US-Taliban Peace Talks

Why in news?

- The longest round of peace talks yet between the US and the Taliban ended recently.
- It marks a shift in stands of the stakeholders and offers hopes for an ending to the prolonged war in Afghanistan.

Why the talks now?

- The war in Afghanistan, the second longest armed conflict in American military history after Vietnam, has claimed thousands of lives on all sides.
- Afghan civilians, US-led coalition troops, and those belonging to insurgent groups have been affected.
- The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have together cost the American taxpayer almost $6 trillion since 2001.
- So eventually, the US has realised the futility of the military option.
- The need to stop the ceaseless fighting has become the top priority for all parties.
- Back in 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had spoken of the need to distinguish between the “good” and “bad” Taliban.
- The view in favour of holding talks has only strengthened since then.

Why is the shift in Taliban's stance?

- The Taliban have been grappling with the emergence of the ISIS in Afghanistan.
- The ISIS is in direct conflict with both the Taliban and the US-backed Afghan government.
- However, the Taliban is keen to demonstrate to the Afghan people that it seriously wants to govern them.

How did the talks evolve?

- In 2018, the administration of US President Donald Trump asked the State Department to explore the possibility of talks with the Taliban.
- This signalled a major paradigm shift in American policy towards the Taliban.
- Zalmay Khalilzad, the former American ambassador to Afghanistan, was

appointed the special US envoy to initiate the peace process.
- Reaching out to the Taliban, a framework peace deal was agreed “in principle” in January 2019.
- The current talks are directed towards materialising this framework.

What is the significance?

- At the close of these talks, both sides agreed to an “agreement in draft” on two of the most critical areas central to American interests-

1. a commitment by the Taliban to not allow anti-American activities on Afghan soil
2. a time-bound withdrawal of American troops

- The US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad expressed his sense of achievement on Twitter.
- The talks and the statement indicate a change in the US policy on the Taliban from an armed invasion to peaceful negotiations at present.

- Moreover, the Taliban delegation for the talks was chaired by Mullah Baradar, a co-founder of the Islamist movement and one of its most senior leaders.
- He was released by Pakistan last year after almost a decade of incarceration.

What are the unresolved concerns?

- **Afghan government** - The Taliban have from the beginning been firm that they would not talk directly with the Afghan government.
- The Taliban consider the Afghan government to be a US puppet.
- However, with the current negotiations, a change in the Taliban’s attitude could perhaps be expected now.
- With the upcoming talks, the two sides are expected to discuss the possibility of a complete ceasefire after the US troops' departure, definitively ending the war.
- **Freedom** - During their government from 1996 to 2001, and in many of the areas that they controlled, the Taliban enforced a highly puritanical form of Islam.
- They have banished women from public life, restricted their access to schools, and banned music and television.
- After the Taliban's ouster from power, Afghanistan has taken steps towards providing to its people constitutional freedoms.
- The government has created the conditions for an independent media and an increased role for women.
- It is now widely feared that the return of the Taliban would destroy these

hard-won achievements which are still in the evolving phase.

- Despite these, a political arrangement with the Taliban is a price that the government is now willing to pay.
- However, this is only on the assurance that Afghanistan will not be allowed to become a terrorist threat to the West again.

What does it mean for India?

- Afghanistan is a strategic investment for India, and India has made significant contributions to the rebuilding of the country.
- However, it has not been India's principle to differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ terrorists.
- So in effect, India rules out direct negotiation with the Taliban.
- India’s participation in the Moscow talks with Taliban last year was only in a ‘non-official capacity’.
- Most likely, Taliban will have a major say in the government of Afghanistan at least for the foreseeable future.
- But India’s strategic presence in Afghanistan stands on a much lower footing compared to that of Pakistan.
- It was, notably, Pakistan's intelligence wing that in many ways created the Taliban, and which continues to influence its leaders.
- So once the Americans withdraw fully and the Taliban take over the country in a direct or indirect capacity, India will have a tough time.

Source: Indian Express

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