**Tensions and trade offs in the Afghan peace process**

The Trump’s Administration and the Taliban have agreed (in principle) on a peace deal to end the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan. If the agreement is approved and signed by the US government and the Taliban, the US will withdraw 5400 troops within 135 days from Afghanistan. The Taliban in return will refrain from committing violence in 5 major locations where the US forces are currently located and that they will not provide sanctuary to any terrorist network in the areas under their control. While the peace deal between the Taliban and the US is a good move towards short-term relative stability, there is no guarantee, the deal will result in long term peace in Afghanistan. The fragile deal includes the following tensions and trade-offs:

****The political commitment:**** While all the belligerent parties apparently endorse the deal, it seems there is a significant trust deficit on all sides to commit to the implementation of the deal. The Trump’s administration wants to deliver upon the election commitment to end never-ending and costly wars and the Taliban wants to strike a deal due the pressure recently exerted by their all-weather supporter in the regions. Both parties try to fool each other. The deal comes out of a necessity evil, and with no will to make a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

****The Political settlement:**** Even if the deal is approved and signed between the US and the Taliban, the hardest phase is seemingly protracted the Intra-Afghan talks. This badly needed but difficult phase is convening the representatives of the Afghan Government and the Taliban to discuss the potential political system for Afghanistan.

The tension here is that the Taliban never believe on the values of democratic governance and the election of state officials. Their aim is to reinstate the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, a system led by the supreme religious leader with no respect for citizenship and democracy.

The Afghan Government insists on the democratic system, supported by the west over the last 18 years, the rights of women and the freedom of speech.

The Taliban would apparently seek an interim government while the Afghan Government insists on the election planned for September 2019.

The ideological differences and the competing interests between and among the parties are the key tensions in making this deal sustainable.

****Power sharing:**** The prospects for election planned for this month look important but not necessary to the Taliban and apparently the US Government.

The US and the Taliban seek to set up an interim government which in principle should emerge from the Intra-Afghan talks.

The main tension here is how the power between the Taliban, the Afghan Government as well as the different ethno-political groups is to be shared.

The Taliban are not negotiating for nothing. Nor are they like Hezbi-Islami seeking to engage in the mainstream Afghan politics. They are negotiating to seek power. They seek to exert control over the geography as well as have a good share in the resources the country generates.

The potential structure of the Afghan security forces, the disarmament and reintegration of Taliban fighters and the consensus over the constitutional reforms are among the most formidable tensions in the process.

Making an agreement on these terms seems challenging and even impossible given the history of failed power sharing processes in the past. This phase is also very susceptible to both internal and external spoilers.

****The Power struggle and power vacuum:**** The total withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan provides an enabling environment for internal and regional power struggles in Afghanistan. The ideological differences between the Taliban and the Afghan Government including different anti-Taliban forces on the one hand, and the struggle for strategic depth and influence between different regional power-holders on the other pose formidable challenges to sustain this deal. The withdrawal also increases the chance for a more bolder ISIS-K and the resurgence of Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the risk of a protracted civil war is eminent.

The deal per se looks good as of now. But would it succeed? Well, no one knows!