US with Blood on its Hands in Afghan Tragedy

The bloody war in Afghanistan has raged on for over 18 years, and there is no end in sight to this tragedy, no peaceful solution on the horizon. In 2001, US President George W. Bush used a far-fetched pretext for the military invasion of Afghanistan, and sent in 150 thousand troops, who occupied the sovereign state.

The bulk of US and NATO combat forces were only withdrawn from Afghanistan in 2014, and to this day there is a NATO-led non-combat “mission” with about 14 thousand instructors and advisers still stationed in the country. In order to justify what has been almost two decades of military presence in Afghanistan to US taxpayers and the international community, NATO claims that they are leading a non-combat mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces and institutions, although the Afghan national forces suffer defeat time and time again at the hands of militants, and the US also claims to be conducting counter-terrorism operations, most of which are carried out at their own military bases.

But, as they say, it is easier to start a war than to end one. For the past year now, Washington has been deliberating a very difficult question - how can American troops be withdrawn from Afghanistan safely, and what will the American policy towards this important country in the Middle East be going forward? And most importantly - how will the US negotiate with the leaders of an illegal terrorist organization, the Taliban, to convince them to put an end
to their hostile activity? This not only applies to Afghan territory, the United States also want to receive a guarantee that the Taliban will not carry out terrorist attacks against any American troops stationed in the Middle East.

Statements have been made on numerous occasions in Washington about how the US wants to end the forever war, many of which have come from incumbent President Donald Trump. Reports in the American media estimate that about $4 billion is spent on the war each month, not to mention the fact Donald Trump can significantly boost his chances of securing a second term in the White House by playing the peacemaker role. At the very least, ending the war in Afghanistan will show American society that the huge sacrifices they have made have not been in vain (about 2,500 American soldiers have died in Afghanistan). No one in the United States, especially now of course, wants a repeat of the shameful Vietnam War.

That is exactly why Washington is currently taking active steps to find a settlement and safely withdraw American troops from this death trap, the US War in Afghanistan. US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad has been back and forth on visits to Qatar, where he has held nine rounds of talks with the Taliban. The American diplomat was reportedly accompanied on a recent visit by commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan General Austin S. Miller. The military commander had not played a direct role in any previous peace talks with the Taliban leaders, and the fact that he has now gotten involved in the negotiations shows just how much Washington wants out of its forever war in Afghanistan, and indicates that the Americans are willing to go to great lengths to get a peace treaty signed.

Khalilzad has also held numerous meetings with the Afghan government and non-governmental leaders, as well as with Middle Eastern and international leaders, although he has not met with the Iranians, as the US gotten itself into a viscous circle of deepening hostility with Iran. He is focused on achieving four interdependent goals: fixing a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops currently stationed in Afghanistan; getting the Taliban to pledge that Afghan soil would not be used as a base for terrorism against the US; facilitating direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, who the Taliban consider “illegitimate puppets”; and the declaration of a ceasefire throughout Afghanistan.

On the other hand however, security conditions in Afghanistan have seriously deteriorated amid the negotiations – the Taliban have carried out a number of major attacks and acts of subversive violence in the country in recent years, which they hope will lend them the upper hand in negotiations for a ceasefire. A recent suicide bombing at a wedding in Kabul where over 60 people were killed and about 200 were injured, which was organized by IS Khorasan, a branch of illegal terror group Islamic State active in Afghanistan, is a vivid reminder of the deplorable security conditions in Afghanistan. It also highlights the fact that the Taliban is not the only armed opposition in this power struggle.

Moreover, even the Afghan government does not see the talks between the Taliban and the United States as a sort of attempt to find a way out of the impasse that has been reached. Kabul sees the negotiations as yet another game the Americans are playing, which does not aim for strategic solutions, but quick fixes for immediate problems. Thus, a treaty or any other agreement the US manages to broker with Taliban is unlikely to ensure a peaceful breathing space.

According to many experts, the situation which is currently tense could worsen in this scenario. Peace talks are meant to begin with an agreement between the US and the Taliban, then there one between the Taliban and other political forces in Afghanistan, including the government. The Taliban have made it clear however, that they do not intend to engage in negotiations with the current government. The peace talks may follow the envisaged stages, but it is highly unlikely, and it would be a very difficult process. To make it happen, it would take artful and sensitive negotiation techniques, and the current reality in Afghanistan would need to be acknowledged and respected. It is doubtful whether the Trump administration will be able to achieve all of this in the Middle East, as Washington does not know how to get anything done without using force, and has none of these negotiation skills in its arsenal.

On one hand, Donald Trump seems to be in favor of negotiation and the safe withdrawal of American troops, and on the other hand, he voices his support for strengthening Washington’s position in this very important country, which is a completely incomprehensible position. Trump declined to comment for example on whether he thought the United States would sign an agreement to end the hostilities in Afghanistan with the radical Taliban terrorist group. “We will see what happens. We will negotiate with them, we will continue to negotiate,” the American President said. “We are in talks with the Taliban, with the government [in Kabul], we will see if we can achieve something.” At the same time, he made more demagogic claims that the United States would be able to achieve victory in the armed conflict in Afghanistan very quickly if it wanted to. However, the head of the US administration admitted that the
cost of this victory would be a huge number of Afghan civilian casualties. That is why he has assured people that the US would not take this course of action. From Trump’s point of view, the course of the American military campaign in Afghanistan is complicated by the fact that the US troops are essentially forced to play the role of the world’s policeman rather than a military role.

As the Russian proverb goes: “Where the horse lays its hoof, there the crab sticks its claw” (i.e. “the thread follows the needle”). US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is also against signing an agreement between the United States and the Taliban. According to the US media, the preliminary peace deal that US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad presented to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is missing a number of important conditions. The draft deal does not give any guarantee that American troops would be able to take part in any future operations to combat the illegal terrorist group Al-Qaeda, and there is no guarantee that a pro-American government would be kept in office in Kabul or that the obligation to bring an end to the violence would be fulfilled. That being the case, Time magazine has reported that the Taliban has moved to demand that Mike Pompeo personally sign a peace deal with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the name the Taliban refer to themselves by – ed.). According to the Taliban, this move would signify the de facto recognition of the movement, the rebirth of the Islamic emirate. That is why the US Secretary of State has refused to sign the document.

Washington is prepared to go to great lengths to provide a seat for the Taliban at the negotiating table with incumbent President Ghani’s government. The Taliban, for their part, are more obstinate than the Americans and flat-out refuse to negotiate with those in office in Kabul, whom they regard as a puppet government and refuse to recognize. The Taliban refuse to meet with government officials, at the very least until American and other foreign troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan. In July however, a brief formal meeting took place in Doha between the Taliban and a delegation of the current Afghan government. US Special Representative Khalilzad organized this opportunity for the government delegation to participate in the negotiations, so that they could play a very brief and token role in the talks and to help President Ghani save at least some face.

The possibility of the Taliban and the United States signing a deal, and the impact this document could have on the process of trying to find a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan remains a thorny issue, and the international community is keeping a close eye on how this difficult situation is developing, as they are still hoping that there will be a positive outcome and that the situation in this turbulent region will improve.

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