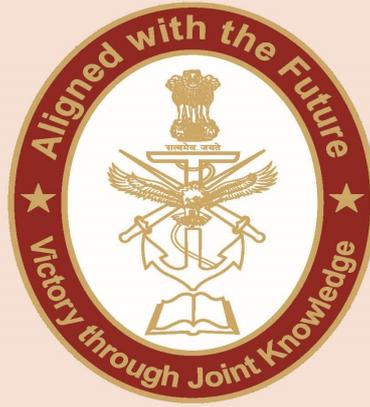


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

FORMAT ADOPTED IN THE MOSCOW TALKS WAS MORE LOGICAL

BY

MAJ GEN HARSHA KAKAR (RETD)

The intra-Afghan talks sponsored by Moscow cleared for the first time, demands being placed by the Taliban but kept under wraps. Details of ongoing US led talks are not shared on open media with only some snippets being made available in tweets by the US special envoy, Khalilzad. The only message flowing from Qatar in all earlier talks was the Taliban's refusal to sit on the same table with the Afghan government, as they consider them as a puppet of the US, as also insisting on a timetable of withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

The US, which has been conducting its own discussions with the Taliban maintained silence while the present Afghan government criticized the Moscow sponsored talks. The Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, stated, 'those who have gathered in Moscow have no executive authority. They can say what they want.' Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, stated that if the talks create an opening for real peace, then it would be a step forward. These talks come as Taliban attacks on government forces continue unabated.

From the Afghan side, most who attended the talks were opponents of Ghani and hence it is visualized that these talks were aimed at lowering his standing, especially as elections draw close, in July. Heading the Afghan delegation was its ex-President, Hamid Karzai. Accompanying him in the delegation were Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik leaders as also members of the

erstwhile mujahideen, all of them having opposed and fought against the Soviet invasion and the Taliban in the past, as part of the Northern Alliance.

It was the Northern Alliance whom the US combined hands with to remove the Taliban in 2001, making it important. Hamid Karzai had always been against the Taliban and had openly criticized the US when it permitted the Taliban to open its political office in Qatar.

To push the Taliban into re-considering its approach to women, Fawzia Koofi, a women right's activist and lawyer was also one of two women members of the delegation. Hence, it was possibly the first time, intra-Afghan talks were held and included erstwhile enemies.

Prior to the commencement of talks, both parties, the Taliban and Afghan representatives prayed together, sending forth a message that there can be a solution.

Other than the two delegations there were no other participants or observers in the talks including from its hosts in Moscow. Thus, it was basically a discussion between two groups of Afghans, both old enemies and against the present leadership. The clear message was that Ghani could be side lined for the moment, as also different ethnic communities sitting together, could evolve a future for the country.

In his first comments, the Taliban representative, Abbas Stanikzai, stated, 'the Kabul government's constitution is invalid. It has been imported from the west and is an obstacle to peace. We want an Islamic constitution.' Stanikzai went on to state that the Taliban do not seek a 'monopoly of power' but 'an inclusive Islamic system.'

They also promised to stamp out Afghanistan's poppy cultivation and take steps to prevent civilian casualties. They indicated that they could loosen some guidelines in line with Sharia Law. This was seeking to allay fears of their earlier rule especially where women were concerned.

The joint statement issued by the Afghan delegation rightly stated that this meeting is the 'first step towards intra-Afghan peace talks. We hope the meeting will prove helpful and complementary for encouraging a national and regional consensus for supporting the US efforts for Afghan peace'.

At the end of the talks, both Karzai and Stanokzai made a rare appearance together in front of the media. They stated that the talks were successful, and they agreed on multiple points. Reports state, disagreements remain on adopting an Islamic constitution and women's rights, while there has been an agreement on withdrawal of US troops, release of prisoners and removal of Taliban leaders from the UN blacklist. It

did indicate that the Taliban were being pressured to include the government in future talks.

However, apart from the Afghan government, major stakeholders are different Afghan ethnic groups which must be represented in case peace is desired in Afghanistan and a civil war which existed during the earlier Taliban regime is to be prevented in the future.

Thus, the presence of members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, comprising Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras was important. The Taliban are largely from the Pashtun community and cannot alone run the nation as it has experienced earlier. It is for this reason that the Taliban representative stated, 'inclusive government' implying power sharing with a broad coalition. The wider the consultations between the Taliban and the Afghan community, the better are the chances of obtaining a solution. The Afghan government would have to be incorporated in some timeframe. It cannot be ignored.

The above was also confirmed by the Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, in an interview to the Dawn newspaper of Pakistan over the weekend. He stated, 'When we say we want an inclusive political system, we mean that the future government will represent all ethnicities of Afghanistan. All will serve in it.'

For India, a solution to Afghanistan lies where its interests are protected, the influence of Pak is reduced. The present team led by Hamid Karzai is equally favourable to India. Similarly, Indian influence in the erstwhile Northern Alliance and minority communities has always been high. Even during the Afghan civil war, prior to the US invasion, India ran a military hospital for the Northern Alliance.

India has always maintained a distance from the Taliban as most of its leadership has the backing and support of the ISI. With the present dispensation in Afghanistan, the Taliban alone would neither be solely in command nor would it be able to wield complete influence in the country. It would need to form a unity government involving the present leadership and ethnic communities.

The Afghan army also cannot be ignored. It remains a powerful element in the country, despite its losses. If India is to prevent Pak from pushing erstwhile Taliban members into Kashmir, then the involvement of members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, ethnic communities and a major role of the Afghan army in the new government is essential. This should be India's approach.

The US, seeking dialogue with the Taliban solely with the intention of pulling out may not be the only path for peace in the long term. While

withdrawal of foreign troops is an issue, more important should be discussions between multiple internal stakeholders on the future direction of the country. It should also lead to the formation of a unity government, comprising of all communities, reducing the power of one group alone.

The Taliban had recently stated that it would protect Sikh and Hindu minorities and support the Chabahar project. It has also realized that it cannot run the country as it did earlier, if it wants peace in the country. Its last downfall was led by the Northern Alliance in collaboration with NATO support, solely due to its own policies, an error it may not seek to repeat.

The present dialogue must be leveraged by India and it should remain in touch with stakeholders other than the Taliban. While it may be essential for the Afghan government to be involved in the talks, however India should push for greater engagement between all communities of the country and for the formation of a unified government, thus ensuring that the Taliban alone do not hold power, reducing the impact and domination of Pakistan. It could consider sponsoring the next round of talks in India.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.