[Endgame in Afghanistan – and the fears](https://nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2019/647049%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

Muhammad Tahir Iqbal February 14, 2019 the nation

In his book, “Fear: Trump in the White House”, Bob Woodward notes how Trump emphasised that “Afghanistan is a total disaster. We don’t know what we are doing. Let’s get out”. What later develops is the outcome of what Trump and his cohort plan accordingly.

To put the plans into appearance, Lindsey Graham, a Republican member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, landed in Islamabad some time ago so as to secure assistance in ending the Afghan war by managing to pull the Taliban for the meaningful dialogue.

Pakistan, in return, endeavoured to set the tables for the peace-talks between America and the Taliban. For this, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, the external affairs minister of Pakistan, visited the regional countries whose input matters when the things are settled in Afghanistan. Islamabad’s efforts were recognised by all sides as the peace-dialogue initiates between the US & Taliban’s representatives.

To acknowledge the efforts of Pakistan, Mohammad Umer Daudzai, an adviser to the Afghan president, reached Islamabad and hailed Pakistan’s moves as “positive change”.

Several sittings with Taliban were held in recent times, but last month’s meeting in Doha stood out as a rare achievement where both parties – the US and the Taliban – engaged in negotiations for six days, some sessions stretched as long as eight hours a day. This shows the resolve to reach some viable conclusion. Both parties gained some tangible developments in Doha to end the gory war that has so far taken thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo regarded the news from Doha as “encouraging”. Hamid Karzai, the former Afghanistan President said, “I see the resolve on the part of the Taliban...they are moving beyond the standard rhetoric, that they are not only engaging but seem committed to a political settlement.”

Doha talks reached a preliminary draft framework that seeks guarantee from the Taliban that the land of Afghanistan will never be used for transnational terrorist activities – an implied reference towards the 9/11 type of offensive on the US by the insurgents from Afghanistan – in return for the phased withdrawal of the 14000 American troops.

One factor is palpably perceptible this time – the seriousness in talks by the parties involved though there are misgivings. If any stake-holder feels aggrieved in the wake of recent developments, that would certainly be the president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani whose government has so far been kept aloof by the Taliban in all the meetings as they deem the former as merely a puppet regime of the US, so why not get engaged with the real masters.

As the tidings about the breakthrough came out, the doleful Ashraf Ghani appeared on the national TV and expressed his disquietude while hinting at the fate of Dr Najib who was given guarantees by the United Nations but later he was dragged from the UN compound in Afghanistan and hanged from a lamp-pool.

There are reasons to his concerns. First, his government has been kept out of the dialogue process. The Taliban just lately even engaged with senior Afghan politicians, including former President Hamid Karzai, at Moscow and held fruitful talks about the adoption of a new constitution, interim government and women rights, but rebuffed the idea of meeting Afghan officials.

Second, many hawks like former NDS head Ammrullah Saleh are not in favour of engaging in talks with the Taliban whom they deem as Pakistan’s sponsored.

Third, Ashraf Ghani’s government seems a tad skeptical about the moves of the US and expressed doubts over the likely deal which may compromise the concerns of Afghan government in Kabul. That was why, just on the heels of Doha talks, the American military commander, Gen. Austin S. Miller and ambassador John Bass met with Ashraf Ghani in a bid to mitigate his apprehensions.

Fourth, some similarities have been drawn by writers and analysts in attempts to corroborate how the hasty withdrawals of past resulted into the collapse of political facades. One such parallel was sketched in The New York Times where the writer traced out the similar lengthy sessions between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese leaders. The resultant American pullout in 1973 precipitated the collapse of South Vietnam just two years after.

Fifth, the president is in panic because of another draft agreement written by a former American diplomat, Laurel Miller. The copy of the agreement is much in circulation these days and thereby produces quite a fuss in official circles of Kabul. The draft attempts to visualise what the final terms with the Taliban can take shape. It talks of the likelihood of the formation of an interim government including members of the Taliban through some agreed-upon way. The interim government will then change the existing constitution which the Taliban currently regard as the copy of western culture, laws and norms; and also hold the elections presently scheduled in July. The vexed president infuriately spurns the idea.

Last, notwithstanding solemnity of intent by both parties, there still lurks fear – that Afghanistan can yet again relapse into a land for international terrorists after the drawdown of the potent American forces. This fear is jointly shared by Afghan officials, Americans and other stake holders like India. The fear emanates from the questions on Taliban’s commitment to the deal, and their capability to withstand the existence and growth of other terrorists’ designs and ideologies as there has been a strong claim about the presence of some twenty groups operating in Afghanistan.

As far as the matter of the credibility of Taliban’s commitment to the deal is concerned, Mr. Khalilzad, the US special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, feels satisfied in this context. “The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals”, said the confident diplomat who has been dealing with the Taliban in all the recent dialogue sessions.

Moreover, the Taliban have, over the years, matured their stature from the position of disengagement to engagement with state actors sending a sense of a serious player. Now they are talking about women’s rights, education and trade. Of late, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said that any future relations between the Taliban and the United States should be based on “sound diplomatic and economic principle”.

Now comes the question of the presence of other terrorist groups and then the Taliban’s strength to keep tabs on them. I think the claim is over-exaggerated. Noticeably, there are three prominent groups in Afghanistan: Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the recently emerged Islamic State in Khorasan Province. In last 17 years, the Taliban have emerged to maintain monopolised hegemony over other groups. That’s why when they announced cease-fire in June last, every group submitted to the decree. Al-Qaeda has almost vanished from Afghanistan partly because of America’s relentless operations, the group’s attention to Middle East and also non-cooperation from the Taliban.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province, a loose franchise of ISIS, came into existence in 2015. They are basically the rejected rebels from Afghan Taliban and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As IS Khorasan chapter appeared in eastern Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban took no time in attacking them. Now much of their capability stood blunted as a result of ferocious Taliban assaults.

Other terrorist groups are almost non-entities. Some are loosely built central Asian organisations afflicted and peeved mostly by their oppressive states rather than America or the West, while rest of the insurgent groups operate on a small scale and target minorities only. Still it can be said that there are two insurgent forces in Afghanistan: the Taliban and the ISKP – the latter having effete capacity to set international terrorist agenda.

Amidst negotiations for peace, the war on the turf continues. Strange! The US has ramped up air strikes and raids on the Taliban. The Taliban, too, retaliated with the deadliest attack on Afghan intelligence base in Wardak Province, killing dozens.

Negotiations and war cannot get along to achieve the desired peace. To secure the coveted peace, cease-fire ought to be the first option during talk-sessions. Policy of coercion through attacks will vitiate the hard-earned will for the amicable settlement. And the parties involved have seen in the last 17 years that muscle-power has led only to bloody mayhem. The Taliban seem serious and committed, the US wants withdrawal, and Pakistan is helping. Now it high time that hawks in Afghan government produced leniency in their tones, and the Taliban also got engaged with them – to devise an interim or neutral set-up, power-sharing formula, time-limit for withdrawal of foreign troops and finally the elections for the strife-free transfer of genuine power to the people of Afghanistan with least interference from regional and international players.

The writer is an educationist and historian.

 tahiriqbalstars@gmail.com

@TahirIqbal87