**Afghanistan Peace Agreement: the need to convert uncertainty to opportunity**

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On Saturday, February 29, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement between the two entities in Afghanistan. This agreement presents the potential opportunity to end the longest war in U.S. history.

There is much uncertainty, however, as to whether it will be consummated. There is no uncertainty, on the other hand, that Pakistan played a role in helping to get to this point and could make a contribution to converting this opportunity into a reality. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was in Doha at the signing ceremony for the agreement and was reportedly involved in many important meetings between the Taliban and the U.S. during the negotiations.

According to peace agreement, the US will withdraw its 13,000+ troops in phases over a span of 14 months. The deal bars the Taliban allowing any extremist group to work against the US and its allies worldwide. And, it calls for beginning a comprehensive intra-Afghan dialogue in the week of March 9.Unfortunately, within a few days after the “deal to make a deal” was signed, there were incidents that cast a shadow upon it prospects for success. The first was a denial of the unconditional release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, as promised in the US-Taliban deal, by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. “There is no commitment to release the Taliban prisoners,” he said. “It was requested, it can be included in the negotiation and it can be a part of the agenda of the negotiation, but it can’t be a precondition. It is not a matter of good faith.”Under the agreement, the Taliban would have to release 1000 Afghan security personnel in exchange for the return of their fighters.

This was followed by second snag inthe peace process. That was theTaliban partially ending their truce by carrying out around 33 operations against Afghan security forces, killingat least 6 personnel.

The third setback was around of violence by the Talibanon March 4 reportedly killing 28 Afghan security personnel. The U.S. responded to this with airstrikes on Taliban fighters.

As these negative events unfolded, US president Donald Trump made a callto senior Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar. After their telephonic dialogue, Trump said he had a “very good” relationship with Baradarand they were both interested in “getting this ended.” Given this context, the question becomes, how will this end – with an agreement which benefits all and a sustainable peace in the region; with a superficial agreement that is done just to make a deal; or, with no agreement at all? I firmly believe thatno individual concerned with seeing a positive future for the people of Afghanistan and this region would like this end with no agreement or a superficial one. What would be required for bringing this to a meaningful and positive conclusion?

In my opinion, it starts with realizing that this the window for a new beginning. As Missy Ryan wrote recently in the Washington Post:

“This is the first moment in almost 20 years of conflict involving the United States that there’s a real chance that there could be a political resolution or a peaceful settlement to the war. It’s important to recognize the significance of this moment even if it doesn’t pan out in a real end of the fighting.”

Realizing this, the next requirement is to ensure : the participation of the U.S. is substantively and not politically motivated; Pakistan and other interested states playing roles in bringing about and maintaining asolid settlement; the Afghan government in collaboration with the Taliban putting the proper framework in place to create and to sustain the peace process.

That agreement can be achieved, however, if the affected stakeholders have the authentic intention and an enduring commitment to end the violence that has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the devastation of a country since 2001

President Trump campaigned in 2016 promising to terminate U.S. participation in “endless wars.” Many experts question whether the Afghanistan deal as currently proposed is a good one (Some have labeled it a “big win for the Taliban”.) or simply a tactic to deliver on that promise as part of his 2020 re-election campaign.

It cannot and must not be that if it isto produce the right solution for this situation rather than one that is delivered for political interests and immediacy. That solution would include making a major commitment to rebuilding this war-torn nation in areas such as infrastructure, education, healthcare, etc.

As noted, Pakistan has been involved in bringing about the Afghanistan peace agreement. It should stay involved but as a neutral force and not an advocate for the Taliban’s position or the supremacy of the Taliban at the end of the process.

In doing this, Pakistan should adhere to the words of Foreign Minister Qureshi who has said, “Pakistan is not a party to the issues between the US and Afghanistan. Our role is that of a facilitator. These decisions have to be made by Afghanistan, as is their right.”In addition to Pakistan, as this moves forward, it would be extremely helpful for other interested countries such as Indonesia, Qatar and China to weigh in, provide resources and to help bring order to this war-ravaged country.

Finally, the Afghanistan government must be involved and instrumental in formulating a final and acceptable peace agreement. They had no role to play in shaping the parameters for or content of the agreement that was put forward on February 29. That was a mistake.

The Afghan government and the Taliban need to frame out a mechanism, soon after they commence peace talks, to minimize any conflicts that would end the cease fire. And for the long term they need toreconcile their different ideologies and models of governance for thecountry and find the means to moveahead that are mutually acceptable.

In conclusion, there are countless details that will need to be worked out to create a sustainable peace agreement. That agreement can be achieved, however, if the affected stakeholders have the authentic intention and an enduring commitment to end the violence that has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the devastation of a country since 2001. Those traits will ensure that Afghanistan peace agreement is converted from one of uncertainty to one of opportunity for sustainable peace, stability and progress in Afghanistan.

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