**[Afghanistan: Dawn of a new era](https://nation.com.pk/03-Mar-2020/afghanistan-dawn-of-a-new-era%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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The signing of an agreement between the Taliban and the US in Doha on 29 February promises the dawn of a new era of peace and stability in Afghanistan provided the commitments contained in it are faithfully implemented by the various parties and the intra-Afghan dialogue pledged in it leads to a peace agreement. Thanks to this agreement, the prospects of peace in Afghanistan are brighter than they have ever been since 9/11. But there are still many obstacles that need to be overcome and many pitfalls that need to be avoided. As the future events unfold, it would become clearer whether the promise of peace offered by this agreement would become a reality.

The agreement is the outcome of prolonged negotiations between the US and the Taliban delegations led by Zalmay Khalilzad, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban co-founder, respectively. It essentially reflects the realization on the part of the two sides that peace can be achieved only through political agreements. It took the US a war lasting about 18 years and entailing the cost of $ 2 trillion and loss of lives of more than 3500 American and Coalition troops to recognize finally that it was in no position to dictate the terms of durable peace through military means. On the other hand, the Taliban have also come to the conclusion that they need to combine their military efforts with talks with the US and other Afghan parties to achieve the goals of the US military withdrawal from and durable peace in Afghanistan.

It is a measure of the of the ignorance of the US policy makers of the lessons of the Afghan history, the misplaced hubris of the American generals after achieving an easy military victory over the Taliban following the tragic terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the naivete of American scholars and think tanks that Washington persisted in the longest war of its history in pursuit of the mirage of durable peace in Afghanistan through military means alone. Considering the lessons of the Afghan history learnt by other great powers like Great Britain and the Soviet Union at enormous cost, it was a foregone conclusion that the US neglect of the path of a negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan would prove to be a costly blunder. This is precisely what has happened. The Americans have finally realized the futility of their war in Afghanistan and chosen the path of negotiations and a political settlement for achieving their essential goals.

The Americans blundered into the war in Afghanistan with very ambitious goals. Besides the legitimate goal of defeating and dismantling Al Qaeda, which was responsible for launching the 9/11 attacks, Washington set for itself the unrealistic goal of nation-building in Afghanistan in accordance with its own liberal values in disregard of the extremely religious, conservative and tribal character of the Afghan society. Such a societal change, howsoever desirable, can come about only gradually through the process of education, enlightenment and economic progress. It cannot be imposed at gun point as the Americans have discovered to their dismay. It is not surprising, therefore, that Washington miserably failed in this nation-building project which was based on false assumptions and an ill-designed strategy. Washington failed also partly because it assigned the task of governance to US-sponsored Afghans who lacked the necessary political base in Afghanistan besides suffering from the stigma of close links with the occupying power.

The US-Taliban agreement on bringing peace to Afghanistan reflects the realization of the ground realities in Afghanistan on the part of Washington. Its first two parts deal with the timeline for the withdrawal of the US and other foreign forces from Afghanistan and guarantees by the Taliban that they will not allow Al Qaeda or any other group or individual to use the Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. According to the timeline given in the agreement, the number of the US troops will be reduced to 8600 together with the proportionate reduction in the number of the troops of the US allies and Coalition partners in the first 135 days after the signing of the agreement. The US, its allies and the Coalition partners will also withdraw all their forces from five military bases in Afghanistan. The remaining troops of the US, its allies and Coalition partners will be withdrawn within the subsequent nine and a half months from all the military bases in Afghanistan.

The agreement also lays down that by 10 March, 2020, the Taliban will commence intra-Afghan negotiations with the other Afghan sides to discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, which will be announced along with the agreement over the future roadmap of Afghanistan leading to the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government. By 10 March, 2020, up to 5000 Taliban prisoners will be released in return for the release of up to 1000 prisoners of the other side as confidence building measures. The remaining prisoners will be released within the subsequent three months. With the start of the intra-Afghan negotiations, the US will initiate action so as to lift its sanctions against the Taliban by 27 August, 2020. In addition, action will be initiated by the US so as to remove the members of the Taliban from the UN Security Council sanctions list by 29 May, 2020.

The US commitment to the total withdrawal of its own troops and the troops of its allies and Coalition partners over the next 14 months is linked to two conditions: Taliban’s pledge to prevent Al Qaeda or any other group from using the Afghan soil for any terrorist activities against the US and its allies, and the initiation of intra-Afghan negotiations on 10 March, 2020. It remains to be seen how far and how fast the intra-Afghan negotiations for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government will make progress. In view of the mutual antagonism and mistrust between the various Afghan parties, the history of opposition between the US and the Taliban, and the overlapping interests of Afghanistan’s neighbours, the possibility of hiccups and serious obstacles on the path to a negotiated settlement cannot be ruled out.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s rejection of the proposed swap of the prisoners before the start of the intra-Afghan dialogue is an indicator of the difficulties that the peace process may encounter. The differences between President Ashraf Ghani and his arch rival Abdullah Abdullah may also complicate the peace negotiations. Some Afghans, especially those in urban areas, are extremely apprehensive about the retrogressive views of the Taliban on such issues as women’s rights and democracy. There may also be spoilers within Afghanistan and outside such as India which would try to derail the peace process for the sake of their own vested interests.

The various parties in the intra-Afghan dialogue would have to exhibit exemplary sagacity, maturity and flexibility to navigate skillfully through the choppy waters ahead for the peace process to have any chance of success. Thus, while a good beginning has been made with the signing of the US-Taliban agreement, the more difficult task of the successful completion of the intra-Afghan dialogue, the implementation of a permanent ceasefire and the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government still lies ahead. It is now incumbent on all peace loving countries to facilitate the early completion of this task. Pakistan-Iran coordination would be a must for this purpose.