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Intra-Afghan Talks & Role of India

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This editorial is based on “**Another Afghan peace push and a role for India**” which was published in The Hindu on 19/09//2020. It talks about Intra-Afghan Talks between the Taliban & Afghan Government and the role India can play.

Recently, the much awaited **intra-Afghan talks** between the Taliban and the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation (representative of Afghan Government) opened in Doha, Qatar.

India's External Affairs Minister participated in this crucial intra-Afghan talks via a video link. This decision seemed to be aimed at regaining diplomatic momentum and re-asserting India's position on an “**Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled**” peace process. However, instead it had become a **U.S.-led and Taliban-controlled process with nobody claiming ownership or responsibility**.

Moreover, despite the start of intra-Afghan talks, the **Afghan conflict** is far from over, and a failure to reach a consensus in Qatar would only present a more complex array of challenges and threats than ever before.

Therefore, India must urgently mobilize a coalition for a major regional diplomatic push aimed at resolving the Afghan crisis and establishing regional peace.

Intra-Afghan Talks

- The initiation of intra-Afghan talks is a key element in the **U.S.-Taliban peace deal** signed in Doha on February 29 between the U.S and the Taliban.
- The US-Taliban peace deal was a three-way negotiation whereby the US negotiated with the Taliban who were brought to the negotiating table by Pakistan and this Doha outcome was to be accepted by the Afghan Government.

- There were four objectives of the deal:
 - An end to violence by declaring a ceasefire.
 - An intra-Afghan dialogue for a lasting peace.
 - The Taliban cut ties with terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda.
 - U.S. troop withdrawal by April 2021.
- Though the deal was to be held in march-April 2020, it got delayed due to disagreement on mutual release of prisoners by both Taliban and Afghan Government.
- Now as the Taliban have released 1,000 members of Afghan security forces and the Afghan authorities have freed over 5,000 talibani from their custody, it paved the way for Intra-Afghan talks and brought the prospect of peace in Afghanistan.

Challenges in Afghanistan Peace

- Speaking of Doha, Afghan Government held that more than 12,000 Afghans had been killed and another 15,000 injured since the end-February.
- A report by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued in July 2020 assessed that:
 - The Taliban is calibrating its use of violence to harass and undermine the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and the Afghan government, but remain at a level it perceives is within the bounds of the agreement.
 - This move would probably have encouraged U.S. troop withdrawal and set favorable conditions for a post-withdrawal Afghanistan.
 - The report expressed scepticism about whether the Taliban had cut ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.
- A UN report concerning the **Islamic State and al Qaeda** concluded that Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent continues to operate under the Taliban umbrella.
- Further, there are many Taliban leaders who are under the most wanted list of the US.
- Therefore, given these conditions it may be difficult to reconcile peace in Afghanistan. This would destabilize the region after the US. Troops withdrawal.
- In this context, India needs to strategically frame a policy to secure it's security and economic interests emanating from Afghanistan.

Way Forward

Apart from Afghanistan, peace in the country is crucial for almost every other country in the region. For example, for Russia blocking the drug supply and keeping its southern periphery secure from extremist influences is key. Also, at a time when Iran's economy is in dire straits due to low oil prices and severe economic sanctions, its leadership cannot afford an Afghanistan at war with itself and its neighbours.

Therefore, India must give a diplomatic push to a coalition of regional powers for ensuring peace in Afghanistan after US exit. In this pursuit, India should engage with regional power like Iran and Russia.

- **Engagement With Iran:** Although, India and Iran may have differing views on the US presence there, but both are aware of the challenges once the Taliban gain authority and the current regime in Afghanistan weakens as a result.
 - This dynamic is what makes Iran an indispensable partner for India as the US gradually winds down its troop presence in Afghanistan.
 - The **Chabahar port** is the most tangible symbol of India-Iran- Afghanistan trilateral cooperation. However, China's potential involvement in the Chabahar project has unmistakable strategic implications for India.
 - Here India must reengage with Iran to ensure that China cannot be allowed to chip away at India's vital interests in its extended neighbourhood.
- **Engagement With Russia:** Although Russia's interests in Afghanistan are in conflict with that of the US, its role in the regional security matrix is not of a disrupter, but of a balancer.
 - Thus, India should engage Russia to play a key role in Afghanistan. But, here also an alliance-like relationship between Russia and China may jeopardise India's interests in Afghanistan.
 - However, Russia does share with India a good relationship and can keep China in check.
 - Besides convergence on regional security, India, Iran and Russia can develop cooperative mechanisms for commercial and economic ties with Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The prospect for peace in Afghanistan depends on regional consensus to support the peace process as much as it depends on actual progress in the intra-Afghan talks. India's vision of a sovereign, united, stable, plural and democratic Afghanistan is one that is shared by Afghanistan, cutting across ethnic and provincial lines.

A more active engagement will enable India to work with like-minded forces in the region to ensure that the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal does not lead to an unravelling of the gains registered during the last two decades.

Charting U.S. withdrawal

March 10: Release of 5,000 Taliban and 1,000 non-Taliban prisoners

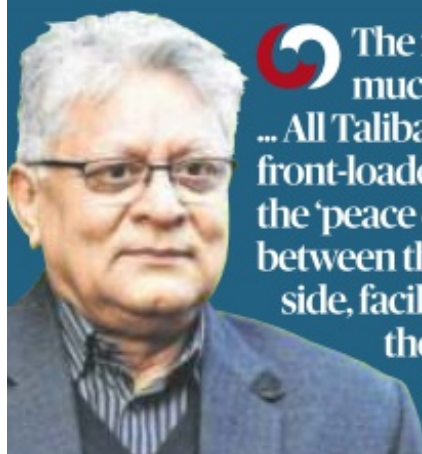
May 29: Removal of UN Security Council sanctions against Taliban fighters; release of all remaining prisoners


June 15: U.S. Coalition Forces reduce to 8,600,

withdraw from five military bases

August 27: Removal of U.S. sanctions against Taliban

April 29, 2021: Expected completion of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, full withdrawal of U.S. troops in five military bases



 The reduction in violence is a much-needed respite for Afghans ... All Taliban demands have been front-loaded, while the actual terms of the 'peace deal' are yet to be negotiated between the Taliban and the Afghan side, facilitated by the U.S. So, much of the heavy lifting remains

AMAR SINHA, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Drishti Mains Question

The prospect for peace in Afghanistan depends on regional consensus to support the peace process as much as it depends on actual progress in the intra-Afghan talks. Discuss.



Watch Video At:

<https://youtu.be/FrDedo8nxCI>

This editorial is based on **“A push for reform: On UN reforms”** which was published in The Hindu on September 18th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.
