January 2019 saw the conclusion of the first round of talks between the USA and the Taliban, which took place in Qatar. The Afghan Taliban and the official representatives of the USA reached preliminary agreement on three key issues:

- the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan within 18 months;
- an exchange of prisoners;
- the lifting of the travel ban on Taliban leaders, and their removal from the UN’s blacklist.

In turn the Taliban agreed, among other things, not to allow terrorist organisations, including Al Qaeda and DAESH (an organisation prohibited in Russia) or any other armed grouping to carry out attacks on Afghan civilians or authorities, the USA, or any of its allies.

The second round of talks is scheduled for the end of February 2019. The USA and the Taliban plan to sign an official agreement on the above points. The agreement is expected to be fairly strict. The Taliban delegation will be headed by its lead negotiator, Abdul Ghani Baradar.

After the above steps have been completed (in 2021), Afghanistan will embark on an internal regulation process, which will involve two stages:

- the entry into effect of a general ceasefire between the opposing sides;
- the formation of a temporary government, to be elected for a term of three years: the Taliban will nominate its own representatives for election to this body;

- the Taliban propose a reform of the Afghan police, including local police authorities (which have been accused of being extremely corrupt and of intimidating the public).

The Taliban’s leaders have declared that they are renouncing their claim to exclusive power in Afghanistan and that they recognise that peace in Afghanistan needs to be an inclusive process. They also promise to seek ways to involve the Afghan government in the peace and reconciliation process, and also to act in conjunction with existing authorities (whereas, during the period of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, from 1996-2001, they imposed a strict form of Sharia law).

The talks between the USA and the Taliban (December 2018- January 2019) are a small part of the larger Afghan dialogue process, which has, traditionally, involved four parties: the Taliban, the USA, the Afghan National Unity Government, and Pakistan.

In addition to the US troops and the armed opposition, made up of Taliban militants, there is a third party in the Afghan conflict: the Afghan national security forces, which seek to protect the country’s constitution and its head of state, President Ashraf Ghani.

But for the whole duration of the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan, from 2001 to date, the Taliban have refused to take part in any direct talks with representatives of the National Unity Government, which they consider to be illegitimate. Ashraf Ghani has been highly critical of this stance, which has forced him and his government into the position of an onlooker, while the Taliban and the USA determine the country’s fate between them.

Washington has declared that its strategic goal, in its talks with the Taliban, is to get the Taliban and the Afghan National Unity Government to sit around the negotiating table together. In other words, to “force” the Taliban to accept the country’s Constitution and current state institutions. According to the White House, this process will take 18 months, and will be accompanied by the progressive withdrawal of US troops.

According to the White House’s roadmap, with the beginning of the dialogue, Afghanistan will enter into a new phase: an internal regulation process. Which raises the obvious question - will that process actually take place, and, if so, when, and under what circumstances? The Pushtuns are a hospitable race, but they keep their word. The lack of any direct dialogue between the Taliban and the National Unity Government will result in either an extension of the US military presence in Afghanistan, or the outbreak of a new civil war like that in the early 1990s.

The talks have also revealed certain specific characteristics relating to the armed opposition in today’s Afghanistan. In general, that opposition is made up of the Taliban. But there are other forces operating in the country, including militants from Al-Qaeda, DAESH, Uighur separatists from the Xinjiang region of China, militants from the Pakistani Taliban, and various armed groups from the Central Asian countries and the Caucasus. The Afghan Taliban, which dominates the armed opposition, has been able to persuade the Al-Qaeda militants to pledge their loyalty to the Taliban’s leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. As a result, in recent years the Taliban has been reinforced by Al-Qaeda militants serving in its ranks. This helps to explain how the Taliban is now able to control 60% of the country’s territory and carry out almost daily attacks on Afghan security forces and government officials.

As for DAESH, its leaders remain subordinate to their Emir and refuse to accept the leadership of Hibatullah Akhundzada, which results in a split within the armed opposition in Afghanistan.

The fourth party in the dialogue process is Pakistan. As one of the organisers of the talks between the USA and the Taliban, Pakistan has received assurances from the Afghan Taliban that, in the future, the latter will cut its links with Pakistani Taliban militants based in Afghanistan, insurgents from the Pakistani province of Balochistan and the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, and that it will refrain from acting against Pakistan’s interests.

The talks between the USA and the Taliban demonstrate that the two parties are serious about bringing an end to the internecine conflict in Afghanistan. But it is also evident that all the parties are determined to stick to their initial positions. The parties exchange spoken declarations, but they show no will to take any constructive steps or even move towards a compromise.

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