[Afghan peace — Ice starts melting](https://nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2019/644817%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

Malik Muhammad Ashraf February 01, 2019 the nation

The six-day long parleys between Taliban and US special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad at Doha seem to have made some progress towards finding an amicable solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and an honourable exit from that country after 17 years of unsuccessful adventure launched in the wake of 9/11. Reportedly the parties have reached a consensus on withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan within the next 18 month, swapping of prisoners, lifting of ban on travel by the Taliban leaders and Taliban not allowing terrorist outfit to use Afghan soil for attacks against other countries. The earlier round of talks failed to produce any positive results and the process seemed to have been stalled due to the insistence of US on inclusion of the Afghan government in the discussions and refusal by the Taliban to accept the proposition.

However, Pakistan which had played a significant role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, through behind the scene efforts, consultations with the regional countries and discussions held with the US special representative was able to break the deadlock and pave the way for resumption of the dialogue. The result of the dialogue is very encouraging and one can safely draw the inference that the ice had starting melting. Both sides have expressed the resolve to continue the mutual interaction.

Khalilzad wrote on twitter “We will build on the momentum and resume talks shortly. We have a number of issues left to work out. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and everything must include an intra-Afghan dialogue ” The US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in the backdrop of the latest developments tweeted “ The US is serious about pursuing peace, preventing Afghanistan from continuing to be a space for international terrorism and bringing forces home.” That indicates a sea change in the US attitude and could prove helpful if it continues to act with the same spirit. One however cannot take an issue with the observation of Zalmay that the ultimate solution rested on intra-Afghan dialogue, meaning thereby the dialogue between Taliban and the Afghan government.

The Taliban may be refusing to talk to the Afghan government at the moment but they have indicated the possibility of talking to the Afghan government once a firm date for the withdrawal US troops is agreed between them and the USA. That also signifies flexibility in approach by the Taliban. In my article in this newspaper written in the backdrop of the failure of the earlier round of talks published on 11 January I had emphasised the acceptance of this reality by the Taliban as well and advised the US not to allow the talks to be derailed because of its insistence on the participation of the Afghan government in the dialogue at this stage. This is what I wrote “The reality is that peace in Afghanistan cannot be ensured without the participation of the Afghan government. The Afghan Taliban must realise that negotiating a peace deal warrants flexibility and give and take. Their rigidness in regards to non-inclusion of the Afghan government in peace talks is not going to help the cause of peace in Afghanistan. A historic opportunity has been created for settling the conflict in Afghanistan and it should not be wasted. The failure to capitalise on this opportunity will consign Afghanistan to perennial instability.”

“It is hoped that as a result of the diplomatic efforts going on behind the scene the Taliban would show the required flexibility to continue the peace process. However if they continue to insist on their demand, the process should not be allowed to be derailed. The inclusion of the Afghan government in the talks should not be made a pre-condition for restarting the parleys. The US must keep engaged with the Taliban and continue discussion on the possibilities for striking a peace deal. May be the Taliban agree to the proposition at a later stage when their reservations about the Afghan government are removed. The US which has greater stake in peace in Afghanistan and in ensuring honourable exit from that war-ravaged country needs to show more flexibility and appreciation of the ground realities. The circumstances were never as conducive to finding a solution to the Afghan conundrum as they are at present.”

Things have started happening as I had suggested characterised by firm commitment by both sides to take them to their logical end. In the process Pakistan has also been successful in establishing her credentials as an honest peace-broker proving wrong the US misgivings about the role that it has played in the fight against terrorism and promoting Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation in Afghanistan. The chill in relations between the two countries is also gradually being replaced with new enthusiasm and warmth as is evident from the desire of the US President Donald Trump to meet the Pakistani Prime Minister in the near future.

It is pertinent to point out that Pakistan has been doing what it has done with a firm belief and commitment that peace in Afghanistan was crucial to peace and progress in Pakistan and it was in her own interest to nudge the process of reconciliation in Afghanistan. It was not doing it for the US money a notion that US resident tried to rub in when he announced his policy on Afghanistan and Asia. The reality is that the US during the last sixteen years provided $ 33.4 billion to Pakistan under CSF and economic and military assistance whereas Pakistan suffered an estimated loss of $ 123.3 billion in the war against terror in addition to nearly 80,000 thousand lives of both the civilians and military personnel. Pakistan wants cordial relations the US even beyond Afghan settlement notwithstanding its increased focus on relations with the countries of the region with whom its security and economic prosperity is inextricably linked. The US has to accept the changing geo-political realities and allow the required space to countries like Pakistan to pursue their strategic interests in the region the way they perceive them.

While one can look with satisfaction to the developments taken so far in regards to resolving the Afghan conflict, it would be rather pre-mature to predict the way the things are going to move in the future. As they say there is many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip, both the parties will have to move cautiously due to the complexities involved with a spirit of accommodation and unruffled commitment to take the things to their logical end. The ultimate reality is that peace in Afghanistan is unimaginable without the involvement of the Afghan government at some stage along the way.

The writer is a freelance columnist.

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