

US-Taliban Talks Cancelled: RSTV – India's World

Context:

- On the 7th Sep, US President Donald Trump tweeted that he was calling off the secret negotiations that were to take place at Camp David between the US President, representatives of Taliban and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.
- The immediate trigger was said to be a recent terror attack carried out by the Taliban which killed many innocent Afghans including an American soldier.
- This scheduled meeting was a part of the ongoing peace process that the US President has pursued with the Taliban since 2017.
- The US has been stuck in the Afghan conflict ever since it invaded Afghanistan along with other NATO forces, following the 9/11 attacks in order to overthrow the Taliban government.
- This 18-year war has become increasingly unpopular in the United States and Trump had promised during his Presidential campaign that he will end America's involvement in the Afghan civil war and bring American troops back home.
- Since 2017, he has pursued peace talks with the Taliban and had even appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as his special envoy to engage in secret negotiations with the Taliban leaders at Doha, Qatar.
- The scheduled meeting at Camp David was supposed to be an extension of these peace talks and it was expected to help work out a peace plan under which the US would withdraw its troops under the condition that the Taliban would not allow Afghan soil to be used by terror groups, especially the ones that are known to target western countries.
- But strategic experts and countries like India had raised concerns that the peace process had completely excluded the Afghan government and it ran the risk of bringing the Taliban back to power.
- So the cancellation of talks has come as a disguised blessing for India, which has expressed support only for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process.
- This discussion evaluates the implications for India due to the sudden and abrupt cancellation of the peace process by President Trump.

How the talks progressed?

- Initially, when the dialogue began, a lot of concern was expressed by experts and commentators over the exclusion of the Afghan government at the behest of the Taliban.
- Earlier, it was even being reported that Zalmay Khalilzad had arrived at a final text of the agreement with the Taliban and it only had to be approved by the President.
- But things took a dramatic turn within a span of few days.
- So when Trump tweeted about the cancellation of scheduled talks at Camp David, it left everyone stunned.
- Since then it is not clear as to what would be the next course of action for the United States and as things stand it is a return to the political and military stalemate of the last two years.
- During this stalemate, the Taliban had managed to strengthen its position with the backing of Pakistan.
- So the concern now is, would these developments further strengthen the position of the Taliban?

Is the U-turn good for India?

- It is a little early to say whether these developments go in India's favour or against its interests.
- Major powers such as Russia, China and others have been talking to the Taliban at various peace conferences just like the US. But nothing concrete has emerged out of it.
- The US, on the other hand, has been quite inconsistent in its pursuit of peace with other hostile powers such as North Korea, Iran and Russia. So this inconsistency of the Trump administration

could be playing out with the Afghan peace talks as well.

- So it is too early to predict the impact of these developments on the interests of Afghanistan and India. But India's only concern would be to ensure that Afghanistan doesn't again turn in to a safe haven for terror outfits.

What does it hold for the region?

- Things appear to be at a delicate stage right now. But it definitely gives an opportunity for Ashraf Ghani to try and consolidate his position and that of the civilian government in the run-up to the Presidential elections.
- This could also bring Zalmay Khalilzad under pressure because his line of negotiation had given Pakistan tremendous leverage over the Afghan endgame and this was not to the liking of Trump administration, which has seen Pakistan's role with deep suspicion.
- So the cancellation of talks would not be appreciated by either Pakistan or China, as things appeared to be going in their favour.
- The Taliban leaders have also rushed to Russia immediately after Trump announced that the peace talks were dead. This could indicate a larger role for regional powers in the future to resolve the Afghan conflict.

Has India gotten a fresh lease of life?

- One of the panelists, former Ambassador Vivek Katju, doesn't believe that India was ever out of the Afghan great game. India has always held a privileged position in the minds of Afghan politicians, because they see India as a key development partner and a responsible player in the region.
- Even when the Taliban was in power, at least few sections of the Taliban had indicated that they were independent of Pakistan and they were open to the possibility of engaging with India.
- India's policy of engaging only with the legitimate government of Afghanistan has been the right approach. The problem for Taliban is that India never recognised its government as the legitimate government but this policy was in line with the stand taken by most countries. Except for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE, no other country had given legitimacy to the government of the Taliban.
- Once the Taliban was ousted from power, India has developed close relations with the civilian government and we even have a strategic partnership agreement with them.
- But this shouldn't stop India from being more pragmatic and it needs to recognise the ground realities. It is in India's interests to engage with all the players in Afghanistan and whether we like it or not, this includes the Taliban as well.
- This doesn't mean that India is endorsing the ideology or the actions of the Taliban. It is just a diplomatic necessity to maintain contacts with all the key players and India should continue to engage with whichever legitimate government is in power in Afghanistan.

What should be the focus and strategy of India?

- India has always been welcomed with open arms by the civilian government in Afghanistan because it is a logical choice for promoting development and maintaining stability in the region.
- India on its part has invested heavily in developing Afghanistan's infrastructure, democratic institutions, energy sector, etc. India has offered educational scholarships, it has been training the civil servants and military officers of Afghanistan, it has even extended limited defence co-operation as well.
- So India need not reinvent the wheel and it only has to build upon the tremendous soft power that it enjoys in Afghanistan and it should position itself as the best development partner of Afghanistan.
- Even the Taliban has undergone a lot of transformation over the years and it is no longer seen as just a pawn of Pakistan. The zero-sum game of 1990s is long gone and that's the reason why Russia, Iran, China and others have started to engage with the Taliban, just in case if they return to power in some form or the other.

- India too should keep aside the zero-sum mindset and it should focus on building contacts with all the political players including the Taliban.
- So a combination of enhanced political and economic engagement in Afghanistan is needed for India to secure its national interests.

Where does Pakistan stand?

- India needs to recognise the fact that the Taliban is no longer seen as just a proxy of the ISI, as the case was in the 1990s.
- But India will have to be wary of the fact that the Taliban has its own extremist religious agenda which doesn't suit India's interests of maintaining peace and stability in the region.
- Pakistan on its part has tried to position itself in a key role. There is no doubt that Pakistan has been mediating with China and Russia on behalf of the Taliban.
- So India needs to keep all these factors in mind and carefully manoeuvre its Afghan policy.

The Way Forward

- It is very important for the global powers, especially India, to recognise the real motives of Taliban and the fact that it controls more than 50% of Afghan territory.
- While the Taliban might have become relatively less dependent on Pakistan but the reality is that Pakistan still plays a critical role and it exercises tremendous leverage over them.
- Pakistan had invested a lot of time and effort in the peace process and it would be flabbergasted that these efforts have come undone for the time being due to the abrupt decisions of Donald Trump.
- But the US can do precious little about the leverage enjoyed by Pakistan and it cannot hope to break Pakistan's connections with the Taliban either militarily or diplomatically.
- Pakistan knows this and hence it is confident that one way or the other, it will get to play a key role in deciding the fate of Afghanistan.
- So this should be India's primary concern. The fact that global powers including the US cannot do much to break Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban and by extension over Afghanistan.
- At this point, even Iran, China and Russia are in agreement with Pakistan's position that the Taliban should be legitimised. In fact, it is the position of these countries that pushed the US and other western countries to change their stand on the Taliban.
- Iran, China and Russia have much to gain by embarrassing the US and by weakening its influence they stand to gain strategically. Because the return of the Taliban to power and the withdrawal of American troops works to the advantage of these countries.
- For the US, it is a Deja-vu moment as it is a repeat of its disastrous policy in Vietnam back in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Iran, Russia and China have also played a role in overplaying the threat posed by ISIS-Khorasan. Because this strategy helps them to project the Taliban as a better alternative compared to the brutalities of the ISIS. To this extent, these countries have played a negative role in Afghanistan which has pushed the Afghan civilian government on the back foot.
- This great game of geo-political rivalry between India-Pakistan and between US-Iran-China-Russia has eroded the legitimacy and credibility of the Afghan civilian government.
- If the conflict has to be resolved the key players need to sit and work together to chalk out a viable peace plan. The key players include – the United States, Afghan civilian government, Taliban and of course Pakistan. All the other countries can only enable the process.
- As far as India is concerned, it is high time that it abandons its idealist position and immediately open direct contacts with the Taliban.

