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Issue Brief

Afghanistan-Pakistan-US-China Quadrilateral Coordination Group

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In an attempt to revive the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the first meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-United States-China Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) was held in Islamabad on January 11, 2016. The group included Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Ambassador Richard G. Olson and China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador Deng Xijun.

The meeting highlighted "the need for immediate resumption of direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban."¹ All four countries "agreed to pursue efforts as part of an intensive schedule of meetings and discussions."² The talks focused on adopting a "clear and realistic assessment of the opportunities for peace and reconciliation."³ It also stressed on the "hurdles involved and plausible measures to be taken to create a conducive environment for the resumption of talks."⁴

Speaking at the opening session of the meeting, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz said that "no preconditions should be attached to the reconciliation process... as the primary objective is to create conditions to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table and offer them incentives that can persuade them to move away from using violence a tool for pursuing political goals."⁵

The meeting was a result of a previous quadrilateral (2+2) meeting held on the sidelines of the Fifth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference which took place in Islamabad on December 9, 2015, between Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif, Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken. On this occasion, all four countries had pledged their commitment "to facilitate an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process with a view to achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region."⁶ Simultaneously, a trilateral meeting was also held between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US "to accelerate diplomatic and political efforts to put an end to the conflict in Afghanistan,"⁷ thus highlighting the commitment of all states involved in pushing the peace process forward.

The second meeting of the Quadrilateral Contact Group was held in Kabul on January 18, 2016. The delegation was led by Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan Michael McKinley and China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador Deng Xijun.

Addressing the meeting, Afghan Foreign Minister, Salahuddin Rabbani “invited the Taliban on behalf of the government and the people of Afghanistan to join the peace process and solve all differences through negotiations.”⁸ At the same time, he also warned that those “Taliban members who reject talks and push for war would be isolated.”⁹

Reiterating their commitment for an Afghan led, Afghan owned peace process, all four countries discussed a possible “roadmap for reviving talks and called on all Taliban groups to enter into early talks with the Afghan government to resolve differences politically in accordance with the will and aspirations of the entire Afghan nation.”¹⁰ They also “emphasized the need for an end to the senseless violence against the Afghan people.”¹¹ It was decided that the third the Quadrilateral Contact Group meeting would take place on February 6, 2016 in Islamabad.

The formation of the Quadrilateral Contact Group is a welcoming development and a good initiative. While the ‘Quadrilateral’ initiative may be the first of its kind, similar initiatives have been seen in the past that have not been able to deliver. However, what makes this initiative special is that the US and China have once again maintained their support to the peace and reconciliation process. This has not only added credence to the process but has generated immense hope and confidence that the quadrilateral mechanism would be able to develop a roadmap for engagement between the representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban for a possible deal in due course. Pakistan’s supportive role makes this process more plausible on many counts. However, for the process to succeed, all sides will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other’s views. In short, both principal stake holders – the Afghan government and Taliban - will have to move beyond the rhetoric, find the middle ground and be willing to compromise on their initial and maximalist positions.

Talks with the Taliban have been initiated in the past by the Afghan government. Kabul now must move beyond giving statements and instead focus on galvanizing domestic support from forces opposed to the peace process. It not only has to convince the Taliban to enter into talks but must also accommodate them in the political process through a holistic and viable national reintegration programme that is acceptable to all. Furthermore, while the Taliban continue to wage attacks in an apparent effort to put pressure on the government to gain greater leverage, all efforts need to be made to reach out to the group before it embarks upon yet another spring offensive. Hence, the current window of opportunity must not be lost.

At the same time, the Taliban too, must ensure a visible reduction in their attacks against the Afghan state. The Taliban have given no indication of a ceasefire, and continue to justify their insurgency as a “means to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control.”¹² However, now that the responsibility of national security lies with the Afghan National Security Forces, with majority of foreign forces out of the country, it is no longer advisable for the Taliban to do so since they are no longer fighting a ‘foreign’ enemy.

Differences, divisions and in-fighting within the Taliban particularly between the group’s new chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour and breakaway factions such as the one headed by Mohamed Rasool is also a major impediment to the peace process. A significant factor that could convince the Taliban to accept the Afghan government’s overtures for peace talks is the growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in the region and its growing penetration into Afghanistan. Although, the presence and influence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan is limited compared to that of the Taliban, many Taliban fighters and commanders such as Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mawalwi Najib, Sayed Emarati and Mawlawi Qahar have defected and joined the IS.¹³ This poses a grave “strategic threat to the very survival of the future of the Taliban in Afghanistan.”¹⁴ In fact, it is believed that the Taliban have initiated a “recruitment commission”¹⁵ to reach out to those members who have defected to IS in an attempt to win them back. Increasing divisions will not only undermine the Taliban’s presence and influence but could also result in a possible vacuum for other militant groups such as the Islamic State to fill. Hence, unless the Taliban sort out their differences and consolidate their position under a united negotiating stance – the chances of the success of talks remain slim.

With changing regional dynamics and the threat of the Islamic State, neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban can afford to miss this opportunity of starting at least a dialogue process, as force is no more a viable option. Although the Taliban have not yet shown their willingness to talk, the group knows that they cannot operate in complete isolation and therefore they will have to eventually reach a political compromise with the government. But before doing so, they must end the infighting to gain greater leverage as a united group in the larger interest of the people of Afghanistan.

A note of caution, both Pakistan and Afghanistan must keep the gains they have made in their fragile relationship independent of the peace process. Continuing violence on the part of the Taliban and slow progress on peace talks must not be allowed to hamper improvement in bilateral ties. Pakistan, the US and China would continue to play a supportive and facilitative role. That said, the process is essentially intra-Afghan, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. The real challenge for all political forces of Afghanistan,

including the ruling coalition in Kabul and the Taliban, is to find a solution that eliminates violence and promotes peace and reconciliation.

Notes and References:

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- ⁶ "Statement from the Quadrilateral Meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan," *The Embassy of Afghanistan*, Washington DC, December 9, 2015, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/article/statement-from-the-quadrilateral-meeting-in-islamabad-pakistan>
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- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Abdul Basit, "Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban's IS predicament," *Express Tribune*, May 12, 2015, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/884582/al-qaeda-and-the-afghan-talibans-is-predicament/>.