**The US-Taliban historic deal — the day after**

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March 6, 2020

The Afghan Taliban in principle have agreed to join an “inclusive government” to be formed with consensus following the intra-Afghan talks scheduled to take place in Norway in the second week of March, officials familiar with the development said, a day after the historic agreement signed between the US and Taliban in Doha. The four-page deal has envisaged a timeframe for US troops withdrawal, release of prisoners, intra-Afghan talks and Taliban guarantees about not allowing Afghan soil to be used again by terrorist groups.

Unbeknown to many, the Taliban and the US have reached understanding on certain other vital issues, which were not made part of the agreement. One of the commitments given by Taliban during the year and half long negotiations with the US is that the insurgent group is ready to share power with other Afghan factions for an “all-inclusive government”.

This has led to expectations that in intra-Afghan negotiations, all of the Afghans when they sit down together are going to work out a new governing arrangement. US officials believe that they are trying to bring the Taliban off the battlefield into a political process. If that becomes successful, then there’ll be a new arrangement prior to five years. Taliban had long resisted agreeing to an all-inclusive government since they considered themselves as legitimate rulers. But the US along with Pakistan as well as other players successfully convinced them to join the inclusive government.

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The Afghan Taliban conveyed to the US that they would join the intra-Afghan dialogue only if President Ashraf Ghani dropped his government’s plan to start a fresh five-year term after the controversial presidential elections. It was because of this reason that Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad rushed to Kabul when just two days before the signing of US-Taliban deal, Ghani announced his inauguration. At the same time his rival Dr Abdullah Abdullah planned a separate oath taking ceremony since he contested Ghani’s victory and declared himself a winner. Diplomatic sources said that the US and other stakeholders were pushing Ghani to first wait for the outcome of intra-Afghan dialogue before starting his fresh tenure.

Some informed US officials, when asked what if President Ghani digs in his heels and insists on forming a fresh government regardless of the outcome of Oslo talks, the official responded that they believe that there is a lot of interest on the part of all Afghan stakeholders and the international community to encourage the Afghans to reach a mutually agreed outcome. Many believe that the success of US-Taliban deal clearly hinges on the outcome of intra-Afghan dialogue. The major challenge is not just to bring all Afghan players on the table but also to evolve consensus for the future of Afghanistan.

Besides the US, a number of other countries have chipped in and contributed to the peace process. They include Pakistan, Qatar, China and Russia. “Credit will go to the state of Pakistan and the military establishment because the current military establishment, led by Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has changed the wrong policies of the past establishment. Once upon a time Islamabad was fixated with Afghanistan providing “Strategic Depth” to Pakistan and was hell bent on installing only its allies in the corridors of power in Kabul. It was only when Pakistan put such behind that it was able to support the peace process. Without Islamabad’s nudge to the Taliban, they would not have smoked the peace pipe. Pakistan urged Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to show flexibility in his approach on the peace process and abide by the prisoner-swap clause mentioned in the US-Taliban agreement signed in Doha over the weekend.

The sad part is that barely had the ink on the agreement signed between the Taliban and the US gone dry, that a deadly blast rocked a football ground in Khost in eastern Afghanistan, where three brothers were killed. Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid informed media.

Pakistan has already warned the US that there are elements within Afghanistan and outside who may try to sabotage the peace process. The US however retaliated through airstrikes at Taliban targets in the Helmand region casting doubts at the nascent peace process.

Another impediment arose when within hours of the historic deal signed between US and Afghan Taliban in Doha, President Ghani told reporters in Kabul that his administration had given no commitment to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners.

Under the four-page deal, prisoner exchange is supposed to take place before the intra-Afghan dialogue scheduled for 10 March. But Ghani’s objection prompted Afghan Taliban to say that they would not join the intra-Afghan dialogue until the 5,000 prisoners are freed. It should be noted that the swap of prisoners was part of the deal signed by the Taliban and the United States. The move is supposed to be bilateral as the Taliban have agreed to release 1,000 Afghan Security personnel from their custody. The road ahead is expected to be bumpy but not unsurmountable.

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