



Can US-Taliban Peace Talks End the War in Afghanistan?

Summary Report

Shabnam Nasimi | March 2020

About Conservative Friends of Afghanistan

Conservative Friends of Afghanistan (CFA) was founded in March 2019 as an organisation that seeks to build stronger links between the UK, Afghanistan and British Afghan diaspora. It recognises the successes and values of British Afghan diaspora and advocates closer relations between Afghanistan and Britain to the benefit of both nations.

Conservative Friends of Afghanistan is an organisation, registered in England and Wales (Community Interest Company Number 12216867)

CFA sets out to:

- Highlight and celebrate the past, present and future importance, success and contribution of the British Afghan community to Britain and its culture;
- Better engage with the British Afghan communities, listen to their views and concerns and advocate these within UK Parliament;
- Assist those from British Afghan communities to become more involved in voluntary and representative politics;
- Promote greater Indian inward investment to Britain to further our economy and future prosperity;
- Serve as a point of contact for the Conservative Party, for other interested organisations and individuals wanting to gain an insight into British Afghan communities and also Anglo-Afghan relations.

UK welcomes US-Taliban Peace Deal as a significant moment in the pursuit of peace in Afghanistan.

If that agreement holds, the people of Afghanistan must come together in the intra-Afghan dialogue phase to devise a political settlement - but it won't be easy.

Although the historic deal is an important achievement, it is but one step on a long, rocky road to peace, noted Tom Tugendhat, Member of Parliament for Tonbridge and Malling on February 25th at the Conservative Friends of Afghanistan panel discussion at the Houses of Parliament.

"It's really unclear what the international and United States response would be in any intra-Afghan dialogue, if the Taliban tries to undermine human rights and democracy in Afghanistan" said Emily Winterbotham, Director of Terrorism and Conflict Group and Senior Research Fellow at RUSI. "Ashraf Ghani does go into an intra-Afghan dialogue in a relatively weak position with a slim majority of votes and a contested election which had an extremely low turnout," she added.

How we got here

A year and a half ago the Trump administration took what could be called a bold but risky decision to begin direct and open discussion with the Taliban on how to end the insurgency and allow United States troops to come home. This was prompted by the recognition that by all sides there was no viable military solution to the war. The people of Afghanistan continue to suffer ever-greater civilian casualties - the need for peace is palpable.

Whatever path lies ahead, we know the way forward must provide lasting security and preserve the hard-won gains earned by the people of Afghanistan.

The United States signed a deal with the Taliban on 29th February 2020 that sets the stage to end America's longest war — the nearly two-decade-old conflict in Afghanistan that began after the Sept. 11 attacks, killed tens of thousands of people, vexed three White House administrations and left mistrust and uncertainty on all sides. The agreement lays out a timetable for the final withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan, the impoverished Central Asian country once unfamiliar to many Americans that now symbolizes endless conflict, foreign entanglements and an incubator of terrorist plots. But it is seen as a step toward negotiating a more sweeping agreement that some hope could eventually end the insurgency of the Taliban, the militant movement that once ruled Afghanistan under a severe Islamic code.

American efforts to instill a democratic system in the country, and to improve opportunities for women and minorities, are at risk if the Taliban, which banned girls from schools and women from public life, become dominant again. Corruption is still rampant, the country's institutions are feeble, and the economy is heavily dependent on American and other international aid.

The deal should be conditions based, stressed Shabnam Nasimi, Director of Conservative Friends of Afghanistan who moderated the discussion - "The Taliban have to be held accountable to manage their own and impose discipline." If reduction of violence continues post US-Taliban peace deal, then the intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement should begin; although it is currently speculated to begin 10 days after the signing of the agreement.

Naturally such an agreement raises all sorts of questions - what are the implications for Afghanistan's national security? - can the Taliban even be trusted to negotiate? - what will remain of Afghanistan's constitution, especially its protection of women's rights? - and based on the recent re-election of Ashraf Ghani and news we heard yesterday where the United States has asked Ashraf Ghani to defer his second-term inauguration over concerns it could inflame the election feud with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah - what are the implications of this on US-led peacemaking efforts?

The Real Challenge: Intra-Afghan Talks

The U.S.-Taliban deal opens the door to the complicated intra-Afghan negotiations process. "The hope is that the intra-Afghan dialogue is inclusive of the opposition, civil society, women and youth," said Christina Lamb, Britain's Leading Foreign Correspondent and Author. Ensuring intra-Afghan talks are inclusive of everyone in Afghanistan is seen as critical to not only achieving a sustainable peace, but to protecting the post-2001 gains Afghan society has made.

Afghan women have made clear that they are not willing to go back to the pre-2001 days and that their inclusion in the peace process is critical. Conservative Friends of Afghanistan is working to equip Afghan women who could be part of an intra-Afghan dialogue with the negotiation skills they would need in such talks. "When women are at the table, peace processes work better," said Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Former Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, responsible for Afghanistan.

Baroness Warsi also stressed that "the outside intervention in the end is never the one that secures lasting peace - in the end lasting peace will be found the Afghan way, where the Afghan people of all different backgrounds find a way to reconcile their differences".

But what the delegation for the intra-Afghan dialogue will look like is still up in the air.

Testing the Taliban's Sincerity

“The United States is on its way out and this does not ensure peace for the people of Afghanistan,” emphasised Nasimi. Whether the Taliban can live up to their commitments is still up for question. We are risk of raising the profile of the Taliban, and the kudos that we're giving them by effectively making them an equal partner with authority - “where does that effectively leave Afghanistan, especially if a US election happens and Trump wins, where does that leave the natural progression Afghanistan to govern itself as a healthy democracy?” stated Baroness Warsi.

It is of utmost importance that the international community does not leave Afghanistan alone, especially as the Taliban have resumed offensive attacks against Afghan forces over the last few days. Why would Afghanistan support the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners without a process, guarantees and a ceasefire? Many Afghans recall what happened to prisoners released during previous administrations - with many returning to the front lines to kill Afghans.

They will only [agree to] an acceptable peace if they're forced into it. What is likely to force them into it? A recognition that the United States and international community won't leave unless ... there is a sensible and sustainable agreement,” said Tom Tugendhat.

The whole structure of the peace process has to be based on testing premises and some of the premises to be tested are whether the view of the Taliban out of Doha is the accurate one,” said Nasimi.

The issue of peace before justice still worries many Afghanistan who have had to live under their terror for decades, emphasises Winterbotham - which was entrenched during the Bonn Agreement, and looks like it's being repeated. Issues of human rights, women's rights and justice should therefore never be forgotten.

Baroness Warsi said that the United States can use long-term assistance as a source of leverage over the Taliban. Afghanistan cannot survive without that assistance. So, the United States can condition it on the outcome of intra-Afghan talks, pressing the Taliban to ensure that whatever government emerges protects and promotes human rights.

Recommendations

As the second phase of a peace accord between the Taliban and Afghanistan's government is upon us, we are now in a crucial stage. This time, America's role would be secondary to that of Afghans on both sides of the conflict.

The general goals of phase two would reportedly include a complete, or at least nearly complete, U.S./NATO troop departure, as well as a real power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the government. This phase would also feature, naturally and necessarily, an end to the violence. This will be a daunting proposition at a time when Afghanistan's government, as well as the Taliban both, consider themselves in the driver's seat in terms of legitimacy and power — and when they have not found a way even to talk to each other yet.

The sentiment of British Afghan diaspora from the panel discussion that needs to be fed into appropriate channels are:

1. **Transparency:** Details of negotiations to be made available to all Afghans. The people of Afghanistan are unhappy about being ignored and everything happening behind closed doors between the US, Taliban and the Afghan government and nothing being disclosed to the people of Afghanistan.
2. **Stakeholders:** All stakeholders in Afghanistan to be part of the intra-Afghan dialogue. There is also additional anxiety that neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban represent the interests of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. There needs to be representation from Afghans globally in the intra-Afghan dialogue who have a vested interest in supporting the building of a new Afghanistan, post US withdrawal.
4. **US Forces:** Many foreign forces would not leave until a peace deal was reached and then implemented over a period of at least a couple years, allowing the foreign forces to remain in a strategic overwatch role. Making things even more complicated, when describing the second phase of a peace accord notionally, officials sometimes suggest that the U.S.-NATO departure would happen as soon as intra-Afghan talks get underway, not when they reach agreement and implementation. This would badly skew incentives for the Taliban.

5. **NATO:** The departure of NATO should be succeeded by an international UN peacekeeping force that, while not mandated to impose peace through force of arms, could help monitor an accord as a way of determining if the future government should continue to receive international aid as promised. Other foreign specialists working in areas of development would also have to be allowed sustained access to the country.
6. **Protection of Afghanistan's Democracy:** Not only human and gender and religious rights, but elections of some sort, together with protections for free speech must be part of any future Afghan political system. The Taliban should not be allowed simply to rule the country by force or to muzzle core elements of the new Afghan democracy.
7. **De-centralisation:** Beyond these central principles, the international community can and should be very flexible over matters like sharing of cabinet positions, revisions to the Afghan Constitution that would de-centralize power to the regions, and other matters where the Afghan negotiators might find ways to compromise.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has been at war for four decades and its people are ready for the conflict and violence to end. In 2019 alone, the civilian death rate was almost seven per day, the U.S. dropped more than 7,000 missiles and bombs and the Taliban and other insurgents carried out 25,000 attacks. The road ahead is fraught with a host of obstacles. While there is much work to be done, this interim U.S.-Taliban deal offers "a chance of a chance" at building a sustainable peace.

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About the author

Shabnam Nasimi is the Director of Conservative Friends of Afghanistan with ten years' experience of assessing political and security developments Afghanistan. She has worked in local government supporting the UK Home Office in the implementation of its counter-terrorism strategy, Prevent. She holds a Master's degree in International Peace and Security from the University of Birkbeck.



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