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Afghanistan Manoeuvres:

Sense and Nonsense of Talking to Taliban

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Afghanistan Manoeuvres: Sense and Nonsense of Talking to Taliban

*“It is easier to make war than to make peace”,
Georges Clemenceau*

Abstract

In return for all these soft power engagements India remains the most appreciated friend for the Afghans. But that does not seem to have helped India's strategic concerns. Viewing her unviability in deploying troops in any foreign venture - but maybe under the United Nations flag - as India eschewing from due military contribution to its cause, the US had recently pitched shrill missives to India to come forward to shoulder the burden of Afghanistan's security. In this context, there are many nuances to the Afghanistan manoeuvres which need to be considered in the background of past, present and future.

There could be many ways for India to upscale her contribution to the stability and progress of Afghanistan. Indeed, between the development projects undertaken to the extent of her not inconsiderable funding and executing capabilities at the one end, and the impractical idea of deploying troops on ground at the other end, there are many other possible ways to achieve that purpose – both in civil and military fields.

America's Long War

As the 17 years of stability operations has not resulted in Taliban being eradicated from Afghanistan, the United States (US) is intent on pulling out of what it considers to be an unending expanse of money and man sapping quagmire. The US has had enough of Afghan indulgence and Taliban intransigence - so its electoral politics dictate, apparently so. President Trump could not agree more. And he must have his way.

But there is a caveat. Having assumed the role of world-stabilising super power, US cannot just put its tail down and scoot. After all these years of mocking at its *bete noir*, the Russians' unceremonious exit from Afghanistan in the face of American protégée Mujahideens' 'victory', that caveat assumes a particular salience in order to avoid being at the receiving end of a mock-back. Since to the US, an honourable, planned and applauded farewell from Afghanistan imbroglio seems out of question, the least the Trump administration wants is to find a somewhat face-saving, even if short-term, expedient with the terrorist group to make the withdrawal of US forces seem less inglorious.

The American wariness has generated certain multi-player strategic manoeuvres which have elements of security related *sense* as well as *nonsense*. The resultant effects of these manoeuvres on the State of Afghanistan must await the time of reckoning. Meanwhile, the unfolding situation is discussed in this paper under the following heads:-

- a. Situation in Afghanistan.
- b. Engaging Taliban.
- c. Settlement: Terms of Reference.
- d. Finding a Solution.
- e. Summary of Observations.

I - Situation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan on Brink

It will be recalled that after chasing out the Taliban from its gut-churning five-year of barbaric rule in end-2001, the Americans had planned to thin out, gradually hand over the situation to the Afghan Government and withdraw their forces, approximately 10,000 in number at that time. As it turned out later, that hope turned banal as the US' attention shifted to Iraq and the troop strength came down to 3,000, thus giving the Taliban fanatics a breather to resurge. In the mid-2000s, as the Afghan Government started functioning as best as it could within the parameters of fiscal support received from donor nations, endemic in-house corruption and inefficiency, and deep-rooted intra-societal animosity, Taliban's organised acts of terrorism started to rise through an unending series of blood-letting attacks upon public, security forces and private targets. Soon, the Afghan State was under threat of falling into Taliban's bloody hands once again.

To save Afghanistan from relapse into Taliban dark age that had earlier horrified the entire world, and more to save their homelands from a primary source of terror attacks, US, NATO and allied troops engaged in counter-terrorist operations had to be raised to some 48,000 by 2008, the number rising further to 100,000 by 2009. In the years following, most key areas dominated by the Taliban terrorist hoards were freed and the group was pushed back into its safe sanctuaries in remote and underdeveloped parts.

... American decision to parley with the so far outcast Taliban has activated the worried neighbours – Russia, China, Iran – enough to find their own equations with the fanatic organisation that the Taliban undoubtedly remains ...

Forces' Draw-down and Surge

By 2014, the legitimate Afghan State had been more or less secured against being outright overrun by the Taliban terrorist machine, but its writ, somewhat tentatively, ran just over a half of the country. After the end of NATO mandate in 2015 and build-up of Afghan National Defence & Security forces (ANDSF) to take up much of counter-terror responsibility, US-NATO-Allied troops were then down scaled to around 10,000 or so.

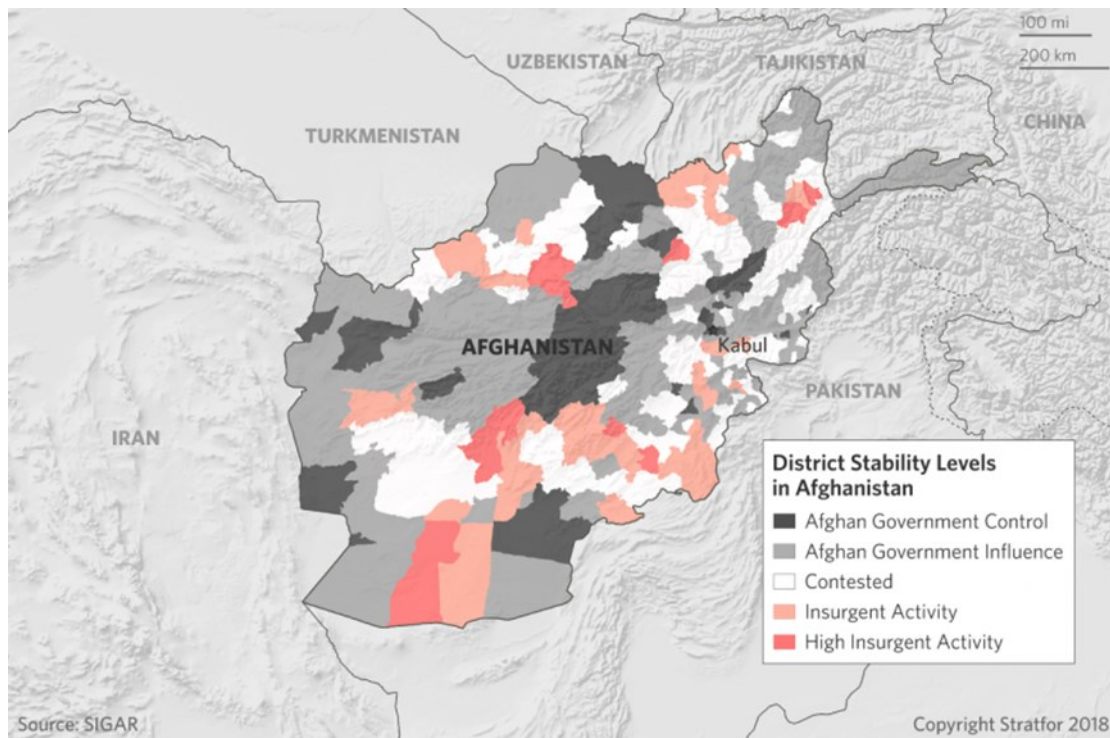
Since 2011, with the Afghan Government starting to operate on its own feet against Taliban's terror, the idea of US forces' 'draw-down', 'thin-out' or withdrawal had been contemplated as many as three times. Each time the idea sent shivers down the spines of everyone with fears of Afghanistan falling into Taliban's control and a return to its despicable terror trade. Nightmares of barbaric interpretation of religious injunctions and its mindless enforcement against all norms of civilised conduct, world-wide export of Islamist terrorism as a matter of undying faith and a religious commitment, and en-masse flight of refugees to other countries were invoked thus. Lip service apart, actually it was the last two of the fears that counted in the US-led alliance's decision making. Consequently, the American urge to get out of Afghanistan got translated into either postponement, reinforcement or even 'surge' of troops.

Presently, the situation on ground has come to a stalemate of sorts. It is estimated that the Government's controls about 55.5 percent of the Afghan country, mainly over the urban centres and hub areas of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif etc., while the Taliban exercises control over some 30 percent of the rural and relatively distant areas spread between central Afghanistan adjacent to the Pakistan border and some smaller areas in the West and North along the Turkmenistan and Tajikistan borders. The rest of the areas, some 15 percent or so, fall into 'contested' grey zones. Notably, in terms of population, it is estimated that the State controls approximately 63 percent while the Taliban influences 11 percent. But Taliban's suicide bombings of public establishments, and religious and ethnic rivals, abductions and extortion, and attacks on security forces' convoys and static posts continue with alarming frequency all across the country, including the capital of Kabul, resulting in heavy casualties on almost daily basis.ⁱ

The American and Afghan forces, in their present form of deployment, have found themselves checkmated by the Taliban fighters and their supporters from expanding the Government's control over many reckonable parts of the outlying countryside and bring about the necessary level of peace and stability at the pan-Afghanistan context. They have also found themselves rather vulnerable to Taliban's intermittent bombing, kidnapping and suicide attacks, and are unable to stop its relentless mayhem even in key areas under the state's administration. Tired of 17 years of Taliban and its clone factions' violence, the Americans have come to a stage that they want out – at any cost, so it seems.

... decision to give up is drawn from two conclusions: One, the casualties incurred ... are found to be unsustainable for any length of time; and two, that the Taliban cannot be defeated within the men and material resources affordable by the US-led alliance ...

So desperate President Trump is to keep his election promise to 'get out' that some acceptability, if not nobility, has been discovered even among the much disparaged Taliban extremists. The American decision to parley with the so far outcast Taliban has activated the worried neighbours – Russia, China, Iran – enough to find their own equations with the fanatic organisation that the Taliban undoubtedly remains. It has downed on these major players having interests in Afghanistan that stability is possible only with the Taliban's cooperation and that has left them with no choice but to reach some kind of palatable understanding with an innately unscrupulous group which uses terror and fear to arrogate for itself an absolute dictatorial control over the country, and justify that in the name of their own brand of draconian interpretation of religious injunctions.



II - Engaging Taliban

American Conclusions

The American decision to give up is drawn from two conclusions: One, the casualties incurred by the Afghanistan State are found to be unsustainable for any length of time; and two, that the Taliban cannot be defeated within the men and material resources affordable by the US-led alliance. The answer, as the US President believes - much to the chagrin of American strategic analysts including his now former Defence Secretary as well as serving and retired military commanders - is that his administration must come to terms with Taliban terrorists' promise of good behaviour and their supposed change of heart to accommodate some of the modern ideals of good governance. That belief, if hopefully sanctified through talks, can then let the US extricate from the muddle of its own creation.

As it would be seen, both the conclusions are debatable, if not doubtful. But to be fair, the American decision have elements of both, *sense* and *non-sense*.

... viewed in the long-term, history tells that a status of global super-power cannot be secured by absolving from extending helpful commitments to the larger humanity...

Notion of 'America First', Others Nowhere

The decision to abandon the painstakingly re-built the Afghanistan State and its modernised society to a situation of stalemate – and to the eventual mercy of Taliban fanatics – has upset the American strategic community no end, just as it has its allies, friends and secondary beneficiaries like China, Russia, Iran, the CARs, India etc., who remain vulnerable to the spread of Islamist terrorism. But President Trump seems to be determined that his administration would not be diverted this time around. He rejects the notion that the US must be the lead provider of security and stability to a 'parasitic' world order and pay with its own men and material to do so. In his words, "We are subsidising the militaries of many very rich countries all over the world, while at the same time these countries take total advantage of the US, and our taxpayers, on trade". He is convinced that the advantages of US being a super power would still be accrued without having to bear the larger burden of assuaging global security concerns.ⁱⁱ

When cited in the context of US funded and manned security assurances extended to the NATO, other allies or non-allies, and *inter alia* even some of China's overseas interests, 'Trumpism' appears to make *sense* to the President's home constituency of the rightists and the tax-payers. No doubt, from the view point of hard-line, self-centred political logic, the President's stance seems to be eminently *sensible* and justified. That becomes clear when tested against the many advantages that accrue from US' posturing to the benefits of equally self-interested powers without them having to offer commitments in return. The President therefore may not be distracted by many among the strategic community being upset with the turn of American policy. In any case, such experts themselves have not been immune to

subscribing to many past decisions which later proved to be detrimental to American interests.

Contrarily, when viewed in the long-term, history tells that a status of global super-power cannot be secured by absolving from extending helpful commitments to the larger humanity across the globe. Indeed, occasional blunders of serious consequences notwithstanding, America's military and soft power have undoubtedly helped keep the world order more or less stable. President Trump's calculations to maintain America's superiority without conforming to its global responsibilities are therefore liable to go awry when the affected nations are forced to find coalescence of their interests, to the exclusion of US' role.

Similar inward-fixated policies have proved to be detrimental to the US in the past - before and after World War I, for example. Conversely, global engagement has paid to the US much of its celebrated successes. But since adoption of tipsy decisions have been an old American habit, in the instance of abandoning Afghanistan to Taliban and its mentor, the ever-dangerous Pakistan, that may turn out to be a *nonsense* - and a big blow to regional stability and progress, and of course, to the super power's prestige.

... by all indications, the Taliban losses are many times higher in proportion... even the most brainwashed fanatics would be enthused no more by the lure of heavenly rewards as compensation for death or capture ...

Fear of 'Unsustainable' Losses

There is no doubt that Taliban's diabolic policy of indiscriminate terrorist attacks on defenceless targets to instil fear among the common citizens and thus force the state to capitulate to its barbaric rule has led to massive scale of human casualties, destruction of properties and vitiation of societal order. It is also true that the scale of losses suffered by the state apparatus cannot be sustainable in the long run and that a stage might come when citizens and institutions are forced to submit to Taliban rule in preference to death and destruction.

But it is also true that casualties inflicted upon Taliban could not have been any less. In fact, by all indications, the Taliban losses are many times higher in proportion. There is a difference though: Taliban does not care about its casualties; it sells 'martyrdom' as a duty in God's service and a short ladder to *jannant* (heaven) with all its enticing stocks of wine and women (sic). But soon enough, a stage should be coming when even the most brainwashed fanatics would be enthused no more by the lure of heavenly rewards as compensation for death or capture.

Americans may appreciate that the main trigger for Taliban's scaling up its terrorising attacks on soft targets is the open dithering over their commitment to Afghanistan's stability. By upscaling terrorist aggression, Taliban hopes to exploit the US-led alliance's weakening resolve. But certainly, the Taliban cannot sustain this scale of attacks for long. The *nonsense* of submitting to Taliban's bluff of ratcheting up its mindless destruction is therefore nothing but a case of a stronger and legitimate authority blinking first when faced by desperate attempts of a dictatorial, barbaric and deceptive cabal.

... traditional solidarity of the simple rural folk Afghans with Taliban's cleverly propagated interpretations of religious and tribal injunctions are the actual source of the latter's supposed 'invincibility' ... (but) the fact is that no organisation has ever been able to capture state power just by resorting to terrorist attacks ...

Notion of Taliban's 'Invincibility'

Tradition bound solidarity of the simple rural folk Afghans with Taliban's cleverly propagated interpretations of religious and tribal injunctions are the actual source of the latter's supposed 'invincibility'. Even the extremist factions of Taliban find solidarity as one of their 'own' from practically the entire Muslim *Ummah* (fraternity), though it is wished that the Taliban could, even while upholding fundamentalist ideology, shun their extremism and violence methods. The main plank of Taliban's popular endorsement comes from a contrived interpretation of an Islamist ideal, that of preventing the 'purity of Muslim lands' from being 'sullied by *Kafirs*' (non-believer) influence' (sic). Contrived opposition to the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan thus helps Taliban in securing loyalty of fanatic factions of the society as well as solidarity of most of the gullible rest. And that gives the Taliban a veneer of invincibility.

But whatever be the case, it is no secret to tribal and factional mentors as well as most of the citizens of Afghanistan that the Taliban's true purpose is to be rid of the Western forces, followed by overthrow, by violent means, the lawfully established state. It is also no secret for them that Taliban's interpretation of religious injunctions does not, in fact cannot, permit democratic principles to hold sway, and that notwithstanding recent promises of benign rule, installation of radicalised Mullah rule once again is their final goal. That fear of people's clear understanding of their true intent prevents Taliban from participating in the elders' *Jirga* (tribal council) or contesting elections.

Besides, if a young, tottering ANDSF, assisted by the US-led alliance, can, for over a decade, prevent Taliban from overrunning 70 percent of the country, there is no reason that the terror outfit, with lesser resources and opportunities, can overrun the state ever – that is, unless the strong have no stomach to fight for the right cause. Conversely, if ANDSF can hold full and partial control over 70 percent of Afghanistan, there is no reason that given due resources, that control cannot be extended to the rest 30 percent. Finally, freedom, stability and development minded Afghans may take strength from the historical fact that no group has ever been able to capture state power just by resorting to terrorist attacks. Therefore, unless the Afghanistan Government and its US-led allies throw down the gauntlet in panic, Taliban has to secure success in regular military conflict before it can find its political seat. That success however, is rather farfetched given the universal abhorrence of their ways.

Therefore, rather than abandoning Afghanistan to its fate, finding legitimate political and social accommodation with the people's innate, unwavering religious dogma should make *sense* - just as other Islamic nations, starting with the Saudi Arabia, have done

successfully. Indeed, it is possible to find accommodation among fundamentalist Muslim nations and their partners of the liberal West. Needless to state, *inter alia*, that step requires segregation of *fundamentalist-moderates* from the *radical-extremists* within the Taliban and dealing with the two in different ways. Indeed, that should demolish the Taliban's supposed invincibility.

Convenient discovery of Taliban's supposed 'invincibility' is a subterfuge, a *nonsense*.

... some indicators give rise to a hope that the present setup of Taliban, having learnt the lesson of global abhorrence of their barbaric rule over Afghanistan, has mellowed its destructive streak... fanatic hard-liners do not appear to be dominating the Taliban leadership, and much promises are made over some vestiges of liberty and progress ... (but there are) no conclusive evidences to show that there has been any change of Taliban heart and mind

Prospecting for Taliban's 'Good Behaviour'

By any count, after the mayhem it had subjected to Afghanistan during its six years of draconian rule, Taliban cannot be seen as anything but a self-appointed assembly of violent fanatics who must control every aspect of the people's lives and must force them to live but as condemned slaves of medieval Arabia – that is their idea of 'peace and stability'. At core, its agenda is no different than that of Al Qaida or Daesh - with which it has smooth cross-mobility, despite occasional rivalry - though the methods may sometimes be less diabolically demonstrative. Further, the Taliban have no concept of sharing power with those who differ even mildly. Contrarily, they are ordained to spread out their *ghazis* (terrorists) all over the globe to wage *jihad* (righteous war) and make the world submit to Islamist rule. Thus dominated by the fervour of their self-anointed cabal's extremist interpretation of religious injunctions and the supposed inviolability of such interpretations, the orthodox, extremist Taliban suffers no compunction in sully the very name of Islam that they motivate themselves with.

Taliban aims to establish an 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' that is ruled according to *Sharia* practices, similar to what the ISIS had tried in the Levant. The intent gets exposed when it is specified that: One, the *Sharia* practices have to be treated as absolutely inviolable 'God made law'; two, the *Sharia* must be according to the interpretation of a particular strain of radical Sunni cabal and much to the violent condemnation of all other lines of established Islamic theology; and three, that *Sharia* leaves no sanction for popular franchise to elect the Amir and his cohorts who must be self-anointed to rule over the realm arbitrarily and absolutely.

Believing in enforcement of tyrannical practices in the name of their version of *Sharia* - at the pain of flogging, dismembering and decapitating of non-compliers - to be a duty towards the Almighty, fanatic elements of Taliban do not permit even themselves any choice but to serve what they are programmed to consider as 'His cause'. Indeed, these are themselves but helpless prisoners of a horrifying agenda, their version of 'divine law' giving

them no sanction, none whatsoever, for any sort of accommodation or reconciliation with what is interpreted, arbitrarily by the ruling cabal, as *haram* (prohibited). None, not even their Caliph or Amir may have any flexibility on that account.

Admittedly, there are some indicators which give rise to a hope that the present setup of Taliban, having learnt the lesson of global abhorrence of their barbaric rule over Afghanistan, has mellowed its destructive streak. The fanatic hard-liners do not appear to be so brazen in dominating the Taliban leadership, and much promises are made over some vestiges of liberty and progress. That may be true. However, there are no conclusive evidences to show that there has been any primary change in Taliban heart and mind. Indeed, there are some concerns:-

- a. One, even the apparently ‘responsible’ Taliban does not flinch from routinely murdering innocent, defenceless masses, just as it shows no compunction in adopting to massive contraband opium commerce.
- b. Two, the group does not flinch from pronouncing its scornful denunciation of ‘man-made’ constitution, democracy, election, societal modernity or individual freedom. Even if miniscule among the wider global Muslim fraternity made up of multiples lines of Islamic theology, the Taliban remains insistent in its ‘ordained duty’ to impose its narrow, radical interpretation of Sunni Sharia system in Afghanistan - and as opportunities come by, on the entire Muslim world, and more, through an autocratic cabal headed by the most radical of all - the Amir.

Therefore, to expect the shot-callers of Taliban leadership to mellow down their medieval instincts and behave in civilised manners could turn out to be a self-deception and wishful *nonsense*. Utmost caution in engaging with even the proclaimed moderate factions of Taliban must be imperative.

... (with) many of their agenda being endorsed by a large chunk of Afghans, particularly by their rural and orthodox folk, empowering the Good Taliban and drawing them towards universally acceptable conduct would make *sense* ... many countries do follow similar ... kind of governing system and yet remain as responsible members of the global society...

The ‘Good’ Taliban

No doubt, the Taliban has many shades of noble convictions amongst its vast members, followers and sympathisers. It has acquired among its hierarchy a substantial membership of educated, articulate, reasonable and humane leaders of modern outlook. In fact, such individuals may well be in majority. It has been under their influence that the Taliban now speaks of its so far contemptuous ideals of female education, health services, rule of humane laws and similar facets of people-centric modernity. It could also be that with Mulla Omar and older Haqqani gone, and goaded by its international law-abiding West Asian sponsors led by Saudi Arabia, the Taliban has imbibed the lessons from universal rejection of its barbarity. Contrarily, the show of modest liberalism could also be to make it tolerable for the US-led alliance to withdraw, and to make itself more acceptable to the

Afghan people. As such, the fear of the extremist Taliban's return does remain palpable, and that fear needs to be alleviated by effective counter-measures.

Even if the Good Taliban prevail to arrive at negotiated settlement, two concerns remain:-

- a. One, in a group wherein the hierarchical ladder is ascended by the degree of radicalisation displayed, liberals among the Taliban leadership have to remain consigned to the margins, tolerated but vulnerable to violent purge. Therefore, if invited to share power under the influence of the Good Taliban, there still looms a strong possibility of the group executing about-turn after some farcical show of reconciliatory approach.
- b. Two, unquestionable 'finality' of radical ideology might not permit even a reformed Taliban to be accommodative of liberal values at the pain of their own purge at the hands of the more radicalised factions – those who proclaim themselves to be ideal, 'devout' Muslim, so to say.

But all said, because of many of their agenda being endorsed by a large body of Afghans, particularly by their rural and orthodox folk, empowering the Good Taliban - the abovementioned *fundamentalist-moderates* - and drawing them towards universally acceptable conduct at the State as well as individual levels would make *sense*. Having thus mainstreamed the moderate constituency, the *radical-extremists* could be marginalised and out-cast to wallow in their medieval stupor. Notably, many Arab countries, starting with Saudi Arabia, do follow somewhat *moderately restrictive* kind of governing culture and yet be recognised as responsible members of the global society.

... should the US, its allies and regional stake holders wish to see a stable and responsible Afghanistan with which they can live and trade, all efforts need to be directed at fostering a democratic and forward looking regime in that war-torn nation...

III - Settlement: Terms of Reference

Key Consideration

If the Taliban would find it difficult, even self-inflicting to change or compromise with its radical convictions and continue to keep Afghanistan in a state of violence and instability, *if* the US would remain sold to the expediency of military withdrawal, and all the while *if* the Afghan State and its people would pine for progress in an environment of peace and stability, then what could be the compromise formula for settlement of the conflict?

Whatsoever be the manner of settlement of the Afghan conflict, there are some fundamentals which must dictate the formula:-

- a. Firstly, in the contemporary world of human societies, freedom and democracy are irrefutable stipulations for long-term stability and progress; that is in spite of all kinds of local and regional rivalries and conflicts that pervade all over. Realisation of that stipulation is reflected in even autarkic regimes - like the Arabian Emirates, monarchies and Communist rulers, who could impose fundamentalist values *before* the surge for individual empowerment gained momentum. Presently, in order to survive, such regimes are obliged to loosen their dictatorial impositions which they had made in the past on the pretext of religion or ideology. Indeed, even in a religious-minded nation like Afghanistan there would be no place for any self-appointed cabal to impose its regressive and despotic rule in the name of their narrow and extremist interpretation of Islam without instigating civil strife – not for long anyway.
- b. Secondly, past records indicate that there is every possibility that once the Taliban assumes power, the mature and amenable elements of the Taliban leadership could be overthrown by frenzied hard-liners. There is also the possibility that the settled agreements are renegaded on the justification of the terms not being in accordance with their brand of Islam, and the group having been ostensibly forced to acquiesce in ‘expediency’. Therefore, even if the Good Taliban emerge as an acceptable partner in arriving at an agreement to normalise Afghanistan, there have to be firm assurances that once the Good Taliban led or partnered governance is installed, the understandings are not allowed to be subverted by the *radical-extremist* Taliban through its trade-mark violent means.
- c. Thirdly, and most importantly, various myriad influential Afghan groups and factions would be required to keep their internal differences and deep rivalries in abeyance, and neither sabotage the agreement nor start another bout of internal, violent conflicts. Given the compelling inclinations of such groups, that condition would be difficult to meet, and a politically conferred Taliban might find many breakaway groups turning the tables on them. Peace would then remain elusive.

In sum, should the US, its allies and the regional stake holders wish to see a stable and responsible Afghanistan with which they can live and trade, and be free from inflow of terrorism, then all efforts need to be directed at fostering a democratic and forward looking regime in that war-torn nation. That could well be the Good Taliban, given certain stipulations.

Gist of Taliban’s ‘conditions’ as spelt out at the Moscow Conference, and India Country Statement at the Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, both held in November 28, 2018, are listed at Appendices A & B respectively.

... effect of reduced numbers of US and allied troops upon ANDSF operations would be reckonable, but not crippling ... given due ranges of armament, air, intelligence and logistic support, even that effect may be overcome...

US Angle

President Trump's method of engagement seems to be clear by now. Like in any commercial negotiation, it is to pronounce shocking quotes and then make some concessions to the back-footed party to secure settlements in more favourable terms than what would have been otherwise. Such tactics might work in commerce, but geo-politics is a different game altogether. Therefore, success of Trump's method would need to be tested in times to come.

US' partial withdrawal might be a carrot for Taliban, severely crippled, stagnated and on the verge scattering of its support base, to grab at an opportunity to claim success from a hopeless position. Conversely, it could also be a 'Trump-ist' brinkmanship to get its allies to contribute better for their own security against export of terror. Engaging with its ideological enemy, Taliban, could also be a message to China, Russia, Iran, even India and the CARs, that their free ride of US' security umbrella might be over, and that it is time they shoulder some of the burden of keeping the region free of terrorists in some way or the other. Finally, if it comes to reversal of American interests, what in any case might stop the super power to land up on Afghanistan once again?

Notably, US deals with Taliban without renouncing its policy of 'not negotiating with terrorists'. But then it may be possible to explain away, to the delight of the hopefuls, that the Taliban are presently elevated to a rebel, insurgent, albeit violent, organisation, and therefore qualify for formal confabulations.

Military Angle

There are reportedly 16,910 regular troops deployed in Afghanistan under 'Operation Resolute Support' (RS) and 'Operation Freedom Sentinel' (OFS) missions from 27 NATO and 14 operationally allied countries. The US troop contribution is 8500 and 5500 respectively. The RS mission is engaged in training, advising and assisting the ANDSF while the OFS mission targets the Al-Qaida, Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and their factions to prevent their resurgence to target the West. There are 25 Counter-Insurgency (CI) Advisory Cells and nearly 240 private security contracts operative in Afghanistan who employ approximately 25,000 former military personnel. The ANDSF, with over 300,000 active personnel at 90 percent of authorised strength, executes the CI operations with RS personnel grouped with them as operational advisors.

Opposing the ANDSF is the Taliban with its fighters' estimated between 30-40,000, and another 3-4,000 of the Al Qaida and the IS terrorists. Even if fanatically motivated, these are but lightly armed militia having little of combat support back up. They depend on hit-and-run, swarming or suicide attacks against soft targets to instil fear and despondency. Against the ANDSF, their successes have generally been found against remote and vulnerable static posts while their performance against ANDSF offensive operations has been dismal. Finally, Taliban's fighting capability comes from illegal opium trade and smuggling of armaments, petroleum, medicines etc., and with some stringent efforts such income can be choked.

In the present context, with the withdrawal of 7000 US personnel, the strength of mission troops would be down to 10,000 or so. Even if the withdrawal is total, there is every possibility that elements of regular allied forces would remain in advisory, operational support and liaison roles, besides the large contingents of private security contractors. Having gained years of operational experience, effect of reduced numbers of US and allied troops upon ANDSF operations would therefore be reckonable, but not crippling. Given due ranges of armament, air, intelligence and logistic support even that effect may be overcome.

Finally, in practical terms, the withdrawal could be compensated to some extent by various professionally applied tactical alternatives. In any case, there being many instances of US' troop 'draw-downs' and 'surges' in the past and its vast ability to re-induct, the withdrawal means little as long as the Americans are intent in fulfilling their Afghanistan commitment.

... besides the orthodox, radical and brutal Taliban, Pakistan's haughty afflictions remain as the other source of all troubles of Afghanistan ... the only recourse to free and democratic Afghanistan is to purge the Pakistan's proxy, the orthodox fixated Taliban...

Afghan Angle

As discussed above, dependence on anything more than minor partnership of moderate elements of Taliban, to promote a sovereign, democratic and progressive Afghanistan would be too short-sighted a venture. In any case, the fate of a modern and stable Afghan State would mainly be decided by the quantum of fiscal assistance provided to the legitimate Government alongside a sustained supply of military hardware. Ruthless enforcement of trade sanctions to cut the Taliban's jugular - opium and extortion trade – too would be necessary not only for a violence free Afghanistan, but also to save the humanity from terror strikes and drug addiction.ⁱⁱⁱ

Further, as the international community is aware, the Afghans know that besides the radical and brutal Taliban, Pakistan's haughty affliction of controlling Afghanistan remains as the source of all troubles. Since sobering of a habitually intransigent Pakistan has proved to be a difficult proposition even for its traditional patron, the US, the only recourse to a free and democratic Afghanistan is to purge Pakistan's proxy, the orthodox fixated Taliban.

Pakistan Angle

More than even the Taliban, Afghanistan's sovereign dispensation is tampered by Pakistan's convoluted, pompous ambitions. Pakistan cannot live with Afghanistan when it is not under its thumb, the notion having its roots at the latter's repudiation of the arbitrarily drawn Afghan-Pakistan Border (the Durand Line, drawn by the British colonial power), Afghan's traditional ties with Pakistan's rebellious Baloch, and the trans-border spill of Pakhtoon nationalism, all of which pose grave danger to Pakistan's narcissist afflictions. Besides, Pakistan sees Afghanistan as providing it a necessary 'strategic depth' against its sworn enemy, India's aggression, supposedly to run over Pakistan. Finally, peace in Afghanistan would displace Pakistan from its free ride of strategic centrality in the region

and all the handles that comes to its grip by that centrality; Pakistan's loss of 'coalition support funds' adds to that concern.

An unencumbered Afghanistan being unacceptable thus, Pakistan remains committed to offer to the Taliban a firm base to live, organise, and operate in Afghanistan. Pakistan does so, even against the American pressure, in the fond belief that a Taliban regime in Kabul would be its beholden proxy. A Pakistan dictated regime would then clamp down on its recalcitrant terrorist protégées while allowing it to continue to deploy its pet terrorists to wreck havoc in India – and may be, if it comes to that, in rest of the liberal societies.

To that extent, besides Taliban, Pakistan's supercilious impulses are the main scourge against the rise of a sovereign, democratic and progressive dispensation in Afghanistan. Ironically, it is a scourge that does not let Pakistan itself to be in peace. Conflict situations in Afghanistan, in some form or the other, can be remedied only if Pakistan is helped to be rid of its prejudiced concoction of exaggerated apprehensions and inflated ambitions.

... (all) are intent on securing their interests, at minimal costs, under the US' security umbrella ... if the US troops are withdrawn, and that leads to an extremist Taliban ruled or even dominated regime assuming power, all the Taliban-zesters' enthusiasm will evaporate ...

Regional Stake-holders' Angle

China and Russia have been reaching out, surreptitiously to begin with, to the Taliban for some time now. For China it was a compulsion to keep its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province pacified against the Islamist rebels who have found sanctuaries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan, Pakistan and even some of the CARs. The Russian approach was similarly motivated by the need to keep the rising Uzbek militancy under control. Basically, both aimed at cultivating Taliban and buy it out from promoting Islamist terrorism in their realms.

China entertains grandiose plans to exploit Afghanistan's natural resources to its benefits. It aims at building a China-Afghanistan-Pakistan regional cooperation forum to protect its security and promote trade. Russia too is intent on keeping its traditional soft underbelly free of inimical forces. Both are intent on securing their interests, at minimal costs, taking advantage of the US' security umbrella. When the US went beyond informal contacts to reach out to Taliban formally, fear of Taliban gaining upper hand in Afghanistan gave impetus to the regional stake holders, including the staunch Shia flag-holder Iran, to seek their own understandings with their anathema, Taliban. Thus Russia and possibly China and Iran have reportedly gone to the extent of supplying certain arms consignments besides offering or promising other 'gifts'. For Russia and Iran such steps are also a function of their hostility to the US. Even Turkey, flexing its muscles in the Middle East with the US' endorsement post-Syria withdrawal and humoured by a loan-seeking Pakistan, has joined the queue of Taliban-zesters. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have

already shown their interest in a moderate Taliban ruled Afghanistan and so gain another follower of their archaic systems.

... with Americans in a state of weariness, brutal Taliban pompous in flouting its patronage from sworn enemies, Pakistan in ecstasy of its rediscovered strategic 'centrality', and China and Russia submitting to confabulations with Taliban, India's influential status in Afghanistan seems to be on a way to marginalisation ...

All such courting of Taliban would be giving it the standing of a political force. But it is certain that if the US troops are withdrawn, and that leads to an extremist Taliban ruled or even dominated regime assuming power, all the Taliban-zesters' enthusiasm will evaporate. None would be able to find understanding with such a radical brand of Sunni extremism, neither would they be willing to bear the fiscal cost of supporting a Taliban government in Kabul. That might even provoke the innately violent group to find its own logic to select and target its unhelpful 'satan' – and all those involved parties know that.

For the regional contenders, the US' departure from Afghanistan would have mixed results, notwithstanding their soft welcoming of the US' troop – but not commercial - withdrawal. They would have to buy at substantial costs – particularly being the *kafirs* and foreign 'polluters' of 'pure' lands - security of their establishments and share the profits of commercial ventures. Indeed, as all stake holders appreciate, even while succumbing to short-sighted expediencies, that with an extremist dominated Taliban ruling in Afghanistan and partnering Pakistan, the region would be a lesser hospitable place to live and work in the longer run.

... strategic bind demands India to ratchet up her contribution even against her modest parameters of fiscal affordability and military prudence. The other alternative could be to join the bandwagon in coming to terms with what might pass as the 'Good Taliban' ...

India's Strategic Bind

As a key component of its neighbourhood of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-CARs Region, an independent and modern Afghanistan is imperative for India's own security and commerce. But there are intractable problems galore. The first and most fundamental one is the animus barrier imposed by an ever-obdurate Pakistan which stymies the fruition of traditional bonhomie that exists between India, Afghanistan and the CARs. This is one hostile territorial barrier because of which India's commercial as well as cultural contacts in the neighbourhood remain but costly and time consuming to nurture.

While repudiating the US' repeated hints to the committal of Indian troops in Afghan-Taliban conflict, India has remained focused at infrastructural development projects in Afghanistan. On that account she has engaged in building key roads, damming and power generation, capacity building training and education, and health services. In so doing, she has not been deterred by the succession of Pakistan-Taliban-Haqqani perpetrated violent

attacks on her unarmed civilian personnel and material assets that she has deployed on civic projects. Thus so far, in spite of her own fiscal limitations, India has committed over \$3 billion to the civic progress of Afghanistan – much higher figures are also referred to. On the military front, India's participation in the group of Afghan benefactors is also reflected through specified spares and maintenance support and transfer of certain armaments to the ANDSF, and the recent transfer of attack helicopters. Besides, India has been making a singular contribution by imparting training to large numbers of officers and men of the ANDSF.

In return for all these soft power engagements India remains the most appreciated friend for the Afghans. But that does not seem to have helped India's strategic concerns. Having got hold of the American's collar due to their dependency for operational logistic in Afghanistan, Pakistan feels free in unbridled targeting of Indian interests in that country, either directly or through its terrorist pets. Meanwhile, viewing her unviability in deploying troops in any foreign venture - but under the United Nations flag - as India eschewing from due military contribution to its cause, the US had recently pitched shrill missives to India to come forward to shoulder the burden of Afghanistan's security.

With the unhappy Americans in a state of weariness, the Taliban pompous in flouting its newfound recognition from sworn enemies, Pakistan in ecstasy of its rediscovered strategic 'centrality', and China, Russia and Iran submitting to confabulations with Taliban, India's influential status in Afghanistan seems to be on a way to marginalisation. That indeed would be a severe setback to the long-term interests of Afghanistan, the region and India, in that order. The answer may lie in the fact that the eventual objective of all stake holders – regional nations, America and its European partners, besides India of course – converges on preventing Afghanistan from falling into a pit of instability, violence and despotic rule.

Maybe, such a strategic bind demands India to ratchet up her contribution even against her modest parameters of fiscal affordability and military prudence. The other alternative could be to join the bandwagon in coming to terms with what might pass as the 'Good Taliban' while keeping Pakistan at bay from sabotaging such effort.

... larger coalition of all stake holders, including the regional ones, to consolidate Afghanistan's modernity and stability ... is a *sensible* option. This mission should ... earn a United Nations mandate...

IV - Finding a Formula

Contradictory Goals

US, and others, are in parleys with Taliban to find reconciliation between two opposite goals. One goal is to ensure the continuation of a democratic, modern and stable Afghanistan, and that requires long-term civil and military commitments which fouls with the present urge to withdraw. Conversely, the powerful radical faction of Taliban aims at enforcement of draconian interpretation of Islamic rule through violence and terror. Indeed, there is no common ground unless one gives up – and that may not be the extremist Taliban.

Presently, a realisation that it could not come out victorious in this conflict, a decimated Taliban shows up to be agreeable in toning down its extremist ideas and tyrannical methods of enforcing these. Similarly, having understood that the Afghan masses are more or less amenable to living under moderated versions of Taliban-interpreted Sharia system, the Western champions of democracy and freedom are ready to terminate their resource sapping operations and leave Afghanistan under a more tolerant autarkic rule that follows modern norms of civilised conduct. By all means, such signs of moderation could lead to an honourable compromise.

But the problem lies in uncertainty of the Taliban's post-compromise behaviour. After all, it remains an extremist outfit which credits itself by being unbound by civilised norms – to recall Bamiyan, beard, bourka and bullet, and none regretted.

Repudiation of Extremist Rule

Point to appreciate in this context is that in case the Taliban is allowed to ratchet-up its armed and fanatical muscle to corner the State, a stage might come when the people and even the troops find it expedient, for survival, to dump the cause of liberty, modernity and progress under duress – as it has happened before. If that happens, and as the internal societal fissures and strong rivalries within the Taliban come to the fore, that would soon enough lead to return of the days of war-lords and their private armies of military deserters and outlaws. There would then be a revisit of widespread anarchy in the region.

The other point, to reiterate, is that though the Taliban leadership of the day may comprise of reckonable numbers of moderates and modernists, these are liable to change colour or be marginalised by the extremists once the power-grab is successful. Needless to reiterate that return of such forces in Afghanistan would hurt even at the global level, and the choice before the stake-holders for stability would be worse than what it is at present.

As discussed, if the Afghan State remains resolute in not giving up to extremist's rule and the international community continues to render effective support – for its own good - the Taliban cannot be expected to capture legitimate power just by their recourse to terror and irregular militant actions. That is, even if the Afghan leadership remains seeped in internal rivalries, and even if the Taliban, encouraged by the American haste to pull out, sees its victory coming around the corner. Theoretically, that leaves certain options to defang the Taliban before squeezing out its poison over time.

Three Options

One option, of long-term salience, could be to adopt deliberate military means to decimate the extremist leadership of Taliban armed groups which control certain parts of the country. There are two models of offensive actions to achieve that end: One, through intense military operations, recapture of Fallujah, Iraq, in November 2004 being an example; and two, a deliberate, unhurried, steady multi-spectral campaign, for example, the eviction of the ISIS from its Mosul-Raqqa strongholds. Of course, both the models would require larger and long-term troop deployment and focused military-civic approach at a scale higher than what has been seen so far.

Another option could be to hold the Taliban at the present state of stalemate without stipulating any time-line. In all likelihood, a resolve to deny Taliban indefinitely against its

promise of impending victory might trigger despondency among the Taliban cadres and lead to its eventual debilitation. This option has been successfully exercised in many countries, including Russia in Chechnia, India in the North-East and US-Coalition in Iraq.

The third option would be similar to what the US and the regional stake holders are presently trying out. Herein, instead of absolute rejection of the entire Taliban, the ‘Good’ among them leadership may be encouraged to join in parlays to find an acceptable, long-lasting solution, and assisting them in gaining ascendancy in the Taliban leadership. In this instance, it would be imperative to appoint a ‘guardian force’ to keep the Good Taliban from relapsing into their old ways and to keep order in Afghanistan.

United Nations Mandate

Reinforcing the Afghan State’s security and economic stability with resources committed at the global level would bury the streak of extremism and violence for good – at the local as well as global level. More importantly, it would be a chastising message of unanimous global rejection of extremism to the wannabe terrorists of tomorrow. Besides, such conjoined effort from the entire civilised world would assuage US’ piqué at being over-burdened. For the Western world and regional neighbours, that should be a reasonable price to secure against their societies’ vulnerability to terrorist mayhem. It could also be a message to the Afghan polity to do more to stand on their own feet.

A larger coalition of all stake holders, including the regional ones, to consolidate Afghanistan’s modernity and stability, in whatever manner they can, is a *sensible* option. This mission should go beyond the Geneva Process to earn a United Nations mandate. With all the Permanent Members of its Security Council being the affected parties, promulgation of that mandate should pose no problem.

Economic Factor

Needless to state, in all cases, Afghan economy will have to be kept propped up through uninterrupted infusion of foreign aids, grants, loans, expertise etc. till it can stand on its feet. Lamentations of Afghans’ corruption and inefficient use of fiscal grants notwithstanding, adequate fiscal assistance to retain all the sections’ interest in a free, democratic and progressive Afghan State must be an expediency at this sensitive juncture.

Participative India

India cannot afford to add to her woes by letting Afghanistan turn into another ground, besides Pakistan, for religious extremism, terrorism and a barrier to regional connectivity. Given the goodwill India enjoys, even an ever-inimical Pakistan has had to admit to India’s role in that country. There is therefore a strong case for India to adopt to the looming emergency in coordination with her strategic partners – US and her allies, Russia, China, Iran. Should that call for more measures than what India already offers, that could be weighed, devoid of fixated emotions, and complied with to the extent practical.

India has many ways to upscale her contribution to the stability and progress of Afghanistan. Indeed, between the development projects undertaken to the extent of her not inconsiderable funding and executing capabilities at the one end, and the impractical idea of

deploying troops on ground at the other end, there are many other possible ways to achieve that purpose. In the civil sector, the contributions could be in wider forms of skill development, technical training, higher education, medical and engineering support, sharing science and technology, including agricultural expertise, electronics and telecommunication, logistic infrastructure - the possibilities are many. Even in strengthening the ANDSF, India can upscale to a larger role - to the extent decided by Afghanistan Government. Advanced technical and tactical training, repair and maintenance support, management of intelligence and surveillance, build-up of military industry and logistic capabilities including manufacturing of basic military hardware etc. are some examples in that context.

V - Summary of Observations

Every stake holder for Afghanistan's democracy, stability and progress appreciates the severe consequences of the Taliban assuming power unless it discards its *radical-extremist* ideology. They also understand that even in a power sharing arrangement between the legitimate, democratic Government and the supposedly reformed and accommodative factions of the Taliban, the latter, given its fanatic instincts, would have to be kept in close observation, and guaranteed intervention if necessary.

The Taliban has so far refused to hold formal talks with the Afghan Government without the United States coming to an agreement with them; though some change in that attitude is expected to be made. Accordingly, the US-Taliban talks, with fringe participation of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, probably Turkey and more, have not been without serious differences, particularly on matters of release of Taliban terrorists, a time table for foreign forces' withdrawal and sanctity of the elected Afghan Government.^{iv,v}

The American stance on withdrawal of its troops, besides enticing the Taliban to negotiate, signals to all the stake holders to join in stabilising Afghanistan. Thus there have been calls to Russia, Pakistan and India to 'involve in fighting'. Arguably, President Trump's stance is not altogether illogical, given that except India's contribution in bolstering Afghanistan's civic infrastructure, the other regional players, China and Russia in particular, have been of little help in stabilising Afghanistan.

Contrarily, while China and Russia have made accommodative gestures to the Taliban, Pakistan and its Taliban proxy have loomed over that nation in the role of a relentless destabiliser. It is also observed that the Taliban remains brazen in its killings and bombings, repudiation of popularly elected governance and commitment to extremist agenda, and encouraged by its new-found acceptability, has been making arrogant statements like threatening the Americans with a 'Soviet-type' fate. That goes to reinforce the uncertainty regarding the Taliban's post-compromise behaviour. In that kind of situation developing, even India would find it difficult to continue its development projects, particularly in the event of withdrawal of US' security umbrella.

Pronouncement of US troop withdrawal has triggered a new set of considerations, one evidence being Pakistan making conciliatory gestures - obviously directed at soothing the American's disappointment with its intransigence – including bringing the Taliban to the

talks. The Government of Afghanistan, in the meantime, has expressed its resolve to fight the Taliban extremists. Counter-insurgency operations have been announced by the ANDSF in Baghlan, Jawzjan, Faryab, Helmand, Farah and Kunduz provinces where Taliban has high presence .^{vi,vii}

In the ongoing parleys, preliminary gestures and semantics would soon encounter the wall of hard realities which the either party would find tricky to negotiate. Some indications of that have started to manifest in the forms of serious differences between the US special representative for the peace talks and the Afghan Government on one hand had stalemate between the former and the Taliban. More and more serious differences are to be expected when it comes to Taliban's approach to the Government of Afghanistan, and thereafter, on matters of the modalities and checks of power sharing between the practically unbridgeable ideologies among the Afghans and between the radicals and the Western stakeholders. It is not certain as to how and if at all would the internal differences between various factions of Taliban would be reconciled, as to what would be the sanctity of any agreement with them, and as to what mechanism – political, economic and military - is put into place to make any agreed settlement to last.

With her stakes so high and risk of marginalisation so palpable, Afghanistan must remain as a high priority concern among the Indian policy makers. It may therefore be the time for her to continuously review the matter and adopt necessary course corrections in her political, economic and military articulations in favour of an Afghanistan that must be unencumbered by destructive ideology and free from neighbourhood machinations to emerge as a truly sovereign, stable, democratic state.

End Notes:

- i. Report by the US Department of Defense on, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," of December 2018.
- ii. NY Times, 24 Dec 2018.
- iii. In 1989, when the Soviet Union pulled out, it was the lack of international support to the shaky Afghan Government which led to the latter's capitulation to the Taliban savages after a bloody, seven years of civil war.
- iv. Reporting by Reuters and AFP.
- v. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-negotiators- in-u-a-e-for-u-s--brokered-talks- with-taliban/29663444.html>
- vi. Radio Free Afghanistan, December 18, 2018.
- vii. Tolo News, December 26, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghan-forces-focus-insecure-regions-winter-operations>

Image Source:

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Appendix A

Gist of Taliban (Islamic Emirate) Conditions spelt out at the Moscow Conference, Nov 18

Preliminary Conditions for Peace:-

1. Removal of Sanctions List
2. Release of Detainees
3. Formal opening of the Office.
4. Stopping poisonous propaganda against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Obstacles to Peace:-

- End foreign Occupation.
- An independent Islamic System.
- Guarantee for peace agreements.
- Constitutional Revision.
- US policy change from war to peace.
- But the Taliban again stressed the group would only hold direct talks with the US - not the Kabul government.

Appendix B

Gist of India Country Statement at Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, November 28, 2018

- This was an opportunity to take stock of the progress made and plan for securing the future of the people of Afghanistan marked by peace, security, self-reliance and connectivity.
- There has been considerable progress in the last 17 years - especially in promoting education and health care, protecting the rights of women, children and the marginalised; securing lives; improving governance and reforms; generating livelihood; moving Afghanistan towards self reliance. Democracy is taking deeper roots.
- India condemns the mindless terrorist violence against the innocent Afghan population. India supports all efforts for a political settlement in Afghanistan which are inclusive, promotes unity, peace, security, democracy and builds a self-reliant and prosperous Afghanistan.
- It is important that all such efforts for peace and reconciliation should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. The Afghan side should have greater responsibility of running and managing its own affairs. International community need to continue to support the people and the Government in this effort.
- India has been engaged in a development partnership with Afghanistan that is based on the objectives of building capacities for governance; training human resource; creating infrastructure; enhancing connectivity; promoting trade and investment. India has committed over US\$ 3 billion towards economic development, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and capacity building in Afghanistan and embarked upon 'New Development Partnership' last year. 116 High Impact Community Development Projects are being implemented in 31 provinces of Afghanistan, including in the areas of education, health, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, renewable energy, flood control, micro-hydropower, sports infrastructure, administrative infrastructure.
- There remains much to be done. This requires continued commitment and sharing of responsibilities by the Government of Afghanistan and all its international partners to build a political, social economic environment enabling Afghanistan to strengthen peace, security and sustainable development.
- Economic recovery would need to be continued after political settlement is achieved. Thus, we need to look at a mechanism for the same. Also, for sustainable peace, prosperity and stability it is equally important that the international community continue to support the Government, the people and the National Defence Forces of Afghanistan to combat terror and violence imposed on them and ensure that verifiable actions are taken to end safe havens.

On November 27, the first day of the two-day Geneva conference, the European Union announced 474 million euros (\$535 million) in financial aid for Afghanistan.

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The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

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