

AFGHANISTAN PEACE PROCESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

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With more than 100,000 civilians killed and injured since the United Nations began systemic documentation of the civilian casualties in 2009, the time is long overdue to put an end to the human misery and the tragedy. The best way to halt the killings and maiming of civilians is to stop the fighting.

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February 2020

Abstract

Peace in Afghanistan will certainly help in achieving some semblance of normalcy in the turbulent region of South Asia. This paper aims at elaborating upon the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan. First, it sheds some light on the factors that compelled the US and its allies to reach a peace agreement with the Taliban. Second, it analyses the salient features of the US and Taliban deal, which focuses on four main elements: ceasefire, withdrawal of the foreign troops, intra-Afghan dialogue, and counterterrorism assurances. Finally, the paper touches upon the characteristic attributes of Afghanistan that will impact the intra-Afghan dialogue. In the backdrop of intra-Afghan dialogue, there can be two emerging scenarios: either the foreign troops will completely withdraw or there will be no or partial withdrawal of troops.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, peace process, Taliban US deal, South Asia, intra-Afghan dialogue*

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Introduction

Afghanistan is a victim of the 9/11 incident. On 11 September 2001, some 3,000 US citizens died in attacks on Pentagon and the World Trade Centre, allegedly conducted by a non-state actor, Al Qaeda, headed by a Saudi national, Osama Bin Laden. It was presumed that Al Qaeda conducted attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre in collaboration with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. It is ironic to note that neither Al Qaeda nor the Taliban has explicitly accepted responsibility for conducting the attacks, in response to which thousands of people have died in Afghanistan.

After the incident of 9/11, the US took a rash decision to launch a war against the Al-Qaeda network, whose leadership was, unfortunately, residing in Afghanistan. If the leadership was in Saudi Arabia, would the US have launched an attack? The answer to this question is: probably not. Attacking Afghanistan was in line with other strategic interests of the US. On 20 September 2001, President Bush called for the extradition of Osama Bin Laden. In response, the Taliban demanded evidence from the US government to warrant a trial of Osama Bin Laden, which the Taliban offered to handle in an Islamic Court.¹

The Bush administration refused to provide evidence and invaded Afghanistan in October 2001.² The 'light footprint strategy' comprised of heavy air offensive but minimum troop presence was adopted by the Bush administration at the initial level which eventually led to 'dispersal' of the Taliban. The dispersal was also momentary. The Taliban resurged with full power in 2003. In 2003, 148 attacks were conducted by the insurgents.³ Time proved that the Taliban did not retreat but dispersed temporarily. It has been eighteen years since the US has consumed all its efforts in achieving its 'proclaimed' objective of stabilisation, but it could not happen.

The Taliban, owing to their resilience, have pushed the US to finally plan a withdrawal strategy. For which a meaningful peace

process was initiated in 2018. This paper attempts to analyse the peace process in Afghanistan and its probable outcome for Pakistan and the region. Before going into the details of the peace process, it is imperative to understand why and how the US was compelled to think about leaving Afghanistan. It is ironic to note that despite pouring in monetary and military resources, the US and its allied forces along with the Kabul government were unable to establish a hold on Afghanistan. Various factors, in tandem, eventually led to the 'withdrawal scenario'.

Factors Behind the Withdrawal Scenario

Control of Afghanistan

As per the claim of the Taliban, they control seventy per cent of the area of Afghanistan. However, according to a research study by the *Long War Journal*, Kunar, Kandahar, Farah, Helmand, Ghazni, and Sur-e-Pul are completely controlled by the Taliban, other areas are contested. However, in Kabul, Bamian, Daykundi and Oruzgan, the government of Afghanistan has control.⁴ According to a report of the Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), published in January 2018, 229 districts were under the Afghan government's control, while 59 districts were under the control of the Taliban, and 119 districts were contested.⁵

According to a list provided by a report of UN sanctions monitor, every province has a leader appointed by the Taliban,⁶ which means that they do plan to take hold of the entire Afghanistan. Another factor that led to the peace talks was the ever-growing increase in violence.

Map

Source: Aljazeera

Increase in Violence

In 2019, the most volatile area had been Kabul with 1,563 civilian casualties. The other areas where violence was considerably high were Nangarhar (1,070 casualties), Ghazni (673 casualties), Helmand (675 casualties), Faryab (665 casualties).⁷ With most of the casualties in Kabul, it can be inferred that where the Afghan government wished to tighten the noose, the conflict escalated. According to a website of the Taliban, the locals have lost trust in the Afghan government, therefore, the Taliban have started dispensing justice through their courts. This claim of the Taliban also puts a big question mark on the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The damages of the war had been numerous. Until now, more than 30,000 civilians have died nearly 60,000 people have been injured.

Table

Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan

Year	Civilian casualties
2007	1,523
2008	2,118
2009	5,978
2010	2,790
2011	3,021
2012	7,559
2013	8,615
2014	10,548
2015	11,002
2016	11,418
2017	10,453
2018	10,993
2019	10,392
2020(July)	3,458

Source: UNAMA annual reports

Green on Blue Attacks

Insider attacks have also been a key instrument of war for the Taliban. Through green on blue attacks and suicide attacks Taliban were successful in seeping fear among not only the Afghan forces but also among foreign troops. These insider attacks challenged the security arrangement of the Afghan state and exposed the vulnerability of the security apparatus in the country.

Table**Insider and suicide attacks**

Month/ Day	Year	No of Soldiers (Non-Afghan)	Province	Nature of attack
February 8,	2020	2	Nangarhar	Green on Blue
July 29,	2019	2	Uruzgan	Green on Blue
November 11,	2018	1	Kabul	Green on Blue
September 3,	2018	1	Logar	Green on Blue
August 5,	2018	3	Pawan	Suicide bomber
July 7,	2018	1	Uruzgan	Green on Blue
June 10	2017	1	Nangarhar	Green on blue

Source: icasualties.org- the table excludes the casualties in non-hostile exchange of fire, small arm direct attack and IEDs

Nonetheless, the Taliban have grown stronger, more focused, and concluded a peace deal with the US on 29 February 2020. However, the dialogue process had been strenuous and time-consuming.

Talk for Talks

After the election of President Trump, the Taliban offered peace talks to the US in February 2017.⁸ The US government also reciprocated the same intention of initiating a peace dialogue. In October 2017, Rex Tillerson, the then Secretary of State, said that the US was also willing to negotiate with the Taliban. Later, in 2018, in an unprecedented move, President Ashraf Ghani on 27 February made a bold announcement of holding unconditional talks with the Taliban. He also recognised the Taliban as a political entity. To this offer, the Taliban remained silent. On Eid ul Fitr, in June 2018, the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan mutually declared a ceasefire. However, that ceasefire could not last and fighting resumed afterwards.

The Trump administration started with the agenda of 'America First'. The war in Afghanistan that started with the light a footprint strategy, had more than 100,000 US soldiers till 2010. The cost of war also reached \$100 billion a year.⁹ Some 2,000 soldiers have lost their lives and nearly 20,000 have been injured.¹⁰ Nineteen years of war, with no end in sight, President Trump called for a quick fix for Afghanistan. Therefore, a peace dialogue process started in the summer of 2018. Zalmay Khalilzad, a US citizen born in Afghanistan, was chosen to break the ice between the US government and the Taliban. He as a special representative of the US started confidence-building measures with the Taliban. In eighteen years of war, it was the first time that the US and the Taliban sat around a negotiating table formally. The process took more than a year, though.

In October 2018, the Trump administration decided to enter into direct negotiations with the Taliban. Lack of progress on the

battlefield led the US to change its longstanding position of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process. As a result, the first high-level talks between the Taliban and the US took place in Doha. US special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad and six Taliban representatives attended the talks. The meeting was 'exploratory', in which the representatives from both sides talked about 'end to occupation', 'peaceful resolution of Afghan issue', and removal of Taliban leaders from the sanctions lists.¹¹ Later, Khalilzad stated, "United States shares the aspirations of all Afghans for a peaceful Afghanistan where all Afghans see themselves included."¹² The statement did not mention the meeting between the two parties.

In November 2018, Khalilzad held another round of talks for three days in Qatar.¹³ It is reported that Mullah Khairullah Khairkhaw, the former governor of Herat and the current Taliban spokesperson, also joined the talks. During the talks, issues about the timetable of the US and NATO troops withdrawal, the release of Taliban prisoners, recognition of the Taliban office in Qatar were discussed.¹⁴ Khalilzad pressed upon the Taliban to declare a ceasefire, however, the Taliban declined this suggestion. The Taliban also suggested postponing the upcoming presidential elections and install an interim government under the leadership of Abdul Sattar Sirat, a Tajik Islamic scholar.¹⁵ This suggestion was also declined by the US. However, later it came out to be a valid suggestion, as after concluding the US Taliban deal, the intra-Afghan dialogue has become a real challenge under the existing leadership.

In December 2018, representatives of the Taliban, several Asian states, the Afghan government, and the US gathered in the United Arab Emirates to formally conclude the talks.¹⁶ However, the meeting ended abruptly. It appeared that the Taliban rejected a meeting with the Afghan officials who were present at the venue. Later, Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman stated that Taliban

representatives have “no plans to meet and will not meet the Kabul administration.”¹⁷ This meeting was facilitated by Pakistan.¹⁸

In January 2019, the Taliban again held six-day talks with the representatives of the US government. The duration of the talks was the longest ever. During the negotiations, the US pressed upon the Taliban that they will not allow international militant groups like Al Qaeda to use their country as a base. The Taliban called for a specific timeframe for the withdrawal of all US and NATO forces. They suggested that withdrawal should complete in six months, however, maintained that they could be flexible in this regard.¹⁹ On the other hand, the US wanted three years for the withdrawal.²⁰

In March 2019, Khalilzad announced that an agreement had to be finalised on counterterrorism assurances and the drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban and the US government held two weeks of talks for finalising the document of agreement. No breakthrough could be achieved during the talks, though.²¹ Moreover, Khalilzad stated that once the agreement is finalised the Taliban and the Afghan government would start the intra-Afghanistan negotiations. During this meeting, the Taliban remained much cautious on the text of the agreement regarding the US demand of not allowing Al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base.²²

In April 2019, the Afghan government officials were also supposed to meet the Taliban, as they agreed to meet the Afghan officials to know each other. However, the meeting could not take place, as the Taliban rejected the composition of the Afghan government delegation.²³ In May 2019, the US and the Taliban again started a round of negotiations in Doha. The talks were based on four basic issues, “troop withdrawal; guarantees against terrorism; talks between the Taliban and the American-supported government of Afghanistan to establish a path toward political settlement; and a lasting cease-fire.”²⁴

In July 2019, Afghan officials met the Taliban leaders in a personal capacity in Doha. It was a major step taken towards peace. Both sides agreed on a 'roadmap for peace'.²⁵ In August, Khalilzad met the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan before convening talks with the Taliban leaders in Doha.²⁶ By the end of August 2019, a peace deal framework was finalised. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, while expressing his hope for peaceful agreement said, "Inshallah [God willing], this time we are hopeful that everything will be finalised. Work is underway to streamline the mechanism, but there is no such sticking point left that is not agreeable."²⁷

A Setback to Talks

The process seemed to be reaching its conclusion. But, in September 2019, President Trump called off negotiations with the Taliban after a Taliban attack killed a US soldier.

He Tweeted on 8 September 2019:

"An attack in Kabul that killed one of our great great soldiers, and 11 other people. I immediately cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations. What kind of people would kill so many in order to seemingly strengthen their bargaining position? They didn't, they only made it worse! If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don't have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway. How many more decades are they willing to fight?"²⁸

At that time the US president expressed his will to secretly meet the Taliban leaders. However, abruptly ending the talks for the aforementioned reason was astonishing. According to Lawrence Sellin, a retired US Army reserve colonel, "Inviting the Taliban, who many consider a terrorist group, was a politically risky move both from the optics and from a greater likelihood of failure and embarrassment to

the president."²⁹ "If such a meeting were to take place, it would also mean that Trump would host the Taliban just days before the anniversary of the 11 September 2001, attacks."³⁰ From 2006 till 6 June 2020, some 2,000 US soldiers have died in the conflict in Afghanistan.³¹ It is also ironic to note that in late July 2019, before agreeing upon the final provisions of the deal with the US, two US soldiers were killed in a 'green on blue' insider attack.³² At that time, President Trump did not cancel the talks but later in September 2019, he cancelled, citing the killing of a US soldier as a reason.

Interestingly, in February 2020 before the conclusion of the US-Taliban deal, two more US soldiers died in an 'apparent' insider attack.³³ However, despite all hurdles and predicaments, a senior US official announced on 14 February 2020 that the US and the Taliban had reached an agreement to reduce violence across Afghanistan, including attacks on Afghan forces. After the US military commanders assessed that the truce held, the US and Taliban were supposed to sign a formal agreement. On 22 February 2020, a reduction in violence went into effect and US commander General Scott Miller expressed his satisfaction over the Taliban's efforts to reduce violence.

On 29 February 2020, Khalilzad signed a formal agreement with the Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, In Doha. President Trump issued a statement:

Nearly 19 years ago, American service members went to Afghanistan to root out the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. In that time, we have made great progress in Afghanistan, but at great cost to our brave service members, to the American taxpayers, and to the people of Afghanistan. When I ran for office, I promised the American people I would begin to bring our troops home, and seek to end this war. We are making substantial progress on that promise.³⁴

US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad tweeted on 29 February:

“Today is a day for hope. After years of conflict, we have signed an agreement with the Taliban that achieves US objectives and puts Afghanistan on a path to peace.”

Several international observers were present at the meeting, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Simultaneously, Secretary of Defence Mark Esper met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to issue a joint US-Afghan declaration reiterating US support for the Afghan government and the government’s willingness to negotiate with the Taliban without preconditions.

US-Taliban Doha Agreement

The Doha agreement laid the foundation of future engagement of the US with Afghanistan.

Following are the four main points of the Doha agreement:

- “1. Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies. Afghanistan government shall not give asylum, work permits, visas to anyone who has posed threat to the US
2. Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and the announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.”³⁵

The Guarantees and enforcement mechanism entail the following:

- In 135 days, the US will reduce its troops to 8,600. The coalition forces shall also proportionally reduce their presence.
- The US and coalition forces withdraw all their presence from 5 bases

- The US and its allies shall complete total withdrawal in the remaining nine-and-a-half months
 - The 5,000 Taliban prisoners will be released by the Afghan Government and 1,000 prisoners shall be released by the Taliban
 - The Taliban guaranteed that the released prisoners will abide by the agreement
 - The US agreed that it will refrain from the use of force against Afghanistan
3. "After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar."³⁶
- The above point entails the following:
 - With the start of Intra Afghan negotiations, the US shall initiate a review of its sanctions against the Taliban, to remove them by 27 August 2020
 - With the start of Intra Afghan negotiations, the US shall also negotiate with the UN Security Council to remove sanctions against the Taliban by 29 May 2020
4. "A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be

announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan."³⁷

- The US shall have positive engagement with the post-settlement Islamic government
- The US shall seek economic engagement with the post-settlement Islamic government

Intra Afghan dialogue was to begin by 10 March 2020. However, various Afghan factions entered into discord amongst each other and the dialogue process could not start till the end of August. As the removal of sanctions against the Taliban was also conditioned on the start of the intra-Afghan dialogue, nothing substantial has been done on this aspect as well.

It is also imperative to note that the Taliban were successful in gaining the maximum benefit from the deal. They had always demanded a complete withdrawal of the foreign troops as soon as possible. The US insisted on a period of three years for total withdrawal. However, the Taliban objective of a speedy withdrawal plan was achieved. The main hurdle now remains in fulfilling the dream of a peaceful Afghanistan, i.e., lack of unity among Afghans.

Intra-Afghan Talks

The mistrust looms large among various Afghan factions. "Though Afghans never allowed foreigners to settle in their territory, yet they have always provided room for 'others' to manoeuvre, owing to their disunity. The over inclination of Afghans towards ethnic identities, galvanize their discord."³⁸ Eventually, the country has paid the price of this division in the form of two long wars. The Pakistani government stressed upon the Afghan government to seize the opportunity of reaching a consensus but the distrust loomed large on the peace dialogue. "The ongoing peace process has provided an opportunity for Afghan factions to unite and undo all the wrongs committed against them in the past 20 years. Unfortunately, the internal strife of Afghans has again prevailed over this opportunity."³⁹

“The question arises who doesn’t want peace? According to Taliban official in Doha, Khairullah Khairkhaw, the Kabul administration doesn’t want the foreign troops to withdraw. As all the benefits they avail now shall be curtailed if the foreign forces will withdraw. Abdullah Abdullah recently reiterated his commitment to peace but also asserted that violence must stop. On the other hand, Taliban on their website allege, that afghan intelligence is behind all the violence, even the attack on the hospital was carried by the Kabul administration to convince the foreign forces that Afghanistan will further plunge into chaos if they’ll leave.”⁴⁰

“By closely examining, one can understand that if the Taliban conducted attacks against civilians, they would have lost the support of the local population. As in guerrilla warfare, support of the local population is of utmost importance. Ironically, the local population scarcely show any affiliation with the Afghan government. It can be further testified from a very slim turnout in the Afghan elections of 2019. The Afghan leaders, both Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani seem absorbed in their self-interest. By working together for four years in a government they could not build trust and again entered into a tug of war after the 2019 elections.”⁴¹ The problem is Afghanistan has never been a nation. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society. There are serious challenges of cohesion prevalent in Afghanistan.

Challenges of Cohesion

Afghan society is highly fragmented. There are Pashtuns (42%), Tajiks (27%), Uzbek (9%), Hazaras (9%), Aimak (4%), Turkmen (3%), Baloch (2%), and 4% fall in unspecified “other” group.⁴² Pashtun group dominate the political domain of the country. In 1919, Afghanistan officially got independence from the British and signed the treaty of Rawalpindi.⁴³ Amanullah Khan (1919-29), a Pashtun, then ruled Afghanistan and introduced the country’s first Constitution in 1923, making the country a monarchy.⁴⁴ Later, Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933-73), who was also a Pashtun and nephew of Amanullah started a

40-year rule in the country.⁴⁵ Muhammad Zahir Shah was overthrown by his cousin, Muhammad Daoud Khan, again a Pashtun in 1973.⁴⁶ After the Soviet invasion, there was complete chaos. The country plunged into civil war at the end of Soviet occupation as all ethnic factions started to fight for power.

Before the Soviet invasion, a prolonged rule of Pashtuns created dissonance in the other ethnicities. The guerrilla fighters that emerged during the Soviet resistance started a power struggle. Gulbadin Hekmatyar (Pashtun), Ahmed Shah Masood (Tajik), and Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek) emerged as leaders of their respective ethnic groups. The Taliban are also mainly Pashtuns. Therefore, still, the internal strife goes on. Within Pashtuns as well, there are various divisions based on their ideology or interest-driven preferences.

Ashraf Ghani (current Afghan president) and Hamid Karzai (previous Afghan president) are Pashtuns. They have a different mindset and ideology from the Taliban. Therefore, it is not just ethnicity that divides people in Afghanistan, it is also ideology. Even today, while negotiating for the intra-Afghan negotiations, Abdullah Abdullah, a Tajik is given a task to negotiate with the Taliban.

Afghanistan is a country of various identities, where all identities do not associate themselves with a single entity of being Afghan. For them, ethnicity or in some cases ideology comes before their national identity. In such a scenario, a monarchy or a presidential form of government does not effectively vent out the difference of opinions. A parliamentary system would suit Afghanistan, given its multicultural and multi-layered society. In a parliamentary system coordination of 'diverse views' and interests is possible.⁴⁷

However, it depends on how the Afghan factions conduct a dialogue with each other. What system would they adopt? Whether they would continue with a newly installed democratic system or would revert to some Taliban induced system of governance. To what extent the dialogue will be successful? Or are the Taliban just trying to

buy time so that the total withdrawal takes place and they take over Afghanistan once again.

In comparison with the Taliban, the strength of the Afghan national army and Afghan national police is weak. As ideologically, the Afghan National forces do not consider themselves as forces for the nation. Most of the recruits joined Afghan government forces for monetary benefits. Lack of nationalism affects the performance of recruits of Afghan Police and Army.

The likelihood of a mutually accepted government system amongst the Afghan factions is questionable. There will be an internal power struggle. Hence, all this discussion establishes that the Afghan peace process is in the doldrums. There can be two main scenarios afterwards:

- The US forces will withdraw even if the intra-Afghan dialogue fails
- The US forces will maintain a presence

Both these scenarios entail serious implications for the region in general and Pakistan in specific. Afghanistan's location is strategically very important. It is a land-locked country surrounded by Iran in the west, Pakistan to the east and south, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north and China to the northeast. Russia is connected with Central Asian states, which are connected to Afghanistan. Therefore, Iran, Pakistan, China, Russia, and India have all developed their 'interests' in Afghanistan, not just because of its geographical location but also because of the absence of any governing power in the state.

Therefore, other than understanding the internal affairs of Afghanistan, it is imperative to understand the probable dynamics of international relations for the possibility of the abovementioned scenarios in Afghanistan.

Scenario 1: Total withdrawal

Implications

If the US forces completely withdraw, it will be a clear victory for the Taliban. The Afghan national forces are no match to the resilient Taliban forces. The following can be probable implications:

The onset of a Civil war

History repeats itself. In retrospect, after the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan plunged into a civil war, leaving the Taliban victorious. If the US forces withdraw without ensuring consensus or any political settlement amongst the warring Afghan parties. An all-out war in Afghanistan might take place between the Kabul government and the Taliban.

Russia's Murky involvement in Afghanistan

Russian President Vladimir Putin once praised Washington for taking on the 'burden' of fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and urged it to 'carry it to the end'. In the past two years, Moscow has hosted two international conferences on the Afghan peace process, inviting the Taliban leaders and Afghan opposition members.

Implicitly, it is alleged that Russia is monetarily supporting the Taliban.⁴⁸ According to Mark Galeotti, a Russia analyst and a senior associate fellow at the British-based Royal United Services Institute, "Russia's interests in Afghanistan are twofold: to avoid an explosion of chaos on the borders of what it considers its sphere of influence, and to use it as an opportunity to demonstrate and assert its claim to be a great power."⁴⁹

Iran-Taliban Dichotomous Relationship

Iran certainly does not want a US presence in Afghanistan. But it also does not want the Taliban to take entire control. Before 9/11, Iran backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. But in recent years the Islamic Republic and the Taliban have forged closer ties, with militant leaders even visiting Tehran. The relationship between Shiite-majority

Iran and the Taliban, a fundamentalist Sunni group, is dichotomous. Iran officially opposes the Taliban, but some experts say it provides some military support to the mainstream Taliban.

The Taliban have also emerged as a political force and taking fundamental decisions to secure maximum geopolitical support. The appointment of Mawlawi Mahdi,⁵⁰ like a shadow district chief of the group for northern Sar-e Pul province, is a tactic to win the support of the Hazara (Shiite) community, which constitutes ten per cent of the area and also to woo Iran to galvanise its support for them. But if the Taliban would be unable to effectively suppress the ISKP (a branch of ISIS) and the Islamist militant group continues to pose a direct threat to Iranian interests as well as to Shiite communities, Iran may exacerbate its support for the Fatimuyun militia group, leading the country to sectarian fighting. Pakistan will be directly affected by this sectarian fight.

The eruption of a Refugee Crisis

From 1978 to 1983, during the time of internal strife in Afghanistan, the average inflow of Afghan refugees had been 44,118 persons per month.⁵¹ To date, Pakistan hosts more than 1.4 million registered Afghans. A large number of Afghans will flee from their home country and might take refuge in Pakistan. The civil war that might erupt after the withdrawal could again give rise to this human tragedy.

Initiation of Jihad-centric Education in Afghanistan

Another likely impact of the Taliban coming to power would be on the education and overall social fabric of Afghanistan. On the website of the Taliban, they mentioned, "Anti-religious elements initially threw away all references to jihad, shariah, Islamic governance, hudood and other such topics and replaced them with irreligious alien terms."⁵² It seems that under the Taliban rule jihad will be a norm of life in Afghanistan.

TTP's Revival

Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban will become prime attractions for madrassah graduates in Pakistan, particularly in the country's border regions. Such convergences can push Pakistan deeper into religious extremism and violent sectarianism.⁵³ Once the Afghan Taliban assume power in Afghanistan, TTP might also feel empowered, it is the ambition of TTP to throw Pakistan into deep chaos from where they can rebuild a new system according to their vision. According to Muhammad Aamir Rana, a security analyst in Pakistan, "Pakistan's strategic architects are not factoring in, at least at the moment, non-state actors and phenomena such as extremism into their strategic designs, and their prime focus is on the political calculus."⁵⁴

Probability of Launching Jihad in Xinjiang

China's Xinjiang province shares a 46-mile border with Afghanistan. With the anticipated withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban coming to power, the Uygur militants can reignite violence in the Xinjiang province of China. Taliban once settled might expand their Jihad to Xinjiang, (China) located in the northeast of Afghanistan.

However, if the Taliban would do so, they would serve the interest of the US as Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, recently said that China's campaign in the western region of Xinjiang is an "attempt to erase its own citizens."⁵⁵ "Allowing Muslim extremist forces to parade towards China could also very well be an intended consequence of the Trump administration's deal with the Taliban."⁵⁶ China on one point wants total withdrawal of the US forces and on the other, it wants security for Xinjiang province. However, if Pakistan would be successful in maintaining a hold on the Afghan Taliban, such a possibility could be avoided.

Jihad against Expansionist India

India, a country with the largest Muslim minority is persecuting Muslims based on religion. On 14 May, it was revealed in a media report that the Taliban will launch an offensive against India to save Muslims from the atrocities of India.⁵⁷ Three days later, Taliban spokesman Sohail Shaheen said, "The statement published in the media about Taliban joining Jihad in Kashmir is wrong.... The policy of the Islamic Emirate is clear that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries."⁵⁸

Taliban's disdain for India is an open truth. It could be in the interest of Pakistan if the Taliban indulge in the Kashmir struggle. However, in the near future, it is quite unlikely, as the Taliban would initially stabilise their own country.

Scenario 2: The US will stay

Implications

There are five American bases in Afghanistan. The US has spent an enormous amount of money on trying to secure its stay in Afghanistan. It will not give up on that so easily. In 2018, during the peace talks, the US wanted the Taliban to agree on having at least two US bases, Bagram and Shorabak but the Taliban rejected the proposal.⁵⁹ Until now, the US has reduced troops from 12,000 to 8,600. However, it seems that the US wishes to keep an eye on China, Iran, and Russia by staying in the region. US presence in Afghanistan is likely to benefit its 'enduring strategic partnership' with India. The ongoing peace process looks like a watershed. They wish to stay in the region for an indefinite period.⁶⁰

Launch of a Fierce Offensive

According to the *New York Times*, in the last month of June, 322 pro-government forces and 159 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan.⁶¹ In July, the Taliban conducted an attack on a government facility in Samangan province's capital Aybak, close to an

office of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the main intelligence agency.⁶² Earlier, in an interview, a Taliban representative accused the Afghan intelligence of sabotaging the peace process. The attack occurred after the Afghan government refused to release 600 Taliban prisoners.⁶³

Lost Peace Process

The heavy investment of all stakeholders in achieving peace in Afghanistan could be lost. Afghanistan could again sink in conflict, inviting various state and non-state actors to manoeuvre the conflict for their benefit.

Upsurge of ISIS

In 2015, the IS established its hold in the eastern Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. There are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 IS fighters in Afghanistan.⁶⁴ In recent months, IS has penetrated the northern province of Kunduz and the western province of Herat. The Western media is reporting that IS recruiters are active in Kabul and other major cities, attracting educated youth from universities. The IS is projected as a threat to American security.

Taliban are also sceptical of IS role and the US apprehensions regarding the IS. Last year, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid rejected General McKenzie's assertion that the US is vulnerable to IS attacks.⁶⁵ He also claimed that the Taliban had cleared many areas of IS. He said, "If American generals really fear Daesh, why are they avoiding its elimination and creating hurdles against mujahedeen operations? Statements of American generals are contrary to their actions."⁶⁶

It appears that the US wishes to prolong its stay in Afghanistan and is using the IS as an excuse to legitimise its stay in Afghanistan in the eyes of Americans, who are becoming wary of an endless US war in Afghanistan. Interestingly, Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, in an interview with a UK based newspaper on 29 November 2016 said that

the US was responsible for “paving the way for the IS.”⁶⁷ ISIS is also against Iran and the Shiite community in Afghanistan.

Boost of the Indo-US Relations

The main beneficiary of the US stay in Afghanistan will be India. According to Stephen P Cohen, although India declined to join the US-sponsored alliances during the cold war, it received more than Pakistan in economic and military grants and purchased about \$55 million in military equipment from the US. President Donald Trump’s visit to India in February 2020 was also a reaffirmation of US commitment towards India. It is also ironic to note that President Trump visited India right before signing the peace deal of Afghanistan.

With the US in the Backyard: India China Rivalry can Grow

With the US in the backyard, India will not try to limit its expansionist plans. The geostrategic calculus will shift in favour of India. Currently, it is at loggerheads with Nepal and has engaged in fist fighting with China over Laddakh. India and China also have an unsettled dispute over Doklam. China claims a plateau, which lies at a junction between China, the north-eastern Indian state of Sikkim and the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. India supports Bhutan's claim over it.⁶⁸ Some more misadventures can be seen by India shortly.

Proxy Wars in Afghanistan

Since the Taliban have now acquired a position where other nations like Russia are also willing to support them and Iran is also playing a role, there will be proxy wars in Afghanistan if Afghanistan fails to have a cohesive governance system of its own.

The entrenchment of India in Afghanistan

India recently concluded 5 pacts with the Kabul administration.⁶⁹ Abdullah Abdullah the chief negotiator from the Kabul administration is said to have backing from India. Over the past few years, India has heavily invested in Afghanistan. Till 2016, India’s aid amounted to \$1.36 billion. India’s increasing involvement in

Afghanistan “in the past two decades is driven by a desire to limit Islamabad’s influence.”⁷⁰

China–Iran Proximity: A Reason for the US to Stay

Iran dropped India from the Chabahar rail project, citing funding delay as a reason behind the decision.⁷¹ The development comes as China finalises a massive 25-year, \$400 billion strategic partnership deal with Iran. Iran and China also have drafted a joint plan to integrate the two regions of Central Asia and South Asia. They are creating “a sweeping economic and security partnership that would clear the way for billions of dollars of Chinese investments in Iran.”⁷² According to the deal, China will invest a total of \$400 billion over 25 years, in Iran.⁷³ The deal would “undercut the Trump administration’s efforts to isolate the Iranian government” and “would vastly expand” China’s presence in the region.⁷⁴ With this development, the US will hardly think of a total withdrawal from Afghanistan.

What Can Pakistan Do?

Although Pakistan has been successful in bringing the Taliban to the table of negotiation, it is unable yet to convince the Afghan government to earnestly accept the opportunity of establishing peace. If Pakistan can, it must press upon the Afghan government to seize the opportunity, in the best interest of its people and the country. Otherwise, the Afghan government will be responsible for pushing the country into war once again.

In the long term, Pakistan must help Afghans in nation-building. Although Afghans never allowed foreigners to settle in their territory, they have always provided room for ‘others’ to manoeuvre, owing to their disunity. The over-inclination of Afghans towards ethnic identities intensifies their mutual distrust. Eventually, the country has paid a price for this division in the form of two long wars.

At the moment, the only indigenous leadership in Afghanistan is of Taliban. The government of Afghanistan has no link with the people. Afghanistan needs leadership. Power in the hands of the

Taliban is not in the interest of Pakistan either. It is not impossible for the Taliban, given their ideology, to launch an offensive against Pakistan also if they find a need to do so. Therefore, Pakistan should invest in the education sector in Afghanistan, so that Afghanistan can have visionary leaders.

To curtail growing Indo-US bonhomie in the wake of an unstoppable presence of the US in Afghanistan, Pakistan needs to establish relations with Iran and Russia. Only China cannot always bail out Pakistan from every trouble.

China and the US are tactfully playing politics against each other but not waging a war. The reason is interdependence. US and China are economically interdependent. Pakistan needs to construct a security design in the region that ensures economic connectivity and interdependence with the neighbouring countries, only then can peace be attained in the region.

Conclusion

The key to peace in Afghanistan is mutual trust. The Afghans need to trust each other. Nationalism must be cultivated in the country to fend 'great games' to be played in Afghanistan. If Afghans again fail in becoming a nation, another power would try to occupy this unfortunate land for its strategic interests.

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