violence as an instrument of power, to coerce the opposition

to arrive at an agreeable settlement. Until such time, the ACM would continue to spread violence across the country, to achieve its political end.

In view of the foregoing, the U.S State Secretary Mike Pompeo, in his opening address at the Intra-Afghan Talks urged the Afghans to safeguard the democratic principles and values; this being said he accentuated that the decision to determine a political form of governance lies with its people. He also underlined that the U.S doesn't believe in enforcing its political system on others but affirmed that his country is steadfast 'to protect the rights of all Afghans' to assist the country break-away from the course of violence.

Political Aspirations in Afghanistan

The Afghan Government has been vocal about its political stance and its vision for the country. It has expressed its desire to restore and pursue a democratic form of governance, while constituting Islam as the state religion. Furthermore, the Afghan President has assured his people that the government will not concede to any demands made by the Taliban which may compromise the rights of his subjects, especially the rights of women. He elucidated that his administration would deny the formation of a power-sharing government with the Taliban. As opposed to the government, the Taliban has not articulated its political vision and has been deliberately vague over specific matters of individual's and women's rights. Heading the Taliban peace negotiations, Mullah Baradar pronounced, 'We seek an Afghanistan that is independent, sovereign, united, developed and free – an Afghanistan with an Islamic system in which all people of the nation can participate without discrimination.' Mindful of Taliban's religious fanaticism, in all likelihood, it would press for an Islamic State and institute a clerical chair to oversee the executive and legislative institutions in the country.

Recalling the Taliban rule, most Afghans notably the women are critical of the organisation's parochial views, insular policies and the use of force and hence remain circumspective of its return to power. The traumatic experiences under the Taliban regime have indelibly scarred the Afghans. The announcement to withdraw the U.S troops from Afghanistan has further caused distress to the locals and has led them to believe that this step would entail in the resurgence of the Taliban and renew the spread of violence in the country. While some Afghan officials are convinced that the radical militant organisation is deliberately stalling the peace talks by protracting the negotiations as long as it is required, to ensure in achieving a complete repatriation of U.S troops, whereafter it will seize the opportunity to overthrow the incumbent government and subsequently take control of the state by the use of force. According to a survey conducted in December 2019, a 'significant majority' of Afghans are in favour of the peace negotiations with the Taliban, despite opposing them. While 89 per cent of the locals were in strong support of the peace talks, the people of Afghanistan are desperate to achieve "peace at any cost" since the country has been ravaged by conflict for decades. It would be interesting to observe the political and security dispositions that are achieved by Kabul and the Taliban, to ensure restore peace and prosperity across the nation.

To hastily withdraw the U.S military from Afghanistan could be disastrous for the future of the country. The abrupt absence of the U.S, would result in re-emergence of the Taliban. Ever since, the U.S-Taliban Agreement was signed, the Taliban has perpetrated multiple attacks on the Afghan forces, in response to which, the NATO Chief Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg recently

commented that the ‘hasty’ withdrawal “risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organise attacks on our homelands.” He further added that there is a significant risk of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) setting foot into Afghanistan to re-establish and regain its lost caliphate in Iraq and Syria. As the U.S commanders in Afghanistan anticipate an executive order in the coming days for their withdrawal, the NATO will continue to serve in the country and assist the Afghan forces. It remains to be observed how the new administration under Joe Biden would deal with Afghanistan in the days to come.

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