



US-Taliban Peace Agreement: the need to prepare, set priorities and manage expectations

By Zubair Popalzai¹

After 14 months of wrangling over the US and Afghan government demand for a ceasefire before the final peace agreement is signed, the United States settled with a week-long Reduction in Violence (RIV) agreement with Taliban. The RIV agreement, effective across Afghanistan, was signed on Saturday 22 February.

The two sides then shook hands on 29 February on a peace deal which outlines the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and provides assurances that Afghanistan will not be used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies. The deal is also expected to pave the way for “intra-Afghan” talks with the goal of reaching a permanent ceasefire.

The peace deal, if successful, will bring the longest, and arguably the most unpopular, war in US history, over which President Donald Trump has been haranguing his top generals, to a conclusion more than 18 years after it was launched to topple the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks. This war has cost two trillion dollars, claimed the lives of 3500 US and coalition troops and 150,000 Afghans.

From ceasefire to reduction in violence

After a number of unsuccessful peace overtures, the Afghan government set ceasefire as one of the preconditions for talks with Taliban. Taliban, however, continued to ignore the government and, instead, pursued direct talks with the United States through their political office in Doha, Qatar, eventually concluding a RIV agreement with the American negotiating team led by the State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad.

RIV is not quite the ceasefire on which the Afghan government had been insisting, but it marked a major step toward the ultimate goal of permanent ceasefire, the path to which remains uncertain and unclear.

In addition to potential loss of control over Taliban fighters, one of the reasons why Taliban agreed to RIV and not to a complete cessation of violence is the fact that

¹ Zubair Popalzai, PhD, is a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS), Trustee at HealthProm and Consultant at BBC Monitoring



Taliban are only one, albeit most powerful, of the several militant groups in Afghanistan. Al-Qaidah, Lashkar-e Taibah, Jaish-e Muhammad, Lashkar-e Jhangvi, Tajik and Uzbek Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Chechen fighters and the Islamic State (IS), to name a few, are some of the other terrorist and militant groups operating in the country. Though responsible for most of the violence, Taliban do not have monopoly over violence in Afghanistan.

It is unknown, at least to the Afghan public, what RIV entailed and how it was implemented, but Taliban had reportedly pledged not to attack major military centres, large cities and highways during the week that the deal remained effective. Skirmishes were reported in the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Balkh, Kapisa and Samangan in southern and northern parts of Afghanistan during the first three days of the agreement. According to TOLONews, one of Afghanistan's premium news channels, "At least four members of public uprising forces and three civilians – including a woman – were killed in an attack by the Taliban on the public uprising forces outpost in Chahar Kint district in the northern Balkh province after midnight on Monday." However, no major security incidents were reported.

Monitoring Taliban operations through their joint coordination cells with US forces, the Afghan government expected at least an 80 per cent drop in Taliban attacks, which were estimated to range between 80 to 100 attacks per day until the start of the RIV agreement.

Peace agreement, the electoral dispute and prospects for successful intra-Afghan talks

Following the relatively successful implementation of the RIV phase, the United States and Taliban signed a peace agreement on 29 February. Under the agreement, the United States will start the phased withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan "...all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel..." will pull out of Afghanistan within fourteen months following the announcement of the agreement.

Although it is the second most important step toward peace in Afghanistan, the agreement is rife with ambiguity and could unravel if 1) either the United States or Taliban renege on their pledges, 2) the Afghan political elite fail to resolve their differences and place Afghanistan's interests above their personal and factional interests and, 3), if the so-called intra-Afghan talks fail.

The agreement is also silent on the role major powers and Afghanistan's important neighbours will play to ensure the success of future intra-Afghan talks and agreements. After all, the regional dimension of peace in Afghanistan is as important as the local and international dimension of this issue.



The Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan declared the incumbent Ashraf Ghani the winner of the 28 September presidential election, but his main rival, the National Unity Government Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah rejected the result crying fraud and treachery. He threatened to form an “inclusive government” of his own and has thus set Afghanistan for a political shutdown at a critical time.

This internal bickering faded in the background after the signing of the agreement and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s tacit message to Ghani and Abdullah to “be committed” and to “deliver for the Afghan people... who are thirsting for peace”. However, a source close to Abdullah told Radio Liberty on 2 March that, in a show of power as president-elect, Abdullah will soon appoint new governors in the provinces of Takhar, Faryab, Badakhshan and Daikundi. Meanwhile, Ghani is preparing for his inaugural ceremony as president soon.

Taliban have consistently refused to talk to the Afghan government. They have also denounced the most recent presidential election result. Taliban have been emphasising that they will talk with government representatives but only as ordinary Afghans. The peace agreement conspicuously excluded the Afghan government. The government was also sidelined in the US-Taliban negotiations. The Afghan government is a key party to the conflict with control over the entire apparatus of the state. It would be hard to imagine a smooth and desirable outcome if it feels left out or set to be displaced completely.

Ghani and Abdullah, both of whom consider themselves legitimate leaders of the people of Afghanistan with Ghani parading his most recent re-election as President, will interpret Taliban refusal to negotiate with the government as a direct threat to their power. In the absence of external, especially US, pressure they are unlikely to agree to negotiate and make peace on Taliban terms, citing the threat to the “Republic” and gains of the past 18 years as the reason. The issue of Taliban prisoner release has already triggered discontent and opposition within Afghan government circles.

As part of intra-Afghan talks, Taliban can hold talks with the Afghan groups and individuals that they have met before in Moscow and other places, but those groups and individuals lack the executive powers to meet Taliban demands. For example, they are not able to meet the Taliban demand for prisoner release. Ghani stated categorically in his most recent press conference that he has made no commitment to release Taliban prisoners. Prisoner release can be on the agenda for talks, but it cannot be a precondition to talks, he stressed. But, then, Ghani has retreated from his position under pressure before. For example, he changed his position on releasing a key member of the Haqqani network, Anas Haqqani, despite his initial opposition to the proposition. He also agreed to postpone his inauguration under US pressure. This shows that in the absence of appropriate mechanisms and oversight, significant hurdles will appear on the road to peace.



Political groups and actors outside the government are separately advancing their own agendas, which are different from those of the Ghani-led administration's agenda. They are also not necessarily aligned with the requirements of peace.

There are uncertainties about whether the government and other Afghan players, some of whom have bitterly fought against the Taliban in the past, would be willing to make compromises and concessions especially vis-à-vis the nature of the political order, the constitution, human's rights and other critical issues. Power-sharing has been anathema to the Taliban in the past.

The government delegation for talks with Taliban reportedly lacks the full backing of all Afghans political actors, something which has raised questions about whether the political class would be able to agree on a negotiating team and strategy. The delegation is in Doha to meet Taliban representatives, but Taliban have reportedly remained steadfast in their position that they would not meet government representatives. They have, therefore, refused to meet the delegation.

Simply put, Afghans are not ready for the highly important intra-Afghan talks, which must be held to finally usher in an era of peace after decades of war and suffering. The risks of these talks failing and Afghanistan descending into another episode of civil war is real, making it necessary for Afghans to unite on one platform and agree on their needs and priorities in the light of the lessons learnt from their own not very distant past.

US Military withdrawal and Taliban protestations

Taliban have been violently resisting US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan for over 18 years. They have been insisting, at least publicly, that all foreign troops pull out of Afghanistan. Commenting on the agreement with the United States, the spokesperson for Taliban political office in Doha, Suhail Shaheen, has written in Pashto language on his Twitter, "Based on the agreement with the US, all international forces will leave Afghanistan, the invasion will end and no one will be allowed to use Afghan soil against others."

The agreement lays out a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, but Trump has made it clear that "If bad things happen, we'll go back." Pompeo also warned in Doha that "The agreement will mean nothing – today's good feelings will not last – if we don't take concrete action on commitments stated and promises made."

There is, therefore, scepticism about whether the United States will pull out of Afghanistan completely. After all, Trump demanded payment and threatened Iraq with sanctions that made the sanctions imposed on Iran look "somewhat tame" when the Iraqi parliament called for the expulsion of US forces from that country following the assassination of Iran Revolutionary Guard Quds Force commander Maj. General



Qasim Suleimani near Baghdad airport on 3 January 2020. This is despite Trump's own declaration of victory against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria which means US forces are not essentially needed in those countries anymore.

There is also a lack of confidence among US circles about whether Taliban will truly decouple with al Qaida and other terror outfits. While long-term US combat presence in Afghanistan cannot be expected or envisioned, no US administration can tolerate a terror attack that originates from Afghanistan or can be attributed to Afghanistan.

Countering Iranian influence in Afghanistan, especially after recent US-Iran spat, is equally important to the United States. US intelligence assessments suggest that Quds Force has been providing training and weapons, including MANPADS, the portable shoulder-fired air defence systems, to Taliban.

Alleged Russian links with Taliban are another source of concern for both the United States and the Afghan government.

Despite Taliban protestations, the United States is, therefore, likely to seek to retain some degree of military presence in Afghanistan as a guarantee to protect its own interests.

It is not clear how this will bode with current Taliban demands and position. Despite the heavy US military presence, Taliban now control or hold influence over more Afghan territory than at any point since 2001. They have been carrying out near-daily attacks against military outposts throughout the country. Taliban strength was estimated at 200,000 men in 2016. The number of sympathisers and supporters is unknown, but is estimated to be a few hundred thousand people.

Taliban operate a complex intelligence system with dedicated checkpoints and provincial teams of around 20 strong tasked to hunt and execute government and US collaborators on the basis of Taliban's own priorities and available intelligence. They have significantly infiltrated the capital Kabul, especially its eastern, southern and western districts. Targeted killings and magnetic bombs under vehicles are the common tactics they employ.

The Haqqani networks aides Taliban in Kabul. The Haqqani network orchestrates complex attacks on foreign installations and government offices while other Taliban groups operating under Kabul military commission mainly target individuals working for or considered to be collaborating with government and foreign officials. Half of these groups, numbering around 1600 men, are in support roles of recruitment, logistics and intelligence among others. Government officials, police, army, intelligence officers, foreigners, interpreters, contractors of government, guest house staff, Afghans working with foreigners, and anybody else identified as inimical to Taliban are the main targets. Taliban are growing more experienced and confident in this field. Failed expectations can, therefore, mean a protracted war with greater levels of violence and bloodshed.



An opportunity with serious risks

Recent developments present a major opportunity, but the accompanying challenges and risks remain significant. The agenda for peace is not clear and the framework has not been established. Concerns about the actions and intentions of the parties involved, the potential failure of intra-Afghan talks, and issues regarding the preservation of Afghanistan gains are yet to be addressed.

For Trump, the signing of the peace agreement will be his first step toward meeting his 2016 campaign pledge to pull out US troops and end what he has described as the “loser war”, and thus strengthen his re-election bid. America’s accepting of relatively small concessions by the Taliban demonstrates a dawning sense of futility of the war forcing successive US administrations to seek a solution.

The US-Taliban agreement repeatedly emphasises on prevention of terrorist attacks on the United States and its allies, but it is not clear on what Taliban’s domestic policy on militant and terrorist outfits currently in Afghanistan would or should be. For example, the Haqqani network, designated a terrorist organisation by the United States, is integral to the Taliban movement with the network’s leader Sirajuddin Haqqani being the Taliban deputy leader and military commander.

For Afghans, the agreement presents an opportunity to end the conflict, move toward forming an inclusive and united government and restore sustainable peace. However, there is unease about post-presidential election political problems, absence of a single Afghan negotiating team and strategy acceptable to all, doubts that the United States will pull out all its troops and, most importantly, that Taliban and Afghan political elite will make considerable mutual concessions to reach a lasting agreement.

This unease is not unfounded. Afghanistan went through a similar experience in the late 80s when the former Soviet Union was preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan nine years after invading it in December 1979. The Mujahedin factions of that time refused to recognise pro-Soviet Union Dr Najibullah administration in Kabul as a legitimate government. After toppling the Kabul regime in 1992, they failed to honour the agreements they had reached with one another and the oaths that they had taken and plunged Afghanistan into a civil war that led to the emergence of the Taliban on the Afghan political horizon.

Today, Taliban denounce the current Afghan administration as a puppet regime that has been propped up by the United States and which contravenes Taliban ideals. Taliban may insist on a new constitution and a near, if not full, restoration of their Emirate with stringent Islamic laws. The current administration and political elite, however, are likely to push for the status quo and integration of Taliban into the current system. Both of these positions can lead to a standoff. Without the necessary preparation, which includes building confidence, bringing all actors on board and



setting realistic expectations, and the willingness to make compromise, there is a serious risk that Afghans will fail in their internal negotiations with potentially devastating consequences for the country and its people.

For a start, it is of critical importance to improve the current political situation in Afghanistan. The success of future intra-Afghan talks depends, to a large degree, on political clarity and cohesiveness of the Afghan government and politicians, who must overcome their differences, agree on a single agenda and prioritise peace and the interests of the people of Afghanistan above their own interests. Afghanistan's gains and future must trump pride and personal interests.

Intra-Afghan negotiations must be centred on a win-win situation for all parties involved. To be successful, they must not be driven by a sense of victory over the opponent. Taliban have shown a commitment to make peace with Washington. They must now do the same with their fellow Afghans. Taliban may feel victorious, but the real victory will come when Afghans live in peace and prosperity.

The armed forces of Afghanistan one of the gains of the past 18 years and must not be compromised under any circumstances. When the Mujahedin took control of Kabul in 1992, they disbanded the highly professional and well-equipped Afghan armed forces, a move that arguably continues to affect Afghanistan until today. Other key gains to preserve are the gains made in the education and training sector, communications, public health, human rights and representative democracy. The Taliban seem to have achieved, at least for now, their goal of pushing the Americans out, but they have remained vague in their commitments to protect the rights of the Afghan public. Afghanistan has come a long way since 2001 with an entirely new generation of Afghans who were born and grew up in the past two decades. Taliban will not be helping themselves by pushing for the same stringent laws that they enforced when they were in power. Insisting on the release of 5000 prisoners shortly after the agreement as a pre-condition for talks is also neither practical nor politically wise especially since Taliban have resumed their attacks on Afghan armed forces and refuse to hold talks with the government.

Khalilzad has been emphasising all along that the United States is not seeking an agreement that facilitates mere military withdrawal. The ambiguities in the agreement, however, raise as much fear as they inspire hope. Taliban sense of victory and ideological differences between Taliban and other Afghan parties, including and especially the government, point to a long and winding road ahead. The ultimate result will depend on continued US and international commitment to peace and democracy in Afghanistan. Without such commitment, Taliban will dominate the political and military scene with the nascent democracy faltering and pockets of armed resistance re-emerge in different parts of Afghanistan.