Afghanistan Crisis - US TALIBAN DEAL

Part of: GS Prelims and GS-II- IR

Historical Background

The Saur Revolution had taken place in Afghanistan in 1978 which installed a communist party in power. Nur Muhammad Taraki became the head of the state replacing the previous president Daoud Khan. Taraki’s government introduced many modernisation reforms that were considered too radical and left them unpopular, especially in the rural areas and with the traditional power structures. The communist government also had a policy of brutally suppressing all opposition. Even unarmed civilians opposing the government were not spared. This led to the rise of various anti-government armed groups in the country. The government itself was divided and Taraki was killed by a rival, Hafizullah Amin, who became the president. The Soviet Union, which at that time, wanted a communist ally in the country, decided to intervene.

Soviet army was deployed on 24th December 1979 in Kabul. They staged a coup and killed Amin, installing Babrak Karmal as the president. Karmal was a Soviet ally. This intervention was seen as an invasion by the USA and other western nations. While the Soviet army had control of the cities and towns, the insurgency groups called the Mujahideen had the rural parts of Afghanistan under their control. A bitter war was fought between both groups. The Soviet Union, which had planned to stay for 6 months to a year in Afghanistan found themselves stuck in a war that was proving to be too costly.

The Mujahideen did not relent in their pursuit to ‘drive out’ the Soviets. They had the support of many countries like the USA, Pakistan, China, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They were given assistance like arms and training needed to fight the soviets. The soviets followed a policy of wiping out the rural regions in order to defeat the Mujahideen. Millions of land mines were planted and important irrigation systems were destroyed. As a result, millions of Afghan refugees took refuge in Pakistan and Iran. Some came to India as well. It is estimated that in the Soviet-Afghan war, about 20 lakh Afghan civilians were killed.

In 1987, after the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, he announced that his government would start withdrawing troops. The final soviet troops were withdrawn on 15 February 1989. Now, the government of Afghanistan was left alone to fight the Mujahideen. Finally, they succeeded in taking control of Kabul in 1992. Again, the Mujahideen had different factions within and they could not agree on power sharing. The country collapsed into a bloody civil war.

The Taliban

In 1994, a group of fundamentalist students, wrought control of the city of Kandahar and started a campaign to seize power in the country. They were called the Taliban. Many of them were trained in Pakistan when they were in refugee camps. By 1998, almost entire Afghanistan was under the control of the Taliban. Many of the Mujahideen warlords fled to the north of the country and joined the Northern Alliance who were fighting the Taliban. This time, Russia lent
support to the Northern Alliance, though they were fighting against them earlier. The Taliban ruled the country under strict interpretation of the Sharia law and many of the progress with regard to women and education which the country had seen earlier, were reversed. Girls were forbidden from attending schools and women banned from working. The Taliban-ruled country also became a safe haven for international terrorists. Only Pakistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia recognised the Taliban government.

In 2001, a US-led coalition defeated the Taliban and established another government in place. However, Afghanistan still sees resistance from the Taliban in certain pockets.

US fighting a war in Afghanistan and why has it lasted so long?

1. On 11 September 2001, attacks in America killed nearly 3,000 people. Osama Bin Laden, the head of Islamist terror group al-Qaeda, was quickly identified as the man responsible.
2. The Taliban, radical Islamists who ran Afghanistan and protected Bin Laden, refused to hand him over. So, a month after 9/11, the US launched air strikes against Afghanistan.
3. As other countries joined the war (ISAF), the Taliban were quickly removed from power. But they didn't just disappear - their influence grew back and they dug in.
4. Since then, the US and its allies have struggled to stop Afghanistan's government collapsing, and to end deadly attacks by the Taliban.
5. The mission, he said, was "to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime".
6. The first targets were military sites belonging to the hardline Taliban group who ruled the country. Training camps for al-Qaeda, the terror group run by 9/11 plotter Osama Bin Laden, were also hit.
7. But 18 years on, it's hard to argue the US mission has been fulfilled - the Taliban may play a part in ruling Afghanistan again if peace talks do eventually succeed.

The Taliban first took control of the capital Kabul in 1996, and ruled most of the country within two years. They followed a radical form of Islam and enforced punishments like public executions. Within two months of the US and its international and Afghan allies launching their attacks, the Taliban regime collapsed and its fighters melted away into Pakistan.

A new US-backed government took over in 2004, but the Taliban still had a lot of support in areas around the Pakistani border, and made hundreds of millions of dollars a year from the drug trade, mining and taxes. As the Taliban carried out more and more suicide attacks, international forces working with Afghan troops struggled to counter the threat the re-energised group posed.

In 2014, at the end of what was the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since 2001, Nato's international forces - wary of staying in Afghanistan indefinitely - ended their combat mission, leaving it to the Afghan army to fight the Taliban. But that gave the Taliban momentum, as they seized territory and detonated bombs against government and civilian targets. In 2018, Taliban was openly active across 70% of Afghanistan.

Where did the Taliban come from?
Afghanistan had been in a state of almost constant war for 20 years even before the US invaded. In 1979, a year after a coup, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan to support its communist government. It fought a resistance movement - known as the mujahideen - that was supported by the US, Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia, among other countries. In 1989, Soviet troops withdrew but the civil war continued. In the chaos that followed, the Taliban (which means "students" in the Pashto language) sprang up. They first rose to prominence in the border area of northern Pakistan and south-west Afghanistan in 1994. They promised to fight corruption and improve security and, at that time, many Afghans were tired of the excesses and infighting of the mujahideen during the civil war. It's thought the Taliban first appeared in religious schools, mostly funded by Saudi Arabia, which preached a hardline form of Islam. They enforced their own austere version of Sharia, or Islamic law, and introduced brutal punishments. Men were made to grow beards and women had to wear the all-covering burka. The Taliban banned television, music and cinema and disapproved of girls' education. And because the Taliban gave shelter to militants from the al-Qaeda group, it made them an immediate target for an attack by US, Afghan and international forces in the wake of 9/11.

Why has the war lasted so long?

- There are many reasons for this. But they include a combination of fierce Taliban resistance, the limitations of Afghan forces and governance, and other countries' reluctance to keep their troops for longer in Afghanistan.
- At times over the past 18 years, the Taliban have been on the back foot. In late 2009, US President Barack Obama announced a troop "surge" that saw the number of American soldiers in Afghanistan top 100,000.
- The surge helped drive the Taliban out of parts of southern Afghanistan, but it was never destined to last for years.
- As a result, the Taliban were able to regroup. When international forces withdrew from fighting, Afghan forces left to lead the charge were easily overwhelmed. To make matters worse, Afghanistan's government, that is full of tribal division, is often hamstrung.

5 Main reasons why war is still going on:

- a lack of political clarity since the invasion began, and questions about the effectiveness of the US strategy over the past 18 years;
- the fact each side is trying to break what has become a stalemate - and that the Taliban have been trying maximise their leverage during peace negotiations
- an increase in violence by Islamic State militants in Afghanistan - they've been behind some of the bloodiest attacks recently
- There's also the role played by Afghanistan's neighbour, Pakistan.
- There's no question the Taliban have their roots in Pakistan, and that they were able to regroup there during the US invasion. But Pakistan has denied helping or protecting them - even as the US demanded it more to fight militants.
How have the Taliban managed to stay so strong?

The group could be making as much as $1.5bn (£1.2bn) a year, a huge increase even within the past decade. Some of this is through drugs - Afghanistan is the world's largest opium producer, and most opium poppies - used for heroin - are grown in Taliban-held areas.

But the Taliban also make money by taxing people who travel through their territory, and through businesses like telecommunications, electricity and minerals.

Foreign countries, including Pakistan and Iran, have denied funding them, but private citizens from the region are thought to have done so.

The figures for Afghan civilians are more difficult to quantify. A UN report in February 2019 said more than 32,000 civilians had died. The Watson Institute at Brown University says 42,000 opposition fighters have died. The same institute says conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan have cost the US $5.9 trillion since 2001. The US is still conducting air strikes against the Taliban, instigated by the third president to oversee the war, Donald Trump. But he is keen to reduce troop numbers before he faces another election in November 2020. The Taliban now control much more territory than they did when international troops left Afghanistan in 2014. Many in Washington and elsewhere fear that a full US troop pull-out would leave a vacuum that could be filled by militant groups seeking to plot attacks in the West. The Afghan people, meanwhile, continue to bear the brunt of the long and bloody conflict.

What do the Taliban and the United States want?

The negotiations appear to be focused on four elements:

- **Withdrawal of Foreign Forces**: Both sides agree on the full withdrawal of the fourteen thousand U.S. troops currently in Afghanistan, as well as of additional foreign forces, but they disagree on the timeline. The United States is reportedly offering a two-and-a-half-year deadline, while the Taliban insists on nine months.
- **Counterterrorism Assurances**: The Taliban has agreed to prevent Afghanistan from being used by terrorist groups, but negotiators disagree over how to define the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist.”
- **Intra-Afghan Dialogue**: Washington has urged Afghan government and Taliban leaders to begin official talks on how Afghanistan will be governed after the war, but the Taliban refuses to negotiate with the government until after it has reached a deal with the United States.
- **Comprehensive Cease-fire**: U.S. negotiators seek a permanent cease-fire among U.S., Taliban, and Afghan government forces prior to a peace deal, but the Taliban insists on putting off a cease-fire until U.S. troops have withdrawn.

Reasons for India to be part of reconciliation process with the Taliban:
Regional Stability: Security and Stability are foundations over which development can be built on. Peaceful neighbourhood and trouble free regional climate will provide space for the regimes to focus more on development as threats of violence by Taliban’s in the region will be minimized.

Counter China and Pakistan’s vested interests: India should play a considerable role through Quadrilateral group plus 2 talks to thwart the efforts of China to place puppet regimes which can play according to their own vested interests. This can be counterproductive for India’s aspirations and concerns.

Connectivity with Central Asia: India’s trade with Central Asia and reaping benefits from the enhanced connectivity will be largely dependent on Afghanistan’s domestic environment. A peaceful and cooperative Afghanistan will be a key pin in India’s central Asia policy. The latest trilateral transit agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan is a significant step in this direction.

TAPI for Energy security: Violence free Afghanistan is desideratum for finishing the project of TAPI and sustaining the benefits from it through energy supplies from Turkmenistan.

Gateway to "Link west" policy: Afghanistan will act as a gateway to India’s increasing rigour on its west Asia policy.

Minerals of Afghanistan: The cost of access to minerals will be minimum and helpful in expanding the production of Indian Industries.

US-Taliban Deal

Recently, the U.S. signed a deal (at Qatar’s capital-Doha) with the Taliban that could pave the way towards a full withdrawal of foreign soldiers from Afghanistan over the next 14 months and represent a step towards ending the 18-year-war in Afghanistan. Along with this, a separate joint declaration was also signed between the Afghan government and the US at Kabul.

The peace deal is expected to kick-off two processes - a phased withdrawal of US troops and an ‘intra-Afghan’ dialogue. The deal is a fundamental step to deliver a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire and the future political roadmap for Afghanistan peace process and the Central region.

Background of the Deal

- On 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks in America killed nearly 3,000 people. Osama Bin Laden, the head of Islamist terror group al-Qaeda, was quickly identified as the man responsible.
- The Taliban, radical Islamists who ran Afghanistan at that time, protected Bin Laden, refused to hand him over. So, a month after 9/11, the US launched airstrikes against Afghanistan.
- The US was joined by an international coalition and the Taliban were quickly removed from power. However, they turned into an insurgent force and continued deadly attacks, destabilising subsequent Afghan governments.
- Since then, the US is fighting a war against the Taliban.
- Donald Trump’s 2017 policy on Afghanistan, was based on breaking the military
stalemate in Afghanistan by authorising an additional 5,000 soldiers, giving US forces a freer hand to go after the Taliban, putting Pakistan on notice, and strengthening Afghan capabilities.

- However, the US realised that the Taliban insurgency could not be defeated as long as it enjoyed safe havens and secure sanctuaries in Pakistan, the US changed track and sought Pakistan’s help to get the Taliban to the negotiating table.
- The negotiations began in September 2018 with the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to initiate direct talks with the Taliban. After nine rounds of US-Taliban talks in Qatar, the two sides seemed close to an agreement.

Salient Features of the Deal

- **Troops Withdrawal:** The US will draw down to **8,600 troops in 135 days** and the NATO or coalition troop numbers will also be brought down, proportionately and simultaneously. And all troops will be out within 14 months.
- **Taliban Commitment:** The main counter-terrorism commitment by the Taliban is that Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the **security of the United States and its allies.**
- **Sanctions Removal:** UN sanctions on Taliban leaders to be removed by three months and US sanctions by August 27. The sanctions will be out before much progress is expected in the intra-Afghan dialogue.
- **Prisoner Release:** The US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from “the other side” held by Taliban “will be released” by March 10.

Challenges in the Deal

- **One-Sided Deal:** The fundamental issue with the U.S.’s Taliban engagement is that it deliberately excluded the Afghan government because the Taliban do not see the government as legitimate rulers. Also, there is no reference to the Constitution, rule of law, democracy and elections in the deal.
  - Taliban is known for strict religious laws, banishing women from public life, shutting down schools and unleashing systemic discrimination on religious and ethnic minorities, has not made any promises on whether it would respect civil liberties or accept the Afghan Constitution.
  - Therefore, Shariah-based system (political system based on fundamental Islamic values) with the existing constitution is not easy.
- **Issues with Intra-Afgan Dialogue:**
  - President Ashraf Ghani faces a political crisis following claims of fraud in his recent re-election.
  - The political tussle is between Ashraf Ghani (who belongs to the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan- the Pashtun) and Abdullah Abdullah (whose base is among his fellow Tajiks, the second largest group in Afghanistan).
  - If there are any concessions made by Mr Ghani’s government to the Taliban (predominantly Pashtun) will likely be interpreted by Mr Abdullah’s supporters as an intra-Pashtun deal reached at the cost of other ethnic groups, especially the Tajiks and the Uzbeks.
Consequently, these ethnic fissures may descend into open conflict and can start the next round of civil war.

- Thus, the lifting of the US military footprint and the return of a unilateral Taliban could set the stage for the next round of civil war that has hobbled the nation since the late 1970s.

- **Problem with Prisoner's Swap:** The US-Taliban agreement and the joint declaration differ:
  - The US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from “the other side” held by Taliban “will be released” by March 10.
  - However, the joint declaration lays down no numbers or deadlines for the prisoner's swap. Afghan President held that there is no commitment to releasing 5,000 prisoners. He also held that such prisoners' swap is not in the authority of the US, but in the authority of the Afghan government.

- Also, the Taliban is fragmented or divided internally. It is composed of various regional and tribal groups acting semi-autonomously.
  - Therefore, it is possible that some of them may continue to engage in assaults on government troops and even American forces during the withdrawal process.
  - It is unclear if there is a date for the complete withdrawal of US troops or for concluding the intra-Afghan dialogue, or how long the truce will hold.

**Impact of the Deal on Other Stakeholders**

- **US:** The promise to end America’s “endless wars” in the greater Middle East region was one of the central themes of US President Donald Trump’s election campaign in 2016. This deal may demonstrate progress on that front in his bid for re-election later this year.
  - Though, the US doesn't recognise Taliban as a state under the name of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (key demand of Taliban), though many experts are of the view that this deal is a little more than a dressed-up U.S. surrender that will ultimately see the Taliban return to power.

- **Pakistan:** The deal provides the strategic advantage to Pakistan, who is a long-time benefactor of the Taliban.

- **China:** After the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan is seen as more of a protectorate state of China. Thus, China may leverage Pakistan's influence on the Taliban, to propel its strategic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Impact of this Deal on India**

This deal alters the balance of power in favour of the Taliban, which will have strategic, security and political implications for India. The deal may jeopardise the key stakes of India in Afghanistan:

- India has a major stake in the stability of Afghanistan. India has invested considerable resources in Afghanistan's development.
- India has a major stake in the continuation of the current Afghanistan government in power, which it considers a strategic asset vis-à-vis Pakistan.
An increased political and military role for the Taliban and the expansion of its territorial control should be of great concern to India since the Taliban is widely believed to be a protégé of Islamabad.

- As Afghanistan is the gateway to Central Asia, the deal might dampen India’s interest in Central Asia.
- Withdrawal of US troops could result in the breeding of the fertile ground for various anti-India terrorist outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed.

**Way Forward**

An independent, sovereign, democratic, pluralistic and inclusive Afghanistan is crucial for peace and stability in the region. In order to ensure this:

- The Afghan peace process should be Afghan-led, **Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled**.
- Also, there is a need for the global community to fight against the global concern of terrorism. In this context, it high time to adopt the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (**proposed by India at UN in 1996**).

Though the deal is a good step, the road ahead would not be easy. Achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan will require patience and compromise among all parties.

**Recent News:** Afghanistan’s two rival leaders have sworn themselves in as President at simultaneous ceremonies that were interrupted by at least two blasts.

**Background:**

Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner of a disputed presidential election in Afghanistan by the country’s independent Election Commission.

**Concerns:**

- The bitter feud between President Ashraf Ghani and his former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah has raised fears for Afghanistan’s fragile democracy as the U.S. prepares to leave the country following an agreement with a strong and largely unified Taliban.