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**Cracks in the deal**

While commenting on the news regarding a prospective peace deal between the US and Taliban, I had on February 26 termed the development a positive outcome of the protracted dialogue between the two, maintaining that it had surely raised the hope of peace in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

I had, however, also cautioned that: “Reaching agreements on resolving conflicts, as is evident by history, does not necessarily guarantee peaceful end to them. Agreements are only the first step in that direction. The most important aspect is the implementation of the agreement”. The developments after the signing of the agreement confirm that assertion.

Regrettably, the ink of the agreement signed between US and Taliban had hardly dried when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made a mind-boggling statement that the Afghan government had made no commitment to free Taliban prisoners as included in the US-Taliban deal, but that it could however be discussed in the ensuing intra-Afghan talks. Reacting to this contention, the Taliban took the position that they would not engage in dialogue with the Afghan government as per agreement unless the Afghan government honoured the commitment given by the US in the signed deal.

The stalemate on the issue has spurred a string of attacks on the Afghan security forces by the Taliban in which 20 Afghan soldiers and policemen are reported to have been killed. This happened shortly after US President Donald Trump stated that he had a very good chat with the political chief of the Taliban.

The US also launched an airstrike against the Taliban, which according to a tweet by the spokesman of the US forces targeted the Taliban fighters attacking Afghan forces checkpoint in the Helmand province. Although the US has tried to downplay these occurrences by maintaining that the Taliban are sticking to the agreement and the peace accord has not been threatened, many analysts fear that the emerging situation has surely cast a pall of gloom on the prospects of the deal being implemented as easily as envisaged.

The refusal regarding prisoners swap by the Afghan president is really very perplexing in view of the fact that Zalmay Khalilzad who was negotiating the deal with the Taliban met several times with the Afghan president during the talks process with the purpose of taking him into confidence on the progress of the talks. He also met him before he went to Doha to sign the deal.

The US could not have included the clause regarding exchange of prisoners without obtaining the consent of the Afghan president. If they did not then it was a grave mistake on their part to take things for granted. And if President Ghani has backtracked after agreeing with the US for inclusion of that clause in the agreement, then he has played the role of spoiler which can have very severe repercussions and even scuttle the progress made so far to extricate Afghanistan out of the decades old conflict it has suffered.

President Ghani made yet another untenable statement while addressing a gathering in the Nangarhar province asking the Taliban to break ties with Pakistan if they wanted the release of their prisoners. He reportedly said that “If the Taliban have set release of their prisoners as a condition for intra-Afghan dialogue talks, we also have conditions; they should tell me when they are going to break ties with Pakistan”.

It is pertinent to point out that on the day when the US and Taliban signed the deal he also inked an agreement with the US in Kabul. Speaking on the occasion, among other things he also appreciated Pakistan for its facilitating role that culminated in the US-Taliban deal. Taking a somersault on that only a day after the signing of the agreement is absolutely untenable.

He probably does not understand that Pakistan’s role was not only crucial in facilitating the US-Taliban talks but was also indispensable for promoting the intra-Afghan dialogue. The situation makes it incumbent upon the US to launch damage-control efforts so as to salvage the deal by engaging with the Afghan government to iron out the kinks that are threatening the progress in the peace process.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbours and their political, economic and security interests are inextricably linked. There is no way this geographical reality can be changed. In this regard, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was right on the money when referring to the statements of Afghan leaders during his discourse in the Senate. He said that Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbours and cannot remain indifferent to one another, and that the peace and stability of either side is of mutual benefit and interest. He also made it clear that Pakistan was never a part of the deal and its role always has been and will always be of facilitator and not guarantor and that Kabul should have no concern about it.

It is an irrefutable reality that Pakistan has made sincere and relentless efforts to facilitate the dialogue between the US and Taliban, and without the country’s efforts the signing of the deal between them could not have been possible. The deal has provided a springboard for achieving a perennial peace in Afghan through successful intra-Afghan dialogue. It has created a historic opportunity for the Afghan government and the Taliban to end the conflict and they owe it to the Afghan people to provide them a peaceful environment and make collective efforts to rebuild the country that has seen unparalleled death and destruction over the four decades, which has also affected neighbouring countries in varying degrees.

Firming up a consensus on the future of Afghanistan through intra-Afghan dialogue is a test of the ability of the Afghan leaders to rise to the occasion and orchestrate a way forward. Whether they will be able to grab this opportunity will depend on removal of mutual mistrust and willingness to work together casting off the past hangovers. No doubt it will be an arduous undertaking but given the will nothing is impossible.

President Trump has given a commitment to the American people to pull out of Afghanistan and the fulfilment of that promise could be crucial to his chances of re-election. He seems committed to doing that and allowing the Afghan leaders to sort things out between themselves. The Afghan leaders must not forget that he has also hinted on different occasions to affect the pull-out from Afghanistan with or without a deal. Now that a deal has been struck between the US and the Taliban it is incumbent upon the Afghan leaders to take the process to its logical end, failing which the country could fall once again into never-ending turmoil.

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