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In Afghan Peace Derailment, a Wagon of Hope



The suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the global community and India to reset the peace process.

In a characteristically **mercurial** tweet on September 9 morning (Indian Standard Time), U.S. President Donald Trump abruptly called off ‘peace’ talks with the Taliban — led directly by the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad — citing the killing of an American soldier just days before in a suicide bomb attack for which the Taliban claimed credit. He also revealed that he had secretly invited the Taliban and the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, separately to Camp David over the weekend to **clinch** a deal personally. The agreement had been in the making over nine rounds of talks, largely in Doha, Qatar, of which the Afghan government was not a part on account of a Taliban veto that the U.S. implicitly accepted, **ostensibly** to bring peace to Afghanistan.

The tweet capped a **turbulent** week during which Mr. Khalilzad briefed Mr. Ghani and the Chief Executive Officer of the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah on the **interim** agreement over several rounds of talks. They were shown but not given a copy of this. The **salient** details of the agreement were revealed on a private television channel on the evening of September 2. They centered primarily on an initial timetable for the withdrawal of around 5,400 out of nearly 14,000 U.S. troops from five Afghan bases in 135 days. Also included was a tight timeline of two weeks to kick-start intra-Afghan talks before the Afghan presidential elections scheduled on September 28.

The announcement was accompanied by a wave of violence that included offensives against strategic provincial capitals in the north and suicide bombings in Kabul, including one just as Mr. Khalilzad was **wrapping up** his TV interview. They were clearly intended to **sabotage** the elections. These were not allowed to affect the agreement.

The deal as negotiated was one-sided, partial and highly flawed. It was loaded heavily towards Mr. Trump’s goal of a withdrawal of all U.S. troops by November 2020, weak in guarantees against terrorism aimed at the U.S., and lacking safeguards for the security and stability for Afghanistan. Unresolved differences over the withdrawal of the remaining troops (8,600) amid U.S. insistence on a residual counter-terrorism (CT) and intelligence presence, and a lack of trust in the Taliban at critical levels in the U.S., were among the reasons for Mr. Trump’s decision.

Other elements of what the U.S. maintained was a composite agreement, were also seriously compromised. The comprehensive ceasefire was **watered down** to a limited ‘reduction’ in violence (observed more in its escalation).

And, the intra-Afghan government talks effectively downgraded, under Taliban pressure, to talks with a non-official **delegation**. The Afghan government with which the U.S. has bilateral strategic partnership and security agreements, was sidelined and powerless, contributing to a public sense of helplessness that decisions regarding Afghanistan were being taken by foreigners. The government has gained from the **backlash**.

The most **insidious** aspect of the announcement was its timing and attempt to rush intra-Afghan talks just days before the presidential elections with the aim of undermining the elections and **rendering** them meaningless. The fear was that if successful, they could have undercut plans to instal an interim, transitional or power-sharing arrangement that could provide the fig-leaf of a mechanism and an illusion of peace to pull out U.S. forces. It would have **paved the way** for a dominant position for the Taliban in any future dispensation before they took over power altogether and pushed Afghanistan towards instability and even a civil war worse than the intra-Mujahideen fighting of the 1990s with unpredictable consequences.

More fundamentally, the agreement was also widely criticised in the U.S. and elsewhere. It was seen as a “negotiated withdrawal”, “**abdication**”, and even a “surrender” rather than a peace agreement, sacrificing the political, military and economic investments and civic gains of the last 18 years including democracy and the advancement of women, and creating the conditions for a likely descent into civil war, fanning radical extremism. In Afghanistan, the agreement was widely perceived as a sell-out and a betrayal of Afghanistan to the Taliban and Pakistan. These are concerns Indians share deeply.

Under the circumstances, **notwithstanding** the manner and reasons for calling off the talks for which Mr. Trump has been rightly **lamponed** — particularly the shocking invitation to the Taliban to Camp David just days before the 9/11 anniversary— his tweet at least had the virtue of pulling Afghanistan away from the brink of disaster foretold. Behind the decision was an instinct that it was a bad deal for the U.S. and **exasperation** with the Taliban’s attempts to extract maximum advantage for the meeting; the Taliban’s insistence on the announcement of the deal before the visit, deprived him of the limelight for sealing the deal.

However, while Afghans and the world may breathe a sigh of relief that the Khalilzad deal has been **aborted** for now, this may be short-lived. The mindset of a unilateral pullout unmindful of its consequences for Afghanistan and the region and the danger of Trumpian swings, remains. For now, Mr. Trump has proclaimed the talks to be “dead” and ordered offensive operations. But he still needs a counter-terrorism strategy for which he would have to look for options. The demand for a peace process will also remain. Things could change again in a few months.

Nevertheless, the suspension of U.S.-Taliban talks has opened the space for the holding of Afghan presidential elections and a window of opportunity for the international community and India to reset their approach to peace and withdrawal.

First, the Afghan election authorities and security forces should be supported in every way to conduct free and fair elections as an exercise of Afghan sovereignty. Concerns about misuse of government apparatus should be addressed. The Taliban will try to disrupt it. But a reasonably good turnout even if elections are held only in secure areas would be a barometer of support elsewhere, victory for the constitutional order and ‘Islamic Republic’, and a **repudiation** of the ‘Islamic Emirates’ of the Taliban.

Second, its outcome could provide a stronger foundation for talks with the Taliban that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled, and not as dictated from Washington, Islamabad, Doha or Moscow. India should be able to support such talks.

Third, free from elections, the Afghan government should take the lead in forging a national consensus behind talks with the Taliban that it has failed to do until now.

Fourth, the international community should support this process and focus its efforts on the Taliban to demonstrate their 'nationalism' by distancing themselves from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, halting attacks against fellow Afghans, agreeing to a ceasefire, and negotiating directly with a representative Afghan delegation.

Fifth, resumed U.S. military pressure on the Taliban is not enough. The Doha talks **dispel** any doubt that the route to peace in Afghanistan is through Pakistan even though it was the U.S. that was making the concessions. Every possible instrument should be brought to bear on Pakistan to deliver on this. Crucial to Afghanistan's future is its ability to stand on its own feet economically, through investment in Afghanistan's mineral sector to generate revenues, and militarily, through a progressive 'Afghanisation' of security forces at a lower budget. India should be able to help in this.

Finally, India should be able to use Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rapport with Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to influence their policies and play a larger international diplomatic role in Afghanistan.

Courtesy: The Hindu (International)

1. Mercurial (adjective): Meaning: subject to sudden or unpredictable changes of mood or mind. (मनमौजी)

Synonyms: Capricious, Fickle, Protean, Erratic, Fluctuating, Vacillating

Antonyms: Steady, Unchanging, Predictable, Unvarying

Example: Meanwhile, his **mercurial** character has only got more erratic.



2. Ostensibly (adverb): Meaning: apparently or purportedly, but perhaps not actually. (प्रकट रूप से)

Synonyms: Seemingly, Outwardly, Supposedly, Presumably

Antonyms: Truly, Actually, Genuinely, Really

Example: He did it **ostensibly** for love, but really for money.



3. Salient (adjective): Meaning: most noticeable or important. (प्रमुख)

Synonyms: Chief, Conspicuous, Prominent, Vital

Antonyms: Minor, Trivial, Insignificant, Trifling

Example: She began to summarize the **salient** features of the proposal.



4. Sabotage (verb): Meaning: deliberately destroy, damage, or obstruct (something), especially for political or military advantage. (नुक़सान पहुंचाना, तोड़-फोड़ करना)

Synonyms: Wreck, Vandalize, Undermine, Subvert, Ruin

Antonyms: Aid, Fix, Assist, Build

Example: This was a deliberate attempt to **sabotage** the ceasefire.



5. Water down (verb): Meaning: to reduce or temper the force or effectiveness of. (हल्का करना)

Synonyms: Mitigate, Adulterate, Dilute, Tone Down

Antonyms: Enhance, Strengthen, Beef Up, Fortify

Example: The report was **watered down** by the committee.

weaken

6. Insidious (adjective): Meaning: proceeding in a gradual, subtle way, but with harmful effects. (कपटी; छिपा हुआ)

Synonyms: Surreptitious, Sneaking, Machiavellian, Guileful

Antonyms: Straightforward, Artless, Forthright, Candid

Example: They are, in my view, the most **insidious** of traitors.



7. Lampoon (verb): Meaning: publicly criticize (someone or something) by using ridicule, irony, or sarcasm. (हँसी उड़ाना)

Synonyms: Ridicule, Satirise, Parody, Caricature, Mock

Antonyms: Applaud, Praise, Support, Adore

Example: His cartoon mercilessly **lampoons** the leading politician of the day.



8. Exasperation (Noun): Meaning: a feeling of intense irritation or annoyance. (खीज; झल्लाहट)

Synonyms: Chagrin, Spleen, Pique, Vexation, Enragement

Antonyms: Pleasure, Delight, Glee, Gratification

Example: The organization has expressed its **exasperation** with the government.



9. Abort (verb): Meaning: bring to a premature end because of a problem or fault. (अन्त करना)

Synonyms: Scrub, Terminate, Halt, Call Off

Antonyms: Continue, Persist, Pursue, Persevere

Example: The decision was made to **abort** the mission.



10. Repudiation (Noun): Meaning: rejection of a proposal or idea. (खण्डन)

Synonyms: Refutation, Negation, Retraction, Disavowal

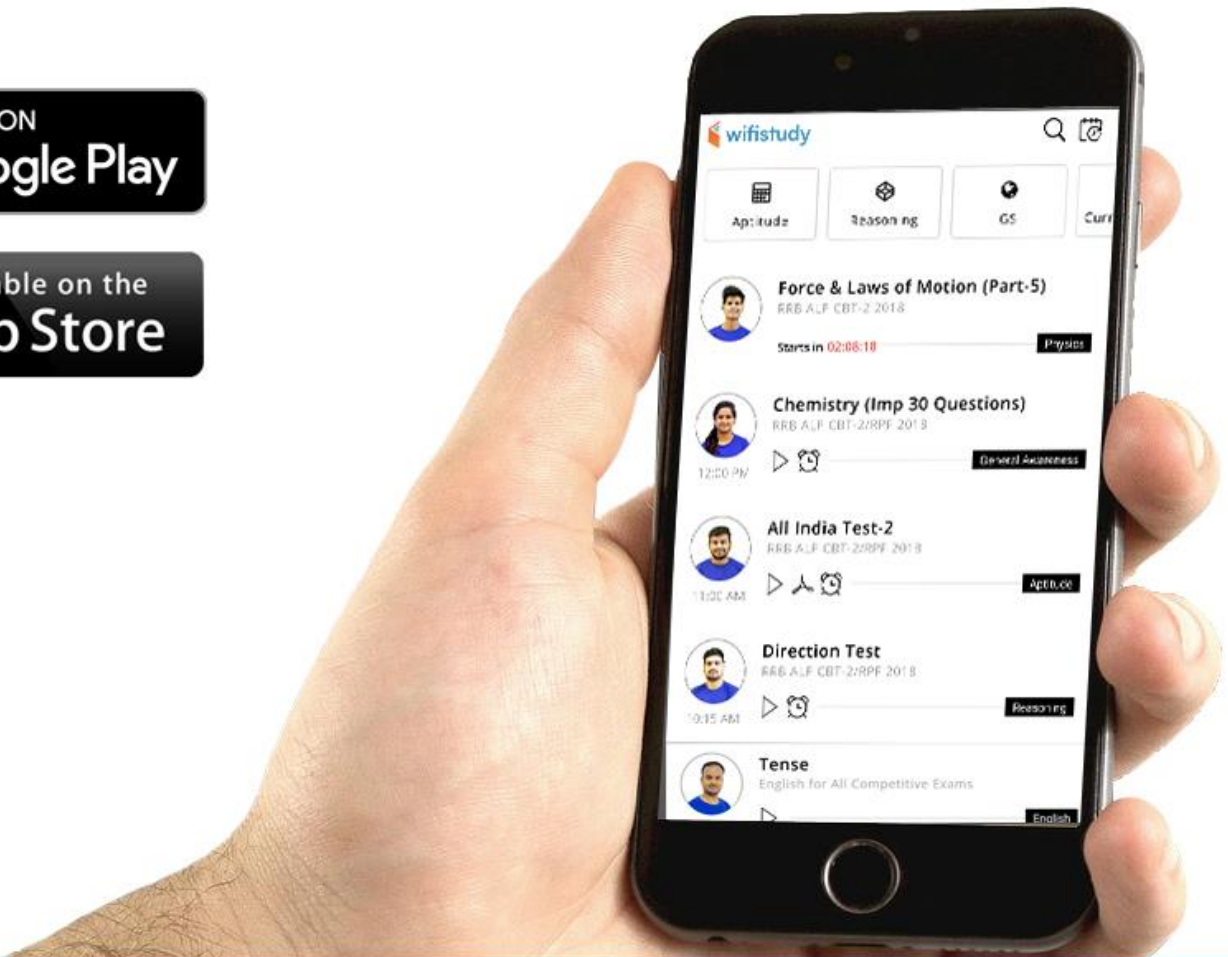
Antonyms: Acknowledgement, Confirmation, Recognition, Acceptance

Example: That was a major **repudiation** of Iran the other day at the Security Council.





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