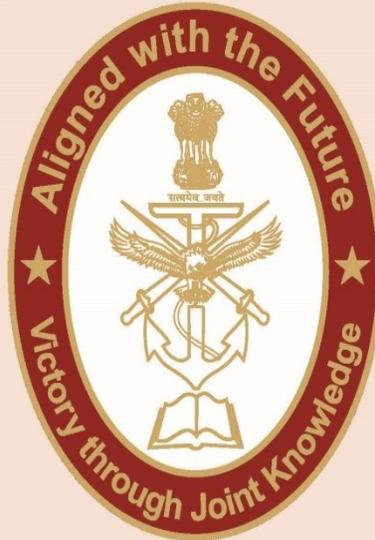


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US -TALIBAN TALKS : KEY TO AFGHAN RECONCILIATION

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1. Afghanistan continues to be one of the most disturbed areas of the world wherein the rebels have used their sustained coercive quotient to seek political space in the face of the largest and most advanced military force in the world. The objective of the western powers in the Afghani landscape during cold war era was to check the spread of communism plus exploit the natural resources of the Central Asian Region. Having pushed out Russians from Afghanistan in 1989 using economic paradigms alongside nuisance quotient of the Taliban, the western world lead by US set upon a grand game to occupy the vacated strategic space. In that, the disintegration of the Soviet Union paved way for the politico-economic encroachment of strategically important Afghanistan, a pivot to dominate the West, Central and South Asian landscape.

2. However, the Taliban lead government in Kabul in late 90s had reservations as regards to the intentions of extra regional players with eyes on the natural resources. Taliban intended to do business on their terms and conditions instead of permitting western world to intrude on their turf as was the pattern elsewhere. Apropos, the doctrine of regime change was applied to unseat Taliban from power in Afghanistan. To do that, the US and their allies chose to intervene militarily in 2001 in aftermath of 9/11 apparently to seek out and neutralize Al Qaida chief Bin Laden and their cadres who were purported to be enjoying patronage of Taliban government in Kabul.

3. Thus started the Global War on Terror (GWOT) which continues in Afghanistan even after 17 years with seemingly not reaching its envisaged end state. Taliban continue to be a force to reckon with indulging in coercive terror operations on daily basis against the Afghan government forces and the American/NATO troops. As a result, it has turned out to be the longest US military intervention campaign which is proving to be a futile exercise at the end of the day. US seems to be keen to move out of Asian landscape in the emerging geo political equations with their own substantial energy production, besides ever increasing public opinion for pull out of US troops fighting others battles.

4. While doing that, US would obviously like to move out from position of strength and install pro American political dispensations to take care of their strategic interests. Looking at complexity of politico-military situation and disturbed societal milieu, there seem to be no easy solutions in sight. There are far too many stake holders with varied vested interests impacting on feasibility of a clean break from the existing political mess. It surely would need optimal political convergence and compromises primarily with the Taliban alongside elected polity, tribal lobbies and the regional players otherwise the current state is likely to continue.

5. The US, following a pragmatic approach, has reached out to Taliban for reconciliation to end the bloodshed in Afghanistan which has been responded positively by them also as of now. The Russia has also been engaging the Taliban for quite some time, although from a different political approach. The US has nominated Zalmay Khalilzad an Afghan born American diplomat as the interlocutor to negotiate with the Taliban leadership. In order to soften the grounds for talks the co founder of Taliban Abdul Ghani Akhund known as Mullah Baradar has been released from a Pakistani jail in January who was captured earlier while entering

Pakistan from Iran in 2010. Zabiullah Mujahid has been nominated as the representative from Taliban camp and Suhail Shaheen is the spokes person heading Taliban office in Doha in Qatar.

6. There have been five rounds of talks so far between both the parties since the ice was broken in the first interaction in late 2018. The talks between the US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the top Taliban negotiators has its focus on US withdrawal of troops in exchange of Taliban pledging not to permit any foreign terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan, besides Taliban agreeing to join the intra Afghan dialogue on future political structure. A cease fire would be a pre requisite before the US starts withdrawing first batch of 7000 troops from the Afghanistan. Taliban on their part seem to be pushing for withdrawal of all foreign troops as a pre condition for sitting across the table with the Afghan government in Kabul.

7. Zalmay Khalilzad is travelling extensively within the region to shore up for a political solution to the Afghan imbroglio. He is known to have met the Russian special envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov in Turkey wherein he is supposed to have indicated their support to American push for intra Afghan dialogue. Khalilzad was also scheduled to meet Taliban representatives in Islamabad but the meeting was called off by Taliban. The travel restriction by the UN and US on Taliban leaders is stated to be reason impacting on progress of the talks.

8. Russia has been in touch with the Taliban for quite some time primarily to seek their support to check in spread of ISIS in the Afghanistan as it would impact on security matrix of Russia and her Central Asian allies. A secure Afghanistan also fits into their prospects of occupying the strategic space being vacated by the US in the Central, South as well as West Asia. This strategic notion when hyphenated with the Syrian sector would help to facilitate "Bear hug from Mediterranean to Indian Ocean" an ambition since Czarist era.

9. Therefore, Pakistan with their connectivity to the Indian Ocean is gradually becoming important to the Russia as central to their strategy. Russia, accordingly, has also shown their inclination to provide military hardware to Pakistan consequent to US restrictions on arms supply to them due to Pakistani duplicity in their Taliban afflictions. Further to this, they have indicated their inclination to join the Chinese CPEC bandwagon with its potential of economic expansion through their foot prints in the Indian

Ocean. All this is possible only when there is stability and peace in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region. In consequence, Russia seems to be in sync with the US in bringing about amicable reconciliation amongst the Afghan society.

10. The BRI concept has been the biggest political investment of China in the recent times for their economic expansion which is central to their global ambitions. China, therefore, is interested in resolving the Afghanistan political issues at the earliest in their own strategic interests. They have been in touch with the Afghanistan government as well as the Taliban to extend their help in arriving at an amicable solution. China is supporting the Russian as well as the American initiatives as they see economic opportunities in post reconciliation period within as well as outside Afghanistan.

11. The Pakistan is interested in ensuring their political influence over any future government in the Afghanistan for their perception of acquiring strategic depth as against perceived Indian hegemonic designs. Accordingly, Pakistan has been indulging in duplicity in nurturing the Taliban and Haqqani net work on one side and at the same time supporting US in their campaign in Afghanistan. They are also looking at economic resurgence and upgrading their military deterrence through their partnership in CPEC scheme. Taliban, in Pakistan army narrative, are viewed as strategic assets to upgrade the ante in J&K by replicating 1990 model once they come back to power.

12. Pakistan, with their connectivity and complicity with the Taliban, do have reasonably high political leverages, an advantage they seem to be exploiting by positioning them as central to any discussion on Afghanistan. Accordingly, Pakistan is much sought after and has become an important entity in the negotiations with the Taliban. However, Pakistan is likely to be pushing their own opportunist agenda keeping their strategic calculus in mind in the post reconciliation phase. It has an obvious inimical connect to Indian security also, hence a matter of concern for Indian polity.

13. The fifth round of talks which lasted for 16 days in Doha does convey seriousness of purpose and signs of positive engagements so far. Counter terrorism, foreign troop's withdrawal, intra afghan participation and cease fire have been central to these talks with no concrete agreement as reflective in differing views stated by both the parties in their press briefings. Looking at the lack of convergence in the pre conditions and

perception differentials by both the negotiating parties are indicative of no early fructification of any worthwhile deal. The US as well as the Taliban are trying to seek a political position of strength for obvious strategic reasons from their perspectives.

14. While Taliban are trying to protect themselves as the sole arbitrators of Afghanistan and want to acquire full political space, the US is trying to dilute their position in favour of pro US Afghani lobby by insisting on intra afghan political dialogue. There are also no meeting grounds on methodology and timings of US withdrawal of forces and reluctance of Taliban to accommodate concept of Afghan owned and Afghan led negotiated settlement. Hence, there exists a state of stalemate as of now till the time one of the parties blinks first and agrees for a compromise.

15. It seems difficult looking at the high unpredictability and emotional quotient, besides well known intransigence of Taliban, a typical characteristics of Afghans as a race. However, there is always a hope of emergence of positive and cooperative attitude amongst the negotiators leading to reconciliation amongst the Afghan society. Sooner it happens better it would be for the regional peace.

16. India needs to be cautious as bonhomie between Taliban and Pakistan with their politico-religious afflictions cannot be ignored. It would be a testing time for Indian diplomacy to manage positive political synergies for India in the post reconciliation phase in Afghanistan. A constructive and cooperative environment in the region should be the envisaged objective as the end state.

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