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Between a Republic and an Emirate: The Future of Afghanistan

Shubhangi Pandey and Sushant Sareen

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PROLOGUE

This special report was written before the 2020 United States presidential elections. Under the incoming Biden administration, the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to be more gradual and “responsible”, despite the President-elect being in favour of American troops exiting the war-weary country soon. In retrospect, Donald Trump’s insistence on pulling out all US troops from Afghanistan by Christmas 2020 was not misguided, since there is little that such military presence can achieve at this stage of the war. The situation is sealed by some neighbouring nations acting as spoilers in the peace process, impeding American efforts to help bring stability to Afghanistan.

Given Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban and its unique ability to shape internal dynamics in Afghanistan, Biden may prefer to incentivise Islamabad, instead of exerting pressure on it, to pursue larger US strategic interests in the region. However, notwithstanding Biden’s historically strong ties with the Pakistani leadership (both civilian and military), his administration will seek to address the issue of existing terror networks operating out of Pakistan,¹ since a “no-tolerance” policy towards terrorism was one of the cornerstones of Biden’s electoral agenda for South Asia.² However the US decides to approach the issue, India will be faced with unique dilemmas regarding its engagement strategy for Afghanistan, especially in the context of fast-evolving but precarious regional dynamics.

THE AFGHANISTAN SITUATION: AN OVERVIEW

On 29 February 2020, the US signed an agreement with the Taliban, aimed at ending the two-decade-long war in Afghanistan.³ It provided for a phased US military withdrawal, contingent upon the Taliban delivering on certain security guarantees, which included severing ties with the Al-Qaeda. While a comprehensive ceasefire was not included as a precondition for the withdrawal, it was made part of the agenda of the intra-Afghan talks that were to follow. The talks were preceded by a long-drawn process of back-and-forth between the Republic and the Emirate, on the contentious issue of “prisoner release.”^{4,5} They finally began on 12 September 2020, and were attended by key regional and international stakeholders. The future of the talks so far seems less than promising, as the negotiating parties continue to remain divided, both on procedural issues and on the validity of the US–Taliban agreement as the basis for the talks.⁶

The conditions under which the negotiations commenced had already raised questions about the entire peace process. Despite entering into an agreement with the US, the Taliban continued violent attacks across

Afghanistan. Consequently, violence levels in the first half of 2020 resembled those of 2019, even as the Taliban did not formally announce its annual spring offensive. According to the quarterly report of the UN Secretary-General on the evolving security situation in Afghanistan, the civilian population had suffered at least 3,458 casualties by mid-2020.⁷ While total civilian casualties decreased by 13 percent from 2019, the numbers attributed to Taliban-led attacks remained consistently significant.⁸ As violence continues unabated in Afghanistan, it has become the Taliban's single most important leverage in its negotiations with the Afghan government. Incidents of violence have also included assassination attempts against key political figures, such as Vice President Amrullah Saleh and Fawzia Koofi, one of the few women in the Afghan delegation negotiating peace with the Taliban in Doha.^{9,10}

A report shared by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in May 2020 revealed that the Taliban continues to maintain close ideological and operational ties with the Al-Qaeda.¹¹ This goes against the very premise for the signing of the US–Taliban deal, which was that the Taliban must sever all ties with Al-Qaeda as well as any other terrorist outfit operating in Afghanistan. While the Taliban rejected the UN report and reiterated its commitment to the Doha agreement, the findings raised serious questions about the sustainability of the Afghan peace process.¹²

Adding to the growing uncertainty and rising fear of instability are the conflicting messages coming out of Washington. The outgoing Trump administration seemed set on continuing with the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, which will render the Islamic Republic vulnerable to encirclement by the Islamic Emirate, both politically and militarily. While the US–Taliban agreement does lay out an eventual US military exit from Afghanistan, the pace at which the drawdown will be executed remains unclear. Trump's tweet in early October, about bringing the remaining US troops in Afghanistan home by Christmas 2020, hinted at the possibility of an accelerated withdrawal.¹³ However, senior officials in the Pentagon were reported to have been caught off-guard by the tweet; they maintained that the US was on-track to bring down the force levels to 4,500 by November 2020 and that a drawdown would remain conditions-based.¹⁴ Later, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien issued a clarification, stating that Trump's tweet was to be understood as a desired objective rather than a military order.¹⁵

Both Trump and incoming President Joe Biden have expressed a strong desire to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. While Trump's military drawdown call may have been an integral component of his electoral agenda for the November polls, Biden's stand has been consistent from the time he was vice-president in the Obama administration.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the US ambassador-nominate to Afghanistan, William Ruger, is also in favour of a military withdrawal, claiming that America has "achieved [its] three primary objectives": attrite the Al-Qaeda, kill or capture Osama bin Laden, and secure counterterrorism guarantees from the Taliban.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Taliban continues to hold on to its leverage in the battlefield, to compel the Afghan government to concede significant political control of the country in the intra-Afghan negotiations. Despite repeated calls by the international community for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Afghanistan, the Taliban has refused to renounce violence until the cause of war is addressed at the ongoing Doha talks.¹⁸ The Taliban remains an unreformed force, fundamentally opposed to compromise. It has been unyielding in two crucial demands: making the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence the guiding principle to frame laws in post-conflict Afghanistan, and using the US–Taliban agreement as the basis for peace negotiations.¹⁹ To the Afghan delegation, both conditions are unacceptable in their current form, since Afghanistan wants to forge a national future that reflects the plurality of its society. In the absence of a meeting ground, what are the chances for the intra-Afghan dialogue leading to a negotiated peace settlement? Will the conflict ultimately be decided in the battlefield?

To facilitate a constructive, forward-looking dialogue on the future of Afghanistan, Observer Research Foundation convened a three-part webinar series in June–July 2020, in collaboration with *Her Afghanistan*. The series of discussions brought together academics, practitioners, and regional security experts to explore regional and global perspectives on the evolving political and security situation in Afghanistan, and how events on the ground would implicate countries in the neighbourhood and afar. This special report builds on the deliberations of the various sessions of the discussion series.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS IN AFGHANISTAN

With US interest in Afghanistan waning—and likely to vanish once its forces withdraw substantially, if not completely—and internal disagreements within the Afghan government becoming increasingly strident, the peace process appears susceptible to breakdown.²⁰ Internal

divisions within the current political dispensation in Afghanistan began with the political impasse that followed the allegedly fraudulent presidential polls of 2019. Former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah contested the election outcome, which had declared Ashraf Ghani as the victor, and both candidates held parallel swearing-in ceremonies in adjacent premises on 9 March 2020.

Even as the two political rivals eventually signed a power-sharing deal that came into effect in May 2020, friction between their respective camps continued over several provisions of the agreement. Two of the biggest points of contention were the composition of the government's negotiating team that was to engage with the Taliban at the intra-Afghan talks, and the creation of the new Cabinet. Another contentious issue was the appointment of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) via a presidential decree issued by Ghani, rather than by the head of the HCNR, Abdullah.²¹ Not only did President Ghani appoint the Council, but he also unilaterally inserted some of his allies into key positions.

While the senior Afghan leadership, barring a few members, was not in favour of expediting the negotiations with the Taliban, they were forced to do so after the US threatened aid cuts.²² However, the Taliban's demand for the government to free 5,000 of its fighters in prisons became another roadblock. Even within the government, there were differing views on the fate of these prisoners, with President Ghani refusing to concede and Abdullah insisting on compliance.²³ During the talks, differing opinions emerged on the contours of a potential power-sharing agreement with the Taliban and the degree of political compromise acceptable to the government. These differences will likely endure in the future, and in the short term, the Afghan government would want to stretch the negotiations until the standpoint of the next US administration becomes more clear. Since President Ghani would have the most to lose in case of a settlement with the Taliban, requiring him to step down and make way for an interim administration, he was perhaps counting on a Biden victory to buy him more time to navigate the troubled political waters in Kabul.²⁴

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The future of Afghanistan is largely contingent upon how regional and international stakeholders respond to the evolving political and security situation in the country. While long-term peace in Afghanistan would be advantageous to all powers involved, the need to secure their respective strategic interests in the country—often at odds—could altogether threaten

the prospects for peace. Moreover, existing bilateral tensions between many of the external players could spill over into Afghanistan, undermining collective regional efforts and significantly altering the outcome of the process. So far, all external powers have unanimously expressed support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process; however, they are likely to respond differently to the political outcomes of the ongoing negotiations in Doha.

Great-Power Rivalry

Afghanistan has long been a theatre of contestation between powers such as the US and Russia. The two have usually been at odds with each other, following starkly different policies of engagement vis-à-vis Afghanistan, but neither has been able to significantly contribute to peace and stability in the country. While the two-decade-long presence of US troops has not managed to curb Islamist insurgent forces, the impending exit of the troops and allied forces is unlikely to bring peace and stability either. In addition to the threat of either a civil war or an Islamist takeover—which would reverse the progress made in the last two decades—there is the imminent possibility of Afghanistan once again becoming a playground for “great power” rivalries. Recent reports published by international media point to an intensifying US–Russia conflict over Afghanistan, with Russia allegedly having paid bounties to the Taliban to kill American and allied soldiers in the country; the US intelligence data-intercepts show financial flows from a bank account controlled by the Russian military spy unit to those linked to the Taliban.²⁵ The intercepts corroborate what have previously been revealed in interrogations of captured Afghan militants by US troops in Afghanistan.²⁶

Russia has facilitated various multilateral diplomatic initiatives aimed at reconciliation in Afghanistan, citing national and regional security concerns to justify its active involvement in Afghan affairs. However, an integral objective or component of Moscow’s Afghanistan strategy is arguably to exercise greater diplomatic and strategic influence in the power vacuum that will be created by the US’ departure. The approach would also help Russia rebrand itself as a benevolent great power, as opposed to the US, which it considers invasive.²⁷ Therefore, a US departure from Afghanistan will not only cement the failure of America’s effort in Afghanistan, but also pave the way for Russia to consolidate greater influence over the country.

While the timeline of a complete US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan hinges on the incoming American president, that it will happen is certain.

Even if the US continues to maintain a considerable diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, as well as the formal and informal linkages cultivated over the last two decades, its influence over Afghan affairs is likely to recede. Of course, the country can employ other tools of reconstruction to retain the gains of the past: it must continue to not only provide the Afghan government with military and financial aid for combatting the Taliban and affiliated organisations, but also use trade pacts and development aid to keep the stakeholders invested in power-sharing arrangements that may take shape in the future.²⁸

The Regional Dimension

Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Central Asian states and Iran, have the most to gain from peace and stability in the nation, in terms of both security and increased regional connectivity, trade and development. Conversely, if the Afghan peace process fails and results in a hostile takeover by Islamist forces, they stand to lose considerably, given their geographical proximity, historical cultural and religious links, and ethnic affiliations with Afghanistan.

At present, the Central Asian region's involvement in Afghanistan is limited to investing in infrastructure development and providing diplomatic support to the government. However, instability in Afghanistan is a serious security concern for the region, since the unrest can spill over into their states. While Central Asian states have shown reservations vis-à-vis a Taliban government, they appear largely nonchalant, even optimistic, about the unfolding scenario—perhaps in the hope that a *modus vivendi* can be reached with whoever comes to power. One view in Central Asia dictates that a Taliban predominance in Afghanistan may not be a disadvantage, since the group has been forthcoming in engaging with them.

In March 2018, Uzbekistan invited the Taliban to participate in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan. The following year, Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov held a meeting with the head of the Taliban's political office, Mullah Baradar, in Qatar, where Baradar endorsed Uzbek political and economic endeavours in Afghanistan.²⁹ While the Taliban turned down the invitation to attend the 2018 Tashkent meeting, it sent a delegation to Uzbekistan five months later.³⁰

For Iran, the US' presence in Afghanistan is a double-edged sword: acting as both a deterrent for the IS and a clear and present threat to Iran. Since the nation considers the US as the "Great Satan," it remains in favour of

the country's exit from the region over its prolonged presence. However, the growing threat of Islamic State (IS) militants establishing a substantial presence in the country is bolstered by the impending absence of US troops.^{a,31} Therefore, Iran has adopted a two-step approach. First, it has developed a transactional relationship with the Taliban, thereby securing its borders along the Afghan districts and provinces where the Taliban is dominant. Second—which can be put into motion only after the US withdraws—is to take on the Taliban, with the bigger threat out of the way. At that stage, the sectarian angle of Iran's relationship with the Taliban will likely come into play.

The South Asian Tangle

How India and Pakistan choose to proceed vis-à-vis Afghanistan will have a significant bearing on the future of the country. While both nations have vital security and strategic interests in Afghanistan, their mutual distrust, bordering on hostility, makes it unlikely for them to work together. This is exacerbated by their diametrically opposing views on the future political system in Afghanistan.

One of the primary drivers of Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan is to secure strategic depth, as seen in its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate forging closer ties with the Taliban, particularly with the military arm of the group, also known as the Haqqani Network (HQN). The HQN is a staunchly anti-India entity, known to have carried out attacks against Indian nationals in the Af-Pak region.³² For its part, India has vital geostrategic interests in Afghanistan and much to gain from enduring peace and stability in the country. However, India's Afghan policy has often been shaped by its need to strike a strategic balance between Islamabad and Kabul, to curtail Pakistan's influence over terrorist outfits in Afghanistan. While India considers Pakistan as the biggest obstacle to peace in Afghanistan, it must accept that Pakistan has weaved itself intricately into the Afghan reconciliation narrative, with the US acknowledging it as an indispensable force in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. India's policy or outreach to the various Afghan players must therefore be oriented towards establishing itself as a deeply invested stakeholder, without losing sight of the dangers that overwhelming Pakistani influence on Afghanistan could pose for India.

a This is perhaps why Tehran has often engaged with the Taliban tactically, even though it cannot reconcile with the anti-Shiite beliefs espoused by the militant group.

For now, even as India and Pakistan aim to secure mutually exclusive strategic objectives in Afghanistan, existing tensions between the two will prevent them from engaging in effective communication to contribute collectively to the Afghan peace process.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The jury is still out on whether the Taliban will agree to a power-sharing agreement with the Afghan government. However, that the US will withdraw from Afghanistan has become inevitable. There are three possible outcomes to the ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha. First, the negotiating parties may hold on to their competing visions for the future of Afghanistan, resulting in a continuation of the ongoing civil war. Second, one side may capitulate to the demands of the other. Third, a negotiated political settlement may be reached between the Taliban and the Afghan government, effectively ending the 40-year-old civil war.

The Taliban remains staunchly committed to establishing an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan,^b which the government, civil society, and large sections of the population strongly oppose. In the absence of any indication that the Taliban will compromise on these core beliefs and doctrines, the third scenario can be ruled out with certainty. Were the two sides to reach a real settlement, factions on either side will continue to challenge the arrangement. Moreover, the extensive presence of foreign terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State Khorasan will present a serious challenge to ensuring that the counterterrorism gains of the past are protected.

The Taliban currently has the upper hand in the region, both in the battlefield and in negotiations, where it uses violence as a leveraging tool. Thus, if the second scenario were to unfold, it is more likely that the Taliban will overpower the Afghan government. In the past, too, the Taliban has successfully worn out opposing forces, not only militarily but also psychologically.³³ In the future, without the ready availability of military support from the US, the Afghan government will be rendered increasingly susceptible to further encirclement by the Taliban and could be compelled to surrender to its aspirations. Moreover, there is a real risk of the US or NATO pulling the plug on the regular supply of military and development aid

b A system of governance based on a strict interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law.

upon their eventual departure from Afghanistan, which would only deepen the sense of siege and raise questions about the survivability of the Afghan government.

The third scenario is most likely—where neither party can establish complete control over Kabul. Since several powerful warlords, tribal chiefs, ethnic groups and political leaders are opposed to the Taliban, they may coalesce around the cause of defeating a common enemy, which will essentially spiral into an intense civil war, as it happened in the early 1990s. While the US might not be backing the anti-Taliban forces, other regional and global players could come to their assistance. In other words, the 1990s might revisit Afghanistan, with the same devastating consequences.

THE WAY FORWARD

With the fate of intra-Afghan talks hanging in the balance and the security situation in Afghanistan becoming increasingly formidable, external stakeholders must reorient themselves to the fast-changing ground realities in and around the nation. It is imperative that the international stakeholders engaged in Afghanistan realise that they have a significant role to play in ensuring that the negotiations result in a sustainable solution to the decades-old conflict and that any such conciliatory arrangement is in consonance with popular aspirations of the country and its people.

So far, India's role in the Afghan peace process has been peripheral at best, since it began two years ago. However, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's presence at the opening ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks indicates a gradually evolving approach. At the historic inaugural session held in Doha on 12 September 2020, Jaishankar addressed the gathering remotely and reiterated India's long-held position on Afghanistan, which supports an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled" peace process.³⁴ His participation in the ceremony suggested the possibility of India agreeing to engage in direct talks with the Taliban at some point in the future—something it has refrained from doing thus far. There are several reasons for India to forge amicable ties with the Taliban, chief amongst them the inevitability of the Taliban's dominance in the Afghan political domain and the need to safeguard Indian interests in the country, especially in the face of an ascendant Taliban and an adversarial Pakistan that seeks to sabotage Indian stakes in Afghanistan. However, it is important to remember that engaging with the Taliban in pursuit of India's larger strategic objectives in Afghanistan does not mean providing legitimacy

to the group. In other words, India can adopt the old diplomatic stance of recognising a regime without approving its conduct.


The divided public opinion in India notwithstanding, the country will not give a walkover to any destabilising force in the region, in its pursuit to engage with and exercise strategic influence over Afghanistan. This likely means opening a direct channel of communication with the Taliban, without undermining or alienating friends in the current Afghan political dispensation. Conversely, India could just as well stay the current course and double down its support for the Afghan regime and shun the Taliban. Already, there are reports of the group's inability or unwillingness to sever ties with the Al-Qaeda.

The extensive presence of foreign fighters presents a gloomy forecast for peace in Afghanistan. Consequently, Indian concerns regarding enduring instability in Afghanistan filtering into the neighbouring states remain significant. Since it is not feasible for India to place boots on the ground, it must continue to provide training, military support (albeit limited), and capacity-building programmes to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), to do its part in combating the spread of international terrorism in the country.³⁵ Finally, New Delhi must capitalise on its unique ability to collectivise key international stakeholders around devising a common approach to dealing with the Taliban, since India is arguably the only power that can engage with the West on the one hand, and Iran and Russia on the other.³⁶ That said, regional dynamics in Afghanistan's neighbourhood are fast evolving, presenting newer challenges as well as opportunities for India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy, while continuing to be mindful of regional volatilities.

With the UAE and Israel overcoming centuries of religious conflict to pave the way for the Abraham Accords, and Iran welcoming China's recent overtures to establish a deeper strategic partnership, new alignments have been developing in the region.³⁷ At the same time, the Arabs' impatience with the Iranians seems to be growing, since the latter continues to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries—both directly and through proxies. While there is an assumption that Tehran is ready to play ball with New Delhi, India has more to gain from associating with the Arab-Israeli bloc than with Iran. Considering India's historically strong ties with the Arab Gulf, and Pakistan's progressively deteriorating relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Arabs too may be open to the idea of partnering with India to secure strategic influence in Afghanistan.

For its part, Iran might be more interested in collaborating with Pakistan than with India, to deal with the Taliban and retain influence in Afghanistan. This would allow Tehran to maintain its transactional relationship with the Taliban, while acquiring a degree of influence over the group's political manoeuvres. Meanwhile, the Arabs have lost the considerable influence over the Taliban that it had previously exercised. They will likely be tempted to use Afghanistan against Iran, to further their own strategic objectives. It remains to be seen whether India will get caught up in such a tussle between the Arab–Israeli bloc on the one hand and Iran on the other, or succeed in walking the tightrope between the two sides and safeguard its stakes in Afghanistan.

Russia, too, has been building a relationship with the Taliban and consolidating its ties with Pakistan and China. These emerging geopolitical realities limit New Delhi's strategic connect with Moscow. What India and Russia could do in the 1990s—undertake coordinated efforts to oppose the Taliban regime and back the Northern Alliance against it—might no longer be possible today. Some analysts argue that the competition between India and China could push New Delhi closer to Moscow, which shares some of India's goals in the region. However, the Russia of today is more commercially motivated than before and likely to prioritise its strengthening ties with China over its relationship with India.

Regardless of who India chooses to collaborate with, the dilemmas it faces in Afghanistan are complex. Indeed, it must tread on eggshells to engage with regional players in responding to the Afghanistan challenge. While each external player is trying to safeguard its strategic and economic stakes in the country, enduring peace is the overarching goal for all. However, with the process hinging on agglomerating the strategic and economic stakes of various players, it remains to be seen whether peace in Afghanistan is possible or if the competing interests of regional players will only lead to a perpetuation of war. 

About the Authors

Shubhangi Pandey is Junior Fellow with the Strategic Studies Programme at Observer Research Foundation, and works on conflict and security in South Asia.

Sushant Sareen is Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation and works on Afghanistan, Pakistan and terrorism issues in South Asia.

ANNEX

ORF Afghanistan Webinar Series

‘Between a Republic and an Emirate: The Future of Afghanistan’

June–July 2020

Participants:

Adnan Tabatabai, Co-founder & CEO, Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient

Ahmad Shuja Jamal, Director General for International Affairs and Regional Cooperation, Office of the National Security Council, Afghanistan

Akramjon Nematov, First Deputy Director, Institute of Strategic & Regional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan

Amar Sinha, Distinguished Fellow, RIS and Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Anahita Saymidinova, Reporter, Iran International TV Channel, Tajikistan

Ivan Safranchuk, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of International Research, MGIMO University

Javid Faisal, Spokesperson, Office of the National Security Council, Afghanistan

Kabir Taneja, Fellow, ORF

Luke Coffey, Director, Douglas & Sarah Allison Centre for Foreign Policy, Heritage Foundation

Madiha Afzal, David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Foreign Policy Programme, Brookings Institution

Mariam Wardak, Founder, Her Afghanistan

Nandan Unnikrishnan, Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation

Rakesh Sood, Distinguished Fellow, ORF and Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Between a Republic and an Emirate: The Future of Afghanistan

Shubhangi Pandey, Junior Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer
Research Foundation

Sultan Akimbekov, Director, Institute of Asian Studies, Kazakhstan

ENDNOTES

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005.
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org