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Stalemate in Afghanistan Talks: Uncertainty Looms

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

While US–Taliban talks are stalemated before they even began, the Taliban are confident of victory inside Afghanistan. The US seeks to balance its residual force after 2014 with a peaceful withdrawal.

Commentary

THE DOHA talks proposed between the United States and Taliban on peaceful settlement in Afghanistan have become stalemated, possibly aborted, before the talks even begin. The impasse over a protocol issue: the name and flag of the Taliban political office, is a reflection of the larger conflict and reminder of the difficulties that lie ahead.

Reports from Washington indicate that President Barack Obama is considering a complete American withdrawal by end of 2014. While various parties to the conflict trade accusations of duplicity and bad faith, the world awaits in trepidation whether there will be a negotiated settlement to the decades old Afghan conflict.

Taliban's growing legitimacy

While the Taliban gained some international legitimacy with the announcement of American willingness to talk to them, the opening of the office and even if the negotiations ever begin, are unlikely to change the nature of war inside Afghanistan.

Doha symbolises several missed chances of ending the war earlier. During the 2005 Asian Security Conference (Shangri-la Dialogue) in Singapore, when General Jamshed Ayaz, President, Institute of Regional Studies in Islamabad suggested talking to the Taliban, he was met with ridicule. Similarly, in April 2007 Kurt Beck, the head of the German Social Democratic Party was scorned as 'clueless' by Chancellor Angela Merkel when he suggested talking to the Taliban.

At the Bonn Conference in December 2011, President Hamid Karzai scuttled the imminent announcement of Taliban-US talks. The US, which first accepted talking to the "good Taliban", is now compelled to negotiate with their nemesis. The costs of this delay are enormous.

Despite claims to the contrary a study released by the Bundeswehr – Germany's military, at the end of May reports that the number of attacks on troops and civilians saw a year-on-year jump of some 25 percent in 2012. The victories and the West's weariness of the war have made Taliban more confident that they can finally win

the battle of wits against the foreign forces mainly represented by the US.

The US-led plan of more than doubling the size of Afghan forces to 352, 000 quickly has resulted in poor selection, severe loss of training quality leading to battlefield defeats when facing the motivated and hardened Taliban fighters, according to a US military video.

Karzai's growing irrelevance

The Taliban know that the US need for an orderly withdrawal by end 2014 compels Washington to negotiate with them. The Taliban's approach therefore, is to completely disregard Karzai - the weakest player in the peace process. That makes him irrelevant but the very process of Doha negotiations, if it takes off, will eventually lead to his irrelevance.

Mr. Karzai is a lame duck in a bind. He is wary of American intentions, which is why he does not want direct talks between the US and the Taliban. He needs the presence of American forces after 2014 also to shore up the successors he leaves behind. The Taliban will not acquiesce to this arrangement.

The Americans who are in a "we are getting out; make our departure easier" mode know if they allow Karzai to stop the Taliban from entering the political process, he jeopardises orderly American withdrawal. In that situation the American decision makers will jettison Karzai to get their troops home safe.

For now American interests are met keeping Karzai insecure to the extent where he is compelled to agree on leaving behind sufficient American forces and sign the status of forces terms with the United States. As the recent videoconference between Presidents Obama and Karzai seems to have made little headway in resolving the impasse, the US will balance its desire to maintain residual force after 2014 with America's need for peaceful withdrawal.

Uncertain future

With daring Taliban activity even inside Kabul's Red Zone, Kabul's structures are creaking. "Once American troops are withdrawn, the existing government will collapse," says William Polk a veteran US foreign policy commentator. People associated with the current regime are attempting to get their families out and consequently property prices are falling in Kabul, confirms Tino Weibezahl the head of Kabul office of Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

Much of the Western world fails to appreciate that in a country where no foreign invasion has ever been able to hold, the Taliban represent resistance to attempts to westernise a society strongly rooted in its culture and traditions. By firing up yearning for freedom they have maintained a psychological grip over the Afghan population.

By providing an effective underground governance structure in much of Afghanistan, "the seeds of their return were planted long ago," says Gérard Challand, the French expert in armed conflict studies, a regular visitor to Afghanistan.

With imminent American withdrawal by end 2014 most Afghans are now attuned to the coming reality that the Taliban will outlast the US presence, challenge the corrupt and fractured US-installed administration in Kabul and eventually prevail. Afghanistan is set for a period of uncertainty in the interim.

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