**Peace from broken pieces**

Last week, the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan endorsed efforts to hold direct peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This is, indeed, an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed. Even the UN secretary-general emphasised that “to be lasting, peace must be based on a broad political consensus involving all of society”.

The conference, which was held at the midpoint of Afghanistan’s Transformation Decade (2015-2024), was attended by 61 countries. It aimed to help rebuild the war-torn country. The joint declaration demanded effective preparation for and maximum participation in the 2019 presidential elections in the country.

To ensure this, efforts are being made to bring the Afghan government and the Taliban to the negotiating table. While it is likely that efforts in this regard will bear fruit before April, it seems unlikely that they will be able to resolve all issues. Therefore, it will be unwise to derail the democratic process for these talks as it may embolden the Taliban. They may unleash another wave of terror to widen their influence. This will add to their self-absorption and, consequently, their demands.

The question is: what will the US put on the table for the Taliban if these elections are to be held as scheduled? Parliamentary elections have already taken place and the Taliban have lost another opportunity to show representation in over 50 percent of the land that they claim is under their influence. They still harbour illusions that time is on their side. What’s more, international efforts to form an inclusive government have increased their vanity.

The US can afford delaying tactics in this regard for another decade. But Russia and China are getting weary of the stalemate. The deadlock is adding to the sheer frustration and the Moscow format stands witness to this. By bringing the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan Peace Council to the negotiating table, Moscow has outclassed Washington in terms of diplomatic moves.

As expected, many Taliban representatives used the platform to vent their anger against the US, alleging that the US had used chemical weapons in Afghanistan. In the same breath, they lauded Russia’s role in facilitating the peace initiative. They believe that of the $1.5 trillion drained on the Afghan war, the US has only spent a fraction on reconstruction while the Soviets had at least developed infrastructure to some extent.

Taking advantage of the presence of regional countries, the Taliban also highlighted their own wish list. Their delegation termed occupation as the mother of all miseries and simultaneously left the door open for negotiations on the modalities and timeframe. They also softened their approach in other areas. The Taliban advocated the need to incorporate Afghan values into the constitution, and showed willingness to introduce “modern education” and women’s rights. But the Taliban didn’t speak about how they would like to be accommodated within the government.

In 2009, Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef had presented almost similar demands to scholar Barnett Rubin. Much to his dismay, that was the Obama era when former secretary of state Hillary Clinton was overpowered by the Pentagon and the CIA in these matters. Af-Pak Chief Richard Holbrooke, who advocated reconciliation with the Taliban, was jealously ditched by the White House for being too close to Clinton during her campaign. It is ironic that what Holbrooke sought many years ago from his own Democrat government was to be pursued by a Republican administration.

Although it is debatable how successful Trump will be in this endeavour, it is worth giving it a shot. There may already have been some low-level preliminary in-camera meetings in Doha, where the US helped established Taliban headquarters five years ago. But it is time to make top Taliban representatives meet the Afghan government, which they have repeatedly discredited.

It won’t be easy. The US has lost credibility, especially after it unilaterally pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal. As expected, the Taliban want solid guarantees about US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its peace plan. For this purpose, Washington is trying to meet their demands. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the founding members of the Taliban movement, has recently been released. Will Washington remove some of their top names from the sanctions list to get a nod for a prolonged ceasefire? Will the Taliban be allowed to set up formal offices in Afghanistan as a political force?

A great deal depends on how the US reconciles with different factions of the militant groups in Kabul and attempts to form an inclusive government. To reflect the aspirations of major communal and ethnic groups, Iraq was pressurised to adopt an improved version of the Lebanese constitution. Baghdad has a Kurdish president and Sunni and Shia Arab vice-presidents. The prime minister is a Shia Arab with two deputies – Kurdish and Sunni Arab.

Zalmay Khalilzad, who took it upon himself to help draft Iraq’s constitution, is now at the helm of Afghan affairs. Will Khalilzad coin an updated version of his idea on Afghanistan? Or will he consider the ground realities before making crucial decisions to reconcile Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks in the country?

Khalilzad is aware that tribal Afghanistan has yet to evolve. There are many ethnic groups in Afghan society. Yet, there is one thing that binds them: their willingness to resist imposed rulers or foreign ideas. Almost two decades of direct and indirect failed occupation in Afghanistan is a reminder of this fact. Another factor is the influence of regional countries on tribes and armed groups.

Over the last two decades, Pakistan and Iran were criticised for harbouring or supporting these militias. America has added China and Russia in that list too. The situation must be viewed in the regional context. Historically, most Afghan ethnic groups, other than the Pashtuns, had maintained strained relations with Pakistan. In light of this, is it realistic to ask Pakistan to twist the arms of the Pashtuns to subdue them before the US?

In 2001, former president General Musharraf wasn’t given an option to say no. So, he said yes. It is naive to accuse Islamabad for its alleged “lies and deceits”. If America has the right to talk to the Taliban to serve its national interests, the same applies to regional countries who have to live in the same neighbourhood.

This is why the carrot and stick approach to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table has failed and threats of detrimental consequences have backfired. The footprints of Daesh have made these bordering countries even more worrisome.

The way forward is to take regional players onboard. But even that won’t be a true service to Afghans who have tolerated one ruler after another in the hope of finding some semblance of normalcy. For them, it hardly matters whether the Afghan government and the Taliban make peace. All they want is a new political and social horizon.

To fulfil these hopes, the US must take the lead in helping Afghanistan prepare a constitution that pushes the country towards the 21st century and opens the door of opportunities for the people so they can live in peace, not in pieces.

The writer is a senior journalistassociated with Geo News.

Email: nasim.haider@geo.tv