




US- Taliban Deal

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This article is based on **A big, bad deal: On U.S.-Taliban agreement, Tough talks ahead as Ghani rejects Taliban prisoner swap, A deal that increases uncertainty, An uneasy pact, Reading US-Taliban pact, What the Afghan peace deal means.** It talks about the implications of the recently concluded US- Taliban Deal.

Recently, the U.S. **signed a deal (at Qatar's capital-Doha) with the Taliban** that could pave the way towards a **full withdrawal of foreign soldiers** from Afghanistan over the next 14 months and **represent a step towards ending the 18-year-war in Afghanistan.** Along with this, a **separate joint declaration** was also signed between the Afghan government and the US at Kabul.

The peace deal is expected to kick-off two processes- **a phased withdrawal of US troops and an 'intra-Afghan' dialogue.** The deal is a **fundamental step to deliver a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire and the future political roadmap for Afghanistan peace process and the Central region.**

Background of the Deal

- **On 11 September 2001,** terrorist attacks in America killed nearly 3,000 people. **Osama Bin Laden,** the head of Islamist terror group al-Qaeda, was quickly identified as the man responsible.
- **The Taliban,** radical Islamists who ran Afghanistan at that time, protected Bin Laden, refused to hand him over. So, a month after 9/11, the US launched airstrikes against Afghanistan.
- The US was joined by an **international coalition** and the Taliban were quickly removed from power. However, they turned into an insurgent force and continued deadly attacks, destabilising subsequent Afghan governments.
- **Since then, the US is fighting a war against the Taliban.**

- **Donald Trump's 2017 policy on Afghanistan**, was based on breaking the military stalemate in Afghanistan by authorising an additional 5,000 soldiers, giving US forces a freer hand to go after the Taliban, putting Pakistan on notice, and strengthening Afghan capabilities.
- However, **the US realised that the Taliban insurgency could not be defeated as long as it enjoyed safe havens and secure sanctuaries in Pakistan**, the US changed track and sought Pakistan's help to get the Taliban to the negotiating table.
- **The negotiations began in September 2018** with the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to initiate direct talks with the Taliban. After nine rounds of US-Taliban talks in Qatar, the two sides seemed close to an agreement.

Salient Features of the Deal

- **Troops Withdrawal:** The US will draw down to **8,600 troops in 135 days** and the NATO or coalition troop numbers will also be brought down, proportionately and simultaneously. And all troops will be out within 14 months.
- **Taliban Commitment:** The main counter-terrorism commitment by the Taliban is that Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the **security of the United States and its allies**.
- **Sanctions Removal:** UN sanctions on Taliban leaders to be removed by three months and US sanctions by August 27. The sanctions will be out before much progress is expected in the intra-Afghan dialogue.
- **Prisoner Release:** The US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from "the other side" held by Taliban "will be released" by March 10.

Challenges in the Deal

- **One-Sided Deal:** The fundamental issue with the U.S.'s Taliban engagement is that it **deliberately excluded the Afghan government** because the Taliban do not see the government as legitimate rulers. Also, there is **no reference** to the Constitution, rule of law, democracy and elections in the deal.
 - Taliban is **known for strict religious laws**, banishing women from public life, shutting down schools and unleashing systemic discrimination on religious and ethnic minorities, has not made any promises on whether it would respect civil liberties or accept the Afghan Constitution.
 - Therefore, **Shariat-based system** (political system based on fundamental Islamic values) with the existing constitution is not easy.

- **Issues with Intra-Afghan Dialogue:**
 - President Ashraf Ghani faces a **political crisis following claims of fraud** in his recent re-election.
 - The political tussle is between **Ashraf Ghani** (who belongs to the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan- the Pashtun) and **Abdullah Abdullah** (whose base is among his fellow Tajiks, the second largest group in Afghanistan).
 - If there are any concessions made by Mr Ghani's government to the **Taliban (predominantly Pashtun)** will likely be interpreted by Mr Abdullah's supporters as **an intra-Pashtun deal** reached at the cost of other ethnic groups, especially the Tajiks and the Uzbeks.
 - Consequently, **these ethnic fissures may descend into open conflict and can start the next round of civil war.**
- Thus, the lifting of the US military footprint and the return of a unilateral Taliban could set the stage for the **next round of civil war** that has hobbled the nation since the late 1970s.
- **Problem with Prisoner's Swap:** The US-Taliban agreement and the joint declaration differ:
 - The US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from "the other side" held by Taliban "will be released" by March 10.
 - However, the joint declaration **lays down no numbers or deadlines for the prisoner's swap.** Afghanistan President held that there is no commitment to releasing 5,000 prisoners. He also held that such prisoners' swap is not in the authority of the US, but in the authority of the Afghan government.
- Also, the Taliban is fragmented or divided internally. It is composed of various regional and tribal groups **acting semi-autonomously.**
 - Therefore, it is possible that some of them may continue to engage in assaults on government troops and even American forces during the withdrawal process.
 - It is unclear if there is a date for the complete withdrawal of US troops or for concluding the intra-Afghan dialogue, or how long the truce will hold.

Impact of the Deal on Other Stakeholders

- **US:** The promise to **end America's "endless wars"** in the greater Middle East region was one of the central themes of US President Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016. This deal may demonstrate progress on that front in his **bid for re-election** later this year.
 - Though, the US doesn't recognise Taliban as a state under the name of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (key demand of Taliban), though many experts are of the view that this deal is a little more than a dressed-up U.S. surrender that will ultimately see the Taliban return to power.
- **Pakistan:** The deal provides the strategic advantage to Pakistan, who is a long-time **benefactor of the Taliban.**

- **China:** After the launch of the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, Pakistan is seen as more of a **protectorate state of China**. Thus, China may leverage Pakistan's influence on the Taliban, to propel its strategic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

Impact of this Deal on India

This deal alters the **balance of power in favour of the Taliban**, which will have strategic, security and political implications for India. The deal may **jeopardise the key stakes of India in Afghanistan**:

- India has a major stake in the stability of Afghanistan. India has invested **considerable resources in Afghanistan's development**.
- India has a major stake in the continuation of the current **Afghanistan government** in power, which it considers a **strategic asset vis-à-vis Pakistan**.
An increased political and military role for the Taliban and the expansion of its territorial control should be of great concern to India since the Taliban is widely believed to be a protégé of Islamabad.
- As Afghanistan is the gateway to Central Asia, the deal might dampen India's interest in Central Asia.
- Withdrawal of US troops could result in the breeding of the fertile ground for various anti-India terrorist outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed.

History of India-Taliban Relations

- **India and the Taliban share a bitter history.**
 - **IC-814 hijack** in 1999 (India's passenger plane was hijacked and taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan- under the control of Taliban) made India to release terrorists — including Maulana Masood Azhar who founded Jaish-e-Mohammed that went on to carry out terror attacks on Parliament (2001), in Pathankot (2016) and in Pulwama (2019).
 - Also, the Taliban perceived India as a hostile country, as India had supported the anti-Taliban force after the 9/11 attacks.
- India never gave diplomatic and official recognition to the Taliban when it was in power during 1996-2001.

- However, as the Taliban's role in Afghan peace process becomes inevitable, India started to make some strides towards the Taliban.
 - Earlier, India was part of the Moscow-led talks with the Taliban in November 2018, which two former Indian diplomats attended as “non-official representatives”.
 - India is now moving to diplomatically engage with the Taliban. India’s presence at the agreement-signing ceremony is the first sign of a possible diplomatic opening.

Way Forward

An independent, sovereign, democratic, pluralistic and inclusive Afghanistan is crucial for peace and stability in the region. In order to ensure this:

- The Afghan peace process should be Afghan-led, **Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled**.
- Also, there is a need for the global community to fight against the global concern of terrorism. In this context, it high time to adopt the **Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism** (proposed by India at UN in 1996).

Though the deal is a good step, the road ahead would not be easy. Achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan will require patience and compromise among all parties.

Drishti Mains Question

The US-Taliban deal is a good step, but the road ahead would not be easy. Achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan will require patience and compromise among all parties. Discuss.