

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.

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.

National Reconciliation in Afghanistan

By Juma Khan Sufi

National Reconciliation Day is celebrated on April 20 of each year. There are many different “Days of Reconciliation” held around the world that are celebrated on different days. This is a day intended to patch up relationships. In politics, National Reconciliation is the term used for establishment of so-called ‘national unity’ in countries beset with political

problems.[i]

The term of National Reconciliation is not alien to Afghans as they are very much used to it since the time of Soviet-backed regime(s). For the people of Afghanistan and especially for those who constitute the senior generation of population and who resided in Afghanistan even during leftist regimes, this term is not new which was introduced at the behest of Soviet Union by the government of Babrak Karmal during the tenure of Soviet head of the state and party Yuri Andropov in 1984. This was a ten point programme euphemistically wrapped in Marxist terminology as ten theses of Comrade Babrak Karmal.

Karmal appointed a six-member group who belonged to no political party to his government to pursue the task. He also founded a non-party forum with the name of National Fatherland Front to collect all the national democratic forces, i.e. workers, peasants, national bourgeoisie, tribal elders, ulema and other so-called patriotic strata in a single front led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. In practice, the monopoly of power remained in the hands of the ruling party of which Karmal was Chairman. After the death of Andropov in 1984, this programme was watered down and not pursued vigorously under Brezhnev-loyalist and senile Konstantin Chernenko till his death in March 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev after assuming power in March 1985 intensified the reforms programme of glasnost and perestroika in the domestic and foreign policy of Soviet Union and termed Afghanistan as a bleeding wound needing an immediate cure.

In order to chalk out new policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, Gorbachev urged upon Afghan leaders to mend their ways as Soviet Union was not prepared to pay for Afghan venture permanently and shed blood for a revolution which cannot defend itself on its own. In this way, Babrak Karmal was ditched out and replaced by pliant Najibullah in 1986. The National Reconciliation Policy sought to negotiate an end to conflict with the mujahidin and to establish terms for a

comprehensive political settlement. It combined traditional Afghan socio-political practices for consultation and decision-making with a pragmatic political strategy designed to build both domestic support and international legitimacy.[iii] President Mohammad Najibullah intensified and broadened the scope of National Reconciliation Policy. For this purpose, he called Loya Jirga in 1987, got himself elected, approved new constitution, Islam was declared as national religion of the country, proposed six months unilateral ceasefire to Mujahideen, held elections to parliament (Wolesi Jirga and Masharano Jirga), brought non-party elements to the government, strengthened Fatherland Front, reverted back to the pre-revolution name of country from People's Democratic Republic to Republic of Afghanistan and changed the name of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to Watan Party, ended monopoly of power (in theory) and thus lured some non-party opposition fighters to the side of his government.

In the end his policy failed as the two superpowers, US and USSR, were only interested in the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. The talks on Afghan issue was never direct talks between the communist regime and Mujahideen or between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but were indirectly conducted as proximity talks with UN representative as main go-between. So the Geneva Accords were signed under the circumstances that nothing was decided about the dispensation in Afghanistan and the civil war by the proxies mostly backed by foreign backers continued to the displeasure of General Ziaul Haq who wanted that before troop's withdrawal the paramountcy at Kabul should be decided. By this he meant that Afghanistan could be ruled by a government represented equally by Najibullah forces, Mujahideen and Afghan Diaspora represented by ex-King Zahir Shah. He was overruled by his Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo, who created consensus for his policy of signing the faulty document of Agreement from all the political forces of the country. . Both powers were bent upon reaching an

agreement in Geneva without addressing the core issues of non-interference and the shape of ruling authority at Kabul. Accords were signed between Afghanistan, the United States, Pakistan and the USSR in April 1988 in Geneva and Soviet forces began its pullout and completed it in early 1989. President Najibullah soldiered on for almost three years without Soviet troops and afterwards without backing of Russia and at the end his regime exploded from within and paved the way for Mujahideen takeover and the start of devastating civil war.

Najib's national reconciliation failed because Geneva Accords did not address the core issues. The whole world was arrayed against his regime and the Mujahideen did not listen to him, though, most of them used to meet his regime surreptitiously, availing his monetary and material allowances, but openly denying their contacts and bargains with him and continuing fighting against him. 'In spite of the extraordinary efforts by Najibullah to accommodate his mujahedin opponents, the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops on a specifically designated date left his enemies with the impression that they would achieve rapid victory once his Russian allies re-crossed the Amu Darya River separating Afghanistan from the Soviet Union over which they had invaded 10 years earlier. From the point of the mujahedin leadership, the departure of the Russians left them in a position from which any discussion of reconciliation was unnecessary'.^[iii] Even Russians were skeptical about his survival after the troops' withdrawal and the world believed that his days were numbered.

It is obvious that nobody wanted his survival and after Soviet demise even not only Russia backed out from his support but conspired against him as he had unwisely declared the Day of Soviet total withdrawal as National Salvation Day. At the end he agreed with UN Secretary General special representative, Benon Sevan, not to be part of any future government if Mujahideen agreed to support an interim neutral authority.

Neither Mujahideen nor their backers were interested and Benon Sevan had not the support of Security Council. Lessons can be drawn from that failed National Reconciliation Policy, if one wants to pursue the present form of NRP.

Mujahideen did not manage to govern the country and remained at loggerhead with one another as well as against their own people... But somehow as the history is almost written by victors and not vanquished, an old hand on Afghanistan, Michael Semple, ignores their misrule and says 'One powerful way of explaining the persistence of violent conflict in Afghanistan is the breakdown of the social contract, which was precipitate by the two coups in 70's – led by Daoud Khan in 1973 and the 1978 Saur Revolution. Ostensibly the forty years of war since 1978, by Communists and Taliban, and by the resistance to foreign intervention.' [iv] Michael fails to mention the devastating civil war of mujahideen and their misrule. However, the breakdown of social contract is undeniable. Repeated attempts at bringing rapprochement among them on part of Pakistan did not work because of lack of knowledge of Afghan mindset and history and because Pakistan had all along pursued an unconditional open-ended policy with them.

The warlords against whom the people of Afghanistan had welcomed the rise of Taliban as they were fed up with the internecine war, loot and plunder of Mujahideen, who were termed by Taliban as *Shar-o-Fasad* (Mischief mongers and disruptionists) were unwisely imposed by US on the hapless people of Afghanistan against the sane advice of Pakistan and others, who cautioned against helping Kabul takeover by Northern Alliance, after the 9/11. The arrogance of money and weapons which corrupts any power played the trick on Americans who immediately termed the start of their misfortune as a task reasonably fulfilled and they soon turned to another unwise invasion of Iraq in 2003 and termed it as mission accomplished. The minority which American brought to power

started the same game of loot and plunder of the public and private property and alienating the Pakhtun population by terming every bearded Pakhtun residing in Kabul to be Taliban worth handing him over to US forces. These ruling warlords were soon added with the educated Diaspora representatives supported by their resident countries whose families and properties were in the West and who treated American-led Afghanistan as Eldorado to earn by hook or by crook in league with warlords and send back their ill-gotten kickback or commission money to their kith and kin in the West. They became hand in glove with ruling warlords under President Karzai.

This does not mean that everything was bleak. Schools, colleges, universities and other learning institutes were opened whereby both boys and girls started attending in millions. The women plight improved tremendously. Infrastructure of roads and communication facilities improved a lot and other public and private buildings came into being. Along with education, the condition of health facilities also improved. The massive international help contributed to the rise in employment, construction activities, human development, financing the state and government and paying the administrative costs and helping the rising cost of Afghan National Security Forces. The presence of international community helped create unprecedented number of super-rich in the country. However, the core issue of justice and governance remained flawed to this day and therefore the people at the countryside mostly approached Taliban to resolve their day-to-day issues on the face of corrupt administration and judiciary. Inside Afghanistan rumors were afoot that international community and some administrative chiefs were hand and glove with opium and heroin smuggling, though there had been apparent attempts to stem the spread of poppy cultivation.

Despite the initial verbal overtures to Taliban for

accommodation by Karzai-led government, the Americans shun them with contempt and treated them as sworn enemies before their re-emergence. My friend, Merajuddin Pathan, who was then governor of Khost province in 2004-2006, was once approached by senior Jalaluddin Haqqani for a rapprochement, but neither Americans nor Karzai were interested in his approaches. 'Unfortunately, the best time to have attempted a serious national reconciliation program in Afghanistan would have been during the period when the Taliban were at their weakest. The time around the 2004 election would have been ideal and there was a serious attempt made by the Afghan government and its allies to develop such program. But again and equally unfortunate, little attention was paid to historical animosities as the defunct Peace Through Strength Program was set up under the leadership of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi.' [v] Instead Taliban had been declared international pariahs and outcasts in conjunction with al Quida and imposed rigorous sanctions on them

The state of affairs reached to such an extent that in July 2011, the Agriculture Ministry at Kabul admitted that four and a half million jeribs of state land had been grabbed so far by ruling warlords. It does not include the private property grabbed by ruling warlords. The Taliban-termed *shar-o-fasad* supported by US-Nato brought the country to the brink and US started thinking in terms of some sort of reconciliation after Taliban proved their fighting potentials after 2005.

Karzai and Zalmay Khalilzad, the latter was called as viceroy in Kabul before the Pentagon have yet found their feet on the ground, was epitome of all hatred against Pakistan along with fishy Karzai who never took Pakistan as serious partner. Both were whipping anti-Pakistan feelings off and on. Pakistan has never been in the know of Afghan mindset and committed mistakes during the convention of first Bonn Conference on the eve of US-led invasion of Afghanistan and left its unresolved border issue (from Afghan point of view) unaddressed which

always feeds the anti-Pakistan feelings in Afghanistan. They both are responsible for the flawed Afghan process and both promoted this unsuccessful adventure. Though Khalilzad is the special representative for peace in Afghanistan, yet his negative role and proclivity for vitiating the neighborhood cannot be overlooked.

Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation is euphemism used for a politically correct term. All the stakeholders know that without outside support nothing can be achieved in Afghanistan and no two Afghans can agree on any point. But like Loya Jirga, the decision of which are superimposed by the power-to-be from above, in order to succeed the present NRP can only be pursued by the United States-Nato and regional powers. 'A key lesson of NRP (of Najibullah) is that the local and national process must be linked to each other, and both levels need to be connected to external partners'.^[vi] In this regard, Pakistan is placed at an enviable position if it played its cards well, otherwise it could face serious consequences.

When the Enduring Freedom campaign looked likely to be failed, Karzai in the inaugural fraud-filled victory of second term of office on 19 November 2009 announced that peace and national reconciliation would remain his topmost priority. This process was called Peace and National Reconciliation Program. Community-based approach was devised from bottom to top., i.e. reintegrating low level fighters who lay their arms to the community concerned and providing him sufficient fund, job or job-training to look after himself and his family under observation. If senior level commanders are reconciled then they could be provided to join administration on higher level and become part of the establishment. This process did not entice Taliban to avail this opportunity.

The only Taliban leader who from the outset supported US invasion was Mullah Khaksar who vociferously supported Karzai regime, but he was soon killed by Taliban. The other two

leaders initially incarcerated by US forces were Mutawakil, Taliban foreign minister, and Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan. However, they remained committed to Taliban narrative.

Operation Enduring Freedom was going nowhere. So on first December 2009, President Barak Obama devised a new strategy of surge for Afghanistan. On 5th December in Brussels the NATO foreign ministers announced that seventy thousand more troops totaling 110,000 would be sent to Afghanistan. Americans wanted to weaken Taliban, snatch the fighting momentum from Taliban and force them for negotiation. The aim was that Taliban would accept the present constitution, surrender arms and become part of ruling administration. 'The commander of Nato forces in the Afghanistan general Stanley McChrystal, has said in an interview to the London Financial Times, he hoped increased troop levels would weaken the Taliban enough for them to accept a peace deal and bring an end to the war'[vii].

Envoy Richard Holbrooke to Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Alongside surge, President Obama named Richard Holbrooke in January 2009 as a special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan to work for reconciliation in Afghanistan and with Pakistan. He unwisely named his responsibility as 'AfPak' mission ignoring India in this equation. Holbrooke had worked on various prestigious assignments for USA and was considered as main architect of the Dayton agreement putting an end to Bosnian crises. He was not new to Afghanistan which he had visited briefly in 1971 as Peace Corps official and had gone to Afghanistan as private citizen in 2006, had met US Generals, Afghan ministers and even had a long chat with President Karzai. Decades of working in war zones, Vietnam and Bosnia, had prepared him for such an assignment. He wisely selected twenty-one members team from across the various disciplines and embarked on his mission. 'While much

has been written of Holbrooke's struggles, he achieved a great deal in the region. In his final year, he revitalized his relationship with Afghan and Pakistani leaders, enjoyed policy victories in Washington, and achieved diplomatic breakthroughs in the region.' In the end he began to appreciate Pakistani position by saying that 'this cannot be a transactional relationship," he told me several months before he died. "We have to create a long-term relationship." He had a vision and had designed a strategy, but before his strategy could be put to test 'he collapsed on December 11, 2010 in a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her ornate office on the State Department's seventh floor. Two days later, he passed away.[viii] However, for the first time American government and Taliban representatives met on November 28, 2010, near Munich. Two weeks later, Holbrooke died.

With his death the life and peace struggle of ambassador Holbrooke ended who had earnest desire to end the war. Likewise the surge and the mission of Holbrooke both did not bear desired fruits and did not weaken Taliban. It gave further momentum to Taliban as they rightly thought that US was weary of war and would soon be forced to withdraw. They declared the oft-repeated phrase 'that you (US) have watches and we have time.'

On the other hand, despite Karzai's announcement of national reconciliation inviting Taliban to be part of ruling system with other material and political facilities, Taliban responded with strong rejection and reiterated their persistent demand of withdrawal of foreign forces, establishment of Islamic Emirate and then any talk of talks to other ruling Afghans. The Afghan president had consistently made overtures to Taliban, and the West has been increasingly supportive of proposals to lure Taliban fighters back into the political process in a bid to end years of fighting. In this regard the services of Saudi Arabia, one of the three countries to have recognized Taliban regime, were sought. In

early February 2010, President Karzai visited Saudi Arabia to request Saudi King to mediate with Taliban to encourage them to negotiate on Reconciliation[ix]. Taliban never accepted Saudi advances.

The thinking in Afghan establishment synchronized with the thinking of its foreign backers, mostly Americans. They wanting that Taliban should lay down their arms, peacefully return to political process, accept the Afghan constitution, take up ministerial positions, join the security forces, be a part of perks and privileges provided to Kabul elite and then there could be talks of withdrawal of foreign forces. Taliban knew that their strength lies in their arms and fighting and refusal to compromise on their basic principles.

Afghanistan High Peace Council:

ASHPC was established in September 2010 by President Karzai to work for peace and reintegration program. It was stuffed by supporters and like National Fatherland Front of communist era was not a neutral body meant for mediation between the government and Taliban. It was/is not an address of neutral persons and remains almost Government spokes-body. It is presently led by Karim Khlili, former vice-President. It is not facilitator, rather sometimes an obstacle basically meant for weakening Taliban and not enticing them for talks and Taliban never took it seriously. Only those elements are included in its ranks who are mostly interested in the privileges available to this body. It is to be mentioned that Ghani running mate as first Vice President was no other than the notorious human rights violator, Abdul Rashid Dostam, conducted under the watchful eyes of United States and western supported human rights organizations.

Ashraf Ghani and NRP:

The lackluster inauguration of Ashraf Ghani in 2014 as President after bitter wrangling with his rival, Abdullah

Abdullah, on election results finally ended with the solution of outside Afghan constitution imposed by US Secretary of State John Kerry and the formation of Unity government whereby Abdullah Abdullah playing second fiddle as Chief Executive. He also toed the same line and look to US for solution. Though Ghani paid his first visit to Pakistan and met civil and military leadership under the false impression that Taliban were under Islamabad dictates and wished a speedy settlement with Taliban on his terms, yet after continuous terrorist attacks in Kabul and rest of Afghanistan on 6 June 2014 he declared these attacks to be the undeclared aggression of Pakistan against Afghanistan. So In 2016 he started a "trade war" by increasing entry taxes for Pakistani trucks, and making trade deals with India and Iran. Following two deadly Taliban/Haqqani attacks in Kabul in January 2018, Ghani called Pakistan the "center of the Taliban". Those who know the personality of Ghani amply understand the short temper of Ghani. He even refused to take a call from the Pakistani prime minister, instead sending a delegation of his Security Agency to hand over evidence that the alleged terrorists were supported by Pakistan.[x] Whatever, the reason behind Ghani's disapproval of Pakistan, geographical reality and pragmatism as well as Pakistan's commitment to Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process and the mediation of friends forced Afghan government to recognize reality that without the support of Pakistan Taliban could not be brought to negotiating table.

It was the facilitation of Pakistan that first ever talks between representatives of Taliban and Afghan Government took place at Murree on 7 July 2015 and both sides presented their views about progress of peace. They agreed to meet again at the end of July. But at the very neck of time the long-kept secret already in the knowledge of CIA and Afghan NDS i.e., the death of Mullah Muhammad Omar in 2013 was unwisely or intentionally divulged in Kabul, which scuttled the Murree process as the talks were being conducted by representatives of Mullah Akhtar Mansur, apparently on behalf of Mullah

Muhammad Omar, and he favoured negotiated settlement. Most of Taliban were also unaware of death of their leader. Mullah Akhtar Mansur was finally elected by Taliban Shura as a leader replacing Mullah Omar. After consolidating his power, he was poised to start anew negotiations that he was droned in Baluchistan by US returning from Iran in May 2016. This further complicated the peace process and Taliban came to the conclusion that opposite side was playing double game by using peace talks as a tool to weaken or surrender them. Therefore, they stiffened their stance and increased attacks.

Qatar Office:

It was felt that in order to reach a negotiated settlement, Taliban must have an address. Saudi Arabia and Turkey were originally thought to be the places where in one of them Taliban could open an office. But Taliban preferred Qatar as more neutral with no deep ties with Kabul regime. Initially some five members of Taliban movement settled in Doha. In 2013 they were allowed to open an office. Qatar paid for it. But Taliban flew their flag on it writing on it as office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. President Karzai objected to these signs as he considered the place not an embassy of Taliban or of a government-in-exile of Taliban but only place of their movement. Briefly the office was shut. However, soon the symbols were removed and the office resumed its work.

Talks with Americans, indirectly and discreetly, started and Taliban demanded in 2012 the release of their five prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay in exchange for captured US army sergeant Bowe Bergdahi. They were released after a while and the number of Taliban representatives reached twenty from the initial five in 2013. The release prisoners incarcerated in Guantanamo became part of the negotiating team, though they were accused of serious crimes. Voices were raised against their release as both inside US and Afghan Govt expressed concern that they would soon join the fighting against them.

The office of Taliban was not without internal problems as one of its powerful interlocutor Tayeb Agha resigned on not taken into confidence of the death of Movement's founder, Mullah Omar, and choosing of his successor. Except a brief encounter at Murree, during their entire presence Taliban refused to talk to Afghan Government as they always considered/consider it a puppet superimposed by foreigners and not representing Afghan people. From the outset they had been demanding direct negotiation with US for seeking the release of their prisoners, lifting of restrictions on the movement of Taliban leaders, removing them from the UN blacklist and, above all US announcing schedule of their troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. After that happen, they say, that they were prepared to talk to the rulers at Kabul. They know that without US support Kabul regime could not survive like Najibullah regime did after Soviet withdrawal.

US Changing Position:

George Bush's aggressive and unilateral policy helped the re-emergence of Taliban after easy victory over Taliban regime. His tenure in office was that of outright rejection of Taliban needing complete elimination. Barak Obama surge and then drawdown not only not weakened Taliban, but further gave them momentum. In his election campaign Donald Trump pledged to withdraw from Afghanistan following his policy of 'America First'. But assuming office he came under the pressure of Generals at Pentagon who wanted a settlement with Taliban on their own terms. Acting against his initial hunch, he made an open-ended commitment to Afghanistan in his new South Asia Strategy and further injected 4000 more troops to Afghan landscape under the false hope that Taliban would be easily defeated as he was convinced by his Generals. However, Taliban capturing territory after territory became more ferocious and lethal. Now their writ runs over sixty per cent of Afghan territory, although they have not been able to capture any major town except Kunduz and Ghazni which they

could only very briefly retain under their domination. But thanks to the NATO bombardment they remain unable to retain any city. Now Americans had already declared Taliban indigenous internal force only interested in Afghanistan and posing no threat to outside world, including USA.

US finally bowed down. In early September 2018 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad, "Ambassador Khalilzad is going to join the State Department team to assist us in the reconciliation effort, so he will come on and be the State Department's lead person for that purpose," Pompeo told reporters aboard a flight bound for Pakistan. Khalilzad will "be full-time focused on developing the opportunities to get the Afghans and the Taliban to come to reconciliation. That will be his singular mission statement," Pompeo said.[xi]

Until then Americans had been stressing upon intra-Afghan dialogue, refusing the Taliban contention that the issue was between Americans and Taliban and the Afghan Govt of Karzai and then of Ashraf Ghani were just puppets superimposed by US at the dent of weapons. Americans were not listening and blaming Pakistan for not bringing Taliban to the negotiating table. During all this period whether it was hot fight against so-called Taliban terrorists or efforts of reconciliation, Pakistan remained a scapegoat uncooperative in the eyes of American and Kabul regime.

Who is Khalilzad?

The choice of Khalilzad poses dilemma for Pakistan. While he has been eulogized in American establishment as an experienced guy who is Afghan, speak both Farsi and Pashto, knows Afghan history and gone through all the vicissitudes of Conflict in Afghanistan right from the days of Soviet occupation. During the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Khalilzad, 67, played a key role in rebuilding and reimagining governments in both countries. He had a hand in Afghanistan's first post-Taliban

elections and in crafting the constitution of Iraq. Robin Raphel, a former assistant secretary of state for South Asia, says Khalilzad's appointment is a sign that the Trump administration is getting serious about a political solution to America's longest war. "I think that's important," she says, "and personally I think that's long overdue, because I think everybody realizes – and I include in this the Taliban – that things in Afghanistan are getting too fractured, that there are too many players and Afghanistan could become the next Syria if attention is not paid to the political as well as the military dimensions."

Raphel has been involved in U.S. Track II diplomacy with the Taliban, and a top State Department official has had recent contacts, too. This is something that Khalilzad could build on, Raphel says. "He's a very experienced guy," she says. "He knows the political and cultural terrain in the region. He's a gifted diplomat. So I think the potential is for him to bring a lot."

But former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann is skeptical. He hits "He's a great deal-maker, but I don't know if there's a deal to be made," he says. Neumann cites recent advances by the Taliban, and says the U.S. needs to be committed to the fight as well as to the diplomacy. As for the Taliban, he says, they haven't moved from their position that they will only negotiate with the U.S. – and only about America's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"At the end of the day, they have to be willing to negotiate with the Afghan government," he says. "We can't negotiate how Afghans will live with each other." President Trump ordered an increase in troop levels as part of his Afghan strategy in 2017, but has grown frustrated with the war's progress.

Gen. John Nicholson, the previous commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has called reconciliation key to ending the war. "We'd like to see reconciliation between the Taliban

and the Afghan government so they resolve their differences politically," he told NPR's Rachel Martin. "We'd like to see the Taliban renounce their connections to al-Qaeda. These are some of the demands that have been discussed in past years. And I think these are some of the things that'll be discussed going forward." [xii]

Still, Khalilzad's appointment comes in the context of a deteriorating situation, with high-profile Taliban attacks in major cities and its rejection of the Afghan government's recent offer of a second ceasefire, following a three-day ceasefire in June that saw Taliban fighters entering cities without their weapons, taking selfies with civilians and asking directions to the best ice cream shops.

In Afghanistan, views of Khalilzad – who currently runs Gryphon Partners, described as a "global advisory firm focused on frontier markets" – are mixed. "There are many politicians here who blame Khalilzad for many of the woes that Afghanistan is undergoing and they oppose his appointment," says Borhan Osman, the International Crisis Group's senior analyst for Afghanistan.

There are "those who are not happy with the balance of power, who thinks certain ethnic groups have had an outsized role in the post-war order," he said, referring to Pashtuns. "And they oppose it on ethnocentric grounds. There are others who have different grievances, mainly about how warlords were imposed and empowered at the cost of exclusion of others, thanks to the U.S. policies that Ambassador Khalilzad was overseeing."

But many others welcome Khalilzad, Osman says. "Of course he has many friends, supporters, in the current elite. They see him as a powerful Afghan-American who has a better understanding of Afghanistan, who has been involved in shaping the politics over the past 17 years, and he has continued to be useful since. That's their view."

In neighboring Pakistan, Khalilzad is disliked and viewed with suspicion. "He became the first U.S. official – very senior, with direct access to [President] Bush, who criticized Pakistan publicly, and particularly its covert policy of sheltering the Taliban, providing sanctuary to the Taliban," says Abubakar Siddique Wazir of Waziristan, who covers Afghanistan and Pakistan for Radio Free Europe. "He was never liked by Pakistan, particularly by the Pakistani military."

"He's been very critical of Pakistani policies, rightly or wrongly," says Pakistani journalist and author Zahid Hussain. "He is a person who held Pakistan responsible for everything which had gone wrong in Afghanistan." [xiii]

Khalilzad served as a State Department policy planner during the Reagan administration and argued that the United States should arm Afghan mujahideen fighters in their war against Soviet forces in the 1980s. After the Soviet Union withdrew, the mujahideen turned on each other, the country descended into civil war and the Taliban rose to power.

Khalilzad who is one of the architects or promoters of flawed Afghan dispensation blatantly crafted very unwise design along with President Karzai and both are responsible for the most of the present woes Afghanistan suffers. He entrenched the much detested warlords accused of serious war crimes and human rights abuses and helped marginalized the right forces who could build Afghanistan according to the milieu of the country. On the top of it, he propped anti-Pakistan elements within the post-Taliban regime. He never missed an opportunity to blame Pakistan for his own and American failures and spread the culture of Pakistan-bashing and even wrote disparaging remarks about Pakistan in his own book published some time ago. At the same time he is very ambitious guy who wanted to be Presidential candidate in the last election of Afghanistan and wanted that Pakistan should support him. However, the saner minds in Afghanistan discouraged him for being more of an American than Afghan.

He will speak good words in public about Pakistan and its role in Afghan reconciliation as this is his task, but will never miss an opportunity to weaken Pakistan in private and will definitely try to bring the hand of India in this process. Pakistan needs to be extra vigilant about his role and character.

Prospects of Peace:

First and foremost, peace in Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan and the damage Pakistan undergone through in the post-9/11 years is because of Afghan civil war. Like every other rational and normal country, Pakistan urgently needs peace in its neighborhood and Afghanistan tops on the agenda – though Pakistan would also like to remain engaged with India for solving the core issue marring the relationship between them for seven decades. The efforts for peace accelerated after the US appointed Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation last year in September to facilitate direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

If we go to the chronology of recent accelerated Afghan peace process, briefly the following picture emerges:

Chronology of Recent US-Taliban Meetings:

26 July 2018: Alice Well met Taliban at their Qatar office

4 September 2018: Zalmay Khalilzad appointed special representative for talks with Taliban

9 October 2018: US special envoy met Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, and Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua, seeking help from Pakistan for Afghan settlement

12 October 2018: Khalilzad met Taliban officials in Qatar for the first time

22 October 2018: Mullah Beradar released from Pakistani prison at the Qatar request

25 October 2018: According to some sources two Taliban commanders were released from jail in Pakistan.

9 November 2018: Moscow talks held with participation of regional countries, Afghan Peace Council; India participated unofficially, US participated as observer and Ghani government refused to attend

12 November 2018: Taliban and Khalilzad met at Qatar for the second time

13 November 2018: Pakistan releases two more Taliban leaders to facilitate the process

3 December 2018: Trump sends letter to Pakistan leadership asking for help in the Qatar peace process

5 December 2018: PM Imran Khan pledges to help the peace process led by US

17 December 2018: Taliban officials met US officials at Abu Dhabi

30 December 2018: Taliban dismiss to talk with Afghan Government

6 January 2019: Taliban demand to shift the venue of talks

14 January 2019: US sets forth two demands for Taliban

22 January 2019: US and Taliban resume talks at Qatar

24 January 2019: US-Taliban talks extended for two days

24 January 2019: Taliban appointed Mullah Beradar as head of Qatar talks

During the last meeting which covered six days, significant

progress was made and according to Khalilzad an understanding about a broad framework has been achieved, but there are still some issues left to be discussed in another meeting. The broad framework which Khalilzad harps on has been tentatively divulged by TOLO news service of Afghanistan citing the draft document to have been prepared by American Rand Corporation. This has generated a lot of euphoria. The leaked document purports:

Titled as Agreement as Comprehensive Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan, the draft which has never been authenticated by the interlocutors concerned, is in limited circulation and which describe the so-called timeframe and the framework described by Khalilzad. It has also been quoted by Pakistani media. But as explained by Pajhwok News Agency "Taliban representatives and the US special envoy for reconciliation in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, recently met in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates on the peace process. Media reports suggest that a draft agreement among the Trump administration, Taliban and the Afghan government had been prepared.

The 50-page draft accord – Agreement on settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan – pertains to the peace process, a future system and withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

The RAND Corporation has developed the draft agreement and the document has been shared with senior Afghan officials in Kabul, as well as with stakeholders in the region.

In the context, an 18-month transitional government, extension of US assistance to Afghanistan, creation of a high ulema council, changes to the constitution, amnesty, Taliban's complete renunciation of links with terrorist organizations, release of prisoners and formation of an impartial team to implement the draft deal are the main points.

At the end of the draft agreement, spaces have been provided

for signatures of leaders from Afghanistan Pakistan and other regional countries.

Also, there are also unconfirmed reports that the two sides have outlined their views on 50 percent of the issues and will share them at the meeting.”[xiv]

Rand Corporation is very authentic source. It seems that Rand Corporation was asked by US Government to prepare such documents incorporating Taliban as well as American concerns. This has created uneasiness in the Ghani Government, though publicly they have to share American view and endorse whatever Khalilzad decides. Though much of the issues have been touched in the draft, yet as they say the devil is in the detail. AS Khalilzad rightly says that “Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and ‘everything’ must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire.” A lot of snags remain and one cannot be sure of ultimate outcome, but the cautious optimism is there.

Ambassador Khalilzad keeps on informing the Kabul Unity Government about the development and the negotiations with Taliban, yet powerful elements within Kabul Administration and some outside consider themselves sidelined and fear worst-case scenario like Russians left President Najibullah in lurch. Until now the Americans efforts are directed to pressurize Taliban to agree to the participation of Kabul Government in the peace talks which Taliban vehemently reject so far. Pakistan stand behind these efforts and would like to prevail upon Taliban to agree to a consensual peace agreement with all the domestic and regional as well as international stakeholders on board.

But odds are many. Afghanistan is a complex country and the seventeen years US-Nato forces operating in Afghanistan have further added to the complexity. Pakhtuns blame US by downsizing their representation, while the non-Pakhtuns, mainly Tajiks, accuse them of not deviating from the age-old

Pakhtun centric Afghanistan. There are linguistic and ethnic conflicts and every ethnicity wants to increase their share and devolution of state powers under a new social contract. The backbone of Taliban is Pakhtuns and non-Pakhtuns fear their domination in any settlement. The society has further fractured and fragmented under US.

Pakistan hopes for the better and would like a comprehensive peace in Afghanistan to the satisfaction of all domestic and outside stakeholders. Peace in Afghanistan is not only the wish of international community, but also of Afghans – though there are forces within the Kabul regime and Taliban fighters who have strong stakes in the continuation of conflict. War economy has its own rationale and to take it to its total termination needs lot efforts as war in Afghanistan has become a way of life.

Then there are two main sides to the peace – Taliban and US. Keeping the past experience Afghans never abide by any agreement and the memories of Peshawar and Islamabad Accords after the end of Najibullah regime are still fresh. Failure of talks can exhaust President Trump and he can decide to use tremendous force out of rage or he can withdraw without agreement leaving Pakistan and other powers to pick up the pieces and plunging Afghanistan to another prolonged civil war whereby everybody would be fighting everybody. A more dangerous scenario for Pakistan! This could be the end of NATO. As for now Americans look like to withdraw their combat troops under pressure in a phase manner but would like to keep the two powerful listening posts and bases at Bagram and Shindand under their control. Taliban would not agree to it. Future is unpredictable and Pakistan should remain on guard and calculated. Afghanistan is not an easy place and it is not an easy country.

Settlement does mean that war will come to an abrupt end. There is ISIL or Daesh which has increased its fighting capability and which is more dangerous. The Taliban fighters

not sharing leadership views and only interested in fighting as soldiers of fortune may join the ranks of Daesh. This possibility cannot be ruled out. However, the reverse can also happen and Daesh fighters tired of bloodshed can also join the peace process, thus weakening Daesh.

Under the present circumstances when peace is in sight, it would be not easy for US to keep its allies intact. Ghani Government can explode from within like that of President Najibullah. Even now some elements within Ghani government and outside have started contacting Taliban. They can merge with Taliban. US should remain vigilant to forestall any such scenario.

But it can trigger chaos in Taliban ranks also. Though they are more experienced in this regard as witnesses to Najibullah' and Mujahedeen's collapse. They would try to remain in dugouts. They can also disintegrate after ceasefire some Taliban abandoning their fronts. In war they are united and in peace they lose.

The perils are on both sides and one cannot rule out anarchy and chaos which need to be controlled. Nobody can afford descent to another civil war, free for all. But every phenomenon carries with itself the opposite. International community, especially Pakistan, must remain vigilant as another chaos will have devastating effects. Afghans must be discouraged to create such sort of scenario.

[i] Wikipedia

[ii] Heela Najib, President Najibullah and the National Reconciliation Policy Objectives, Operations and Obstacles. Heela Najibullah is a peace and conflict researcher whose book Reconciliation and Social Healing in Afghanistan was published by Springer in January 2017. She is the elder daughter of former President of Afghanistan, Dr Najibullah.

[iii]Pir-Mohammad Mollazehi (Iranian Afghanistan Issues

Specialist), Comparing Soviet and American National Reconciliation Program, Tribal Analysis Center, 2015 by

[iv] Michael Semple, Elusive Settlement in Afghanistan, Ten Priorities for Peaceful Progress, 2018. Professor Michael Semple is a Professor in George J Mitchel Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast, who has spent long years with Afghans.

[v] Pir Mohammad Mollazehi, *ibid*

[vi] Heela Najib, *ibid*

[vii] Shay, Shaul (Dr.), Afghanistan: Between National Reconciliation and Jihad, 18/02/2010

[viii] David Rohde, Richard Holbrooke's Last Mission in Afghanistan, Daily Beast, 26 November 2011.

[ix] Dr Shaul, *ibid*

[x] Ashraf Ghani, Wikipedia,

[xi] Michele Kelemen, Diaa Hadid and Vanesa Romo, Npr, Zalmay Khalilzad Appointed As U.S. Special Adviser To Afghanistan, 5 September 2018

[xii] *ibid*

[xiii] *Ibid*

[xiv] Erfanyar, Ahmad Shah, Pajhwok, 9 January 2019

The Art of Diplomacy

By Harris Ali Akakhail

US President's Special Representative for Afghan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad had a prolonged visit of the Asian region, recently, and ended it up at a high note by having marathon sessions with the Taliban's political office at Doha, Qatar. In all his previous and the latest trips, he has been registering strong observations by the Capitals he is visiting, including Kabul that to not abruptly exit Afghanistan. Although his boss (Donald Trump) wishes otherwise as he wants to pack up and be off the hook. Because in pure business terms, bills of involvement in Afghanistan have so far exceeded a one-trillion-dollar mark with exponential cost of American soldiers' lives. While in return, nothing is at hands as dividends.

While Zalmay Khalilzad was flying from Delhi to Beijing during his visit, the Taliban announced to end peace talks with him because he keeps asking regional powers to coerce them for a sitting with Kabul government for peace talks rather than negotiations with the US. The statement from Taliban was way too blunt in context of diplomacy, but it got its weightage and Zalmay Khalilzad relayed a message to see the Taliban's Qatar office team, while this was at his itinerary.

Initially, it was driven hard that the rendezvous shall be Islamabad, when Zalmay Khalilzad was at the final leg of his journey to Pakistan. However, the Taliban flatly refused to see him in Islamabad as Afghan social media, electronic media and parts of the Kabul government were already inculcating amenably that Pakistan is having a big say over the Taliban and are driving them until now. So, to dispel that advertising, the Taliban emphatically refused to see him and announced officially that there stands no chance of meeting him at Islamabad. Later, it was decided to sit at Doha without

the presence of any other country's delegation, as was the case in previous meet ups when Pakistan, UAE and Saudi Arabia representatives also participated along the sidelines.

The talks at Doha had a clear head start as both sides had met in recent past, so the ice breaking phase along with exchanging goodwill gestures was already over. It was decided in principle that talks shall happen for three days and in course of lengthy sessions. But once they started, sessions after sessions made sure to prolong the talks and stretch it to six days. Talks revolved around talibans demand for exit of foreign forces from Afghanistan and in return for US demand that afghan soil shall never be used against any country, particularly USA. Insiders say that focus of the talks was zoomed over the demands put up by two sides and how meticulously to craft a strategy for it and once a strategy for such demands is written down in the form of a covenant, who shall be the guarantors of it along with United Nations. With these two demands in focus topics of exchange of prisoners, erasing of names of higher Taliban hierarchy from U.N blacklist, Taliban peace talks with Kabul government and complete cease-fire also occupied much of the time.

The Taliban kept on pressing Zalmay Khalilzad that US and NATO forces pull out from Afghanistan in coming 6 months' time, while Zalmay was calling in for a phase-wise exit, saying within a year's time frame by minutely analyzing the security situation on ground. Consequently, Zalmay Khalilzad was asking the Taliban relentlessly that once US and NATO troops starts pulling out, the Taliban leadership must initiate peace talks with the Kabul government. At this very note the Taliban team did not pay a heed, ducked it and kept on avoiding addressing this thorny point of discussion. Taliban inelasticity in this domain was of the reason that they were still not empowered by the Rehbari Shura (Guidance Council) to decide over this subject. Resultantly, the glitch was the real bone of contention for not issuing a joint communiqué, as planned, at

the end of six days talk. As Zalmay Khalilzad was off the opinion that if the joint communiqué was to say that US and NATO forces are to exit phase wise from Afghanistan within a year's time frame than it should also say that; simultaneously Afghan Taliban are going to begin peace talks with Kabul government.

The US team tried her best to end talks on a high note and take some concrete talking points out of it for her President's upcoming state of union address. But eventually the reluctance of the Taliban to open talks with Kabul government fizzled out the desired results. The talks ended on a note that a future course of action is at sights, so let's take a pause from here and resume talks by 25th of February 2019. On almost the very last phases of talks, the Taliban announced to send over its old guard and deputy to their leader on political front, Mullah Ghani Baradar to head their Qatar political office and lead negotiations onwards. By doing so, in future exchanges with US negotiating team Qatar political office of the Taliban is now completely empowered and it does not have to look back at the guidance council for consultations. As was in case to open talks with Kabul government or not.

From the exchanges at Doha, it is evidently clear that US and the Taliban are jelling along well for the time being and one can envisage a picture-perfect scenario within a year's time frame, where Afghanistan is a no-go area for international terrorists and US / NATO forces exit makes Afghanistan look more sovereign than ever. But by calculating so, one grossly misses out that where the Afghanistan government stands in this envisioned scenario. The onus of burden lies at US to care for the Afghan government before it hammers out some sort of a settlement with the Taliban and leave. Accordingly, to cater for, Zalmay Khalilzad instead of flying straight to Washington after talks at Doha, flew towards Kabul. He sat with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and did his best to allay

his fears. Insiders did divulge from the meet that Ashraf is indeed under confident and jittery. But Zalmay Khalilzad assured Ghanni that US won't leave till talks between the Taliban and Kabul government start and get to a conclusive end.

All in all, the art of diplomacy is at his best and these talks holds too much of a learning for students of foreign policy as to how well one crafts his cards and plan them at the right moment. Goals of both parties are set and finally it's dawned upon the world that US is in serious mood to exit Afghanistan. It shall also be kept in design that the ground reality is the factor that dictates and strengthens the interlocutors of talks at the table. As per that ground reality, it's evident that both the Taliban and US negotiating teams are testing each other nerves. For now, all is well but indeed if it ends well.

The writer is an Afghan Expert