



Afghanistan's ceasefire: Short lifeline but great promise

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In an unprecedented unilateral move, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced an eight-day ceasefire beginning on June 12 and due to end on June 20, after Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations. While Ghani has made ceasefires in the past, this is the first unconditional ceasefire to the Taliban and is supported by 2,000 Afghan religious scholars.

Yet, in an even more surprising development, the Taliban also declared its first-ever three-day ceasefire spanning Eid. The Taliban's offer to ease violence is surprising because of its ongoing spring offensive and the group's general consensus that jihad in the form of violent attacks is obligatory in the holy month of Ramadan.

The Trump administration has been supportive of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. Gen. John Nicholson Jr., commander of 14,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, stated that the United States would honor the ceasefire. But is this ceasefire any different from past ones? It may be for three reasons.

First, Pakistan and China, along with Russia and the United Nations Security Council, urged the Taliban to reciprocate Ghani's ceasefire. The Taliban's inclination to listen indicates that the group is using diplomacy to increase its legitimacy as a valid stakeholder in Afghanistan's future. With respect to Pakistan, it shows that it may still enjoy some leverage over the Taliban, which may be helpful for improving the U.S.–Pakistan relationship.

Second, until the ceasefire the Taliban have been engaging in continued violence throughout Afghanistan. For example, in January the Taliban attacked Kabul's InterContinental Hotel, killing 30 people and injuring several more. In May, the Taliban claimed to have taken over Farah, a western province bordering Iran. The group also attacked a government building in Jalalabad, killing 12, including the assailants and security forces. The Taliban are still blocking the main highway between the Ghazni and Paktia provinces. In general, the Taliban's combat ability has improved and they are active in 70 percent of the country. From a strategic point of view, the Taliban are now able to negotiate from a point of territorial strength.

And third, the people of Afghanistan are particularly vulnerable right now. Civilian casualties are currently at their highest. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has documented 763 conflict-related civilian deaths from January through March 2018. The number of Afghan Security Forces has fallen by 6 percent from January 2017 to January 2018. Afghan children, especially girls, remain vulnerable and are unable to attend school. Afghanistan is also currently experiencing a draught, which makes its agriculture-based economy even more vulnerable. Ghani, therefore, is seeking opportunities for respite for his countrymen in the form of peace offers and ceasefires with the Taliban.

Successful ceasefires usually follow a series of failed ones. The current ceasefire in Afghanistan will most likely fail for a variety of domestic reasons. For example, the ceasefire does not address the Taliban's main objective, which is the removal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. It does not include other armed groups like the Haqqani Network or the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, so it may not decrease violence after all. The Ghani government will most likely remain weak and vulnerable in the upcoming parliamentary elections even if the temporary truce is successful because of rampant corruption plaguing Afghanistan.

The ceasefire will also do little to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has been overshadowed by Pakistan's continued sponsorship of the Taliban and Haqqani Network. Also, the Trump administration remains unwilling to hold direct talks with the Taliban, which remains one of Taliban's top demands for negotiating a political settlement.

Yet, the promise to end hostilities—albeit temporary—has led to some positive developments. For instance, Ghani met with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javid Bajwa on June 12 to discuss the operational logistics for the Afghanistan–Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, an agreement made in April and designed to decrease terrorism in Afghanistan and facilitate an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. The Trump administration has also asked Pakistan to facilitate Afghan–Taliban peace talks. This is a welcome change from a policy that is mainly focused on Pakistan denouncing its relationship with the Taliban. For example, the president's Afghanistan strategy and the National Security Strategy both called out Pakistan for maintaining terrorist safe havens and not countering the Taliban effectively. While the U.S. administration's current request does not negate the need for Pakistan to more effectively counter militancy from its territory, it does present an opening for the United States and Pakistan to improve its bilateral relationship.

So, if this ceasefire fails to ignite a political negotiation, it won't be a surprise. It also won't be a surprise if it fails altogether, and violence continues as it has been since the beginning of 2018. But if it lasts, and there is no violence between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, this will be the *first* successful ceasefire between the Taliban and an Afghan government. Call me foolishly optimistic, but I think that would be a promising development.

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