

# Is Pakistan Still Relevant – Afghanistan

*Brig Ishaq Ahmed – Retd*

The peace is so elusive specially in Afghanistan, because the desirous and vested players have divergent objectives even in fostering and while working towards peace. It took 18 years for the U.S. to reach the belief that peace through war is not possible in Afghanistan. The battle ground for the foreign forces even in recent times has become a grave yard for the mighty global powers. The longest war in the recent history of America has becomes a lost war. Why did it take so long to reach the present option of Talking to Taliban? Was terrorism elimination actually the objective? Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and Central Asia, are main or subsidiary targets. Global dominance through military endeavors is the ultimate aim.

Fighting Taliban for an extended period was and is not a correct proposition, though they are far below the mighty U.S and Allies, in all fields of war fighting arsenals, strength, technology less the motivation and dedication, where Taliban are for ahead. Another important factor which the U.S ignored while invading Afghanistan was the ultimate aim and objectives of the war viz-a-viz the Taliban. The war expenses, that too at extended distances, was yet another factor, probably not given due consideration while invading Afghanistan. It's a historic repeat of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ultimate defeat due to prolonged engagement, do consider that Soviet were next door and the U.S. is thousands of miles away.

For the U.S. Afghan war is of 18 years but for the Afghans it has been four decades that they are at war. Afghan peace efforts have reached the difficult stage, where the U.S is trying to make Taliban agree on the cease fire and Taliban

asking for the exit time frame from the American. Another important ingredient of the peace talks is Taliban not talking to the sitting Afghan government.

Seventh round has already begin in Doha, Qatar. The outcome is uncertain as the three basic points stated above are almost on deadlock. The U.S is not prepared to give the time frame of exit which Taliban are seeking since day one. Taliban will never agree on the cease fire as they are at position of strength and their strength lies in fighting not politics. So, the stalemate is obvious.

Pakistan has suffered due to the faulty decisions of their rulers and the invading parties may it be the Soviets or the American. According to Pakistani perspective Soviet came in for warm waters whereas they never had that objective in sight. Yet Pakistan jumped or was dragged to contest Soviets and is facing the Afghan resentment till date. Again, the American invasion was against Al Qaeda and Taliban or war against terrorism in Afghanistan yet Pakistan was asked to be an ally or will be considered an enemy. Pakistan followed the dictates and is facing the brunt from all including Taliban the so-called friends of Pakistan.

Repeatedly asked to do more and more not only by the American but the Afghans also, Pakistan is still the trouble creator despite initiating peace efforts like Murree and even the recent one being spearheaded by Zalmay Khalizad. Having made them agree to negotiate peace, is Pakistan considered a peace seeker today is a question that we may ask yourself, because for the Afghans and even the U.S we are still not doing our best. Are we still relevant in Afghan great game?

Pakistan has suffered immensely in terms of human losses, resources utilization, insecurity, political instability, economic degeneration, ethnic and sectarian divide and above all image and trust damage. Having lost in all domains, Pakistan is still working towards peace in Afghanistan,

because insecure neighborhood is unfavorable to the highly suffered Pakistan. What Pakistan has done over the years for peace in Afghanistan may not be taken as contribution but a compulsion. Every country and nation have the right to work for its own interests. All major powers in the recent times have created and fought proxies within and outside, Pakistan is no exception.

To stay relevant and not to lose more, Pakistan played for her interests and has the right to do so, but not at the cost of others. Note of concern is that today Pakistan is considered as a problem creator and not a solution. The question remains is Pakistan playing a spoiler role in the Afghan crisis, if yes what will it gain or what has it gained over so many decades? What has been the prime objective of Pakistan in keeping Afghanistan troubled?

Relevance in the ongoing great game in Afghanistan and the region is probably the only objective Pakistan should look and work for. But is Pakistan relevant now. With Taliban directly engaged in talks with the U.S the Pakistan's stake may be alive but relevance has probably diminished. Pakistan may have some influence over Taliban but are not the driving force for Taliban.

The recent engagement of the sizable number of political oppositions less Taliban at Bhurban, Murree, is indicative of the changing strategies. Visit of Ashraf Ghani is also an endeavor to remain alive. The vested players in the Afghan game must keep in mind that efforts to keep Pakistan out of the resolve process is not likely to yield positive, as Pakistan has been the major brunt bearer in last four decades of Afghan instability. Any solution without taking into consideration Pakistan's apprehensions may not last long. Indian influence in Afghanistan, anti-Pakistan elements support from Afghan territory at behest of India (Baluchistan separatists, TTP leaders and fighters in Afghanistan), Durand Line, Pashtunistan and refugees repatriation are some the

areas that must get due place in the post Unity Government in Afghanistan.

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## **Doha Talks – 7th Round**

*By Juma Khan Sufi*

The 7<sup>th</sup> round of talks, some say eighth round, between Taliban and Americans jointly sponsored by Qatar and Germany has apparently ended on a positive note, but without any usual upbeat statement coming from Zalmay Khalilzad. It seems that in general terms some sort of understanding on all four elements of the issue, troops withdrawal, non-use of Afghan soil for any terrorist activity, intra-Afghan dialogue and ceasefire, has reached. But there still remain major irritants. And the devil is in the details.

Earlier on 7-8 July meeting of Taliban with Afghan renowned figures in which some representatives of Ghani government also participated in personal capacity whereby the some sort of road map for political settlement was agreed upon also did not touch the specifics as interpretation of Islam and its implementation with regard to democratic freedoms and women rights to get education and work within the framework of Islam are open to Taliban interpretation. The main positive thing about this intra-Afghan gathering was that both sides listened to each other with patience and tolerance without resorting to any acrimony. They freely mixed with one another, dined together and prayed together. The outcome was encouraging, but not wholly satisfactory. Nor the meeting was meant to replace the off-repeated intra-Afghan Dialogue mantra. It was just a continuation of Moscow format albeit the participation of some Afghan government representatives in personal capacity.

Khalilzad rush to Beijing after ending the talks at Doha without issuing any categorical statement and thereby convening a joint meeting of China, Russia and Pakistan on July 11-12 which called upon Taliban to immediately agree to ceasefire and direct talks with Afghan Government and others have put doubt upon the earlier 'substantive progress' statement of Khalilzad.

Though Khalilzad has stated that they were not cutting and running out of Afghanistan but were working out a peace deal guaranteeing the interest of all sides and future US relationship with Afghanistan. But Taliban rightly consider that they are the winning side and to expect them to follow the American thinking is too much. This indicates that Taliban are still sticking to their guns and they are not yet ready to silence their guns on the battlefield and bring the civilian casualties to zero as agreed upon in the intra-Afghan meeting. Rather they have increased their militant activities after the agreed upon roadmap for peace. They consider fighting their weapon of victory and in peace, or put it exactly in their view the premature ceasefire, they see their demise. This fact has been borne out to them in practice. They think that time is on their side and are in no hurry to cut a deal.

Americans are also a divided house. The voices coming out of Pentagon are not in favor of any withdrawal and consider it premature. They think that such a withdrawal tantamount to strategic mistake. They argue that such a scenario would cost dearly to America and especially to the invincibility of US hard power. On the other hand, President Trump is all for the pullout. He is facing reelection and wants to abide by his pre-poll promise to withdraw from Afghanistan as soon as possible. Stressing upon the second elements within the four ingredients of any settlement about the pledge on the part of Taliban that in future Afghan soil would not be used for terrorist activities against US and its allies amply demonstrate that Americans have accepted the ultimate

sovereignty of Taliban not as a partner but as a dominant force in any future dispensation at Kabul.

This state-of-affairs has also put India in difficult situation. They were priding on their 'strategic partnership' with US and now US is turning to Pakistan, as well as China and Russia for help. They are in the tight corner being ignored and not consulted or assigning any task of active partnership for any Afghan settlement. Here the interests of India and Ghani government coincide. They are worried about any enhancement of relationship between US and Pakistan. This goes against Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan. Now Pakistan is assuming the role at the Centre stage.

Ashraf Ghani and his government are also not happy with American stance. They are rightly worried about their future and the annulment of 18 years long gains. Ashraf Ghani per force turned to Pakistan for help which he always chastised in his outbursts. Without active involvement of Pakistan any peace deal in Afghanistan is illusive. Pakistan has a major stake after US. Inclusive and comprehensive settlement is in the interest of Pakistan and peace of the region. Times have changed and the sole power of Taliban at Kabul can induce another spell of refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Such a situation can also incite more severe civil war in the country and can even lead to the dismemberment of Afghanistan. Taliban should be prevailed upon to choose the right and sensible course. War is no more acceptable. The present acceptability of Taliban would evaporate the moment the world powers come to the conclusion that Taliban are no more partner of peace.

Now when some draft agreement between US and Taliban has agreed upon on all the four issues of the peace settlement, the mistrust of each other intentions constitutes the main roadblocks. US would want Taliban to abide by the agreement in letter and spirit as Taliban are a free force amenable to no outside influence, while Taliban would like the assistance

of European and Asian countries to guarantee and oversee the complete withdrawal of US from Afghanistan. The agreement reached between the two sides needs to be signed in front of international community. Both sides need guarantees. The US and international community would like Pakistan to guarantee Taliban to adhere to the agreement. This would put Pakistan in dilemma.

US are tired of war in Afghanistan. It is eager to pullout. But it wants its prestige unscathed. The world also needs a peaceful Afghanistan. Pakistan has all along advocated negotiated settlement, though throughout blamed for harboring Taliban and not doing enough to control them. The region cannot prosper without a peaceful Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghans are thirsty for peace as the brunt of war is borne by them. The only thing is about to rein in Taliban ambitions and prevail upon them to look beyond their sectarian and partisan interests. Otherwise, if American withdrawal took place without some sort of sensible settlement, then Taliban would not be able to run the affairs of their country hassle-free and in peace. Taliban must understand this. The world would put the onus on Pakistan.

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## **The Devil's Advocate**

*By: Harris Ali Akakhail.*

Views of policymakers in the U.S, Afghanistan, and other regions about the current situation in Afghanistan and the predictions they envisage for Afghanistan in the case U.S forces exit the country, are precisely apparent. However, there is a lack of research to understand the views of the other side, i.e. how the Taliban think and foresee the future

of Afghanistan. In an attempt to understand and contemplate the views of the other party, one has to become the 'devil's advocate' and probe into their top structure to retrieve an analysis.

Taliban's top tier is not so forthcoming while dealing with an avid and an enthusiastic scribe; however, there is a moment when a shot is offered – clean as a whistle. Accordingly, a hitchhike followed by a prolong sitting, spanning over several hours, revealed a lot about the myriad facets of the philosophy of the Taliban about the U.S forces exit and how they comprehend the impending issue of Afghanistan.

As per their account, the Taliban entered peace talks with a weak homework and focused only on making sure that the U.S forces leave Afghanistan. Initially, the Taliban did not anticipate that the U.S was serious about the Afghan exit, so they did not do much preparation and thought that they are just testing waters. However, after prolonged deliberations, it became evident that it was about time for the U.S forces to exit Afghanistan. The Taliban 'Rehbari Shura' (Guidance Council) sat down for consultative sessions to articulate their principles and demand list. Later, the reclusive companion of late Mullah Muhammad Umar and the freshly released from Pakistani prison on the demand of Zalmay Khalilzad, Mullah Abdul Ghanni Baradar, was tasked to consult with the Taliban's provincial governors and zone commanders for the concerned matters.

Heated debates rocketed over various issues but first the red lines were to be identified; after a lot of deliberations, finally, two of them were marked. Vouched unanimously by all the stake holders and the supreme leader Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada himself, the first one stated that at no cost shall the talks be held with the Afghan government and secondly, nothing shall be finalized till a guarantee comes that all foreign forces shall leave Afghanistan by all means and with immediate effect.

With the red lines drawn, there were few more impending glitches to be dealt with. Rehbari Shura was of the view that the talks should be advanced, only with the Americans, in a more precise and crisp manner. The interpretation was based on a concrete view of not tainting the talks with the presence of a third party, especially Pakistan. Over the subject of Pakistan, it was contemplated well and proper that even though Pakistan will play the role of a facilitator, it would be better to keep its influence away from the talks so that no shades of gray shall fall upon it. If Pakistan was to play a greater role than this, the Afghan government would grind the mill hard that here it is Pakistan calling the shots rather than the Taliban themselves. Ameer Khan Mutaqi, Taliban supreme leader's top advisor, was the lead man to champion this discussion and formalize a deduction in this regard.

In the first and second sessions between the two parties, which were actually led by the U.S Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice G wells instead of Zalmay Khalilzad, the release of the American and Australian professors of the American university of Afghanistan, held by the Haqqani's was demanded. After a thorough debate with Yahya Haqqani, the principal representative of operational commander of Haqqani group, and Siraj Haqqani aka Khalifa, it was decided in principle that the release shall only occur if in return commanders like Haifz Rashid, Haji Mali Khan, and Jalaluddin Haqqani's younger son, Anas Haqqani will be released as well. Other points of authority were also cemented like the abolishment of U.N black list which blocks the Taliban leaders from international travels, and the recognition of the Taliban's Qatar political office by the international community.

All of the aforementioned points pertained to the Americans were to be sorted out with them. The questions of how shall Afghanistan be run in the case US forces exit completely and how to jell in with the Afghans when the intra-afghan dialogue

initiates, were among the issues that were to be discussed. Up till now, it was evident as to what the red lines are, how to go about them, concessions that the Americans can give when it comes to running the state, and the mechanism that the Taliban are equipped with. These questions when posed put this scribe host at unease and it visibly exposed a fractural faulty homework since they themselves lacked a clarity of mind. This clearly showed that no homework has been done in this regard and the only focus up till now has been on a full-blown effort focusing on gaining concessions from the Americans.

The most prized discussion that came between the top notches of the Taliban was, the future of the status of afghan forces after the withdrawal of the U.S and allied forces. On this issue, till this date, a complete split is on the cards amongst the Taliban which was evident during the talks with Zalmay Khalilzad. At times, the word comes out that the Afghan forces are to be sent packing, while at other instances it is revealed that Taliban troopers shall be amalgamated into the Afghan forces and they stand as of today with their statuses intact; such approach clearly illustrates a confused state of affairs.

At the time of asking for a formal goodbye, it was clearly envisaged by this scribe that the Taliban are almost uninformed about Afghanistan's constitution and its Islamic provisions, what should the law of the land be if the present law is unacceptable to them, and through which mechanism should the economy be run, especially with the world financial system standing on total interest rates which Islam strictly prohibits. For the Taliban, they require an unequivocal span of time to work upon this and prepare themselves for the present day world order; to bring in more technocrats within their fold to understand the dynamics of the government institutions since they themselves repent for not having men of worldly knowledge. That is why they recently stated that they were only interested in the exit of foreign forces rather

than running the state.

All that the Taliban have right now is time, and they are the only party at ease in these peace talks since the U.S, its allied partners, and the Afghan government is under immense pressure due to the time factor. With time being on their side, the Taliban might be able to get the required results but the lack of homework to support the running the state would be a misfortune.

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## The Inverse Theory

*By: Harriss Ali Akakhail*

The momentousness of the ongoing talks between the U.S's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the political chief of Taliban's Qatar office, Sheer Abbass Stanikzai, have signaled that an appreciable outcome in regards to a permanent peace settlement in Afghanistan is in the offing. Further validating the envisaged deduction, neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan, who are always blamed by Kabul for engulfing fire inside her fringes, are in tandem and emanating positivity. However, the real impediment that has emerged in the peace process is the Kabul government.

Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, is struck by an inverse theory effect as he exerts his will at the cost of sabotaging the ongoing peace talks. Why would a man, who has publicly announced that he is ready to sacrifice his own life for the sake of peace in Afghanistan, commit to such wickedness?

Ashraf Ghani has branded himself well among the Afghan population. By successfully detaching Afghanistan's economic

dependence on Pakistan and increasing Afghanistan's regional and economic connectivity to the world, Ghani has made substantial progress in the economic front and has generated massive revenues to run the major portion of the operations of his government independently. Furthermore, Ghani's triumph in sidelining the powerful private militias, an untouched issue before his term, has also been received well by the Afghan population. However, the most powerful scoring point by Ghani was to empower a large segment of his population, i.e. Pushtoons, by pulling them back to the driving seat.

Such quantifiable realizations have transformed Ashraf Ghani into a larger-than-life figure for many Afghans; Ghani, too, holds similar views and expressed his belief that neither can anything be bypassed nor can anything be decided in Afghanistan without his wishes and approval. At a recent trip to Kunar province, Ghani stated that he is the only president of Afghanistan, since Ahmed Shah Abdali, who has reached the top through the wishes of the people, instead of cutting throats of his dear ones or through the support of a superpower. Such statements accompanied by his troublesome stance on the ongoing peace talks are depicting Ghani as a nationalist leader – the one whose stance is being openly refuted by the people.

The direct talks between the U.S and Taliban at Doha, have increased Ashraf Ghani's apprehensions. The prospect of Washington bypassing his government, finalizing a peace settlement and walking away clean as a whistle while he is made to sacrifice at the cost of the deal reached, has soured relations between Afghanistan's government and the U.S government to a point where Ghani's aids are giving statements which are putting Kabul-Washington relations in real jeopardy. A recent example is of his national security advisor, Hamdollah Mohib, who criticized Zalmay Khalilzad on an official tour to Washington, stating that, "the perception in Afghanistan is that Zalmay Khalilzad wants to create a

caretaker government, of which he will then become the viceroy". Such statements not only exhibit Ashraf Ghani's frustration but are also creating a huge void between the two allied partners and if this attitude prevails, it will soon bring the government at Kabul to a standstill, where all the hard-earned gains will erode.

For the Taliban, even the prospects of dialogue with Ashraf Ghani would be suicidal as the principle on which the Taliban continued their war for the past 18 years was based on the notion the government in Kabul is a puppet of Washington. Hence, the Taliban's acceptance of Ghani's government would not only undermine but also question their 18 years long war – a red line they would never cross. This baseline theme has been clearly conveyed to the Americans at the Doha talks and for such an impasse, a solution of a broad-based interim government that is inclusive of all Afghan factions is on the cards. Such a setup in Kabul, with ex-Taliban elements within its ranks, would make it easier for the continuation of dialogue with the Taliban and with the initiation of the second phase of talks or the intra-afghan talks.

Throughout his term, Ashraf Ghani has accused Pakistan of safeguarding Taliban sanctuaries, based on which he, at multiple times, has refused to talk on wide-ranging subjects pertaining to the two neighbors. On the other hand, the role that Pakistan has played to facilitate peace in the region is indeed on a higher moral trajectory than Kabul itself. Where Kabul has failed to appreciate the fact that Pakistan is not only highly supportive of the peace talks at Doha but is also making efforts for the movement of Taliban from Pakistan to Doha and the release of their top commanders who can play a gaudy role in pushing ahead the peace talks, Zalmay Khalilzad has acknowledged such measures and the role played by Pakistan in the peace process

Ashraf Ghani has failed to realize that by getting on board with the ongoing peace process, he can gain a lot and can also

practically implement the stalled Afghan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS). The implementation of APAPPS can entirely change the course of interactions between Kabul and Islamabad by initiating a positive start where bilateral trade and people-to-people contact can play a major role in improving mutual ties. However, Ashraf Ghani's mercurial stance over the ongoing peace process has sent mixed signals to Islamabad. Clearly, Islamabad is currently on a 'wait and watch' mode till it is evident whether Ashraf Ghani sustains or an interim setup takes place over him to talk to the Taliban in the intra-Afghan dialogue.

After taking readings from peace talks at Doha – Taliban guidance council, Kabul, and Islamabad – Ashraf Ghani needs to express maturity and realize that he has done his bid and now his time has come to an end. He must give space to "Loya Jirga" in order to decide the future course of action from here, which evidently would be to form an interim setup. However, if Ghani still holds back and does not let this happen, he will bait Kabul for fire and fury as this is the last real chance for peace to settle down. If this opportunity is forgone now, it would be lost forever. With the Taliban preparing for the summer offensives and initiating it by the first week of May 2019, the window of opportunity is narrowing down quickly. The longer it takes for Ashraf Ghani to come to this realization, the less fluid the peace process at Doha would be.