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## ***Inevitable Withdrawal: The US-Taliban Deal***

It took gallons and flagons of blood, but it eventuated, a squeeze of history into a parchment of possibility: the Taliban eventually pushed the sole superpower on this expiring earth to a deal of some consequence. (The stress is on the some – the consequence is almost always unknown.) “In principle, on paper, yes we have reached an agreement,” claimed the US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad on the Afghan channel ToloNews. “But it is not final until the president of the United States also agrees to it.”

The agreement entails the withdrawal (the public relations feature of the exercise teasingly calls this “pulling out”) of 5,400 troops from the current complement of 14,000 within 135 days of signature. Five military bases will close or be transferred to the Afghan government. In return, the Taliban has given an undertaking never to host forces with the intention of attacking the US and its interests.

Exactitude, however, is eluding the press and those keen to get to the marrow. Word on the policy grapevine is that this is part of an inexorable process that will see a full evacuation within 16 months, though this remains gossip.

The entire process has its exclusions, qualifications and mutual deceptions. In it is a concession, reluctant but ultimately accepted, that the Taliban was a credible power that could never be ignored. To date, the US has held nine rounds of talks, a seemingly dragged out process with one ultimate outcome: a reduction, and ultimate exit of combat forces.

The Taliban was not, as the thesis of certain US strategists, a foreign bacillus moving its way through the Afghan body politic, the imposition of a global fundamentalist

corporation. Corrupt local officials of the second rank, however, were also very much part and parcel of the effort, rendering any containment strategy meaningless.

A narrative popular and equally fallacious was the notion that the Taliban had suffered defeat and would miraculously move into the back pages of history. Similar views were expressed during the failed effort by the United States to combat the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. An elaborate calculus was created, a mirage facilitated through language: the body count became a means of confusing numbers with political effect.

Time and time again, the Taliban demonstrated that B52s, well-equipped foreign forces and cruise missiles could not extricate them from the land that has claimed so many empires. Politics can only ever be the realisation of tribes, collectives, peoples; weapons and material are unkind and useful companions, but never viable electors or officials.

Even now, the desire to remain from those in overfunded think tanks and well-furnished boardrooms, namely former diplomats engaged on the Afghan project, is stubborn and delusionary. If withdrawal is to take place, goes that tune, it should hinge on a pre-existing peace agreement. An open letter published by the Atlantic Council by nine former US State Department officials previously connected with the country is a babbling affair. “If a peace agreement is going to succeed, we and others need to be committed to continued support for peace consolidation. This will require monitoring compliance, tamping down of those extremists opposed to peace, and supporting good governance and economic growth with international assistance.”

The presumptuousness of this tone is remarkable, heavy with work planning jargon and spread sheet nonsense. There is no peace to keep, nor governance worth preserving. Instead, the authors of the note, including such failed bureaucratic luminaries as John Negroponte, Robert P. Finn and Ronald E. Neumann, opt for the imperial line: the US can afford staying in Afghanistan because the Afghans are the ones fighting and dying. (Again, this is Vietnam redux, an Afghan equivalent of Vietnamisation.) In their words, “US fatalities are tragic, but the number of those killed in combat make up less than 20 percent of the US troops who died in non-combat training incidents.” All good, then.

In a sign of ruthless bargaining, the Taliban continued the bloodletting even as the deal was being ironed of evident wrinkles. This movement knows nothing of peace but all about the life of war: death is its sovereign; corpses, its crop. On Monday, the Green Village in Kabul was targeted by a truck bomb, leaving 16 dead (this toll being bound to

rise). It was a reminder that the Taliban, masters of whole swathes of the countryside, can also strike deep in the capital itself. The killings also supplied the Afghan government a salutary reminder of its impotence, underscored by the fact that President Ashraf Ghani played no role in the Qatar talks.

This leaves us with the realisation that much cruelty is on the horizon. The victory of the Taliban is an occasion to cheer the bloodying of the imperialist's nose. But they will not leave documents of enlightenment, speeches to inspire. This agreement will provide little comfort for those keen to read a text unmolested or seek an education free of crippling dogma. Interior cannibalisation is assured, with civil war a distinct possibility. Tribal war is bound to continue.

As this takes place, the hope for President Donald Trump and his officials will no doubt be similar to the British when they finally upped stakes on instruction from Prime Minister David Cameron: forget that the whole thing ever happened.

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