



US-Taliban Dialogue Is an Exercise in Naiveté

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The ongoing US-Taliban dialogue is devoid of logic. The mission of the US troops in Afghanistan is still far from complete. Washington must take the Taliban's jihadist ideology and past record into account. They are not to be trusted.

Optimism is a virtue, but if it is the product of naiveté, it can be a vice. The Trump administration's Afghan diplomacy seems to suffer from the latter syndrome.

If media reports are anything to go by, US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is upbeat following his recent talks with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. He claimed on January 27 that the two sides had reached an agreement on the draft of a framework accord. In accordance with this accord, the Taliban would observe a ceasefire, guarantee against the use of Afghan territory by terrorists, and join the table with the current government in Kabul for the country's better governance. Washington, for its part, would pull its troops out of Afghanistan within 18 months. Khalilzad hopes the Taliban delegation will confer with their leadership and come back to commit to the proposed accord when the Taliban-US dialogue begins its next round in Doha on February 25.

The logic of the US-Taliban dialogue is inexplicable. Volumes have been written on the ideology and history of the Taliban. The group served the global jihadist group al-Qaeda - a threat to world peace and to the cherished values of all modern civilized states. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom to overthrow the Taliban regime, capture or eliminate Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership, and dismantle all jihadi terrorist bases and networks in the region. This mission is still far from complete.

American troops have been in Afghanistan since November 2001. After the US and NATO formally concluded their combat mission in 2014, American and

allied troops remained there to conduct strikes on ISIS and the Taliban and train and build the Afghan military. According to reliable estimates, the US has lost over 2,400 soldiers in Afghanistan since 2001 and spent over \$900 billion there. And yet, Taliban insurgents are now more powerful than at any time since the 2001 US-led invasion. The militants are in total control of at least 13% of Afghan provinces and threaten 70% of the country's territory.

This situation demands that the Pentagon refrain from conducting any dialogue with the Taliban. Washington must not entertain even the suggestion of withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan before the Taliban is totally vanquished. This predominantly Pashtun group, which is historically linked with the most violent radical Islamist forces of the Middle East, aims at complete control over Afghanistan in order to establish its version of Islamic rule across the country and use it as a base for global jihadist groups. It cannot be trusted when it talks of peace. It is likely to do what it did after previous "peace" settlements. When the Soviet Union withdrew from the country in the late 1980s, it threw its then promise of a peace deal to the winds.

In a recent media interview, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid made it perfectly clear what the group wants in Afghanistan today. Mujahid said a foreign (US) withdrawal is the first goal, to be followed by "the establishment of an Islamic system" through "negotiations with different political sides." He said such a system would be based on the principle of *shura*, or council, with Islamic experts making decisions and "representatives of people and scholars" making contributions.

The Taliban has been insisting on a US withdrawal from Afghanistan for a long time. In its message on the 39th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban even warned the US would face the same fate as Moscow in the 1980s if it did not leave Afghanistan.

It is also worth noting that the Taliban has been in discussions with Tehran regarding Afghanistan's "post-occupation situation." Iran has reportedly confirmed that the Taliban recently visited Tehran for a second round of talks. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have in recent years established ties with the Taliban aimed at driving out US forces from Afghanistan.

The Kabul government needs American troops to remain for the sake of its own stability and development. Many Taliban fighters are currently held in Afghan government prisons. If US troops withdraw, these fighters are likely to be set free, putting Afghan forces at their mercy.

Despite the presence of American troops in Afghanistan, the government in Kabul has not been able to subdue the Taliban. It has reportedly lost over 28,000

members of its security forces since 2015 alone. One can only imagine how long the government in Kabul would last in the absence of US troops.

Washington must stand by Kabul. Given the ideology and record of the Taliban, its rise is sure to be highly detrimental to Afghanistan's political, social, and economic development. According to one estimate, more than 60% of Afghanistan's 35 million people are under the age of 25, and half are under the age of 15. This new generation grew up in an atmosphere of freedom. They would lose it if the Taliban returns.

Washington also needs to be tough with the Taliban to protect the interests of India, its natural ally. Given the Taliban's anti-democratic ideology and its approach towards secular democratic India during its rule in Kabul in the past, the return of the Taliban would likely harm India's over \$3 billion investment in Afghanistan's social and infrastructural development. It is also likely to fuel ongoing terror activities in secular democratic India's Kashmir. Islamabad's anti-India designs and linkages with the Taliban (al-Qaeda, the Valley's separatists, and the Hizbul Mujahideen) are well established.

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