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**Afghanistan challenges**

The Afghan Taliban and the Americans reached an agreement on February 29, 2020 in Doha. According to this agreement, the foreign forces were to leave Afghanistan within 14 months (before May 2021) of signing of the agreement. The Americans' second promise was that they would release 5000 Taliban prisoners and their names would be removed from the black list kept by the UN.

US Special Representative on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad made these promises on three premises. First was that the Taliban would bring down violence. Second, that the Taliban would sever contacts with Al-Qaeda and other such organizations and would not allow them to use Afghan territory. The third premise was that during these 14 months a broad-based government would be installed after an intra-Afghan dialogue. But what happened at the practical level?

The promise of release of Taliban prisoners was fulfilled. But violence came down only to the extent that the Taliban stopped attacking Americans and Americans stopped attacking the Taliban and yet intra-Afghan violence has continued and is still continuing. The intra-Afghan dialogue, which was supposed to start a few days after the Taliban-American agreement, took months to commence.

And in these talks the two sides only agreed on an agenda for talks after lengthy negotiations protracted over months. And there is no chance that the two Afghan sides would agree on some kind of setup in the next four months that are remaining before the deadline.

The Taliban’s position is that control of government should be handed over to them and their Islamic Emirate should be restored. All the elements now residing in Kabul should become part of their Emirate. On the other hand, the Afghan government’s position is that their government is a legitimate and constitutional government and all of the Taliban should become part of their government. Obviously, neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban would agree to each other’s position. So it doesn’t seem likely that there would be an understanding on the future political setup in the remaining four months before the deadline.

Americans are now in a fix: if Washington withdraws its forces from Afghanistan according to its promise and leaves Afghanistan in such a state of political chaos then everybody would accuse it of fleeing from Afghanistan just like the Soviet Union. Similarly, the US will also be held responsible for all the destruction that will ensue from this chaos and anarchy.

The Doha agreement has raised the morale of the Afghan Taliban. And as a result of the prisoners’ release, thousands of experienced fighters have joined their ranks as victors. After the American withdrawal there is a possibility that the Taliban and the Ashraf Ghani government etc would repeat the past in Afghanistan.

Another possible scenario is that the Biden Administration could rescind its agreement with the Taliban. Even in that case Washington would face humiliation – primarily because the agreement was endorsed by influential regional countries like Russia, China and Pakistan. The UN also endorsed the agreement.

It would not be possible for Biden to redeploy forces in Afghanistan in large numbers. Therefore, the only option available to the US is that they compel the two Afghan sides to reach an agreement in the remaining four months. For this they are putting all the pressure on Pakistan.

Now Americans are floating the idea of a coalition government consisting of the Taliban and all other political elements based in Kabul. They are not openly talking about it. But a message is being sent to all and sundry that they should pave the way for an interim government based on a coalition of all Afghan groups.

In Kabul, everybody like former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbaddin Hekmatyar and all those groups which are not part of the government are supportive of the idea of a transitional setup. But Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is deadly opposed to the idea, so much so that he refused to meet Zalmay Khalilzad during his last visit to Kabul.

On the one hand, Americans are pressurizing Pakistan to convince the Taliban to agree on a ceasefire and to support an interim government consisting of all Afghan groups. But on the other hand, Ghani has requested the Pakistan government that it should convince the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire and become part of his government in Kabul.

A few days back, a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Baradar was invited to Islamabad for talks with Pakistani leaders. But the Taliban are neither ready to become part of Ashraf Ghani’s government nor willing to join the interim government with terms presented by the US. They also think that laying down arms before the Afghan conflict is resolved according to their wishes would be tantamount to the death of their movement.

Pakistan cannot pressurize the Taliban beyond a certain point as now the Taliban have succeeded in securing the support of important regional countries including Russia, China and Iran. Besides, the Taliban were facing a practical problem as all the elements in their movement are not on the same page. For example, the negotiating team in Qatar has been complaining that the field commanders are not following their promises which they made in Doha – a factor which is weakening their negotiating position at the international level. The negotiating team has also complained that in the talks with the Americans they had promised that there would be a reduction in violence but the field commanders increased violence in their areas.

The irony of the situation is that Pakistan is unable to put pressure on the Taliban leadership more than what is absolutely essential as in the present situation antagonizing the Taliban leadership would be just like committing suicide.

In the event Afghanistan heads towards anarchy and chaos, it would be Pakistan that would be most affected. This is only one challenge Pakistan is facing at the present. Pakistan at present is also facing foreign policy challenges from the Indian front and from the Middle East. But it seems that the Pakistan government is completely oblivious to these challenges. The government is busy hitting its domestic opponents hard and this is a situation that is leading the country towards chaos.

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