

US-Taliban Agreement: A Deal that Increases Uncertainty

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The US-Taliban Agreement achieves some objectives, but may not bring lasting peace

The U.S.-Taliban agreement signed on February 29 may end up paving the way for further intra-Afghan fighting because it leaves the most important issue, namely, the future relationship between the Afghan government and the Taliban, unresolved. All it does is to propose an intra-Afghan dialogue between the Kabul government and the Taliban scheduled to begin on March 10. The prospects of such a dialogue leading to a durable peace in the country do not seem to be very good. A major reason for this is the inability of both the Kabul government and the Taliban to speak in one voice.

The government is a perfect picture of disunity with President Ashraf Ghani and his primary challenger Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah threatening to set up parallel governments. What makes this rivalry very dangerous is that Mr. Ghani belongs to the largest ethnic group, the Pashtun, and Mr. Abdullah's base is among his fellow Tajiks, the second largest group in Afghanistan.

Concessions made by Mr. Ghani's government to the Taliban will likely be interpreted by Mr. Abdullah's supporters as an intra-Pashtun deal reached at the expense of other ethnic groups, especially the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, who formed the bulk of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance from 1996 to 2001. Consequently, ethnic fissures may descend into open conflict.

Many faces of Taliban

- Similarly, the Taliban, despite appearances to the contrary, is not a well-knit force. It is

composed of various regional and tribal groups acting semi-autonomously. All of them may not be amenable to following the directions of its top leadership.

- It is, therefore, possible that some of them may continue to engage in assaults on government troops and even American forces during the withdrawal process.
- What the U.S.-Taliban agreement has accomplished in reality is to help the leaders on both sides achieve their primary objectives. The Taliban has pledged not to allow any terrorist organisation, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, to operate from the territory it controls.
- Although important for American security interests, this was secondary to the Donald Trump administration's key concern. Mr. Trump's main goal was to demonstrate to his domestic constituency that he was serious about bringing American troops back home. According to the timeline set out in the agreement, all U.S. and NATO troops will withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months. More important, the joint statement declared that the U.S. would reduce the number of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days.
- This means that a substantial number of American troops will return to the U.S. well before the presidential election, thus giving a boost to President Trump's odds for re-election.
- The Taliban leadership has also achieved its primary goal, namely, the withdrawal of foreign troops within a reasonable time frame. The Taliban already controls or contests half the country's territory and the American and NATO withdrawal will help it expand its territorial base at the expense of the government's poorly trained forces.

Why India should be concerned?

- The prospect of this happening should worry New Delhi for two interrelated reasons. One, India has a major stake in the stability of Afghanistan, however tenuous it may be, as it has invested considerable resources in the country's development. Two, India has a major stake in the continuation in power of the present dispensation, 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. Therefore, any celebration in New Delhi will be highly misplaced.

SOURCE: *The Hindu*