

Understanding the Complexities of the Afghan Peace Process

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's bold peace offer to the Taliban has aroused hopes of peace in the country torn by war for many years now. In a sweeping proposal made at the Kabul Process conference in February, President Ghani offered a ceasefire, the removal of sanctions, release of prisoners, the recognition of the Taliban as a political party, the conduct of fresh elections, and a review of the constitution. He repeated his offer in March during a conference held at Tashkent. Launching the voter registration process in the middle of April, he again asked the Taliban to take part in the forthcoming district and parliamentary elections. Ghani has demonstrated remarkable boldness and vision for bringing about a positive shift in the structure of the Afghan conflict. This paper seeks to address the structural complexities involved in the Afghan peace process.

INTRODUCTION

In a conflict as long-drawn-out as that in Afghanistan, a ray of hope for peace, however dim, can arouse huge interest. President Ashraf Ghani's peace offer has done just that. The conflict in Afghanistan over the past

four decades has been so virulent that any peace plan gets trapped in domestic contradictions, regional rivalries, and the geopolitical ambitions of Pakistan's security establishment. Ever since the Soviets marched into Afghanistan in 1979, toppling Hafizullah Amin, the people of Afghanistan have not known peace.

If modern Afghanistan is characterised by low level of modernisation and development, there is sufficient historical evidence that the government in Kabul has been ineffective in exercising power in a large country with mostly inhospitable terrain. Politics and power in Afghanistan are strongly influenced by the country's ethnic complexities. Thus, the deep ethno-linguistic divisions and the decentralised nature of the Afghan polity provide convenient faultlines ready for exploitation. Even after the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, a fundamental problem has been the failure of the Afghan government institutions to provide good governance and socio-political development to many parts of the country.

Similarly, there are various layers of geopolitical complications with far-reaching strategic implications. The presence of the erstwhile Soviet Union, and the United States, in today's context has only served to legitimise the activities of the insurgents and jihadists across Afghan territory. Russia's and Iran's contrasting positions have only added to the complexities of the conflict. All parties are inclined to escalate military campaigns in the hope of compelling their rivals to negotiate on more suitable terms. Thus, Ghani's earnest appeal to the parties involved to think of ending the war in Afghanistan, instead of winning it,¹ does not seem to cut ice under present circumstances.

Another noteworthy dimension is the annual production of some 9,000 tonnes of opium in Afghanistan² which contributes to the generation of employment in most of the Afghan provinces as well as the

creation of vested interests. The opium trade generates profits for the Taliban, local warlords, and criminal networks; therefore, there are vested interests in prolonging the conflict in Afghanistan. Drug trade is estimated to finance around 60 percent of the Taliban's total annual budget.³ A recent American air campaign destroying over 70 of the Taliban's narcotics laboratories across the country is said to have cost the Taliban US\$42 million. The airstrikes may not have eliminated Afghanistan's massive drug trade, but it will certainly "have an immediate tactical impact."⁴ However, drug money is not the Taliban's sole funding source; they also mobilise finances from diversified sources including extortions, "protection tax" from Afghan telecom companies,⁵ donations from Gulf-based individuals, and covert support from states amenable to their strategy.⁶ Ever since US President Donald Trump's August 2017 announcement of a "new Afghan strategy"—centred on convincing Pakistan to take more severe action against terrorists—the US has claimed putting greater military pressure on the Taliban to bring it to the negotiating table with the Kabul government.⁷ Within this framework, the Trump administration announced the suspension of some US\$2 billion in aid to Pakistan until Islamabad takes decisive action against the Taliban and the Haqqani network.⁸ As things are, the reinforcement of US military presence in Afghanistan by a few thousand troops is not sufficient to terminate the ongoing insurgency.

Since after nearly two decades of extensive US military aid and training, the Afghan security forces continue to be plagued by serious operational problems that have enabled the Taliban to contest more than half of Afghan districts.⁹ The Taliban-led insurgency remains a lethal force, drawing sustenance from a variety of sources in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan, always attempting to coalesce with anti-government elements and criminal networks. It now controls more territory than at any other time after 2001.

Despite being a quarter-century-old insurgent movement, the Taliban's future aims are still open to various interpretations. It is important to understand who the Taliban are before attempting to decipher their strategy. The Afghan Taliban take pride in calling themselves the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which is a conscious attempt to underscore their desire to establish a unitary state to impose its version of Islamic Sharia law they had built during 1996-2001 primarily through military conquests. That is why the Taliban are always eager to showcase their Islamist credentials while resisting all nationalist currents in Afghan politics. Before the 9/11 attacks too, the Taliban were part of a global terrorist syndicate, hosting al-Qaeda-linked terrorists. Therefore, the biggest worry associated with their coming to power again in Afghanistan is turning the country into a hub of terrorism. For many, the Afghan Taliban are merely Pakistan's proxies who are being exploited to weaken the Afghan state from within. The advocates of such viewpoint argue that Pakistan's asymmetrical warfare formula has created a Frankenstein that can no longer be expected to create a modern state structure.

One may debate endlessly about the Taliban's strategy, but if something can serve as an explanation, it is their patience to wait for the withdrawal of American and allied troops from Afghanistan before setting out to establish "peace" on their own terms. The tactics they have adopted remain clear: their deadly terror attacks, especially in Kabul, seek to undermine the authority of the government, while demoralising the Afghan people. For instance, a suicide bombing in Kabul in late January killed some 100 people. A week earlier, more than 20 people were killed in an attack at Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel.¹⁰ In the middle of April, more than two dozen Afghan security personnel were killed in the Taliban attacks in northern and eastern Afghanistan.¹¹ Caught in the brutal conflict, the Afghan people continue to suffer. According to a quarterly report issued by the United Nations Assistance

Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 763 civilians were killed and 1,495 injured in the first quarter of this year alone.¹² These high-visibility attacks and their high casualties expose the weaknesses of the country's National Unity Government (NUG). To make matters worse, the ISIS remains active.

Daniel Coats, Director of National Intelligence (DNI), presented to the US Senate Intelligence Committee an unclassified testimony in February, stating the following: "The overall situation in Afghanistan probably will deteriorate modestly this year in the face of persistent political instability, sustained attacks by the Taliban-led insurgency, unsteady Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) performance, and chronic financial shortfalls...The ANSF probably will maintain control of most major population centres with coalition force support, but the intensity and geographic scope of Taliban activities will put those centres under continued strain."¹³ The Taliban usually launch their military operations in late April or early May as the weather takes a warm turn. Due to territorial gains, the Taliban is likely to fight this year with an apparently stronger position.¹⁴ For all its tough talk, the US has already recognised the impossibility of a military solution to the Afghan war, and the Trump administration's approach of taking the fight to the Taliban, is actually an attempt to take the Taliban to the negotiating table.

EARLIER PEACE OFFERS

This is not the first time an Afghan government has reached out to the Taliban to end the conflict but peace talks get stalled by the mistrust among the parties. The past decade has witnessed a number of initiatives by the Afghan government aimed at making peace with the Taliban, mostly designed to convince the insurgents to give up their military campaign. These have fallen short of being well-conceived

attempts to negotiate peace. On the other hand, although the Taliban's focus has been on sustaining its military campaign in the face of American military pressure, it has occasionally agreed to talk peace. Opening a political office in Qatar and participating in Track-Two events have been part of this strategy.

Steps towards peace negotiations were stymied, however, by the Taliban's refusal to negotiate with former President Hamid Karzai's government. Karzai had offered the Taliban a peace deal by conducting, first, a grand peace Jirga in 2010 and then a Loya Jirga in 2011. The National Consultative Peace Jirga, held in June 2010, was Karzai's attempt to offer a public forum for Afghans to voice their views regarding reintegration and reconciliation, and to build a wider domestic and international consensus.¹⁵ The reintegration plan focused on those who could be incentivised to abandon their allegiance to the insurgency; reconciliation offered amnesty and political position to enemy leadership to bring them into the political mainstream. Karzai's reintegration plan, fully supported by the US, was aimed at offering the Taliban an honourable place in society, if they renounced ties with the al-Qaeda, abandoned violence, and pursued their political goals in accordance with the Afghan Constitution.¹⁶

Amnesties and power-sharing were offered to the Taliban, with the promise of the removal of their names from terrorist blacklists. But the Taliban rejected Karzai's overtures, responding instead with a renewed campaign against the government. For instance, the chief of the Afghan High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani who was a former president and respected mujahideen leader, was assassinated by the Taliban weeks before Loya Jirga was held in 2011.¹⁷ The haphazard and conflicting nature of the initiatives have resulted in the failure of past reconciliation efforts, along with the lack of a cohesive strategy, poor coordination between the Afghan government and international forces, and the

absence of transparency in the process. Further compounding the problem are the long-standing, deep ethnic divisions in the country.¹⁸

GHANI'S OFFER AND TALIBAN'S RESPONSE

The second round of the Kabul Peace Process was organised on 28 February. The Afghan-led initiative brought together around two dozen countries and international organisations with the aim to chart out a path to sustainable peace for Afghanistan.¹⁹ Although the key antagonist in the conflict – the Taliban – did not participate, that did not deter the Afghan government from extending the unconditional olive branch to the group. In the hope of getting the Taliban to the negotiating table, President Ghani not only offered to confer political recognition on the Taliban and promised to share power with it, but also agreed to “review” the Constitution to meet one of its persistent demands.²⁰ Now the threshold for peace talks stands at the lowest possible denominator: renunciation of violence. This landmark announcement came at the heels of the Taliban's own offer to the US to negotiate peace in Afghanistan.

Many of the elements of Ghani's offer are familiar, but taken together, they constitute unconditional and comprehensive confidence-building measures aimed at reconciliation with the insurgent group. The present offer stands out from amongst its failed precursors in critical ways. The previous formulation was that the Taliban should choose between war and peace; the latest invitation is without preconditions, with no time limit for the Taliban to respond. The Afghan government's past insistence on the Taliban's acceptance of the Afghan Constitution was also a major roadblock; Ghani has now clearly hinted that the Constitution, like all documents, may be subject to amendments. The current offer may be regarded as a landmark as it expects that in order to be recognised as a legitimate political group, the Taliban would make a

vital contribution to building peace in the conflict-ridden country. By removing its pariah status, Ghani has taken a decisive step in the direction of making the Afghan Taliban part of the political mainstream.

The Taliban's top leadership has avoided jumping on the offer; doing so would have made it appear that it has publicly recognised the Afghan government. However, some factions of the Taliban have shown interest in pursuing peace talks. The US Defence Secretary James Mattis underlined that some factions within the Taliban "have either started to come over or expressed an interest...in talking to the Afghan government".²¹

Moreover, the Taliban has maintained its own silence in the form of a temporary lull in violence. In response to the recent suggestion by a former mujahideen leader and an Afghan provincial governor, Mohammad Ismail Khan, that if the Taliban was not interested in positively answering Ghani's peace offer, they could negotiate with former the Mujahideen groups, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said: "We support all efforts that lead to ending the ongoing crisis in this country."²² The statement, which perhaps indicated a willingness, albeit reluctant, keeps alive the hope of a dialogue.

If the Taliban eventually accepts Ghani's unprecedented peace proposal, the stage would be set for the much-awaited engagement between the Taliban and the Kabul government. If Ghani's outreach is spurned, however, he would have more political legitimacy in seeking a military solution against the recalcitrant Taliban.

TIMING AND REASONS

Ghani's peace offer to the Taliban may have been dictated by the group's open letter to the American public, stating that conflict can be resolved only through peaceful dialogue. In a February 14 letter addressed to the

American public and “peace-loving congressmen”, the Taliban also demanded the US to “end her occupation” of the country and “accept all our legitimate rights including the right to form a government consistent with the beliefs of our people.”²³ The timing of the Taliban’s overture was equally important, as it came immediately after the group claimed responsibility for a series of deadly terrorist attacks in Kabul. Though it may seem contradictory that Taliban’s proposal for peace negotiations came after those violent incidents, staging attacks before the offer of talks was primarily aimed at raising the stakes in the peace process. As argued by Pamela Constable, a “combination of outreach and threat” has been a characteristic feature of Taliban public statements.²⁴ It is reasonable to argue that the Taliban wanted to show the powerlessness of the Afghan government while demonstrating its own strength.

Although the Taliban has proven its ability to strike at even the most fortified locations in Kabul, it is fully aware that capturing the capital is not possible as long as the US remains invested in ensuring the Kabul government’s security. In fact, several factors contributed to the timing of peace offensive by the Taliban. Appearing just before the Kabul conference, the letter followed a comment by Trump declaring “no negotiations” with the Taliban anytime soon, and Ghani’s declaration that his government would only talk to insurgents with “no blood on their hands.” The Taliban seemed desperate to suggest that the onus for prolonging the war belonged elsewhere.²⁵ The Taliban’s letter could be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgement of potential battlefield losses and a move towards eventual talks with the Afghan government. The Taliban would therefore not make the mistake of viewing Ghani’s peace offer as a sign of his administration’s utter weakness and American desperation to exit from Afghanistan.

While critics would argue otherwise, it has been suggested that the Taliban’s positive response to the groundbreaking for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which is

supported by Washington, may have also prompted Ghani to explore the options of a grand peace bargain. While welcoming the TAPI initiative, the Afghan Taliban vowed to support and protect the pipeline in areas under its control, since the project has great development potential for Afghanistan.²⁶ The Taliban, which often stands accused of destroying bridges, roads and schools across the country, has rarely supported any project sponsored by the Kabul government. The argument is thus not entirely unsustainable that by warming up to the TAPI project, the Taliban would dispel its anti-development image among the Afghan people.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

The key battleground in asymmetric war in Afghanistan is not only the physical terrain, but the local population's perceptions. Thomas H Johnson, a Research Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, has documented the propaganda campaigns of the Taliban against the international forces as the former have always enjoyed an advantage in shaping narratives of the conflict through remarkable use of jihadi magazines, pirate radio, graffiti, poetry, night letters and various social media platforms. According to Johnson, "the Taliban have become Afghan pioneers in establishing Facebook and Twitter accounts and using them to disseminate their propaganda narratives."²⁷ Similarly, Neil Krishan Aggarwal has also shown that despite writing in different languages such as Arabic, Dari, English, Pashto, and Urdu, the Taliban propagandists are able to disseminate a unified message.²⁸

As regards peace talks, the Taliban's dominant narrative seems to have prevailed – whom to talk to and about what. Since the Taliban believe that the Afghan government is not the final decisionmaker in Afghanistan, they have always insisted on talking directly to the US. Johnson feels that this stance "corresponds with their [the Taliban]

narrative they have suggested since the beginning of the conflict and also served as an explicit informational response to Trump's suggestion that the U.S. will not negotiate with the Taliban."²⁹

However, the Taliban have publicly offered few alternatives to the current regime. Beyond hazy references to the Sharia law and a state totally independent of "foreign domination", the Taliban's vision for the Afghan state after the withdrawal of foreign troops remains incomplete and ambiguous. The Taliban's obsession with the fight against the Afghan government and the foreign troops has meant that questions about the future have only resulted in vague replies.³⁰ As underlined by Johnson, the "Taliban's messaging campaign fails to offer viable solutions or alternatives to the current situation, other than threats of more violence and destruction."³¹ Thus, in their fight against the Taliban, the Ghani administration and the US cannot do without multi-pronged counter-messaging strategy, which must also incorporate plans to "mine the same literary sources – whether religious texts such as the Quran and Hadith or secular literature such as poetry – that the Taliban uses to buttress its arguments."³²

Ghani's recent invitation to the Taliban to take part in forthcoming parliamentary elections constitutes a powerful counter-message. Although rejected by the Taliban,³³ Ghani's assertion—that if the Taliban "believe they have roots among the people in Afghanistan then elections is a chance"³⁴—challenges the Taliban's claims of representing all Sunni Afghans. The continuation of such counter-messaging would be a huge psychological boost to the peace initiative.

TALIBAN FACTIONALISM

Any discussion on the Taliban that fails to differentiate between its factions would be too simplistic. Indeed, despite maintaining its

ideological coherence for many years, the Taliban insurgency has divided internally in rival groups and camps. With the focus of its operations expanding from the south and the east into north and west of Afghanistan, the disputes have also come out in the open. The central leadership of Quetta Shura is no longer as powerful as it once was as separate governance structures and different perspectives over negotiations have emerged in the Taliban ranks.

The Taliban insurgency has four main shuras: Quetta Shura; Mashhad Shura; Shura of the North; and the Rasool Shura. The old leadership is based in the Quetta Shura, which is partly in Karachi and partly in Quetta. Led by Haibatullah Akhund, it enjoys authority over the Miranshah Shura which is based in Miran Shah, North Waziristan, and is comprised exclusively of the Haqqani network; and Peshawar Shura, which is based in Peshawar. In 2007, the Miranshah Shura declared independence from the Quetta Shura. The Peshawar Shura, which did the same in 2009, was forced to rejoin in 2016 due to financial difficulties. However, the Haqqani Network re-joined in 2015, after Sirajuddin Haqqani was appointed deputy leader within the Quetta Shura. Shura of the North is based in Badakhshan and composed of several fronts. Accounting for less than 10 percent of the Taliban's manpower, the Mashhad Shura is based in Mashhad, Iran. The Rasool Shura is based in Farah in Afghanistan. Despite being in opposition to the Quetta Shura, Rasool Shura is linked with the Obeidullah Ishaqzai faction of the Quetta Shura. As present, there are reports of a struggle for monopolising control of the Quetta Shura between Haibatullah Akhundzada and Sirajudin Haqqani. According to Antonio Giustozzi, Haibatullah is willing to negotiate with the Kabul government but Sirajudin is bitterly opposed to reconciliation.³⁵

Due to this fragmentation, there is wide regional autonomy between the various shuras of the Taliban. Competition dictates that none of the

other three shuras recognise the authority of the Quetta Shura. In fact, between 2015 and 2017, the Rasool Shura and the Quetta Shura were engaged in a fight against each other. As disclosed in an interview to Antonio Giustozzi, then leader of the Rasool Shura, Mullah Rasool disapproved of the monopolisation of the peace process by the Quetta Shura. He was reported to have said: “Earlier we were thinking that the Afghan Government wanted peace talks with all Taliban, but when we saw that it is interested only in making peace with Mullah Mansur because of the dictates of the Pakistani Government, we decided we cannot start peace talks with the Afghan Government.”³⁶

As the Taliban want to retain a monopoly over ‘jihad’ in Afghanistan, they have challenged the emergence of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in the country since 2015.³⁷ However, in order to avoid fighting for territory, recruits and revenue, a faction of the Taliban is also keen for ceasefire and coexistence with the IS-K. There are credible reports of cooperation and collaboration between the Haqqani network and both the factions of IS-K. Despite some opposition within the Haqqani network of an alliance-like relationship with the IS-K, a large number of operatives are said to be in favour of collaborative ventures.³⁸

Further, the governance structures of the different Shuras are run separately by the respective shuras. Therefore, if the fragmentation persists, starting negotiations with the government in Kabul will become more challenging. The US is aware of this challenge. During an unannounced visit to Afghanistan in the middle of March, Secretary James Mattis clearly acknowledged that getting the Taliban to reconcile “in one fell swoop” would “be a bridge too far to expect. But there are elements of the Taliban clearly interested in talking to the Afghan government.”³⁹ Although, peace established with some selected factions usually tends to increase the possibility of others to act as “spoilers”, the US seems to be counting on further splitting the Taliban apart and using that as a tactic to entice them to the peace table.

AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

The Americans have backed Ghani's peace offering with repeated affirmations by their top diplomats and commanders of a political solution to the conflict. For obvious reasons, the Trump administration would not like to be seen as too thrilled at the prospect of peace with the Taliban as a legitimate political actor. However, the Taliban's obstinacy on bypassing the Kabul government and directly talking to Washington, and the understandable reluctance of the Trump administration to engage in direct dialogue with the Taliban, have hampered the peace process. The US has rejected the Taliban's so-called "peace offer" by asking the insurgent group to talk to the Kabul government, since a successful dialogue can only be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

It may be argued that the Trump administration will not leave any opportunity to impress the US public with lightning success that would define Trump's first term to ensure a possible second term. The peace process would be certainly projected as a negotiated victory in Afghanistan allowing US soldiers to return.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Washington needs to make it clear that it will prioritise financial and military support to the Afghan government, pressure on Pakistan's security establishment to get the Taliban to negotiate, and keep a sizeable military force in Afghanistan even after a deal is negotiated. But despite some inherent difficulties, the US needs to be more flexible to the idea of talking directly to the Taliban.

PAKISTAN'S ROLE

Pakistan's role in the talks invites much scepticism as Rawalpindi has vastly different priorities in Afghanistan. Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban's ally and major benefactor, has been relentlessly pursuing an asymmetric strategy against India. Rawalpindi has often demonstrated that it can go

to any extent to frustrate friendly relations between India and Afghanistan as its perception of Indian influence in Afghanistan is riddled with infinite fantasies and inaccuracies.

Islamabad had brokered the first round of direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban in July 2015, and it has also been part of the four-nation group comprising Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US and China, but all such efforts have been unsuccessful. An Afghan analyst rightly terms Pakistan “the wrong moderator with the wrong actors in the wrong place.”⁴¹ Pakistan has vigorously welcomed Ghani’s offer, sensing an incredible opening for the rehabilitation of its militant proxies in Afghan governing structures. Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif’s remarks that “Afghan Taliban is a political entity”⁴² are primarily designed to confer political legitimacy on the Taliban without forcing it to renounce violence or moderate its unreasonable demands.

Even though Pakistan is under intense pressure from the Trump administration to deny safe haven to terrorist outfits, it continues to bet on a US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Getting the Afghan Taliban political legitimacy would help Pakistan’s security establishment gain a much bigger political role in Afghan affairs. As argued by C Raja Mohan, Pakistan army’s “investment in Taliban is about controlling the political future in Afghanistan. It is unlikely to abandon the Taliban just when it is getting closer to regaining its position in Afghanistan.”⁴³ Pakistan will do as much as it can to exploit the multiple faultlines in the Trump administration and the Ghani government’s need to ensure a favourable political outcome.

While Pakistan would like the world to believe that the Afghan Taliban is an autonomous entity that is completely free from Pakistani

influence, the reality of Pakistani political and military patronage to the Taliban is no longer in doubt. Who can forget the fact that the Taliban could not last even two months of American military action in league with the Northern Alliance when General Musharraf was forced to withdraw Pakistan's sponsorship following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan? The Afghan Taliban's reliance on Pakistan for military logistics, medical care and sanctuary for the insurgents remains as critical as ever. Islamabad still holds the key to getting the Taliban to the table; a fact that has been underscored by the Pakistani prime minister's April 6 visit to Afghanistan which was seen as an attempt to reset the Pak-Afghan relationship without the US' shadow looming large.⁴⁴

Amidst Kabul's attempts to co-opt some elements within the Taliban insurgency through a grand peace bargain, it is crucial to intensify pressure on the anti-talk constituency, within the insurgency as well as in Pakistan's security establishment, to negotiate for peace. As underlined by General John Nicholson, the top commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, ongoing efforts to apply religious, diplomatic, military and social pressure on the Taliban⁴⁵ must continue with greater vigour.

There is reasonable ground to argue that Pakistan's support to the peace process in Afghanistan after Ghani's offer may be driven by the pressure from the Trump administration on Pakistan's security establishment to stop supporting terror in Afghanistan. However, the Trump administration continues to vacillate about taking more stringent action against Islamabad even as Pakistan's security establishment tries hard to wriggle out of the uncomfortable situation. Pakistan's National Security Adviser Nasser Khan Janjua was reported to have told the Afghan leadership during his visit to Kabul on March 17: "Isolated, blamed and coerced Pakistan is of lesser use to Afghanistan."⁴⁶

His statement coincided with the renewed demand by Washington, urging Islamabad to take more steps in the fight against terrorism. The latest demand was made by American Vice President Mike Pence during his unscheduled meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi in Washington.⁴⁷

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Ghani's peace offer is good but leaves various details uncertain. Who would stop fighting first? This question is important now because despite Ghani's offer to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political actor, the latter may be worried about the attitude of the Afghan security forces, mostly staffed with their bitter rivals. In the absence of a thorough restructuring of the existing security forces, the Taliban would not want to disarm.

Second, various power centres within the Afghan government do not speak with one voice regarding the peace process. In the past, the divisions within the NUG undercut the peace process. Can Ghani heal a crisis within his own divided government enough to present a united front at the negotiation table? Third, the US-Russia competition has prevented the emergence of a genuine Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. In particular, with the Trump administration's National Security Strategy identifying Russia and China rather than terrorism as the principal threat to American security,⁴⁸ the new Cold War-type of rivalry between Washington and Moscow is bound to create insecurity in this volatile region. Can the US and Russia continue along the same trajectory of outmanoeuvring each other in Afghanistan? How can peace be achieved without neutralising these geopolitical faultlines? And last but not least, is the US seeking a permanent presence in Afghanistan?

INDIA'S CONCERNS

India has backed Ghani in his endeavours to end the conflict.⁴⁹ However, New Delhi does not want Islamabad to be brought back into the Afghan endgame without adequate safeguards, as Pakistan's "deep state" has its own agendas for Afghanistan. It needs to be repeated that peace and security in Afghanistan are closely linked to relations with Pakistan. Pakistan's political and military leadership intimately link developments in Afghanistan to Islamabad's relations with its traditional rival India. In fact, it has become a received wisdom in Pakistan that the Kabul regime must have "good relations" with Islamabad and that close relations between New Delhi and Kabul must be prevented at all costs. All Pakistani governments have pursued this strategy, and the present one led by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi is no exception.

Therefore, New Delhi would not want the Taliban to monopolise Afghan power at the behest of Pakistan, to revive the Islamic Emirate that they established in Afghanistan in the 1990s and to allow safe havens for radical Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Any government that emerges from the Afghan peace process cannot be allowed to replicate the Islamic Emirate.

One of the biggest challenges facing India in its Afghan strategy is growing divergence with the position adopted by Russia and Iran, its erstwhile partners to prop up the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. India, Russia and Iran all want to make sure that peace and stability prevail in Afghanistan but they differ in their ways to achieve this goal. New Delhi would like the Afghan government to have the final authority to dictate the terms of peace talks with the Taliban. However, Russia and Iran differ as they would like the Taliban to be a partner in the fight against the ISIS—which is seen by Moscow and Tehran as a greater threat than the Taliban.⁵⁰ For Russia and Iran, tactical advantages trump strategic disadvantages.

If evicting the US from Afghanistan is dictating Russia's and Iran's Afghan involvement, India would be the last country to support this as New Delhi has been increasingly coordinating its Afghan policies with those of the Trump administration. India expects more pressure on Pakistan but there are limits to American influence in forcing Pakistan to reduce its paranoid dependency on jihadist forces. Washington is not oblivious to the fact that a more stringent approach might lead Rawalpindi to deny the US use of its territory for Afghan operations. Realising that the logistic lifeline to Afghanistan passes through Pakistan, Washington can only go that far as the Chabahar route is not available to the US due to its implacable hostility towards Iran. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the selection of Mike Pompeo as the Secretary of State and his replacement as CIA director by Gina Haspel along with the appointment of John Bolton as national security adviser will prevent the Taliban from monopolising Afghan power at the behest of Pakistan.


CONCLUSION

The Taliban appears to be trying to gain the upper hand before agreeing to the peace talks. The US also seems to follow a similar strategy. With both the Taliban and the US pressing to achieve favourable conditions for peace talks, the scenario in which the Taliban will immediately go for peace talks seems unlikely. At the same time, any scenario in which the Taliban will enter negotiations from a position of strength is not likely to be accepted by the US. If the Taliban continue to remain adamant about their primary demands – such as direct talks with the US and a complete withdrawal of foreign troops – before entering into peace negotiations, the status quo will hold. It will not be easy to conduct free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections under these circumstances.

Ashraf Ghani's unconditional dialogue offer to the Taliban in February has received support from all key stakeholders. Similarly, the Tashkent conference in March was the political endorsement for the Kabul Process. However, the Taliban have not responded favourably to peace talks with the Kabul regime and they continue to insist face-to-face talks with the US. Ghani's grand peace offer must find a way around these seemingly insurmountable challenges.

The Ghani government's ability to preserve its cohesiveness, deliver key services, and provide security to the Afghan people can weaken the Taliban's tide. Despite several challenges, the Kabul regime is aided by international support. Thus, at a moment when the military solution seems least likely to resolve the ongoing conflict, strengthening state institutions is important as it will allow Kabul to be better positioned to champion an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. As aptly summarised by M Ashraf Haidari, "We can't build schools during firefights; but without schools, the firefights will continue... [A] disproportionate amount of international resources ... have been devoted to military operations at the cost of job creation... But it is more jobs – not just more bullets – that will help persuade militant fighters to lay down their weapons."⁵¹ Due to a long history of violent distrust between Islamabad and Kabul, the Taliban and Kabul will find it difficult to initiate the constructive engagement aimed at mutual cooperation. However, the very history of violent distrust should be justification enough to force change in deeply entrenched positions and long-held perceptions. Both sides must prioritise the identification of areas where confidence-building measures can be developed.

The Afghan conflict is multi-dimensional, involving Afghan, regional and global actors. Due to its inherent complexity, no single actor holds the key to resolving the crisis. Therefore, any peace process in Afghanistan is going to be long and difficult, and there will be plenty

of room for skepticism that the process is going to falter. The fact remains that no side is going to win the war, and the only alternative to continuing bloodshed and instability is to make way for the peace process. ORF

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