



U.S. Army patrol in in Afghanistan | Image: Reuters

After a set of repeated efforts by the current Afghan administration to conduct peace talks with the Taliban, the infamous fundamentalist organisation themselves through an unexpected open letter in February 2018 offered to hold peace negotiations directly with the Trump administration. In what already seemed a drastic shift in policy from the side of the Taliban, the United States displayed an even more significant shift in their policy by agreeing to the proposal by instructing it's top diplomats on the **15th and 16th of July** to seek direct talks with the Taliban. This might not only be the beginning of the end of the abominable seventeen-year-old conflict, but also a softening of the well known American and Western Lobby policy of 'not negotiating with terrorists'.

Since the Reagan administration, the United States maintained a clear 'we don't negotiate with terrorists' policy, which specifically hardened after the September 11 attacks. However, this recent shift in the Afghanistan policy was confirmed by many top-level American and Afghan officials to formally begin negotiations to end the long-drawn war. The policy up to the recent shift was that of American administrations encouraging talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, without them actually being involved in the negotiation process. However, this development is a standing proof of the sense of urgency of the Trump administration to end this prolonged stalemate.

The move of providing more autonomy and authority to diplomats is being seen by many national security experts as a step in a wider effort to bring about a new momentum in ending the conflict. Some of the other noticeable efforts included the recent rise in political pressure on Pakistan to stop providing sanctuaries to Taliban leaders and the lobbying of Islamic nations against the insurgency's ideology. The former step has been seen in some ways by critics as a success of Modi's foreign policy efforts in the U.S to hardline American policy towards Pakistan.

With respect to the Taliban's opinion on the move, Sohail Shahin, a spokesperson from the Taliban's political office in Qatar revealed that no confirmation or dates for talks have been decided but the signs of the new approach were welcomed. Certain concerns raised by the spokesperson included the blacklist status of the Taliban and the status of international troops in certain Afghan regions. However, any scope of negotiations with the Ghani Administration in Afghanistan has mostly been ruled out considering the fact that the

Taliban still consider themselves a politically legitimate government and the Ghani government as not.

On the other hand, the U.S stance has been clarified by multiple top-level officials. The leader of the NATO-led Resolute Support mission, John W. Nicholson, recognised the key role of the U.S in the resolution of the conflict by citing Mike Pompeo’s approval of the talks with the Taliban and further negotiating the status of international troops. Pompeo in his own statements further highlighted the overall negotiation should still be Afghan-led but that the U.S was now ready to directly join the talks as well.

Past efforts to pursue peace talks might not have had a stable history of success, as seen in 2015, but the optimism displayed by both sides in 2018 has been perceived by the international community as the beginning of a genuine effort to resolve this seventeen-year-old crisis. Yet it still evident that are still obstacles that might arise as talks pursue to end a battle that has killed a record number of civilians this year itself.

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