

## Afghanistan: Déjà vu or a New Beginning

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### Abstract

*The long-negotiated agreement to bring peace to Afghanistan appears to be floundering. While the political standoff between the two leading contenders to Presidency has since defused, and a modus vivendi based on power sharing arrived at, commencement of the much awaited intra- Afghan negotiations are delayed. A successful outcome of Afghan reconciliation will bring to naught decades of support to Taliban from some quarters, which successfully chipped away the international resolve to oppose all terrorist activities in, and emanating from, Afghanistan. But this does not suit some parties. This creates a delicate situation that can easily slip out of control due to continuing gruesome violence even when claimed by other extremist groups operating under new flags and symbols. India has been steadfast in its support to the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Despite the adverse security situation, India has continued with its developmental projects. India's future policy needs to be based on certain realities which the article brings out.*

### Introduction

**T**he long-negotiated agreement to bring peace to Afghanistan, erroneously called 'Afghan Peace Agreement', signed between the USA and the Taliban appears to have resemblance to a still born baby as it refuses to kick and show

signs of life. Most analysts see this as an unbalanced agreement that gives away more than it obtains. For the Afghans, it provides nothing except the hope of endless intra-Afghan talks — if they start at all — that may lead to cessation of hostilities, ceasefire and a stop to violence leading to eventual reintegration of the Taliban in the Afghan body politic. In the meantime, the Taliban remains committed to attacking every fibre of the Afghan society. In short, Afghan society and the Republic of Afghanistan are being told that they are on their own while the international forces, led by the USA, hasten their withdrawal on the basis of assurances provided in the US–Taliban Agreement of 29 February 2020.

### **The Enablers and the Spoilers**

While the political standoff between the two leading contenders to Presidency has since defused and a modus vivendi based on power sharing arrived at, commencement of the much-awaited intra-Afghan negotiations are delayed. New timelines are being sought; while the Taliban is insisting that all the 5000 prisoners in Afghan jails be released as a pre-condition for any talks. Government of Afghanistan finds it difficult to oblige in the face of relentless violence against Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and innocent civilians. Three days of ceasefire, agreed to by Taliban, during the Eid was the only concession Taliban could muster as an indication of their goodwill. The customary Eid greeting from the Taliban leader also was missing, leading to speculation that he may have fallen victim to COVID 19. Both sides remain wary of giving away their negotiating chips even before the talks begin. This creates a delicate situation that can easily slip out of control due to continuing gruesome violence, even when claimed by other extremist groups operating under new flags and symbols.

Additionally, the ability of the spoilers to derail the peace negotiations cannot be underestimated. Disgruntled elements within Taliban may not wish to lose their influence and access to resources, which will inevitably happen once the intra Afghan negotiations succeed. Equally, a successful outcome of Afghan reconciliation will bring to naught decades of support to Taliban,

from some quarters, which successfully chipped away the international resolve to oppose all terrorist activities in, and emanating from, Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan does not serve the strategic purposes of these backers of Taliban. Nor does a reformed Taliban; one that is willing to settle for an equitable power sharing arrangement after eschewing violence and weapons. It is, thus, reasonable to assume that they would keep pushing Taliban to stick to its maximalist demands even if that leads to a break down in the intra-Afghan talks. No outcome is better from their perspective than a reasonable and good outcome that Afghanistan yearns for.

It is, thus, *déjà vu* at different levels. This looks like a replay of a super power withdrawing some 40 years ago, after leaving a government it installed to its own devices. Even then, countries that supported the forces opposed to the USSR did not bring finality to the war by ending all overt and covert support to opposing groups in Afghanistan which was then hurled in a prolonged civil war, paving the way for emergence of the Taliban in the first place. Once again, USA has decided to withdraw, relying only on the promises given by the Taliban, without ensuring that the safe havens and sanctuaries that made Taliban such a lethal force are actually closed down. If lessons from history are not taken, history has a bad habit of repeating itself.

### **Recent Developments**

Over the last 18 months or so, while the USA engaged the Taliban in Doha, a number of initiatives were taken to bring the Taliban face to face with a spectrum of Afghan leadership. While the Taliban delegation flew from one capital to the other, surprisingly the duly elected government in Kabul was side lined and some of these interactions saw no official representation from the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. However, the ice was broken. Given such diplomatic attention, refusal to engage with the Afghan government came naturally to the Taliban, who derisively called the Kabul regime a 'puppet regime'. The irony of a violent force, acting more as a proxy itself for over 18 years, calling an elected government 'a puppet'

was not lost on long time watchers of the Afghan scene. The Taliban started to behave as a government in exile rather prematurely.

No doubt, the Afghan population is tired of the endless war, and is willing to accept the Taliban back in the fold as fellow nationals, but the fear and fatigue that Taliban has generated is no measure of its acceptability as an ideology. Afghan aspiration is to reintegrate them back in the society, go through a healing process, but that should not be interpreted as endorsement of the form of government they once administered. The pain of the last years has not diluted the memory of the Taliban 1.0 regime. The Afghan willingness to embrace the erstwhile hardliners was underlined by the return of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which stands as a successful model. In addition, over the years several members of Taliban, weary of endless massacre of their own people and saddened by the systematic destruction of their native land, have chosen to give up arms and reintegrate in the society, and are actively contributing to the process of reconciliation.

While all regional countries have sworn by the formulaic mantra of an 'Afghan owned and Afghan led' peace process, their actions have diverged from this guiding principle. In several quarters, a nuanced interpretation has been forwarded that denies the Afghan government ownership of this process. To add insult to injury, the US's agreement, signed with Taliban, only enjoins it to engage in intra-Afghan talks with the Afghan sides. Even this has stalled on the issue of the release of up to 5000 prisoners, since the Taliban is seemingly not satisfied with close to 3000 of their comrades and associates already freed. The initial roadblocks due to the disputed elections are now out of the way and it is clear that the Taliban is being worked upon to relent for their demand and start the process.

### **India's Position**

India has been steadfast in its support to the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and has maintained cordial and transparent relations with all the democratic and republican political actors in Afghanistan. It has also reached out to the

larger Afghan population, in all provinces, through a variety of means including its substantive development partnership programme. India's role in rebuilding of Afghan infrastructure and human resources is widely acknowledged, even by the Taliban. In a statement to an Indian TV channel — WION — the Taliban spokesman assured that Indian projects, such as Chabahar and others, would be supported by them. India has been a voice of reason and reconciliation in this war-torn country and has supported an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue. India has also respected Afghan sovereignty and independence and worked closely with South Asian partners to integrate it fully in the region. Despite the adverse security situation, India has continued with its developmental projects.

India is mindful of the Afghan desire to bring a negotiated end to this fratricidal war and accepts that there is no military solution. It also acknowledges that the members of the Taliban are an integral part of the Afghan society and need to be reintegrated peacefully. India is supportive of the legitimate Afghan desire to preserve the social and political gains of the last 19 years. It is unlikely that any nation supporting the peace process would want the entire system to be jettisoned and begin all over again. Nor will the Afghans accept starting from square one.

A day before the Khalilzad-Baradar pact was signed, Prime Minister Modi in a letter hand delivered by the Foreign Secretary wrote, "... we also remain committed to our principled position of support for an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process".<sup>1</sup> India seeks an end to the violence. India also wants Afghanistan's evolution as a state that contributes to regional and global peace and, importantly, as a well governed space that leaves no room for any terrorist outfit that threatens any nation. India's stand on this issue has been uncompromising and this resonates well in Afghanistan. If the Taliban's commitments to the US are serious, they should also be comfortable with this objective. Accordingly, India remains wary of any regime change through force as this would not only destabilise Afghanistan, but, most likely, spill over into neighbouring

countries. These considerations have guided India's wish for an orderly withdrawal of foreign troops, which also leaves behind strong counter insurgency and counter terrorism capabilities with the Afghan forces. The gaps in ANSF, especially in terms of mobility and air support, need to be filled urgently.

Given India's historical relations, and her standing with the entire political leadership, the current move towards Afghan rapprochement offers her an opening to play an active and constructive role, even if it remains in the background. It can effectively counsel and nudge all sides to find a mutually acceptable solution that is inclusive. No doubt, this requires that India has channels of communication open to all political actors in Afghanistan. Having been home to a sizeable Afghan population, mainly the youth pursuing their higher studies in India who wish to utilise their knowledge and expertise in reconstruction of their nations, it is important that India stands with these hitherto marginalised constituencies: youth and women. The new Afghanistan is shaped by them.

### **The Way Ahead**

India's future policy needs to be based on the foregoing and a hard-nosed assessment of what the Afghan society and the Taliban want. The following needs consideration:

- While the Taliban has not been particularly forthcoming in articulating its vision of the future, there are some indications through statements made to the media. The statement by the Taliban spokesman, Suhail Shaheen, on 30 January 2020 appears to be unusually conciliatory and was apparently aimed at easing concerns among Afghan leaders opposed to any peace deal, that includes the insurgent group. This was reported by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) on its website.<sup>2</sup> Shaheen, in an audio message to AP, said the Taliban wanted to live alongside their countrymen 'in an inclusive Afghan world'.
- The deputy Leader of the Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani (leader of the proscribed Haqqani network), in a signed

opinion piece in the NYT on 20 February 2020<sup>3</sup>, (most believe it as handiwork of some ghost writer), struck a reasonable tone allaying fears about Taliban when he stated, “we acknowledge the importance of maintaining friendly relations with all countries and take their concerns seriously. Afghanistan cannot afford to live in isolation. The new Afghanistan will be a responsible member of the international community”. Simultaneously, the domestic audience was reassured that they would like an ‘inclusive society’ where the “rights of the women that are granted by Islam — from the right to education to the right to work — are protected, and where merit is the basis for equal opportunity”. Published a week before the Doha Agreement was signed, this was music to the ears of the international audiences. It appeared as the clearest indication that Taliban had changed.

- Despite this article by the deputy leader of Taliban starting with a noble statement of personal belief — “I am convinced that the killing and the maiming must stop” — the situation on ground has a different story to tell. This was a proof the Taliban could have provided instantly but except for a 7-day reduction of violence (RIV) conceded to the American for facilitating troop withdrawal, and a three-day cease fire during Eid celebrations in May, they have continued with their gruesome violence. There are reports that suggest that the cease fire was actually only a reduction in violence which continued around the country.
- One of the leading experts on the region and Professor Emeritus at the Middle East Institute, Marvin G Weinbaum wrote, “Some clarity over the Taliban strategy was achieved with a statement this past week by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the group’s deputy leader. While asserting that negotiating for peace is a core component of the Taliban’s philosophy, he expressed the group’s unwillingness to abandon the path of jihad. His mixed message was delivered along with film footage showing the training of suicide bombers in an undisclosed location. The Taliban’s pursuit of peaceful diplomacy alongside

military power is understandable. Through using political means, the Taliban has acquired a once unimagined international legitimacy, negotiated the departure of foreign forces, and secured the release of many battle-hardened Taliban fighters — all without having to seriously compromise”.<sup>4</sup>

- Weinbaum's conclusions that, “The Taliban’s military and diplomatic strategies are intended to work in tandem, one leveraging the other. Each has as its ultimate goal, the Taliban’s recovery of an emirate lost in 2001. Adversaries can pretend otherwise, but they do so at their peril”<sup>5</sup>, are worrying. They cannot be overlooked easily, especially as a near chorus has started in India, as if on cue, urging the government to review its policy on engagement with the Taliban.

- Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Rakesh Sood, states succinctly, that in general it could be said that India’s aim should be to continue to have the ability to be represented in Afghanistan for a long time to come. A ‘degree of stability and security’ allowing ‘us [India] to be engaged’ in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> His recommendation that India needs to be ‘actively involved’ and, equally important, ‘to be seen to be actively involved’ in a wider set of international and national conversations is an approach strongly supported by this author as well.

## Conclusion

In a 1904 book, ‘The Defence of Duffers Drift’ the protagonist ‘Lieutenant Backsight Forethought (BF)’ has a series of six dreams about the defence of a river crossing in the Boer War.<sup>7</sup> The infantry tactics in the early dreams are disastrous. Each dream ends with BF being defeated, but each time BF learns something about what he should not have done until in the final defence he is successful. The author agrees that in a fast-evolving situation in Afghanistan, we need to be learning from our experiences and, importantly be ready to take our own path. We may not be successful every time, but like BF — if we learn



from our missteps — eventually we will be successful. India does not have the option of exiting from South Asia.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Roche, “India Committed to Unified, Democratic and Peaceful Afghanistan,” *LiveMint*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-committed-to-unified-democratic-and-peaceful-afghanistan-11582949699491.html>.

<sup>2</sup> RFE/RL, “Taliban Says Not Looking For ‘Monopoly on Power’ In Afghanistan,” *RFE/RL*, Jan 31, 2019. Accessed Jun 11, 2020 from Taliban Says Not Looking For ‘Monopoly on Power’ In Afghanistan

<sup>3</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, “What we, the Taliban Want”, *The New York Times*, Feb 20, 2020. Accessed Jun 11, 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>

<sup>4</sup> Marvin, G. Weinbaum, “The Taliban’s Two-Track Strategy”, Middle East Institute, Jun 08, 2020. Accessed Jun 10, 2020 from <https://www.mei.edu/blog/talibans-two-track-strategy>

<sup>5</sup> Marvin, G. Weinbaum, Facebook post, Jun 09, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Rudra Chaudhari and Shreyas Shende, “Dealing With the Taliban: India’s Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal”, Carnegie India, Jun 02, 2020. Accessed Jun 11, 2020 from <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/02/dealing-with-taliban-india-s-strategy-in-afghanistan-after-u.s.-withdrawal-pub-81951>

<sup>7</sup> The Defence of Duffers Drift by Capt Ernest Dunlop Swinton (London, W Clowes & Sons Ltd: 1904).

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