**Post-withdrawal US-Taliban talks**

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On 23 November 2021, the State Department of the United States (US) announced through its spokesperson Ned Price that under the stewardship of Tom West, the new US Special Representative for Afghanistan, the US would send its delegation to Doha (Qatar) to spend two days on talks with the Taliban next week.

The last formal US-Taliban talks were held in Doha on 29 February 2021. Now after a hiatus of nine months, the US is ready to resume talks with the Taliban. As announced, top agenda items would be three: first, to ensure the safe passage of US citizens and certain Afghans from Afghanistan; second, to agree on ways to handle the impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan; and third, to seek reassurances from the Taliban not to outsource the country to the terrorists for turning Afghanistan into a launching pad for terrorism.

On the part of the US, the new strategy to deal with Afghanistan is interesting: avoid claiming a victory publicly, hand over power to the main adversary, and make the adversary do the lender’s bidding. Apparently, on 29 February 2021, the US made the Taliban its proxy, who would watch the US interests of counter-terrorism in Afghanistan. That is, the Taliban would rout out the al-Qaeda leftovers and subdue the Islamic State (ISIS) called the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K). By the way, the spawning of the al-Qaeda before 2001 and that of the ISIS-K after 2001 in Afghanistan means that the land of Afghanistan abides schism, whether in the name of ethnicity or religion. The Afghan land thrives on fractions proclaiming sovereign and sequestered enclaves. Decentralized and dissociative trends have become a norm in Afghanistan, no matter how much the drifts are incongruous with the age. In a way, on 29 February 2021, the US tasked the Taliban with centralizing their authority and running against the factious tendencies innate in Afghanistan. The Taliban have yet to deliver on the assigned onerous task.

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Currently, the fear swaying Afghanistan is that the Taliban government in Kabul may founder on the challenge of economic inadequacy. Two decades of occupation (from 2001 to 2021) have taught the US two lessons. First, Afghanistan is rife with rampant corruption, which is inescapable for government employees. In the two decades, the US drowned around $ 1 trillion of its economy in Afghanistan. Of the spent amount, the US spent $ 146 billion to reconstruct and rehabilitate Afghanistan. Further, the US disbursed $89 billion to train and equip Afghanistan’s National Security Forces, which melted away with munitions on 15 August 2021 in the face of the Taliban’s onslaught on Kabul.

Second, negotiating with the Taliban is a gruelling task. The US has learned it the hard way since 18 June 2013 when Qatar permitted the Taliban to open their office to let US-Taliban negotiations take place in Doha. The US now knows that the Taliban believe in holding rounds and rounds of protracted mutual consultations before they agree on a point. A pall of scepticism keeps hanging over the conclusion of the US-Taliban negotiations until the Taliban’s spokesperson surfaces at a press conference, later on, to proclaim the Taliban’s consent to the offered proposals. Further, the Taliban can easily end negotiations in nought. The US expects that this time the talks would also be time-consuming. Better spare two days.

The Taliban are excited at the prospects of the forthcoming talks. They consider themselves consummate negotiators, who adroitly defied their subaltern combatant position, thrashed out a winning deal, and snatched victory from the jaws of the US-NATO dominance. This time, the Taliban would be haughty. They might reckon the talks a new beginning, but the US might consider the talks an equivalent to just picking up the threads.

The priority of the Taliban is to get their government recognized internationally, and this is not possible without the US’ consent for it. The Taliban face diplomatic isolation, which no country of the region dares to breach. For regional neighbours, Afghanistan is still backwatering unless flagged by the US to embrace. The ascendance of the Taliban government was not a product of the efforts of regional countries but it was because of the willingness of the US and its allies to vacate Afghanistan.

The second priority of the Taliban is to get financial assets and assistance restored. The Taliban have been already asking the US to release their frozen $9.5 billion. For the time being, the Taliban have been demanding Afghan money, but their need is more than that. The Taliban have also come to grips with the reality that without financial help they cannot sustain control. A civil war might set in. The world has gone economic. If the Taliban become able to persuade the US to open the financial route of aid, other developed countries might think of rescuing the Taliban government financially. The dependence of the Taliban on external financial help is bound to be consequential. Nevertheless, it may not be the priority of the US to make the Taliban self-sufficient financially, but finance would offer the US requisite leverage over Afghanistan to achieve the much-touted objectives. The US may think of doling out Afghanistan the money just adequate to endure the throes of the cold weather, unless the Taliban start delivering on the Doha agreement of February 2021.

Afghanistan’s economy cannot survive by itself. It is now a foreign assistance based economy. Equally, it would be difficult for the US to see its investment to rebuild Afghanistan reels under the weight of Kabul’s bankruptcy. The US wants dialogue to continue but the US may like to offer assistance in the humanitarian domain only. Apparently, the US intends to squeeze the Taliban both diplomatically and financially to make them deliver on their promises: fighting terrorism, installing an inclusive government, respecting the rights of women folk and minorities, and providing equal access to all to education and employment. The Taliban are still dilly-dallying on this account.

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