**[Peace in Afghanistan: A dream or reality?](https://nation.com.pk/03-Mar-2020/peace-in-afghanistan-a-dream-or-reality%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal - Martin Luther King, Jr It has been more than 18 years since the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan, and initiated Operation Enduring Freedom.

To this day, the war has cost more than 700 billion dollars resulted in the killing of hundreds and thousands. An entire generation of Afghans has grown up under the shadow of war and conflict. Rounds and rounds of dialogue have been held between the conflicting parties to achieve peace in Afghanistan, but they only added to the uncertainty. As the US Presidential reelection date drew near, there was a growing fear especially among the regional countries that the US may suddenly announce its unilateral withdrawal just like it did in Syria. As it would further plunge the entire region in a new wave of violence and bloodshed which the region cannot afford. This fear and perceptions were led to rest on 29th February, when the US signed a historic peace deal with the Taliban in Doha. The four-part accord was signed by the US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, whereas the Taliban delegation was headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The agreement ceremony was attended by the foreign ministers and other representatives from 50 countries. This deal provides a withdrawal to the US and foreign soldiers from Afghanistan over the course of next 14 months. It was also announced 10th March ‘as the date for an intra-Afghan dialogue with Ghani’s government’.

As per the newly signed deal, within 135 days the number of US troops in Afghanistan would be reduced from 13,000 to 8,600. Washington would work ‘with its allies to proportionally reduce the number of coalition forces in Afghanistan over that period if the Taliban adhere to their commitments.’ Taliban have also agreed to not use Afghan soil for launching attacks on other countries. The Doha agreement is significant because, for the first time in over 18 years, the two warring parties have agreed upon a conclusive peace deal. It also comes at a crucial time, right before the US Presidential elections which are set to take place this year. This peace agreement can prove to be beneficial for President Trump in his reelection bid because it would fulfil his promise of ending the Afghan conflict and bringing the US troops home, something which his republican and democratic predecessors have failed to achieve.

However, there are still many challenges in the way of achieving this peace deal. Iran, an important player in the Afghan conflict has already rejected this agreement. The biggest threat to the future of this deal comes from the Afghan government. Even though Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that he hoped “the US-Taliban peace [deal] will lead to a permanent ceasefire,” but just after a day of the accord, rejected the clause of prisoner swapping included in the agreement, stating that it was not the US’s place to decide for the government. It is no secret that there has been a constant power struggle within the Afghan administration. Last year, President Ghani fired his foreign ministry spokesman Sibghatullah Ahmadi for his welcome remarks over Pakistan’s talks with the Taliban. It is no secret that Ashraf Ghani and his allies will lose power if this agreement becomes successful. Perhaps, it is one of the reasons why Afghan ruling elite has been resisting and advocating against the peace talks. Apart from the Taliban, the US, and the Afghan government, the biggest stakeholder in this long-standing conflict has been Pakistan.

After Afghanistan, Pakistan has burnt the impact of this long-standing conflict the most. The country’s socioeconomic fabric has been significantly damaged owing to this prolonged dispute. Despite a plethora of challenges and limitations, no one can deny the constructive role played by Islamabad in the success of this agreement. On a number of occasions, President Trump and Ambassador Khalilzad along with others have applauded Pakistan’s contributions and positive role in not only bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table, but working towards establishing a long-lasting peace in its neighbourhood. It is important that Islamabad proceeds with caution. The state of Pakistan must ensure that its interests remain protected in whatever form of government eventually takes office in Kabul. As Islamabad has always maintained that peace in Pakistan can only be ensured if there is peace in Afghanistan, and the country firmly believes in the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliatory efforts.

Undoubtedly, the next 14 months are going to be crucial for the region. Will this peace deal stand the test of times? It is only hoped that both parties will adhere to the agreement, and ensure that peace is fully achieved. However, only time can tell about the durability of this peace deal. For the sake of Afghan people, their future, and this region - let us hope that peace finally comes to Afghanistan. The country and this region has seen enough bloodshed and destruction to last a lifetime.