**Will political factions in Afghanistan come to terms with each other?**

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In a society, devastated by decades of war, determining how power is to be distributed to strike a balance aimed at leading to sustainable peace is not an easy task. An understanding on peace should be a priority for Biden’s administration.

Agreement with Taliban alone to the exclusion of others will not lead to long term peace for Afghanistan. Excluding key stakeholders from the peace process and ignoring core issues underlying their differences can and will, lead to years of ongoing conflict and chaos should U.S decide to exit on a half-baked, uncooked recipe agreed upon with Taliban alone.

The tunnel vision agreement on table with only Taliban will fail to achieve the purpose for the simple reason that too few in Afghanistan support it. The process requires a more diverse inclusion of people from within Afghanistan including both Armed forces and members of civil society for a successful transition from a war-torn society to a nation working towards a peaceful society.

The present methodology chosen to address Afghanistan’s woes is aimed to achieving a ‘quick fix’. This methodology is a mirage. A thoughtful analysis is required of the Afghan matrix to achieve peace mission. If most players are awarded limited or no share in the division of power, there will be a negative cascading impact leading to internal warfare and disenchantment.

It is important to recognize the divisions between political cultures, variables dividing and connecting the various social groups. This is the basic springboard for achieving peace initiatives

If U.S looks at power structures that were successful in South Africa and Guatemala for example, it will clearly understand that mechanisms for public input can exist. Strategies must be part of the larger peace process that are aimed at diffusing ‘spoilers’. But focusing on only ‘spoilers’ to the exclusion of the moderates is self-defeating. On the other hand, leaving out these ‘spoilers’ surely mean an invitation to create violence destroying the process of peace. With their exclusion comes a more violent reaction, more attacks, and more killings as they understand this being the only way to draw attention to themselves for attaining a place in peace negotiations. This is exactly the strategy Taliban followed. Acts of violence committed has offered them greater leverage.

A major deterrent to the peace process in all these years, has been lack of understanding of what exactly peace between the Afghan state and the Taliban is supposed to look like on ground. In spite of years of struggling to achieve some kind of a working mechanism for peace initiatives to be put in place, there is a confusion as to how to go about putting agendas in place, how to manage talks and understanding with different segments of the society, also how to make all stakeholders willing to support the peace process. The process cannot be expected to be easy. For every one step forward two will be in reverse, mainly owing to the give and take process each stakeholder will have to go through in order to achieve the greater goal. U.S will have to be willing to play a broader based role than it’s so far played in achieving the desired exit from Afghanistan. Biden needs to anticipate the demands, often conflicting, between different factions of the Afghan society which is a part and parcel of such a mammoth task.

Biden may like to approach the question of Afghan peace with a two-pronged strategy. First is the temporary path of achieving a ‘peace agreement’ followed by ‘peace settlement’. Both can proceed simultaneously, but may create complications without first achieving certain benchmarks of peace agreement. Different kinds of talks dealing with different kinds of sections involved. Multiple agreements, agreeing upon the peace formation process, power sharing formula and transition process are needed. These agreements can be at national and sub-national level. ‘And while ‘settlement’ implies finality, any arrangement for power-sharing is never fixed but is continually being renegotiated and evolving.’ [Christine Bell (2015), ‘Political Settlements Research Programme, p.18]

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U.S and Taliban agreement in existence today, at best is a very superficial piece of paper. It is divested of to practical, measurable steps to achieve steps by Taliban to step away from acts of violence-the single point around which the agreement revolves, with exclusion of post-exit power sharing and peace implanting formulas. Some within the ranks of Taliban may continue as ‘spoilers’. Or affiliates. What methods does the core team of Taliban plans to follow for this not to happen?

Powerfully placed persons control the economy, profiting from corrupt practices. This includes law enforcement agencies. This can be a road block in achievement of peace initiatives. Opium trade is one example only. Reportedly, Afghan officials are directly involved in this competition for greater revenue with US army personnel sucked into supporting the government functionaries. “There are phases of government complicity, starting with accommodation of the farmers and then on to cooperation with them,” said David Mansfield, a researcher who conducted more than 15 years of fieldwork on Afghan opium. Many US allies in Afghanistan have been involved in drug trafficking. From this money, they draw power. Any policy directed against poppy production and subsequent drug trafficking would have inevitably lent a blow to American military operations on ground.

The tangled webs of corruption, self-serving interests need to be addressed to bring together a cohesive peace settlement, regardless of gender. These are what one can call ‘Principles of Peace’ that help identify grounds of commonality. Principles are the basic structure to build talks upon that leads to agreements. Principles will help lead the discussion towards a dignified transformation to a progressive Afghanistan.

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