

US-Taliban Talks, Agreement and Insurgency

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In 2009, Obama's administration signaled to hold talks with moderate Taliban leadership but no success was achieved. After each failed talks, the Taliban would intensify insurgency for achieving a greater share in the Afghan affairs as they considered the Afghan government a puppet of America. They wanted to establish their own version of shari'a government but the Afghan government had its own reservations regarding the Taliban and the US-Taliban talks. Such dividends approaches of both the stake holders made all peace overtures irrelevant for a long period of time. Even after the US-Taliban Agreement, the intra-Afghan negotiations could not be held which again caused escalated insurgency. The current research paper is an attempt to answer the question that what were the objectives of US and Taliban behind the peace talks and agreement when peace itself remained a distant reality, and insurgency and violence has escalated instead? It will also analyze the success and failure of those talks and the future prospects for peace .

Keywords: Talks, Insurgency, Moderate, Withdrawal, Peace, Success, Failure

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the United States of America (USA) not only shook America itself but the whole world at large. It was a deciding moment for the Americans, world organizations and world states to come up with strategies that could help in dealing with the menace of ensuing terrorism, militancy and extremism. America as a victim of the attacks took the lead and immediately after those terrorist attacks on the twin towers of World Trade Center, President George W. Bush

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made an announcement on 20th September 2001 that “our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there.” Besides the attack on America in September 2001, the ‘neo-imperial’ rhetoric of struggle between ‘Islam and the West’ was at play in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 which was one again an unwelcome come-back (Adib-Moghaddam, 2011). President Bush at the very first instance closed his doors of negotiations with the Taliban by saying that “no nation can negotiate with terrorists” (Greenwood, 2013). It will not end until the terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (Post, 2001).

The genealogical origin of this President Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism’ can surely be found in the discursive construction of counter-terrorism policy of President Ronald Reagan. The similarities in both these approaches are not coincidental but something which is embedded in American foreign policy. It is the same policy which at political level decides American identity, opponents and state power (Jackson, 2005, p. 1). One instance of similarities between Reagan and Bush war on terrors can be found in their statements. President Reagan had once declared that America will not tolerate an act of war against its people and regarding the kidnapping of American citizens in Lebanon, he declared that it as an act of war on a civilized society. Again he declared that the so-called terrorist states (nations) who sponsor terrorism are engaged in an act of war against the American government and its people (Jackson, 2005, p. 3).

In a similar vein, President Bush articulated the same war on terror policy but with slight variations. After September 2001 attacks, Bush declared them as ‘deliberate and deadly terrorist acts’ and ‘despicable acts of terror’ (Jackson, 2005, p. 3). Bush administration put forward justification for waging war against Afghanistan and later against Iraq in 2003 and said that it wants to bring order there by not only civilizing them but the whole international community and thus US ratifies its distinction between friends and enemies (Adib-Moghaddam, 2011, p. 188).

This approach of Bush administration was not, however, of any help to the Americans for making the war on terrorism a successful narrative. Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, the military adviser at the White House who coordinated efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq once said in an interview that “we have never been beaten tactically in a fire fight in Afghanistan” (Barry, 2009). Such a statement of Mr. Lute was just telling about one side of the picture while the other side remained gloomy to him and to the rest of the Americans because the war on terror (which till that time had consumed around eight years, wasted much of the energy of policy makers, devoured too many men and swallowed too much dollars) was still inconclusive. It was this aspect of the war that overwhelmed and compelled Obama’s administration to rethink its policies of war on terror and to show eagerness to “do what it takes to win,” (Barry, 2009) and thus to adopt a more rational and visionary approach for the restoration of the American hegemony and grandeur.

The ‘War on Terror’ was fought in Afghanistan and Iraq both militarily and discursively. Along with military combatants and bio-power, media, policy think tanks, intellectuals and academicians also joined this global war which has both internal and external dimensions. It was not a war to be fought against the other but also within the group whenever the dissident elements tried to threaten the peace and coherence and therefore, it cannot be called a clash of civilization but a war of right wing against the others in the form of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Americans, Chinese and the Hindus alike (Adib-Moghaddam, 2011, p. 210).

During his election campaign and later on as President, Barack Obama rejected the extreme rhetoric of Bush administration about the war on terror and adopted soft and sober approach for turning his dream of American hegemonic role in the world affairs into a reality. He asked his administration to replace the terminologies of Long War or Global War of Terror (GWoT) with overseas contingency operations (The Guardian Weekly, 2009). He proclaimed returning to the moral principles and values of the American foreign policy which never compromises on the safety and security of America but also believes in cooperation. However, upon taking office of the president, Obama immediately ordered the closure of Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) secret prison, Guantanamo Bay and the stopping of the use of torture through an executive order. Through such a move, Obama gave the impression of restoring the core ideals of the American constitution and that the US can prosecute the war against terrorism consistent with those ideals and values. He claimed to bring ideological change by reconstructing a fresh narrative of the war on terror and of not using the same language and rhetoric as used by the previous administration of President George W. Bush (McCrisken, 2011, pp. 781-782).

President Barack Obama Focus on Afghanistan

Through the adoption of this ambivalent approach, President Obama and his administration wanted to immediately bring an end to the war in Iraq which was initially started for stopping the Baathist regime of President Saddam Hussain from developing nuclear capability and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The war though resulted in the dislodging of President Saddam Hussain's government and in his capturing and killing him but the alleged WMDs were not found during or after the war. It is not a debate here to discuss US-Iraq War at length but it was either an intelligence failure or the Bush administration had lied intentionally for launching an invasion (Kessler, 2019). The war proved disastrous for Iraq but it equally proved costly for America that succumb a sum total of over half a trillion of its dollars while the American forces continued fighting actively even in 2009. President Barack Obama and his administration wanted to end the war in Iraq for remaining focused on the war on terror in Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden, his terrorist network Al-Qaeda and Taliban have once more became stronger, thus threatening both the government of the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai and the border areas of Pakistan. All such apprehensions compelled Obama's administration to re-evaluate its policies regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan and to redesign new strategies for combating Taliban, Al-Qaeda and terrorism (Telatar, 2014).

Some scholars are of the opinion and even some reports asserts that Obama wanted the of war in Iraq and the war on terror because it was not only the longest war in the history of America but the costliest war too in terms of men and money. The war took until this time had taken the lives of 2,820 NATO troops, out of which 1849 were American soldiers (Chesser, 2012) and it was costing annually \$100 billion (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, p. 2).

However, a contradiction was seen in Obama's decisions regarding the war on terror in Afghanistan and instead of ending the war in Afghanistan he ordered the deployment of 30,000 more troops initially as to check and reverse Taliban momentum and for strengthening the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) but alongside he set the target dates of July 2011 and September 2012 for the withdrawal of 10,000 and 22, 000 American forces respectively from Afghanistan and for leaving responsibility to the Afghan government and Afghan security forces to look after their country. As long as it would take any such step, the combat forces of Netherland, Canada and France ended their combat operations during 2010-2012 and decided to continue

training of the Afghan security forces only until the end of 2014 (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, p. 6).

Subsequently, several paradigm shifts occurred in the American policy during Obama's administration. As an unpredictable move, a first shift occurred in his strategy after his decision of getting rid of the war on terror. He decided to rescue the Karzai government and for this purpose had increased and reached the US troops surge to 100,000, with most of the additional troops stationed in the south of Afghanistan. Then a second shift in his policy occurred and decided to launch targeted operations inside Afghanistan and along the border areas of Pakistan. For this purpose, the unmanned drone attacks were used to attack the hideouts of the Taliban and the terrorist network of Al-Qaeda and thus to eliminate the threat of terrorism. In the same vein, a third shift in the policy was made after the failure of eight years of necessary delineation of war and US military encounters. Obama along with his Afghan allies worked hard for redrawing distinctions between Al-Qaeda and Taliban as "the terrorists and the tyrants" (Ryan, 2015, p. 4). To the moderate Taliban-who from western liberal perspective would accept constitutional democracy- (Yadav, 2010) among the latter were offered various incentives for engaging them in dialogues with Karzai government as he believed that the use of brutal force is counterproductive and results in the spread of terrorism and the creation of more terrorists (Sattar, 2018).

Such policy shifts, however, attracted sever criticism. It frustrated those who wanted Obama to take quick decisions and to consolidate Bush's strategy but on the contrary, it appealed to those who found him willing to listen to opposing viewpoints before taking any final decision. One can find this willingness in Obama's decision of tracking down and killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 who frustrated President Bush and thus qualified him to claim the greatest victory of the war on terror since it began (McCrisken, 2011, p. 783).

But despite such high claims, neither America nor Obama has won the war against terrorism. The Taliban still remained a great threat to the Afghan government and to the NATO and ISAF combat forces. In such a situation, Obama administration thought to give priority to talks with the moderate Taliban instead of relying only on combat operations. However, violence did not stopped rather it kept on escalating (bij Sub-Saharan Africa Department, The Hague, November 2016).

President Barack Obama's Peace Initiatives and the Taliban

The first direct secretive peace talks to which Hamid Karzai had objected for downsizing his government's reputation and for enhancing Taliban's standing were sponsored by the German officials and the Qatari royal family between America and Tayyab Agha, the representative of Mullah Omar at Munich in November 2010. Subsequently two further meetings were held in Doha and in Germany before the establishment of the Taliban's political office at Doha in January 2012 which was not an internationally recognized office of the Taliban. Initially talks were held to exchange five Taliban detainees at Guantanamo for a single American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl but these talks failed because the Taliban did not guarantee that the released prisoners would not fight the American forces in Afghanistan and the US people during the campaign of presidential elections had resisted strongly the idea of releasing the prisoners (Greenwood, 2013). In addition to that, an alleged American soldier killed 17 Afghan civilians which thus closed all the prospects of talks by March 2012. In reality, the suspension of those talks was caused by the displeasure of the Afghan and Pakistan governments who were insisting on the inclusion of the Afghans in the talks with the Taliban. However, the Taliban were reluctant to talk to the Karzai government for considering him as

illegitimate and as mere puppet of the Americans. This was a major shift in the Taliban's stance because Mullah Omar has rejected all such options in the presence of the American troops in Afghanistan (Rakisits, 2012, p. 6).

However, the Taliban narrative inside Afghanistan was different from its Doha chapter. For instance, talks were held between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership from mid-2011 to March 2012 which was encouraged by the American government. Even it appreciated the step of Pakistani government for releasing Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's second in command as a peace building measure (Grossman, 2013). This hope got shattered when the Taliban widened their attacks on NATO, ISAF, ANDSF and civilians. In one such attack in September 2011, a suicide bomber murdered the chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council (AHPC), Burhan-ud-Din Rabbani. All such acts from Taliban side along with their refusal of talking directly to Karzai government prompted the American officials about the seriousness of the Taliban for establishing peace in Afghanistan (Grossman, 2013) which is why the peace talks has failed in the first place.

The murder of Rabbani had also a negative impact on the relations of Afghanistan and Pakistan because the Afghan authorities had accused Pakistan for providing safe havens to the Haqqani network which was alleged to be behind this attack. While in the due course of time, relations between both Afghanistan and Pakistan got normalized during 2012 and they shared a common interest of stable Afghanistan in the post-2014 through the talks held in Turkey. They besides discussing the "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015" as drafted by the APHC have considered various other issues of mutual interest. Pakistan was given a prime role for facilitating the peace process and a resolve was made to further the peace process during 2013 (Greenwood, 2013, pp. 17-18).

Besides states' level initiatives, track-II dialogues based on unofficial contacts between non-governmental groups, private citizens and officials in personal capacity were also held for exploring possible solutions for the conflict without the restrictions of formal negotiations. For this purpose, dialogues of such kind were arranged in Paris and Kyoto in June 2012 between the Afghan government officials, civil society and Taliban representatives which were though important peace processes but were without a major breakthrough. Another round of track-II dialogues were arranged between *Hizb-e-Isami* (Islamic Party) and Taliban leaders by the Paris-based *Foundation for Strategic Research* in December 2012 which though also not helped in initiating a formal peace process but have shown the willingness of Afghans to bring peace to Afghanistan through dialogues (Greenwood, 2013, p. 18).

Alongside such talks and dialogues the Taliban continued and even escalated their terrorist attacks on the NATO, ISAF, ANDSF and Afghan civilians. In the meantime, when President Obama welcomed and praised the services of the already returned thirty-three thousand American soldiers and of the returning thirty-four thousand soldiers by the end of 2013 in the State of the Union address in 2013 (Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address, 2013), the Taliban further escalated their insurgent attacks. He was severely criticized by his own military commanders in Afghanistan who wanted to keep the rest of the forces in Afghanistan until the completion of their mission by the end of 2014. As Obama could not sustain the pressure of criticism so he decided to rethink his decision of pulling out troops from Afghanistan. In order to give the impression of combat forces' success he announced that we will get out from Afghanistan in a responsible way to avoid going back in again (Obama's 2013 State of the Union Address, 2013).

At the same time, a standstill situation occurred over the terms of Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Obama and Karzai administrations. The agreement was aimed at deciding the role of US after the withdrawal of its combat forces by the end of 2014. On the other hand, Hamid Karzai wanted America to support him in opening talks between his government and the Taliban (Grossman, Talking to the Taliban 2010-2011: A Reflection, 2014). The BSA was the extension of the 2012 Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) that would give a major non-NATO ally status to Afghanistan. Though Hamid Karzai himself had approved the BSA from the *Loya Jirga* (Consultative Assembly) in November 2013 but he refused to sign it which was later on signed by President Ashraf Ghani upon taking office. It was considered as an executive order and was not submitted for the approval of the American Congress (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, p. 7).

Subsequently, President Obama announced his plan for US military exit in phases on 27 May 2014. According to this new plan, the numbers of American troops were declared to be reduced to 9,800 in 2015 who will serve as trainers under the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). In a second phase, their numbers further reduced to 5,000 by the end of 2016 who were to be stationed at Kabul and Bagram Airfield. In the last phase after 2016, the American troops would be reduced to 1000 and will be placed under the authority of the US Embassy without any separate chain of command. They will protect US installation process, Foreign Ministry Sales of weaponry to Afghanistan and will train the Afghans on that weaponry. According, the US and its allies decided to end the ISF mission by handing over 800 bases to the Afghan national forces and the provincial reconstruction teams the Afghan institutions (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, pp. 6-7).

The peace talks between the American and the Taliban broke down in 2015 and so during this period from 2014 to 2016, the Taliban and anti-government forces has again tried to take benefits from the US decision of complete withdrawal of the combat forces in Afghanistan. The peace talks that broke down between the American and the Taliban in 2015 again resulted in the escalation of Taliban attacks (UNAMA, 2016).

President Donald Trump and the Peace Talks with Taliban

After becoming the new president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump has taken into account the shortcomings of the 16 years wars and outlined his South Asian strategy in August 2017. He though discounted the complexities of political realities in Afghanistan (Noor, 2018), yet he showed his commitment in expanding the targeting authority of the US forces, pressurizing Pakistan and increasing modestly the number of US and allies' forces (Constable, 2017). Trump has also vowed to curb the menace of Taliban and of the Islamic State for achieving the national security goals (Aziz, 2017). In response to this strategy of President Trump, violent battles took place in 20 provinces of Afghanistan and 10 districts were captured by the anti-government forces which were later on recaptured by the security forces (Sinha, 2018).

As the Taliban continued their spring offensive during the 2018, the authority of President Ashraf Ghani at home and abroad was weakened who in abysmal declared immediate ceasefire and an ambitious peace plan through unconditional talks which the Taliban has reciprocated with a wave of bloodshed. Later that year, President Trump sent 3,000 more troops to Afghanistan and asked the NATO to do more for winning the war. However, this strategy of the extensive use of force for curbing violence proved counterproductive and the Taliban started fresh insurgency attacks on the Afghan civilians and security forces. (Weekly, 2018).

President Trump administration was compelled to rethink its Afghan policy and revert to the ambiguous stance of pulling out from Afghanistan. Subsequently in July 2018, he decided to hold talks with the Taliban by sidelining the Afghan government which also was a reversal of the previous American policy of supporting the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process (Schmitt, 2018). In order to initiate talks between America and Taliban, Mike Pompeo visited Afghanistan and announced to facilitate the peace talks. It was followed by a meeting between the American delegation under the leadership of principal deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, Alice G. Wells and the six-member Taliban delegation that took place in July 2018 but it was not officially confirmed. One of the Taliban delegate remarked that the meeting was held in a friendly environment at a hotel in Doha. According to him, these were not peace talks but series of meetings in which both sides agreed to meet again soon for resolving the conflict through dialogues. The Afghan government was once again ignored in those talks and was not invited on the directives of the Taliban (Sediqi J. A., 2018).

Furthermore, Trump administration also appointed the former ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation who then held talks with the Taliban in Doha and consulted with the Afghan, Pakistani and other regional governments. However, it was in March 2019 that an understanding was reached between Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban regarding the prevention of Afghanistan from becoming a place for international terrorist groups and individuals, and on complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan, after which intra-Afghan negotiations for political settlement would take place. By September 2019, the US has agreed to withdraw 5,000 of its 14,000 troops within 135 days on the condition that the Taliban would reduce violence in two provinces while the rest of the American troops will be withdrawn during the 16 months period. On the contrary, the nature of Taliban concessions in return was not clear. Though, the US government hoped for Kabul and Taliban talks but the later refused to negotiate with the former. Thus, a deadlock occurred in the talks which Trump has tried to break by inviting President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban to Camp David. However, the Taliban walked away from the deal and started fresh offensives which the Americans responded with more targeted operations (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Peace Talks and the Escalated Insurgency

William Zartman is of the view that escalation during negotiations is a bargaining strategy for gaining more and more concessions. The Taliban has used this strategy to extract huge incentives from negotiations by inflicting heavy costs on the Americans and their allies in Afghanistan because they have realized the weaknesses of the American policy who eagerly wanted negotiations for a successful pull over from Afghanistan. The escalation in response to negotiations by the Taliban was a natural tendency because escalation and negotiations not only heads in different directions but they both require different attitudes and approaches and thus both are mutually incompatible (Zartman, 2005).

Both President Obama and later on President Trump wanted to turn the Afghan experience into a successful narrative for America by putting an end to the war through peace talks with the Taliban. The administrations of both the American tried their best to end the longest war in the American history by withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan but on the contrary, it proved fatal for them because the Taliban sensed their weakness. That is why with each round of talks a fresh intensified insurgency would take place in Afghanistan thus making peace a dream to come true. A close look on the history of insurgency and death tolls during 2009-2018 would provide a clear

picture of the reality of peace talks. About 2,412 civilians died in 2009, 2,794 in 2010, 3,133 in 2011, 2,769 in 2012, 2,969 in 2013, 3,701 in 2014, 3,565 in 2015, 3,527 in 2016, 3,440 in 2017 and 3,804 in 2018 ((UNAMA), 2018).

These figures clearly show that whenever the negotiations were held between the US and Taliban, insurgency has increased and escalated which resulted in the loss of more lives and more damages. The year 2019 saw the repetition of the same practice which continued during the past ten years. As talks were underway between the US and the Taliban, violence has escalated between July to September and the death toll has reached to 3,403 (Kanalstein, 2020). President Trump who was planning to have secret meetings with Taliban and the Afghan President at Camp David for finalizing the agreement had abruptly suspended the talks after the killing of a US soldier along with 11 others at Kabul in a car bomb blast. The Taliban and the Afghan government were on the verge of a deal for starting talks but the attack shattered the talks and the insurgents refused to talk to the Afghan government (Gibbons-Neff, 2020).

US-Taliban Agreement and the Continued Insurgency

However, the US and Taliban resumed the talks behind the scenes during the deadlock. The Taliban agreed to the reduction of violence but the Afghan officials claimed that it is only their strategy to gain much from the talks and that the Taliban had killed 22 soldiers and 14 civilians during that period (BBC, 2020). Officially, the talks between US and Taliban were resumed after three months gap in December 2019. The Taliban continued their insurgency during this period too, for which they now focused more on the countryside by killing approximately 87 Afghan security forces according to rough estimates while the Afghan government officials proclaimed the killing of 30 Taliban militants daily (Gibbons-Neff, 2020). Despite that the Afghan officials have agreed that violence has decreased by 80%. Encouraged by these positive gestures, the US asked the Taliban dignitaries for stopping violence, to which they agreed and proclaimed reduction in violence for seven days starting from 22 February 2020 and finally culminating in the agreement at Doha (Qatar) on 29 February 2020 between Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban deputy political leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in the presence of the international observers including the American Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. While the US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper met the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani on the same day for issuing a joint declaration of US support for Afghan government and Taliban dialogues without preconditions (Thomas, CRS Report, 2020).

Under the agreement, the US agreed to withdraw its 8,600 forces out of more than 12,000 troops from five bases within the first 135 days and conditioned the withdrawal of the rest of the forces in 14 months with the Taliban's fulfillment of their commitments. Both the parties agreed to the release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 prisoners of the other side by 10 March 2020 while all the remaining prisoners will be released over the course of three months who will pose no threat to the US or its allies. The US also agreed to review its sanctions against the Taliban and to remove them by 27 August 2020 while for the sanctions of United Nations Security Council, it decided to engage diplomatically with its other members for removing the sanctions by 27 May 2020. Finally it agreed that US and its allies will not pose any threat to the territorial integrity and political independence of Afghanistan nor will they interfere in its internal affairs (State, 2020).

The Taliban on the other hand, agreed that they will not allow any individual or group or a member of Al-Qaeda to use the soil of Afghanistan and pose a threat for the US and its allies. They agreed to pass a clarion call to all such elements and will neither recruit nor train nor host any such

people. Taliban also agreed not to illegally accommodate people from outside who might become threat to the security of the US and its allies. The Taliban who throughout the talks called the Afghan government as the American puppet agreed to hold intra-Afghan negotiations with the government for sorting out disagreements. The US also insisted on the protection of women rights which was agreed to be made part of the intra-Afghan dialogues (State, 2020).

Nevertheless, a gloomy political picture resurfaced in Afghanistan after the US-Taliban agreement because the presence of the Afghan government would have made it a comprehensive agreement which would have brought durable peace and tranquility to Afghanistan. It though envisioned the end of US military presence in Afghanistan but the prospects of peace were compromised by not facilitating a negotiated peace settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The presumed intra-Afghan talks which would take place on 10 March 2020 were neither scheduled nor held because of the deadlock of September 2019 elections between Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah. Though Ashraf Ghani who received 50% votes was declared as President in February 2020 but Abdullah Abdullah who received 40% votes rejected the narrow majority of Ashraf Ghani and sought to establish a separate government. However this deadlock came to an end with the help of Zalmay Khalilzad and others, and Abdullah Abdullah became the Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation. Amidst of such complications, only preliminary talks could began in June 2020 (Thomas, Afghanistan: Background and U. S. Policy, 2019, p. 3).

The Afghan government expressed its reservations regarding the US-Taliban agreement and refused its commitment to the prisoners swap (Maizland, 2020). This refusal was perhaps due to the use of different language used by the US in its separate agreements with the Taliban and the Afghan government. To the Taliban, the US had assured the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan forces held by the Taliban on 10 March 2020 (State, 2020). While the same day, US and the Afghan government in a joint declaration agreed to the US facilitated discussions with the Taliban with the feasibility of releasing a significant number of prisoners on both sides. As a result Ashraf Ghani signed a decree on 11 March 2020 to release 1,500 Taliban prisoners within 15 days and the 3, 500 would be released (500 every two weeks) if the Taliban succeeded in avoiding violence and maintaining peace (Tribune, 2020). The Taliban rejected this condition and said that the release of prisoners was a pre requisite measure for starting the dialogues (Farmer, 2020). Despite it, both sides started the release of prisoners and by June the Afghan government had released 3,000 prisoners, claiming to release 2,000 more prisoners very soon. The Taliban welcomed this move of the Afghan president and talks were announced to be held in Doha, thus giving a way to optimism. However, the Afghan government supported by the west expressed its reservations regarding the release of few Taliban prisoners which the Taliban dismissed as a barrier against the peace process and if the situation remained the same, it will change the willingness of both side and each delay will cause more complications (Thomas, CRS Report, 2020, p. 5).

Besides these positive gestures and diplomatic overtures, the US-Taliban agreement caused an escalated insurgency and violence because the Taliban considered it as their win and their moral got further boasted (London, 2020) as the agreement was not holding any provision that could refrain Taliban from attacking the Afghan forces. The violence became unacceptably high and an average of 25 to 40 Afghan security personnel were killed in the month of April while in May, the ratio of attacks has increased which included the 12 May attack on maternity ward in Kabul but the Taliban denied to take its responsibility. The government officials refuted this denial and Ashraf Ghani's National

Security Advisor said not to engage with the Taliban in peace talks anymore. On the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr (Islamic festival celebrated after the month of fasting), three day ceasefire was observed by both the Taliban and the Afghan government which the later wanted to prolong but the former has refused it. The Taliban resumed its insurgency tactics and the Afghan government claimed that 291 security forces were killed in the third week of June (Thomas, CRS Report, 2020).

The decision of the US to leave Afghanistan after the US-Taliban agreement in the presence of the menace of Taliban will put the Afghan government at risk; more dangerous than it was in 2001. It will encourage the Taliban to seize power at the expense of all the ethnic groups (Kaura, 2019). Undoubtedly, US had fought a prolonged war and have suffered both in men and money but quitting and leaving Afghanistan at the mercy of a strong Taliban force-who became equal in status of the Americans and more important than the Afghan government during the talks-would result in a chaos which has already been displayed by the Taliban during the peace talks. In the absence of US forces, the Afghan state would become weak (Greenwood, 2013, p. 27).

Conclusion

US-Taliban Talks and the subsequent agreement resulted in the hope for many to see the end of a prolonged war and the establishment of peace in Afghanistan and in the whole region but such hopes got shattered due to the fact that the Taliban have emerged more powerful as it has compelled the sole super power to negotiate peace settlement with them and to withdraw from Afghanistan without consulting the Afghan government.

In reality, America was not sincere in its efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan rather it wanted mere withdrawal of its combat troops as a face saving move. On the other hand, the Taliban too were not interested in bringing peace to Afghanistan through the peace talks and agreement but to maximize their chances of getting a greater share of power. It is because of this reason that they escalated violence and insurgency during the peace talks and even after the agreement, so as to compel and pressurize both the US and the Afghan governments.

The US has neither succeeded in disarming the Taliban nor has pressurized them to stop violence and insurgency before starting any such talks. The operational and command structure of Taliban remained intact and that is why they were capable of attacking the American troops, its allies and the Afghan security forces throughout the dialogues since 2009 as an act of pressurizing their opponents. Even after the agreement with the US, the Taliban continued in the same vein to attack the Afghan security forces which reached its peak in the third week of June 2020, emerging as the deadliest week since the beginning of the war.

The US did not hesitate to negotiate with all the Taliban factions and focused only on the moderate elements, thus living Afghanistan at the mercy of conservative Taliban elements. Furthermore, it failed to alienate the Taliban from the non-Afghan Taliban which might have weakened the Taliban. It could have presented the Afghan constitution as the only law and the Afghan government as the only legitimate government of the country as a precondition for the agreement. More importantly, it must have asked the Taliban to disarm and to stop insurgency before entering into dialogues. Last but not the least; intra-Afghan talks must have been initiated between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban before the US-Taliban talks, so as to secure the government and people of Afghanistan secured from discriminate Taliban attacks. These talks

must have been taken place under the supervision of the US and other regional stake holders of the Afghan conflict.

America showed hesitance to such preconditions for its talks with the Taliban which caused more chaos and bloodshed since the signing of the agreement. American desire to get rid of the Afghan imbroglio and to withdraw its forces has put the peace of Afghanistan at stake once again. This weakness from the US side was realized by the Taliban who used the talks as a source for their growing stature and increased violence in the country. Once, the US withdrawal is complete, there is a great danger of Taliban to bring more chaos to Afghanistan and may possibly try to seize power at Kabul.

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