

Breakthrough in Afghan Peace Process!

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The “extended Troika” on the Afghan problem comprising the United States, Russia, and China — and Pakistan — have announced in Doha on Friday a road map in consultation with the Ashraf Ghani government and Taliban as regards the way forward in immediate terms for reaching a peace settlement.

The announcement followed consultations in Doha with the involvement of the Qatari authorities as hosts, and it coincides with the formal commencement of the US and NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan today, 1st of May.

The announcement builds on the Biden Administration’s stated plans to complete the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, which now takes a note of finality notwithstanding the [continuing calls by interest groups](#) in the US for a review of the withdrawal decision. Put differently, President Biden’s decision now would also assume the nature of an international commitment given by Washington to Russia and China. This altogether lifts the cloud of uncertainty regarding the US decision on troop withdrawal.

The announcement in Doha is in the nature of a [joint statement](#), to be issued in Washington, Moscow, Beijing and Islamabad. It envisages the following signposts, so to speak:

- An orderly withdrawal of foreign troops by Sept 11 is assured;
- During withdrawal period, peace process to continue, no fighting will take place between Afghan parties, and a “steady transition of the situation” is to be expected;
- Safety of US & NATO troops and foreign embassies and diplomats to be ensured;
- Afghan govt counterterrorism operations shall be in cooperation with international community;
- Taliban to shelve its annual “Spring Offensive”;
- Open engagement between Kabul set-up and the Taliban is visualised;
- Any takeover by force by any Afghan party will be unacceptable;
- UN Security Council will review the sanctions against Taliban individuals and assets;
- Doha will continue to be the venue of intra-Afghan negotiations;
- UN will be having an expanded role to navigate the peace process.

Most important, the announcement calls for a settlement that envisages the creation of an

“independent, sovereign, unified, peaceful, democratic, neutral and self-sufficient Afghanistan.” Significantly, “neutral and self-sufficient” is an altogether new formulation, which implies, conceivably, that there shall be no foreign security presence remaining on Afghan soil; Afghanistan shall not join any military alliance or blocs; future Afghan governments will be committed to the pursuit of independent non-aligned foreign policies.

This goes a long way to address the apprehensions in Moscow and Beijing that in a post-settlement scenario, the US might use Afghan soil to deploy extremist groups (Chechens, Uighurs, etc.) as geopolitical tool to undertake covert operations in the Central Asian region — specifically, to destabilise Xinjiang, North Caucasus, etc. Equally, this provision of a “neutral” Afghanistan also addresses a major Iranian concern. Effectively, this amounts to a moratorium on the pursuit of the “great game”, which has been a negative factor historically contributing to the instability and conflict in Afghanistan dating back to the era of King Zahir Shah.

From a larger perspective, this mutual accommodation means a carefully balanced “win-win” for all the three big powers, notwithstanding the present international climate characterised by new cold war conditions. The big question is how far this newfound spirit of mutual accommodation will moderate the US’ hostile policies toward Russia and China. In this case, the US is a net gainer out of the cooperation from Russia and China as Washington’s prestige and NATO’s future critically would depend on the ability to successfully navigate an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Therefore, some positive fallout on the US’ relations with Russia and China cannot be ruled out. This sets a precedent, no doubt, for other situations such as the Iran nuclear issue or the North Korea problem, conflicts in Syria and Yemen, etc.

As regards Pakistan, it can draw great satisfaction from the above outcome as it is assured of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan guaranteed by the UN Security Council members. In the 1980s, when the Geneva Accords were signed in February 1989, the focus was on the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, while no thought was given to what would follow in the aftermath of the withdrawal. That lacuna, of course, led to a mad scramble for power in Kabul resulting in the Mujahideen takeover in 1992 and the rise of the Taliban.

Therefore, Pakistan has great stakes in ensuring that history doesn’t repeat in Afghanistan. Besides, the commitment of the international community virtually guarantees that the heavy burden of sustaining a new power structure in Kabul will not fall on Pakistan’s shoulders once again. Pakistan is greatly interested in firming up assistance from the international community, US in particular, for post-settlement Afghanistan’ reconstruction and development.

From a security perspective too, the above road map addresses Pakistan’s legitimate concerns that “spoilers” may exploit any power vacuum in Kabul. Pakistan’s non-negotiable concern lies in having a friendly government in Kabul. And Pakistan has repeatedly underscored its angst that India may manipulate the volatility in Afghanistan to its advantage. Clearly, that fear is no longer tenable.

In the emergent scenario, a transitional govt may become unavoidable in Kabul at some point. That is not going to be easy but the good part is that in a climate with such a high degree of international commitment and UN involvement, the Afghans would rise to the

occasion. Conceivably, Ghani is nearing the end of the road. It is highly improbable that he or his circle of associates would show the audacity to undermine a “code of conduct” which is underwritten jointly by 3 big powers — and, significantly, by Pakistan as well. Equally, no regional state in its senses would act as a “spoiler” to derail a road map which carries the imprimatur of the three big powers and the UN Security Council.

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