

# Afghanistan Peace Process Outlook

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## Abstract

*The Doha Peace Accord between the United States and the Taliban has rekindled hope for peace in war-torn Afghanistan. Against this backdrop, this paper endeavours to depict a holistic picture of the Afghan Peace Process. It explores the ongoing situation in the country and its impact on geopolitics of the region. It also discusses the impact of the American drawdown, future prospects of intra-Afghan dialogue with possible scenarios if the peace process fails. The role of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries in consolidating peace has been highlighted. Pakistan's concerns with regard to stability, including, inter alia, return of Afghan refugees, Afghanistan's status as a narco state and India's efforts to play the spoiler's role have been looked into in detail. The paper concludes that the most plausible solution to Afghanistan's stability lies in maintaining ethnic and religious balance in Afghan society; establishment of a peaceful political system within and without; and work on making the country a stable bridge between South and Central Asia.*

**Keywords:** Peace Process, Geopolitics, Stakeholders, Spoilers, Intra-Afghan Dialogue, Regional Connectivity.

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## **Introduction**

**T**he Doha Peace Accord<sup>1</sup> between the United States (US) and the Taliban, considered to be a stepping stone, has laid the foundations of a dialogue for reconciliation in war-torn Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the path ahead is bumpy with limited options for Afghan stakeholders but to reconcile as the alternative would mean continuation of war, which has ravaged the country for the past four decades. ‘This peace process will test the Taliban, and also veteran Afghan leaders as well as a new generation which has come of age in the last two decades and is hoping against hope for a different future.’<sup>2</sup>

Since the peace deal, multiple hostile incidents have taken place on Afghan soil: oath-taking of two presidents in one state; President Ashraf Ghani’s delaying tactics over the release of Taliban prisoners; and the Taliban’s non-committal attitude towards the future contours of Afghan governance. There are major factors, which do not augur well for the future stability of Afghanistan. Regional factors are equally important for the internal peace. During the course of the crisis, whether pre- or post-9/11, Afghan soil has been a competing ground for its neighbours and near-neighbours. For Pakistan, India has been playing the role of a spoiler<sup>3</sup> by using Afghan soil. Anti-Pakistan individuals and successive Afghan governments since 9/11 have been working against Pakistan’s interests.

Ironically, this has been the tradition of Afghanistan wherein competing forces have always sought external allies. While it is true that Afghanistan has been a ‘graveyard of empires’,<sup>4</sup> it is equally true that Afghan governments have gone to any extent to gain the support of outsiders in order to trounce their opponents and achieve their objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> “Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban Sign Deal to End 18-Year War,” *BBC News*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Asad Hashim, “Pakistan Warns US of ‘Spoilers’ on US-Taliban Deal in Afghanistan,” *Al Jazeera*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/pakistan-warns-spoilers-taliban-deal-afghanistan-200302093650382.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Milton Bearden, “Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2001, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2001-11-01/afghanistan-graveyard-empires>.

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The peace process, agreed to under the Doha Agreement,<sup>5</sup> is now under severe strain because relations between the Afghan government and Taliban are rooted in the psyche of crushing each other for gaining a ‘position of strength.’<sup>6</sup> Such a situation does not augur well for the peace process even though Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah have struck a deal for power-sharing as Ghani’s delaying tactic of releasing the Taliban prisoners is creating hurdles for the peace process. Besides, weak political will amongst Afghan stakeholders, competition between regional actors and the US’ unclear role in the region also stand in the way.

While the US’ role remains central in the overall milieu, Pakistan’s contribution in facilitating the peace talks has been crucial although its detractors may entertain various conspiracy theories. If geopolitics continues to prevail in Afghanistan and the region, resumption of the intra-Afghan dialogue, and consequently, peace and stability will remain a distant dream, and the world will undergo a re-alignment of interests that could affect the local populations, economies and the environment. Meanwhile, regional countries are suspicious about the permanent US military bases in Afghanistan. They are in favour of complete withdrawal of the US forces but with a ‘logical end’.<sup>7</sup>

There is no purely military solution to the conflict - peace efforts are difficult but not impossible. There is a powerful rationale for exploring the possibilities of a peace process because Afghanistan’s conflict is escalating and government forces are suffering losses. The ultimate victims are common Afghans who are facing savagery on a daily basis for the past four decades. Although a gigantic task, an intra-Afghan settlement requires a compromise amongst all internal and external stakeholders.

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<sup>5</sup> Shereena Qazi, “Afghanistan’s Taliban, US Sign Agreement Aimed at Ending War,” *Al Jazeera*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/afghanistan-taliban-sign-deal-america-longest-war-200213063412531.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Nawaz Khan and Saira Rehman, “Afghanistan Drawdown and Regional Security,” *IPRI Journal XIII*, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 131-139, <https://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/std4naws13.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> “Afghanistan’s Neighbours Fear Refugee Crisis if US Pulls Out,” *CNBC*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.cnb.com/2019/01/01/afghanistans-neighbors-fear-refugee-crisis-if-us-pulls-out.html>.

## **Present Situation**

The Afghan ruling elite, which the US and the international community had assiduously supported after the fall of the Taliban, remains divided, causing apprehensions that Afghanistan would remain mired in a vicious cycle of unending violence. The latter will help the war economy to flourish at the cost of durable peace in the country. Therefore, a rapprochement between President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah has been a result of persistent pressure by the US, which threatened to cut ‘US\$ 1 billion in assistance to Afghanistan and increasing financial penalties in the next year.’<sup>8</sup> As per the Agreement, Washington is bound to meet certain timelines, including the delisting of Taliban from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Sanctions List (R 1267); reduce its troops to 8600 in 135 days, and completely withdraw the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in another 9.5 months. This would be possible if the intra-Afghan dialogue makes headway, which is a precondition under the Agreement.<sup>9</sup>

The Taliban, seeing themselves as a winning party, seem to be more confident of occupying power with or without reconciliation, hence, their reluctance to announce a ceasefire. They also portend that a complete ceasefire may dis-incentivise their fighters, which in turn may incur a heavy political cost on their movement.

Announcing a ceasefire without getting their preferred deal may also send a signal of weakness to the Taliban adversaries not only on the battlefield - such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) - but also in the political sphere.<sup>10</sup>

Adding to the complexity in dynamics around the peace process, the Coronavirus pandemic has affected Afghanistan as it has the world, but there

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<sup>8</sup> Syed Mohammad Ali, “The Future of Afghanistan,” *Express Tribune*, April 3, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2189648/6-the-future-of-afghanistan-2/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban Sign Deal to End 18-Year War,” *BBC News*.

<sup>10</sup> Daud Khattak, “Why Are the Taliban Reluctant to Declare a Ceasefire?” *Diplomat*, August 13, 2019, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/08/why-are-the-taliban-reluctant-to-declare-a-ceasefire/>.

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are no authentic statistics to know the extent of its impact across the country. The fear for life is hindering medical professionals to attend to the pandemic except in limited facilities available in urban centres of the country.

Economically, even before the spread of this pandemic, the World Economic Outlook Report 2019 produced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated ‘a negative economic outlook due to slowing economic growth across different regions.’<sup>11</sup> A World Bank (WB) report stated that ‘extreme poverty is likely to increase in Fragility or Conflict-affected States (FCS) and up to two-thirds of the global extreme poor will be living in these countries if serious actions are not taken.’<sup>12</sup> This was the economic reality before the outbreak of COVID-19, which brought the world to a standstill. ‘The pandemic will certainly worsen global economic outlooks... Afghanistan, ranked as a High-Intensity Conflict among FCS countries’, will suffer more gravely because of disrupted supply chain networks than more developed countries.<sup>13</sup>

## **Major Stakeholders: Internal Dynamics, Geopolitics of Major Powers and Regional Countries**

### *Taliban’s Dynamics*

It is apparent that the Taliban seek complete withdrawal of foreign forces in order to justify establishment of their rule over the country, which would not be acceptable to others in power, especially non-Pashtuns. However, complete withdrawal of American troops would neutralise the hardliners amongst the Taliban ranks who are opposed to a rapprochement either with

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<sup>11</sup> IMF, *World Economic Outlook, October 2019: Global Manufacturing Downturn, Rising Trade Barriers*, report (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 2019), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2019/10/01/world-economic-outlook-october-2019>.

<sup>12</sup> Natalia Cieslik, “Fragility and Conflict: On the Front Lines of the Fight against Poverty,” World Bank, February 27, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/publication/fragility-conflict-on-the-front-lines-fight-against-poverty>.

<sup>13</sup> Shoaib A. Rahim, “What the COVID-19 Outbreak Means for Afghanistan’s Troubled Economy,” *Diplomat*, April 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/what-the-covid-19-outbreak-means-for-afghanistans-troubled-economy/>.

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the US or the Afghan government. Secondly, the Taliban's reluctance to a ceasefire would mean loss of motivation for their foot soldiers to fight. They have earlier experienced that a temporary ceasefire on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha in 2018 lead to a loss of motivation for many foot soldiers who did not return back to their posts.<sup>14</sup>

The Taliban have made it clear that they want to re-establish an 'Islamic Emirate' in the country; they believe they are the rightful and legitimate representatives of Afghanistan who have fought against the US-led forces for the sovereignty of the country. Their assurance under the Doha Agreement that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be misused by al-Qaeda or Daesh/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a major condition, which they have promised to fulfil. While the US may wish to maintain the existing political structure intact, which was introduced in the country after the fall of the Taliban, it may, however, settle for less if the ensuing system can bring about peace in the country. An article in *Washington Post* aptly surmised that Washington unsuccessfully tried to 'reinvent Afghanistan in its own image by imposing a centralised democracy and free-market economy on an ancient, tribal society that was unsuited for either.'<sup>15</sup>

Taliban will seek to run the country basically in line with their values. Unfortunately, the weak and corrupt regime the US propped up has not built enough legitimacy to provide much of a counterweight.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Afghan Power Elite***

The Afghan power elite have been a divided house from the beginning. Since the fall of the Taliban, the US has tried to establish political order on an archaic tribal society, which has been competing for power within its own

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<sup>14</sup> Khattak, "Why Are the Taliban Reluctant to Declare a Ceasefire?"

<sup>15</sup> Craig Whitlock, "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-nation-building/>.

<sup>16</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "Why Winning the War in Afghanistan Meant Losing to the Taliban," *National Interest*, March 31, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/why-winning-war-afghanistan-meant-losing-taliban-139422>.

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ranks, throughout the history of Afghanistan. A glaring example of the sheer power play was formation of ‘parallel governments’ in Kabul. Before the inauguration ceremony of the ‘parallel’ governments, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells mentioned the dangers of this development in a Twitter post, ‘Afghan leaders must prioritize and protect unity of the nation. Parallel Afghan governments are not the answer, and will be harmful to the Afghan people. The *impasse* over governance must end.’<sup>17</sup> The US envoy for Afghan peace Zalmay Khalilzad also issued a statement saying, ‘it is time for Afghans to compromise and put their differences aside to resolve the political crisis resulting from elections and dual inaugurations.’<sup>18</sup> The issue of parallel government resulted in the obstruction of forming a stable government and ended up with ‘two parallel governments, two presidents, two cabinets, and a division of geography in Afghanistan.’<sup>19</sup> In the end, a functional government is a pre-requisite for the successful operationalisation of the Afghan peace process.

Despite internal political wrangling, the international community has given *de jure* recognition to the Ashraf Ghani government, which was evident when the diplomatic corps in Kabul attended the oath-taking ceremony of Mr Ghani. However, his rival, Abdullah Abdullah, has a nuisance value amongst non-Pashtun warlords whose influence in their areas cannot be challenged. However, the game is not restricted to two rivals, and they understand the importance of an intra-Afghan dialogue as both face a formidable adversary – the Taliban – who have proven military prowess and possess the capability to overrun both the camps if reconciliation fails. Therefore, if reconciliation is to start through an intra-Afghan dialogue, both sides will have to make compromises. The Taliban, being the formidable power, will have to compromise more than their rivals. For the time being, they have not shown any inclination to be accommodating unless all Afghan factions give allegiance to the ‘Islamic Emirate.’

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<sup>17</sup> “U.S. Warns Afghan Leaders over Parallel Governments,” *Khaama Press*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/u-s-warns-afghan-leaders-over-parallel-governments-04531/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “US, Taliban Peace Deal a Positive Step, But Rife with Ambiguities,” *Afghan Studies Center*, March 31, 2020, <https://afghanstudiescenter.org/us-taliban-peace-deal-a-positive-step-but-rife-with-ambiguities/>.

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President Ashraf Ghani announced his seven-point peace plan in October 2019 with a five-year time-frame, which was focused on the strategy of winning his re-election.<sup>20</sup> Even after ‘winning’ elections, Ghani has been trying to exploit the prisoner exchange clause of the US-Taliban deal in securing his second tenure. Therefore, he has been hesitant into fully implementing the deal. This generates fear that if he continues to play the role of a spoiler, it would plunge the country in another bout of civil war. However, there are some signs of optimism as well. On the political front, he is cobbling together an alliance of major ethnic groups to face the Taliban on the negotiating table. His announcement of ‘a 21-member team to negotiate with the Taliban is a tentative sign of progress for the US-brokered peace deal.’<sup>21</sup> Abdullah Abdullah, while endorsing the composition of the Ghani-nominated negotiation team, has agreed to lead it. This would be a real challenge for the Taliban to show their diplomatic skills on the negotiating table.

### ***External Stakeholders***

Regionally, the US withdrawal would be seen with satisfaction especially by Iran, Russia and China as the weakening of America’s footprint in Afghanistan would mean less points of friction and more opportunities of access to Afghanistan both for political and economic reasons. These countries’ direct relationship with the Taliban may offer better chances of assurances that Afghan soil would not be used against their interests. In the post-withdrawal period, the European Union (EU) will have a very important role not only in facilitating a peace dialogue, but also economic development of the country.

### ***China***

China considers Afghanistan an unstable neighbour, which can destabilise its Western region of Xinjiang where Uighur Muslims are already agitating. Since 9/11, the US military presence in Afghanistan has been a dilemma for

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<sup>20</sup> Mosharraf Zaidi, “Ashraf Ghani’s Seven Points,” *News International*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/547649-ashraf-ghani-s-seven-points>.

<sup>21</sup> “Afghanistan Government Announces Team for Taliban Talks,” *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/afghanistan-government-announces-team-taliban-talks-200327172504636.html>.



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China. It sees American troops in its ‘backyard’ as a serious strategic threat, but at the same time, it has ‘benefited from the security that the US has provided there, especially in terms of curtailing the growth and spread of anti-China terrorist groups. The implication of this dilemma is that China wants the US to withdraw - but only when the withdrawal is responsible, well planned and does not leave a power vacuum that would destabilize the region.’<sup>22</sup> China has maintained its lines of communication with the Taliban. ‘Since 2014, Taliban delegations began to publicly and regularly visit China, culminating in secret talks that China facilitated between Kabul and the Taliban in Urumqi.’<sup>23</sup>

China would be satisfied with the US withdrawal as it would allow the former to reach out to the future dispensation and secure assurances that Afghan territory would not be allowed to be used by Uighurs. ‘China has made significant investments in Afghanistan, including a US\$ 3 billion copper mining project in Mes Aynak in Logar province, which has stalled because of security concerns.’<sup>24</sup> China would be happy to offer economic incentives to the future Afghan government including a share in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The extension of China’s BRI to Afghanistan could conceivably make a significant contribution to the country’s economic progress. Similarly, a railway corridor envisioned in the Afghanistan National Railway Plan (ANRP) would improve the country’s regional connectivity and enhance its integration into the BRI. ‘China and northern Afghanistan are also linked through the Sino-Afghan Special Railway Transportation Project (SARTP), the proposed Five Nations Railway Corridor, and a possible connection to CPEC.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Yun Sun, “China’s Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-afghanistan/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> John C. K. Daly, “China to Provide Military Assistance to Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13501-china-to-provide-military-assistance-to-afghanistans-badakhshan-province.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Kelemen, “China’s Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?” Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-economic-stabilization-efforts-afghanistan-new-party-table>.

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China has already extended modest military assistance, especially in the country's northern tip at Wakhan Corridor where military equipment has been supplied to the Afghan government.<sup>26</sup> After the US' withdrawal, China may enhance security assistance to the government that may emerge after the success of the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, China would prefer to adopt a regional approach to ensure that Kabul remains secure and stable.

### **Russia**

The US and Russia have consensus on Afghanistan's stability, 'preventing chaos and re-emergence of safe havens for terrorists... But beneath the surface, there have been differences'<sup>27</sup> in perception on how to achieve stability.

The US approach is founded on creating a strong central government in Kabul and a well-equipped and well-trained national security force; Russia, meanwhile, works with a wide range of actors, some of which compete directly with the government in Kabul.<sup>28</sup>

Moscow has even reached out to the Taliban, legitimising them much before the US agreed to hold peace talks with the group classified as 'terrorists' and put under UN sanctions.<sup>29</sup> The Taliban would be acceptable to the Russians if the former do not allow Central Asian *jihadi* groups or Chechens to make sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Of late, Russia has been expressing concern that the US presence in Afghanistan has not contributed to peace and stability. It would prefer a durable security structure in the region independent of the US. Therefore, American withdrawal from Afghanistan would be essential for the stability of the Central Asian states

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<sup>26</sup> Daly, "China to Provide Military Assistance to Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province."

<sup>27</sup> Julia Gurganus, "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy: How Moscow Is Preparing to Go It Alone," *Foreign Affairs*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2018-01-02/russias-afghanistan-strategy>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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whose security is assured by the Russian Federation. Additionally, the US withdrawal would mean lesser chances of American meddling in the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Russia has already been accusing the US of resettling ISIS/Daesh from Iraq/Syria to Afghanistan. Russia's Ambassador to Pakistan Alexey Dedov, while indirectly accusing the US, told a seminar in February 2018:

Islamic State (IS) was turning northern Afghanistan into a 'resting base' of international terrorism and a 'bridgehead' for establishing its 'destructive' caliphate in the region... with clear connivance, and sometimes even with direct support of certain local and outside sponsors, thousands of militants of various nationalities are consolidating under the banners of Daesh there (in northern Afghanistan), including jihadis from Syria and Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

#### ***Iran***

Iran has been in contact with the Taliban since 2005 when the latter started full swing operations against the American-led coalition. *Prima facie*, both Iran and the Taliban had reached an understanding that they would not harm each other's interests, and that Taliban would not disturb the Iranian border with Afghanistan. Consequently, the Iranian border has remained peaceful despite massive Taliban operations. Iran's involvement in Iraq and Syria are diversionary factors for it to stay quiet on Afghanistan, at least for the time being.

However, Iran may have a slightly different stance towards the Taliban due to its close contacts with the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras dating back to pre-9/11. Iran may use the Shia card with the Hazaras and Persian card with the Tajiks and Uzbeks. Nevertheless, Iran would be satisfied with the US withdrawal as it would save its borders from American interference. Iran shares Russia's view that the US has been facilitating ISIS/Daesh to relocate its fighters in Afghanistan once they came under pressure in Iraq and

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<sup>30</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Russia Says IS Turning Afghanistan into 'Resting Base' for Regional Terrorism," *Voice of America News*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/russia-says-turning-afghanistan-resting-base-regional-terrorism>.

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Syria due to Iranian and Russian operations. In fact, there was a convergence of interests between Iran and Taliban once the latter started their operations against the coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Also, Iran sees the Afghan conflict through the lens of the Middle East conflict where it fears that ‘Saudi Arabia may use Afghan-based proxies against it.’ What worries Tehran the most is that Riyadh’s position may shrink the space for its interest in Afghanistan in case of any future settlement.<sup>31</sup> There may be a thinking in Tehran that the Americans, Saudis and Emiratis may jointly advance the project on ‘regime change’ in Iran, and use ‘Afghanistan as a springboard’ to foster cross-border subversion against the clergy. ‘Tehran fears that the US objective in Afghanistan is to create a Syria-like situation in the region that will engulf Iran in violence and anarchy.’<sup>32</sup>

#### ***Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Factor***

Like Iran, Saudi Arabia also sees the Afghanistan conflict through the lens of Middle Eastern conflict where it apprehends that Iran may further enhance its influence in the region. In reality, regional rivalry was a factor for holding the round of US-Taliban talks in Abu Dhabi in place of Doha<sup>33</sup> to enable Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have strained relations with Qatar, to participate and contribute towards the Afghan peace process. The relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, along with UAE, further complicate the situation. Qatar and Iran are on one side, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are on the other. Such a scenario has put the Taliban in a difficult situation as to how to balance both. Saudi Arabia and some countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would be interested in a dispensation

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<sup>31</sup> Rasanah IIIS, *Developments and Impediments in Iran-Afghan Relations*, report (Riyadh: Rasanah International Institute for Iranian Studies, 2020), <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/monitoring-and-translation/reports/developments-and-impediments-in-iran-afghan-relations/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Youssef Igrouane, “US-Taliban Peace Talks Heighten Tensions between Qatar and UAE,” *Inside Arabia*, March 25, 2019, <https://insidearabia.com/us-taliban-peace-talk-heighten-tensions-qatar-uae/>.

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in Afghanistan, which is not pro-Iran. Their financial assistance would be crucial for the future government in Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Pakistan's Stance and Stakes**

Pakistan's known position has been that peace in Afghanistan is an imperative which should be maintained by the stakeholders. In the post-9/11 scenario, Pakistan has tried to facilitate reconciliatory dialogue between the Afghan warring factions, which was evident in Murree talks in 2016; the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG); Pakistan-Russia-China Trilateral Meeting;<sup>35</sup> as well as the US and Taliban deal in Doha. Although, the first phase of Afghan peace process has been successfully concluded after a deal between the US and Taliban was signed, the real challenge is the second phase when the Taliban and Afghan government begin engaging with each other on the negotiating table.

While Pakistan has done its bit to facilitate dialogue by convincing the Taliban to come to the negotiating table,<sup>36</sup> it cannot dictate terms of the compromise to them. It should become apparent to the US and other powers that one cannot dictate terms to the various competing factions in Afghanistan, and the Taliban are not an exception. Despite differences in approaches, Pakistan has been a linchpin for the Americans in the Afghan imbroglio. President Trump,<sup>37</sup> after his initial diatribe against Pakistan, realised that the situation in Afghanistan requires a political solution and for that to happen, he will have to soften his attitude towards the Taliban, who have already been in control of half the country and contested another 20 per cent.

In the next 14 months, the US would expect Pakistan to prevail upon the Taliban to behave and avoid actions that may force the former to opt for

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<sup>34</sup> Sarah Siddiq Aneel ed. *Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Role of Major Powers and Regional Countries* (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2016), [https://pakistan.hss.de/download/publications/7.Evolving\\_Situation\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_Role\\_of\\_Major\\_Powers\\_%26\\_Regional\\_Countries.pdf](https://pakistan.hss.de/download/publications/7.Evolving_Situation_in_Afghanistan_Role_of_Major_Powers_%26_Regional_Countries.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan 'Brokered' Afghan Peace Deal," *Express Tribune*, February 17, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2158273/1-pakistan-brokered-afghan-peace-deal>.

<sup>37</sup> "Trump Attacks Pakistan 'Deceit' in First Tweet of the Year," *BBC News*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42536209>.

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military action. Certainly, Pakistan has emerged as a crucial link in the Afghan puzzle for a variety of reasons.

First, Pakistan provides easy access to the Afghans which they do not enjoy in the neighbourhood. Approximately, tens of thousands straddle Pakistan's border without a visa for business and jobs.<sup>38</sup> Second, despite irritants with successive Afghan regimes, Pakistan is the food basket of Afghanistan and is its largest trading partner. Third, it provides the shortest and more reliable transit route to the country. Therefore, a symbiotic relationship exists between the two countries which President Karzai used to describe as one being akin to 'Siamese Twins.'<sup>39</sup>

For Islamabad, peace is essential in order to ease the two-front situation it faces due to Indian hostilities. The country will suffer the most if war breaks out between the Taliban and other rival factions - hundreds and thousands of Afghans may rush to Pakistan for refuge. Therefore, Americans need to be constantly sensitised on this important aspect of the Afghan problem.

For Pakistan, the major achievement would be peace and stability in Afghanistan; return of bulk of Afghan refugees; and resumption of normal business activities between the two countries and Central Asia. This objective can be achieved by playing the role of an honest broker without playing favourites. Pakistan must change its mindset and stop looking at Afghanistan through the Indian prism. Former Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan has aptly remarked in his article that 'peace (in Afghanistan) will contain Indian capacity for mischief.'<sup>40</sup>

### **India's Meddling in Afghanistan**

Apart from Afghan beneficiaries of American presence, India would be the only country in the region to be upset of the US drawdown, for being

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<sup>38</sup> Ali Mohammad Sabawoon, "The Gates of Friendship: How Afghans Cross the Afghan-Pakistani Border," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 28, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/the-gates-of-friendship-how-afghans-cross-the-afghan-pakistani-border/>.

<sup>39</sup> Najmuddin A. Shaikh, "Afghanistan's Message," *Dawn*, October 17, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/757318>.

<sup>40</sup> Riaz Mohammad Khan, "The Promise of 29 February," Jinnah Institute, March 2, 2020, <https://jinnah-institute.org/publication/the-promise-of-29-february/>.

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deprived of the bargaining power and influence within Afghan power corridors. India would see Taliban ascension as a setback to its objective of sabotage in Pakistan through Afghan intelligence, the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Also, Indians may lose the leverage on Afghan governmental machinery, including media houses to malign Pakistan.

‘India’s Afghan policy has largely been Pakistan-centric, which over the decades thrived on the nature of the relationship Pakistan had with Afghanistan. From the beginning, Pakistan-Afghan relations hit the rocks when Afghanistan voted against Pakistan’s membership in the United Nations (UN). Except for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and ascension of the Taliban, the history of Pakistan’s relations with its western neighbour has been mired in mistrust, a situation which suited India in keeping Pakistan under pressure.’<sup>41</sup>

‘There is an interesting paradox in the Indian narrative of its “historical” relationship with Afghanistan. Indian historians, especially those working principally around the *Hindutva* ideology, describe Afghans as invaders and show Muslim rulers of India in poor light.’<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, India has cultivated a host of Afghan warlords from different ethnic backgrounds to do its bidding in sabotaging Pakistan-Afghanistan relations as well as facilitating India to carry out its destabilising activities in Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> ‘Its consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad are serving as bases for espionage activities. Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been supported by India and NDS. Furthermore, Indian development projects close to Pakistan’s borders are meant to recruit operatives to create trouble in its tribal areas. Interestingly, in a tribal society, intelligence work cannot remain a secret for long, which helped Pakistan to bust such networks’<sup>44</sup> operating in its territory.

The prime motive for Indian policymakers is to keep Pakistan engaged in Afghanistan to divert its military resources along the Afghan border, while simultaneously using Afghan soil to stir trouble in Balochistan and tribal areas. In this regard, New Delhi’s involvement in Balochistan (Kulbhushan Yadav case) further reinforces the argument that it would

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<sup>41</sup> Asif Durrani, “India’s Afghanistan Policy: A Cause for Apprehension,” *Daily Times*, January 24, 2019, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/347295/indias-afghanistan-policy-a-cause-for-apprehension/amp/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

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continue to stoke unrest through low intensity sabotage to put pressure on Pakistan to force it amend its stance on Kashmir. ‘A peaceful Afghanistan would not suit India.’<sup>45</sup>

In an ideal situation, a cooperative relationship between Pakistan, India and Afghanistan could tremendously benefit the entire landmass of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Unfortunately, mutual suspicions and mistrust have negatively impacted not only the overall security paradigm in the region, but also deprived the people and the region of its economic benefits.<sup>46</sup>

### **Impact of the US Drawdown**

Strategically, after getting assurances from the Taliban that the Afghan soil would not be misused by al-Qaeda/ISIS, the US’ objective of bearing major part of Afghan liability would be over. Politically, American drawdown would leave a vacuum in Afghanistan. The so-called intra-Afghan dialogue is in a limbo due to wrangling between the Taliban and Ashraf Ghani’s government. Unless, the US plays an active role in resolving the prisoners’ issue as per the Peace Agreement, the country would remain entangled in internecine war.

Financially, the US drawdown would deprive Afghanistan of a major source of economic and military assistance. Figure 1 indicates the annual cost of the Afghan conflict borne by the US administrations from 2001-19 with reference to the troops deployed in the same period. Washington’s financial liability, bringing minimal returns, has convinced the Trump administration that the ‘war in Afghanistan is a wasteful effort.’<sup>47</sup> President Trump is keen to bring American troops back to fulfil his election promise and also save approximately USD 45 billion per annum.<sup>48</sup> The US has also spent USD 86 billion in the past 18 years on propping up the Afghan security

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<sup>45</sup> Durrani, “India’s Afghanistan Policy: A Cause for Apprehension.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Pennington, “The Pentagon Says the War in Afghanistan is Costing the US \$45 Billion per Year,” *Business Insider*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-pentagon-afghan-war-costing-us-45-billion-per-year-2018-2>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



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infrastructure,<sup>49</sup> apart from sharing substantive burden of the country’s civil administration. It spends approximately USD 5-6 billion annually for the upkeep of the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF).<sup>50</sup> How any future Afghan government would run the affairs of the state without US/EU financial support has yet to be determined.

**Figure-1**

### Afghanistan: America’s Trillion Dollar War



Source: Niall McCarthy, “The Annual Cost of the War in Afghanistan since 2001 [Infographic],” *Forbes*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/09/12/the-annual-cost-of-the-war-in-afghanistan-since-2001-infographic/#500847601971>.

So far, the Afghan leadership and warlords have been extracting financial benefits without offering much in terms of political stability after the fall of the Taliban. The Afghan officials’ ‘rent-seeking’ approach made it

<sup>49</sup> “Afghanistan War: What Has the Conflict Cost the US?” *BBC News*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821>.

<sup>50</sup> Clayton Thomas, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief*, report (Report number 45122, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 2020), 9, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45122/39>.

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easier for them to dump the blame on Pakistan's door for supporting the Taliban and causing instability in Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> On their own, the Afghan leadership utterly failed to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the country or take any initiative that may have brought stability or rapprochement in the country. In addition, corruption has been rampant with no accountability. The US drawdown would be a nightmare for the present dispensation and rent-seekers in Afghanistan.

For the past four decades, Afghanistan has been a narco state. 'When the US and British forces invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, poppies were grown on around 74,000 hectares - 285 square miles.<sup>52</sup> New figures show that production has increased more than four-fold in 15 years: now opium is grown on 328,000 hectares - 1,266 square miles.'<sup>53</sup> After 9/11, despite international efforts led by the United Kingdom (UK) to eradicate opium from Afghanistan, the reverse happened and opium production almost doubled in the country. According to estimates, Afghan drug lords earn USD 5 billion from opium and heroin smuggling which 'benefits' the who-is-who of Afghanistan, including top government officials, warlords and the Taliban. According to a 2010 UNODC report:

...the most lucrative of illicit opiates, heroin, commanded an estimated annual market value of US\$ 55 billion. When all opiates are considered, the number may reach up to US\$ 65 billion. Traffickers, essential to the transportation of drugs from production areas to lucrative end-user markets, pocket most of the profits of this trade. A rough estimate of the number of traffickers involved in moving this illegal commodity across countries and regions would likely stand at well above 1 million people.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Faisal Ali Raja, "Spoilers of Afghan Peace," *Express Tribune*, March 4, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2168877/6-spoilers-afghan-peace/>.

<sup>52</sup> Justin Rowlett, "How the US Military's Opium War in Afghanistan Was Lost," *BBC News*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47861444>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> UNODC 'The Global Heroin Market' in *World Drug Report 2010*, report (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010), [https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2010/1.2\\_The\\_global\\_heroin\\_market.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/1.2_The_global_heroin_market.pdf).

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In the absence of an understanding at the international level to tackle the narcotics business, in all probability, the future dispensations in the country are likely to bank on narco money to sustain their affairs. Serious regional and international efforts would be required to address the menace once peace returns to Afghanistan and a stable government is formed.

### **The EU's Role in Afghanistan**

The EU has been an important partner of the US in assisting Afghanistan to improve its civil and military institutions. Although the US' militarised agenda dominates the scene in Afghanistan, the EU can positively contribute to health and agriculture sectors as well as institutional reforms, including rule of law and police training.<sup>55</sup> The EU has positively contributed to women empowerment programmes, human rights and mother and child health. However, except for the UK (when it was a member of the EU), the EU countries have had clear 'caveats'<sup>56</sup> concerning their military engagement. They refused to participate in direct combats or military operations; and were mostly deployed on camp duties.

### **Hindrances in Intra-Afghan Dialogue**

Resurgence of the Taliban was 'aided by the strategic mistake made by the US to re-empower former strongmen and warlords, which caused old ethnic and tribal tensions to resurface.'<sup>57</sup> The prospects of Afghan peace process are 'full of uncertainty as a consequence of grave disagreement among major ethnic groups in Afghanistan.' The factions of former Northern Alliance have deep mistrust in President Ashraf Ghani and continued hostility with Taliban.

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<sup>55</sup> Samina Ansari and Elliott Memmi, "Europe in Afghanistan: After Nearly 20 Years, What Has Been Achieved?" *Diplomat*, February 8, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/europe-in-afghanistan-after-nearly-20-years-what-has-been-achieved/>.

<sup>56</sup> "Category: NATO ISAF Caveats in Afghanistan," *Military Caveats*, accessed June 4, 2020, <http://militarycaveats.com/category/isaf-caveats-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>57</sup> Zahid Hussain, "The Taliban Question," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, no.15 (Fall 2014), <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/the-taliban-question/>.

It is not surprising that prominent leaders [of non-Pashtun groups] are much more reluctant to support peace effort with Taliban [such as Abdullah Abdullah, Tajik figure Ahmad Zia Massoud (younger brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud), Haraza leaders Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq and Ustad Khalili, or Uzbek warlords Rashid Dostum and his rival Ustad Ata.] ...Afghan territory is largely controlled by local warlords, who are mostly concerned about keeping their areas autonomous rather than working under Kabul or any other authority. Since their de-facto autonomy could be affected if reconciliation between Kabul and Taliban is reached, their attitude towards political reconciliation could be half-hearted.<sup>58</sup>

‘Incidentally, within 24 hours of the signing of the Agreement, President Ashraf Ghani refused to release 5000 Taliban before 10<sup>th</sup> of March, the first benchmark towards the implementation of Peace Agreement and resumption of intra-Afghan dialogue. Mr Ghani’s logic that he cannot honour the deal reached between the US and Taliban represents a view which would want continuation of war so that the beneficiaries of the war-economy may thrive and the country remains a narco-state. Mr Ghani’s U-Turn may also suit some in the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who insist on US’ presence in the country.’<sup>59</sup>

‘Mr Ghani’s assertion of Afghan sovereignty is misplaced as the Joint Declaration between the Afghan Government and the US is essentially a subsidiary document of the Peace Agreement.’ Not to forget that ‘Ghani owes his presidency to the US; it was he who signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) giving immunity to the US citizens and soldiers from prosecution in Afghanistan. Therefore, the US will be bound to press Mr Ghani to honour the deal reached between the US and Taliban for the release of 5000

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<sup>58</sup> Zeng Xiangyu, Zhang Chunyan, and Zhu Yufan, “Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan: Progress, Challenges and Prospects,” *Strategic Studies* 32/33, no. 4/1 (Winter 2012/Spring 2013): 102-121(112), [http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1379480196\\_47959077.pdf](http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1379480196_47959077.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Asif Durrani, “Afghan Peace Agreement: The Real Battle Begins Now,” *Daily Times*, March 6, 2020, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/570741/afghan-peace-agreement-the-real-battle-begins-now/>.

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Taliban prisoners.’<sup>60</sup> Ostensibly, ‘the Taliban are likely to be the major shareholders in the future dispensation or, at least, this is the vibe one is getting from the Taliban’s body language.’ Simply put, ‘other stakeholders will have to live and survive as junior partners. In such a scenario, resumption of fighting between Taliban and other ethnic groups cannot be ruled out. According to Hazara leader Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, who heads *Hizbe Wahdat*, ‘a deal without justice and honour would be unacceptable and war (with Taliban) would continue.’<sup>61</sup> Certainly, other ethnic groups, who are armed to the teeth, would be thinking on similar lines. Such a situation would offer fertile ground to external spoilers to jump into the fray. In the worst case scenario, eruption of civil war would have severe consequences for Pakistan, foremost being the influx of fresh refugees in the country.’<sup>62</sup>

The Peace Agreement also entails huge responsibilities upon the Taliban leadership, which, of late, has been projecting a positive image of their movement. They have admitted past mistakes in the socio-political arena, especially women’s rights although their explanations have not satisfied a large section of urban dwelling women.<sup>63</sup>

The Taliban have also come out of their pre-9/11 cocoon when they would avoid meeting foreign dignitaries. Now they are reaching out to the outside world; ‘beginning from neighbours - Iran, Pakistan, China and Russia - a qualitative difference in their conduct and world view is discernable if compared to their conduct prior to 9/11.’ Even with India, Taliban have expressed the desire to have friendly relations, ‘which shows that unlike rigidity of the past, Taliban have learnt lessons in the conduct of pragmatic

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<sup>60</sup> Durrani, “Afghan Peace Agreement.”

<sup>61</sup> Ustad Mohaqiq’s speech at a seminar organised in Islamabad by Lahore Council for Foreign Relations, January 14, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Durrani, “Afghan Peace Agreement.”

<sup>63</sup> Tanya Goudsouzian; “Yes, the Taliban Has Changed - It’s Gotten Much Better at PR,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/22/yes-taliban-has-changed-its-gotten-much-better-pr/>. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/570741/afghan-peace-agreement-the-real-battle-begins-now/>

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diplomacy in the region and beyond.’<sup>64</sup> ‘Such an approach is likely to pay off in the recognition of a future government led by the Taliban.’<sup>65</sup> However, situation with Taliban is equally challenging as there are hardliners who seek military solution and vie for a clear victory. It is also being argued that the Taliban are changed politically but not ideologically, which is why they would remain inflexible during the intra-Afghan dialogue.

With regard to adequate representation of various ethnic and religious groups, a future interim or national government may work according to the formula applied by Karzai and Ghani administrations since 9/11 which has, by and large, worked satisfactorily; although American mentoring was available whenever a crisis erupted in Kabul. This would be a major test of Taliban’s political acumen as to how they dispense with various ethnicities with justice, and in accordance with the tribal traditions.<sup>66</sup>

### **Unease within the US Deep State**

President Trump needs a victory on the diplomatic front to justify his efforts in the eyes of the American people in order to win the forthcoming elections. For him, bringing troops back home and saving USD 45 billion per annum<sup>67</sup> in Afghanistan would be a morale booster for his election campaign. However, the US-Taliban deal can only serve his election purpose if the deal is implemented in true letter and spirit. It seems that the stance of the US’ deep state ‘lies roughly between Kabul and the Taliban.’<sup>68</sup> The US establishment ‘used to be pretty cold on peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban, as its [agreed] tactics for peace talks could be summarized as “talk while fight, and fight for talk.”’

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<sup>64</sup> “Ahmed Rashid: Afghan Taliban Don’t See India as Their Enemy,” Asia Society, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/ahmed-rashid-afghan-taliban-dont-see-india-their-enemy>.

<sup>65</sup> Durrani, “Afghan Peace Agreement.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Pennington, “The Pentagon Says the War in Afghanistan is Costing the US \$45 Billion per Year.”

<sup>68</sup> Xiangyu, Chunyan, and Yufan, “Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan,” 110.

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The future direction of US attitude (hardened or softened) largely depends on development on Afghan battlefield rather than on a peace table.<sup>69</sup>

#### **Prospects of Intra-Afghan Dialogue: Looking for Convergences**

The coming months will determine the fate of the peace process in Afghanistan. The Doha Peace Accord generated a glimmer of hope that after more than 18 years of war, the parties finally sat down to pursue peace. Therefore, despite setbacks since the signing of the Peace Agreement, one has to be cautiously optimistic about the success of the process. The parties in the conflict rather than looking for divergences will have to strive for convergences that may encourage the antagonists to look for common grounds for rapprochement.

In order to create opportunities for political reconciliation in Afghanistan, stakeholders will have to map out common interests. The apparent convergence of interests amongst most of the parties, including Taliban, would be avoidance of ‘full-scale civil war or state collapse; preserving Afghanistan’s territorial integrity; preservation of national security forces as an institution;’<sup>70</sup> containing growing ingress of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan; and, securing continued international assistance for the country. These could also serve as a common agenda for making the peace process a success.

The parties will have to realise that four decades of death and destruction has turned Afghanistan into a failed state ‘whose civil structure is poorly prepared for either peace or for continuing the war... The civil side has long presented critical problems in terms of leadership, stability, and meaningful efforts to meet the needs of the Afghan people, and there is little prospect that this situation will change. Afghan politicians are corrupt and deeply divided.’<sup>71</sup> The country has become a narco state thriving on war

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<sup>69</sup> Xiangyu, Chunyan, and Yufan, “Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan,” 113.

<sup>70</sup> Matt Waldman and Matthew Wright, “Who Wants What: Mapping the Parties’ Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict” (paper, Chatham House, London, 2014), [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20140731\\_AfghanistanWhoWantsWhat.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20140731_AfghanistanWhoWantsWhat.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The State of the Fighting in the Afghan War in Mid-2019*, report (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/state-fighting-afghan-war-mid-2019>.

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economy. An election was held for the Afghan Lower House (*Wolasi Jirga*) in October 2018, but its members ‘did not take office until April 2019.’<sup>72</sup> The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) claims that it ‘remains as divided and ineffective as in the past.’<sup>73</sup>

### **Afghan Economy and Dependence on US Aid**

Financial advancement is critical to Afghanistan’s strength. Many years of war have hindered the advancement of most businesses, as well as the metals and mining sector.<sup>74</sup> The economy has additionally been harmed by a precarious decline in international aid. Afghanistan’s Gross Domestic Production (GDP) has witnessed significant periods of contraction and relatively little expansion. Boasting a GDP growth rate of 8.8 per cent in 2003, growth declined to 1.4 per cent in 2015 and 1.03 per cent in 2018.<sup>75</sup>

‘Social conditions in Afghanistan remain similarly blended. On social issues ranging from opportunity to females, Afghanistan has, by certain records, made noteworthy advancement since 2001. However, future possibilities stay questionable.’<sup>76</sup> ‘The US Congress has appropriated almost US\$ 137 billion in help for Afghanistan since FY2002, with about 63 per cent for security and 26 per cent for advancement (with the rest of non-military personnel activities and helpful aid).’<sup>77</sup> The US Administration’s FY2021 spending demands USD 4 billion for the ANDSF, and USD 250 million in

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<sup>72</sup> Cordesman, *The State of the Fighting in the Afghan War in Mid-2019*.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Mark Landler and James Risen, “Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-mineral-deposits.html>.

<sup>75</sup> “GDP Growth (Annual %) – Afghanistan,” World Bank, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AF>.

<sup>76</sup> Landler and Risen, “Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals.”

<sup>77</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, report (Virginia: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, January 2020), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr.pdf>.



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Economic Support Funds. These figures speak to a reduction from both the FY2020 demand, just as FY2019 sanctioned levels.<sup>78</sup>

The question is whether the US would continue to help Afghanistan financially even after withdrawal of troops. If it does, then the prospects of peace brighten up although largely depending on how successful the peace process culminates. In case the US cuts down aid, other countries, preferably neighbours, will have to step forward. China and Russia may be encouraged to monitor the security situation, while other neighbours may help the country financially.

#### **Possible Scenarios if the Peace Process Fails**

Peace in Afghanistan would depend on the success of dialogue amongst the warring factions. A successful outcome would immediately quicken the pace of peace process in the country. However, following factors may push the whole process to failure with unintended consequences:

- If parties fail to reach a compromise, the country may plunge into civil war, although in the presence of limited US military support, the Taliban may not be able to gain further territory. The regional warlords are likely to become more powerful pushing the country closer to anarchy.
- A civil war would provide the opportunity to outside forces to intervene. India may take advantage of such a situation.
- Afghanistan may turn into a sanctuary once again for religious extremists affecting the entire region.
- Narco business may flourish further along with the war economy.
- Pakistan will have to face massive influx of Afghan refugees for which the country's economy is not geared to cope with.
- Coronavirus will be a test case both for the government and Taliban to show their concern for mitigation of the pandemic. Its economic

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<sup>78</sup> Clayton Thomas, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*, report (Report number 45329, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, September 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45329.pdf>.

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fallout would be equally devastating for the country which is already facing a recession.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

With slight variation, the ethnic composition of future government in Afghanistan should be the same which was in power after the deposition of the Taliban. Whether present leaders who have been part of the power corridor would join the future government or new faces would appear on the scene, is not clear. This depends on the success of the dialogue and deftness of the players involved.

Since the Taliban are a formidable force, likely to be major stakeholders if not the sole arbiters, the US would be leaning towards them for the end result of the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, this would require understanding between the two about the future contours of their relationship, including sustenance of American bases in Afghanistan. In return, the US may promise continuation of financial assistance for the maintenance of Afghan security forces and civil bureaucracy.

The real test for the Taliban would be winning support from various ethnic (Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Turkmen) and religious (Hanafi, Shia and Ismaili) groups. Interestingly, the list of 5000 Taliban prisoners in government prisons include all the ethnic and religious groups, which in a way belie the accusations that the Taliban are overwhelmingly Pashtuns. However, there is no denying the fact that Taliban rivals possess formidable power who can push the country into a civil war.

The establishment of a durable political system, taking into account the aspirations of various ethnic and religious groups, would usher a new era of peace and stability in the country. A neutral Afghanistan with friendly ties in the neighbourhood can truly become a conduit between South and Central Asia. However, the achievement of this objective would be a big challenge for all the stakeholders. In view of the foregoing, following recommendations are suggested:

- The current security situation needs to be addressed by the interlocutors. Immediate ceasefire would create the much-needed environment for peace in the country. It would also serve as a major Confidence Building Measure (CBM) for various religious and

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ethnic groups. Similarly, it would also encourage the regional countries to positively contribute to the country's well-being and stability. An intra-Afghan consensus for peace, and regional assurances of neutrality would be needed for the success of reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

- To persuade the internal stakeholders to reach on a mutually agreed formula through the platform of broad-based intra-Afghan dialogue would be a daunting task for Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, Central Asia, Turkey and the GCC. They should continue persistent diplomatic efforts in removing any future deadlock in the way of intra-Afghan dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban.
- All concerned stakeholders, especially Iran, China, Russia and Turkey (for Uzbeks) may hold consultations to ensure that neighbours of Afghanistan are on the same page and discourage spoilers from derailing the withdrawal process or provoking Afghan factions to take up arms again.
- So far, there is no agreement on the modalities of an intra-Afghan dialogue. More so, Taliban's attitude towards other ethnic groups would determine the possibility of rapprochement. Right now, the Taliban are behaving as a winning party gearing to enter Kabul as a victor. Reportedly, they are asking the leaders of other ethnic groups to declare their allegiance (*Baiyat*) to the Amir-ul-Momineen Mullah Haibatullah Akhund. Such an attitude is likely to derail the reconciliation process.
- To make the broad-based intra-Afghan dialogue really effective, Islamabad and other regional countries have to convey to the Afghan Taliban that they are not the sole stakeholder in the conflict. Demands of other stakeholders should also be given due importance. Pakistan should also impress upon them to announce a ceasefire during the course of the dialogue process.
- The international community, especially the US/EU, should give assurances to the Afghan stakeholders that in the post-US withdrawal period, Afghanistan's essential requirements, including maintenance of its forces would be met.

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- Economic incentives may be offered to Afghanistan. Regional connectivity and a collective outlook are essential for progress in Afghanistan's peace process.
- Pakistan can continue to play the role of a facilitator in the ongoing Afghan dialogue without playing favourites with any of the Afghan groups. Pakistan is already in contact with all the Afghan groups, which may pave the way for reconciliation.
- Islamabad may seek Washington's assistance to counsel New Delhi not to derail the peace process, and cease its activities in Afghanistan aimed at destabilising Pakistan.
- Pakistan may lobby for financial assistance for the sustenance of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) after the withdrawal of the US troops; offer training facilities to officers in national institutions; conduct joint military exercises and other steps to bridge the trust deficit. More frequent interactions between the parliamentarians of both countries should also be planned.
- Women's rights in Afghanistan have attracted great interest at the international level and are likely to influence Afghan politics in the future. Taliban's diplomatic success would largely depend on this issue. Therefore, it is important that they show flexibility towards women's rights and give assurances to the international community that women would be allowed to seek education and employment.
- Pakistan may seek international cooperation for the repatriation of Afghan refugees, including assistance for their return and creation of conditions inside Afghanistan for their rehabilitation.
- During the past two decades, the US has failed in its nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. Therefore, the UN's role during post-withdrawal period in Afghanistan for rehabilitation and development work should be sought. ■