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Preface

Following appointment of Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, the negotiations between Taliban and the U.S. to end the current war has accelerated. Although hopes have been high for peace since then, the parties have not reached any official agreement after four months and there still remain uncertainties in the process.

The U.S. pullout is the main condition of Taliban for peace. Taliban reasserted this in the Moscow meeting on Afghan peace last week. However, it appears from the remarks by American officials that the U.S. has not reached any final decision in this regard. In addition, structure of the future Afghan government, fate of the current government and the latest progress in peace process still seem to be ambiguous in the ongoing talks.

The first section of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) Weekly Analysis reviews the discussions between Taliban delegation and the U.S. and the ambiguities in the process.

The second part of the Weekly Analysis discusses the horrible condition of children in Afghanistan. According to reports, Afghanistan is among the countries where millions of children are deprived of basic human rights and live under extremely difficult conditions. War, poverty, natural disasters and a number of other factors have affected the lives of Afghan children.

Ambiguities in the Afghan peace process



The U.S. President Donald Trump, in his State of the Union 2019 address on February 05, 2019, said “In Afghanistan, my administration is holding constructive talks with a number of Afghan groups including the Taliban. As we make progress in these negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troop presence and focus on counterterrorism.”

During an interview with the CBS TV Network on February 03, 2019, Mr. Trump said that he will withdraw the American military forces from Afghanistan and that the U.S will focus on intelligence-gathering in the country. His decision, however, faced opposition by the Senators who voted against troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani seems unhappy with Trump’s decision of full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Mr. Ghani expressed his concern in a letter to Trump, after the six-day talks between Taliban and the U.S. Special Representative in Doha, and asked for a gradual withdrawal of American troops from the country proposed.

Although hopes for a possible peace deal are higher now than any other time, ambiguities still remain about the U.S. troop withdrawal, negotiations between Taliban and the Afghan government and future of Afghan government.

The U.S.-Taliban talks

Since the last four months, Taliban and the U.S. have engaged in peace talks several times. After the third meeting in Abu Dhabi, the negotiations were suspended for a while due to disagreements over the meeting agenda but the talks resumed again and at the fourth meeting in Doha, a number of important issues were discussed.

The U.S.-Taliban peace talks in Doha were considered a significant step in peace process and it was expected that both sides would release a Joint Statement about the progress in talks. Different media reported general consensus and progress about important issues including a schedule for the U.S. withdrawal, exchange of prisoners, ceasefire, interim government, facilitating talks between Taliban and the Afghan government, and agreement calls for the Taliban to prevent international terrorist groups from basing themselves in Afghanistan. The U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation expressed happiness after the talks in Doha and said, “After six days in Doha..We made significant progress on vital issues..That doesn't mean we're done.”.

In a statement, Taliban also confirmed that “progress has been made on foreign troops withdrawal and other important issues.”

With all that said, ambiguity still remains in the peace process and a particular direction is still missing. Concerns are increased about a possible peace deal because the talks are happening behind closed doors and there are little details publicly disclosed and because of Afghan government’s opposition to the current process and the future of its relations with the U.S.

Uncertainties in peace talks

In a war-torn country like Afghanistan, any step towards peace can create hope. Afghans are hopeful about the current talks between Taliban and the U.S. and expect they expect that the negotiations will end the 17-year long war. However, the following issues are still ambiguous in the peace process:

First, the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan is perceived to be one of the main obstacles for peace in country and it is the main point of discussion in the peace talks, which is not fully decided yet. In the interview with CBS TV Network and during his recent State of the Union address, Mr. Trump emphasized on complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan but opposition from the senators and Trump's statement that "the U.S will focus on intelligence-gathering in the country" are the two factors that make the future of foreign troops in Afghanistan unclear.

Second, the current peace talks between Taliban and the U.S. is looked upon as a deal between Pakistan and the U.S. and this raise questions such as: Why is Pakistan supporting the peace process after decades? What Pakistan will get form this? Has something been promised to Pakistan in return for the support? If yes, is this a deal between Pakistan and the U.S or Pakistan had a deal over Afghanistan as well?

These questions are raised because the Afghan president mentioned about Gandamak treaty in his speach few weeks ago he said "If someone thinks that they will sign another Gandamak treaty by Ashraf Ghani, I will not do such 'shameful' work even if I lose my blood,"

Third, Taliban and the Afghan government have opposing stances on peace process. Taliban have repeatedly stated that they will only talk to the U.S. rather than the Afghan government. On the other hand, the Afghan government will not accept any peace deal that excludes the government. Another ambiguity is whether the future of Afghanistan will be decided between Taliban and the U.S. or it will involve the Afghan government as well. In other words, the final decision will be made between Afghans and the U.S. or among the Afghans? This a serious issue because if the U.S. supports Afghan government's stance, Taliban may pull back from the talks and if it does not support this stance, the relations between Afghan government and the U.S. may be affected.

Fourth, Taliban state constitutional amendment as one of the conditions for a possible peace agreement and talk about reforms in the structure of government. It is not clear weather Taliban want a Taliban-centered government (Iranian type

of theocracy in Afghanistan where all political and social matters are guided by the religious leaders) or a type of system where political power could be transferred by the means of democracy.

Conclusion

One of the main issues in peace talks between Taliban and the U.S. is the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. But Mr. Trump's recent comments suggest that they are looking for ways to stay in Afghanistan. Out of thousands troops, the U.S. wants to leave some in the country in the form of intelligence workers. The U.S. is trying to convince Taliban about this.

On the other hand, Taliban refused to sit with the Afghan government for any peace talks. A week ago, unofficial peace talks between Afghan political figures and Taliban were held but the government Mr. Ghani was not represented. President Ghani immediately objected the Moscow meeting and said that no one had any executive authority to forge agreements and that the ownership and leadership of peace process is the authority of the Afghan government.

Taliban direct talks with Afghan politicians in Moscow is assumed to be the first initiative to reach an Intra-Afghan political solution for a deadly war in Afghanistan. It seems that both Taliban and the U.S. are trying to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan and to end the war through possible political solution. Intra-Afghan settlement or dialogue between Taliban and the Afghan government seems difficult but the Moscow meeting could be facilitated talks between the two sides.

An insight into the condition of children in Afghanistan



According to UNICEF report, released on February 03, 3.8 million Afghan children need assistance, of which half a million are in need of urgent aids. The report states that most of the children who need urgent aid are those who have migrated from their home towns due to war, insecurity, natural disasters, and poverty. UNICEF has requested the International Community to help the Afghan children with \$50 million.

The ongoing war and poor political and economic situation in the country has made the situation of Afghan children lamentable. Children casualties in war, deprivation from education and vulnerability to various types of violence are the issues that have made the the life of Afghan children bitter. This Analysis discusses the critical situation of Afghan children.

War and the Afghan Children

The ongoing war is one of the biggest threats for the Afghan children. For years, the parties involved in the Afghan conflict are carelessly committing horrible crimes against children and it continues without the perpetrators being held accountable.

According to the UNICIF report in 2018, thousands of boys and girls have been victims of the war and bloodshed across the globe. Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen top the list of worst countries for children, highlights the UNICIF report. Based on the report, 5000 Afghan children and teenagers were killed and wounded in the first nine months of 2018. In addition, the Human Rights Watch report states that more than 10,000 Afghan civilians were killed and wounded in 2018, of which one third were children.

The presence of children in the ranks of the parties involved in war, their use for the purpose of war and even sexual exploitation are other concerns about Afghan children. Even though human right organizations have warned in their reports that there are many youngsters lining up in the opposition as well as the police militias for battles, but unfortunately the youngsters are still being used in roadside bombings, explosions and battlefields.

Even though different national and international organizations (who have spent millions of dollars) have worked for human and children rights since the establishment of the new government in 2001, yet the Afghan children are victims of war and conflicts.

Deprivation from education

Education is a basic pillar of sustainable development, which needs to be taken care of. According to national laws and international rules and regulations, the Afghan government is obliged to provide equal educational opportunities for the public. Improvement in education has been the slogan of the Afghan government and International Community for the last 18 years, yet after a long period of time and spending millions of dollars, the education system faces many threats as millions of Afghan children are deprived from going to school.

According to the Ministry of Education, 3.7 million Afghan children are deprived of educational facilities. A joint research of the Ministry of Education and UNICEF released in the second quarter of 2018 shows that 44% of the Afghan children do not have access to schools. This report links s conflict, absence of important facilities in schools, migration, and child marriage to the current situation of children in Afghanistan.

Overall, the deprivation of education is one of the most important concerns about the Afghan children. Millions of children are deprived of education due to insecurity, migration, and poverty. Afghan children live in a critical condition and are deprived of education while President Ghani has named 2018 as the “year of education”.

Violence against Afghan children

Children in Afghanistan are the most vulnerable to violence. Children not only face physical violence but they are also vulnerable to psychological violence.

Family is the first institution where children learn things with parental love. It is the first institution that introduces role models and teaches basic skills. Thus, it is possible that a parent’s mistake misguide the children into a destructive direction.

Beating, neglecting children’s education, lies, watching inappropriate serials, paying special attention to particular children in front of others, not answering their questions, difficult working tasks, imbalance in their reward and punishment, pre-birth engagements, and tens of other issues are making the children lives vulnerable in Afghanistan. These are the issues that directly affect their physical and personal growth.

Other types of violence against children are the national and security violence which are much more serious than the previous types violence. In fact, migration, difficult work conditions, child abuse, kidnapping, addiction, smuggling, depression and many more issues that affect the life of children negatively are rooted in conflict.

The goal of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which was approved in 1989 is to force the countries to protect the children rights. Afghanistan signed the Convention in 1994 and it is obliged to act accordingly. However, based on the reports of children supporting organizations, the government and relevant entities have failed to secure the children rights. The finance that ought to serve the Afghan children often goes into vain due to the widespread corruption.

End

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