**Prospective Afghanistan peace plan**

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US officials and [Taliban](https://dailytimes.com.pk/374309/qatar-convinces-taliban-to-meet-afghan-govt-representatives/) representatives have signed on Saturday 29th February 2020 an agreement after months of negotiations in Qatar’s capital Doha that is aimed at ending the United States’ longest war surpassing horrors of Vietnam, fought in Afghanistan since 2001. The said agreement, signed in Doha in the presence of leaders from Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, will pave the way for the US to gradually withdraw its troops. The two sides have long squabbled over the US demand for a ceasefire before the signing of the agreement, which has four points: a timeline of 14 months for the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan; a Taliban guarantee that Afghan soil will not be used as a launch pad that would threaten the security of the US; the initiation of intra-Afghan negotiations by 10th March; and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. The talks were launched in 2018 as part of a push by US President Donald Trump’s administration to strike a deal with the Taliban, which has been fighting the US-led forces in Afghanistan since it was toppled from power in 2001.

In a statement, the Taliban said it had reached an agreement “about the termination of occupation of Afghanistan”. “The accord about the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan and never intervening in its affairs in the future is undoubtedly a great achievement,” it added. For his part, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on the Taliban to honour their commitments. “I know there will be a temptation to declare victory, but victory for Afghans will only be achieved when they can live in peace and prosper,” he said at the Doha. Minutes before the agreement was signed, a joint statement released by the US and the Afghan government said the US and NATO troops would withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months. About 14,000 US troops and approximately 17,000 troops from 39 NATO allies and partner countries are stationed in Afghanistan in a non-combatant role. “The United States will reduce the number of US military forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 and implement other commitments in the US-Taliban agreement within 135 days of the announcement of this joint declaration and the US-Taliban agreement,” the joint statement said. It added that the Afghan government would engage with the United Nations Security Council “to remove Taliban members from sanctions list by May 29”.

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The Afghan people from different segment of society have however expressed a mix of hope and fear about the peace agreement keeping in view the many twists and turns that it will have to encounter to finally see peace in Afghanistan. The hope is that some kind of lasting peace can be reached. The fear is that the most difficult work lies ahead, and that the Taliban will be emboldened by the American withdrawal announcement to challenge a bitterly divided government in Kabul. “No agreement is perfect, and the US-Taliban deal is no exception,” said Robert Malley, president and CEO of the International Crisis Group. “But it represents the most hopeful step to end a war that has lasted two decades and taken countless American and especially Afghan lives. It ought to be celebrated, bolstered and built upon to reach a genuine intra-Afghan peace.” Trump has long expressed eagerness to bring US soldiers home and to end the country’s longest war as he seeks re-election in 2020. More than 100,000 Afghans have been killed or wounded since 2009 when the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan began documenting casualties. At the height of the war, more than 100,000 American troops occupied Afghanistan, as did tens of thousands from about 40 nations in the United States-led NATO coalition.

After more than a year of talks, the agreement lays out the beginning of the end of the United States’ longest war. But many obstacles remain. More than 1,200 miles away during the signing, another senior American official, Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper, was with Afghan officials in Kabul to ease the Afghan government’s concerns. Joined by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, they issued a declaration asserting the United States’ commitment to helping sustain the Afghan military. Mr. Esper emphasized that if the Taliban violated pledges, “the United States would not hesitate to nullify the agreement.” The deal’s conditional schedule for the withdrawal of the remaining American troops specifies that in the first phase, nearly 5,000 are to leave Afghanistan in 135 days. The withdrawal of the rest, to be completed within 14 months of the signing, will depend on the Taliban keeping its end of the bargain. The United States also committed to seek the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, held by the Afghan government, and 1,000 members of government security forces from the Taliban side by March 10 – less than two weeks away – before the Afghan and Taliban sides are expected to start direct negotiations; and that is where lies the rub as intra-Afghan dialogue is mined with enumerable explosive issues. With the signing of the deal, the U.S. and Taliban sides clearly stated their commitment to not attack each other. Just how much the Taliban will hold fire on Afghan security forces before a cease-fire is reached in Afghan negotiations remains a point of uncertainty and worry. In recent years, the brunt of fighting has been borne by Afghan soldiers and police officers, many of them American-trained. But even some of them came to see U.S. troops as invaders, turning their guns on their American and NATO partners. More than 150 American and NATO troops have been killed in such “green-on-blue” attacks, including two American service members gunned down this month. All told, the cost of nearly 18 years of war in Afghanistan will amount to more than $2 trillion. Was the money well spent? There is little to show for it. The Taliban now controls or holds influence over more Afghan territory than at any point since 2001 and has carried out near-daily attacks against military outposts throughout the country. Afghanistan remains one of the world’s largest sources of refugees and migrants. More than 2,400 American soldiers and more than 38,000 Afghan civilians have died.

While Pakistan is fully justified to take pride in prevalence of its position on Afghanistan i.e. peaces through all inclusive dialogue duly supported by all regional and extra regional stake- holders and feel satisfied; yet, there are numerous reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the envisaged peace plan’s end state. One needs to remember U.S. General Mac Crystal’s famous slide showing full spectrum players and factors impacting peace in Afghanistan. The competing interests of three big global players especially with respect to the domination of global commons and respective spheres of influence, concerns of regional countries and their operational proxies in Afghanistan, presence of global terrorists networks and mercenaries, spoiling efforts by India to continue to subject Pakistan to multi-squeeze using Afghan soil, crude power play of a tribal society polarized for centuries on ethnic lines, warlordism, smuggling and by drugs barons and above all political elite preferring self above state and people’s interest are only a few quote to avoid over-skepticism. And above all, retention of ultra strong five military bases in Afghanistan that can serve as a springboard for future military operations by USA in the region after presidential fever is over by the end this year is hard to make bigger players or even Iran blink. Hence the path forward is full of convoluted challenges and euphoria thus may be short lived. Pakistan therefore needs to tread with extreme prudence.

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