**[Afghanistan: Light at the end of tunnel?](https://nation.com.pk/04-Feb-2020/afghanistan-light-at-the-end-of-tunnel%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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The Afghanistan peace process is at a critical stage. What happens in the next few weeks in the talks between the Taliban and the Americans will determine whether the country will once again witness durable peace and stability or whether it will continue to be the scene of continued fighting as it has been since 1979 when it was invaded by the Soviet forces. However, even if the Taliban and the Americans are able to reach an agreement, durable peace will be restored in Afghanistan only if and when the Taliban and the Afghan government also reach a peace settlement through an intra-Afghan dialogue. Obviously the dynamics of the two processes, that is, the Afghan-US talks and the intra-Afghan dialogue are vastly different though they are closely interlinked. Also one should not overlook the hurdles in their way. Therefore, despite some positive vibes coming from Doha, the success of the peace process in Afghanistan is far from assured.

Afghanistan has justifiably been called the graveyard of empires. The Soviets disregarded the lessons of history to their detriment by invading Afghanistan and occupying it in 1979. The Soviet military withdrawal in February 1989, after the Afghan jihad lasting for about ten years with the support of the Muslim World and the West, merely validated the folly of invading Afghanistan. It was with good reason that the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had earlier given the advice that the first rule of politics is “Don’t invade Afghanistan.” The 1990’s was mostly wasted in the internecine fighting among the various Afghan armed groups with Iran supporting the Northern Alliance and Pakistan putting its weight behind the Taliban who were overwhelmingly Pashtuns. The proxy war and the tussle for the domination of Afghanistan between Pakistan and Iran, who again were guilty of ignoring Afghanistan’s history, predictably resulted in a failure for both sides with the tragedy of 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan in October, 2001.

It was hoped that the US with the advice of its reputable scholars and think tanks would avoid repeating the mistakes of the Soviets, Pakistan and Iran in dealing with Afghanistan but unfortunately the hope remained illusory. The apparently easy victory of the US and overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan caused hubris in Washington which made it oblivious of the lessons of the Afghan history leading to the Afghan quagmire in which it has been bogged down for more than 18 years. The US has little to show in terms of its achievements in Afghanistan for the longest war in its history and the huge loss of hundreds of billions of dollars and the lives of thousands of its soldiers.

The US initially set very ambitious goals for its military engagement in Afghanistan. President Bush in a statement in April 2002 declared that the aims of the US invasion of Afghanistan were threefold: to defeat and dismantle Al Qaeda, to impose a government of Washington’s choice on the Afghan people in place of the Taliban government for having provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda, and to rebuild Afghanistan with a stable government and as “a better place in which to live.” Whereas the US was able to defeat Al Qaeda and impose a government of its choice in Kabul with relative ease, its goals to leave behind a stable Afghan government in conditions of peace and to rebuild Afghanistan as a “better place to live” have remained elusive because of the continuing Taliban insurgency and lack of economic progress in Afghanistan. The reasons for the American failure are not difficult to fathom.

The US strategy to achieve its goals in Afghanistan was found wanting on several counts. Perhaps the most fundamental error in the US strategy was to place reliance almost exclusively on its military might to achieve its goals in Afghanistan to the neglect of a political approach. It vastly underestimated the tenacity of the Taliban to fight back. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 diverted the US attention and military resources elsewhere providing the Taliban the room to regroup and pose a serious challenge to the American occupation and the political dispensation propped up by Washington in Afghanistan. A related error was to treat the Taliban as terrorists rather than a legitimate political group in Afghanistan, with admittedly extremist views, requiring political engagement. It was not until the beginning of 2011 that the US administration finally recognized, in an address by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the Asia Society, the necessity of a diplomatic route for a peace settlement in Afghanistan.

The Americans in the formulation of their strategy also failed to recognize that the tribal and ethnic loyalties outweighed national loyalties in Afghanistan. If Washington had taken cognizance of this reality, it would have realized that a government in Kabul from which the Pashtuns, constituting about half the population of Afghanistan, felt alienated would not be sustainable in the long run. It was a fact that most of the Taliban were Pashtuns whereas the Kabul government propped up by the Americans was dominated by elements of the Northern Alliance consisting of non-Pashtuns like Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. The Taliban resistance to the American occupation of Afghanistan and to the Kabul government gathered strength also because of Washington’s attempt to impose Western liberal values on the extremely religious and conservative Afghan society.

One would hope that the US, the Taliban, the Afghan government and other political groups in Afghanistan have drawn the right conclusions from their past experience. To begin with, a political settlement is an indispensable condition for durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Secondly, neither the Pashtuns/Taliban nor the non-Pashtuns alone can establish a stable government in a peaceful Afghanistan. So the intra-Afghan dialogue, whenever it starts, will have to evolve a generally acceptable power sharing formula among the major ethnic communities and political groups. Thirdly, US is in no position to impose its views about the formation of the future Afghan government. It can and should merely encourage the peace process in Afghanistan by nudging the Afghan parties and groups towards the negotiating table.

Fourthly, a peace settlement in Afghanistan must be accompanied by the US military withdrawal from the country as there would be no justification for the continued American military presence once a peace settlement is arrived at and guarantees are given for not allowing any terrorist groups to operate from the Afghan territory. Fifthly, the experience of the 1990’s dictates that the peace settlement in Afghanistan must enjoy the support of its neighbours especially Pakistan and Iran, besides securing the blessings of major powers including US, Russia and China. A peace settlement which militates against the vital strategic interests of either Pakistan or Iran would not be viable in the long run. Finally, it goes without saying that both Iran and Pakistan should avoid repeating their mistakes of 1990’s in dealing with Afghanistan.

It is now for the Taliban and the US representatives to work out the modalities and the timing for the US military withdrawal, commencement of a ceasefire, and the initiation of an intra-Afghan dialogue within the parameters given above. Pakistan must continue to extend its full support to the dialogue process. However, one should not minimize the obstacles in the way of a generally acceptable peaceful settlement because of the history of mutual grievances and the mistrust amongst the interlocutors and the proclivity of the Afghan protagonists to reach for the gun instead of entering into a dialogue.