



Future of Peace Talks Gloomy as Afghan State Is Sidelined in Talks with the Taliban

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January 2019 was a busy month for Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, and Omar Daudzai, Special Representative on Regional Affairs for Peace Consensus appointed by President Ashraf Ghani. Khalilzad and Daudzai travelled to regional countries to discuss the Afghan peace talks in an attempt to garner regional support and consensus on a negotiated end to the prolonged Afghan conflict- each of them advancing the agenda of the government's they represent, which do not seem to converge at this juncture of the process. While Khalilzad's direct talks with the Taliban is gaining momentum, the Afghan government, feeling sidelined from the process, has undertaken a series talks with regional countries in an attempt to reclaim its position and garner regional support.

Khalilzad engaged with the Taliban directly and held several rounds of negotiations, predominantly focused on the issues of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and assurances by the Taliban that Afghan territory will not be used against the U.S. During the latest round of talks held between Khalilzad and the Taliban delegation over six days in Qatar, there were reports that both sides reached an agreement in a "framework in principle" on the above two mentioned issues. Some sources even reported a claim made by a Taliban representative that the US will [withdraw half of its troops](#) by April 2019, which was later [denied](#) by Khalilzad.

Immediately after the Doha round of talks, both the Taliban and the U.S. envoy stated that "[significant progress](#)" had been made during the six days of intense talks. However, the significant of this progress was lost on Afghans, who felt that progress would have denoted a cease-fire and direct talks with the Afghan state which did not happen. In response to this, Khalilzad in an interview with the local One TV reiterated that, "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and "everything" must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire." What this means is that the two parties were not able to reach an agreement over a cease-fire and entering an intra-Afghan dialogue. According to a [special interview](#) in local Pashto language with Abbas Stanekzai, the senior Taliban negotiator, said the two sides agreed to meet on 25 February in Doha where technical committees commissioned by the two parties, would present their plans for facilitating troop withdrawal by US and how the Taliban would assure Afghan territory would not be used in the future to attack the U.S.



Moreover, the notion of “intra-Afghan” dialogue has remained too ambiguous. First, different parties to the conflict are defining intra-Afghan in different way, is there a single definition available? Second, in what role, position and with what responsibilities would the Afghan government participate in this dialogue since the Taliban have adamantly refused to sit with them? Second, how will the parties ensure inclusivity is upheld in an intra-Afghan dialogue? If the composition of the Moscow conference is any sign of the inclusivity parties will support then Afghans have much to remain worried about.

Despite these developments and the rapid momentum U.S.-Taliban talks have taken, key issues remain unclear. These issues include the position and fate of the Afghan state, its young democracy, its Constitution and the fundamental rights of citizens enshrined therein. Without clarity on these issues, Afghans will continue to remain deeply concerned and unless the U.S. can facilitate direct talks with the Afghan state its talks will hit an impasse.

To conclude, the peace talks will face a deadlock unless there is enough clarity on these three issues: (a) the role and position of the Afghan state in further talks, (b) a clear definition of what intra-Afghan dialogue will look like and who it will include, and (c) what will happen to the gains of the past 18 years including the Afghan constitution, the fledgling democracy and citizens rights.