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## Issue Brief

# Prospects of Peace & Reconciliation in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is a war-torn country which has seen years of conflict and bloodshed. The prevailing violence in Afghanistan has hindered the process of long-lasting peace in the entire region. Regional countries, along with the major global powers, believe that stability in Afghanistan is a pre-requisite for prosperity in the entire region. American presence in the region has been instrumental in aiding Afghan National Army (ANA) to handle the security situation on their own. However, the peace process in Afghanistan has been stalled despite several attempts by major stakeholders. Pakistan has stressed for an end to the constant state of war in Afghanistan through an indigenous peace process which should include the Taliban as well as the splinter groups. The international community has also urged all involved countries to help guide the nascent government in Afghanistan towards negotiations with the Taliban. Thus it is imperative to analyse the reasons that hinder the peace process in Afghanistan.

The first round of talks that were conducted in Murree in July 2015 was considered a significant breakthrough as they included the Taliban representatives. Later that year, the Heart of Asia Conference was convened in December 2015 where the international community initiated the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) process for peace in Afghanistan. Since then there have been 5 QCG meetings till date which have all been conducted without the Taliban representatives. The boycott of the dialogues was a reflection of their resentment due to the death of Mullah Omar. After his demise, several splinter groups sprouted from the Tehreek-e -Taliban Afghanistan who refused to enter the dialogue process. Thus, the peace talks held without any Taliban leaders were not as effective as they would have been if their narrative was included. The QCG meetings have also been held frequently this year which have resulted in consensus among regional countries and Afghan national government but the process will remain incomplete without the presence of Taliban representatives. No progress can be attained in Afghanistan until the Taliban are included.

There have been deliberations regarding the reasons behind the failure of the peace process. The unfortunate timing of the killing of important Taliban leaders is one of the reasons behind the non-cooperation of the Afghan Taliban in the dialogue process. The disclosure of Mullah Omar's death before the Murree Talks and the recent drone attack by US in Pakistan's territory to kill Mullah Mansur sabotaged the peace process. Since then, all peace talks have been held without the Taliban. Another important factor is the lack of consensus among the groups that currently formulate the Afghan National Unity Government. Tussle for power and authority combined with ethnic divisions have led to grave disparities within the establishment. Lack of proper hierarchy and structure in the government institutions is the result of mutual differences and inexperience. The war weary population of Afghanistan is critical of the Western-led government policies. The new government has not been able

to create a national narrative that unites all ethnic and tribal groups under the umbrella of equitable power sharing and security management. The Afghan National Army (ANA) has been aided by the NATO forces in maintaining complete control over the security of the country but they are less experienced than their foreign counterparts. They also face multiple challenges on a daily basis such as frequent encounters with the Taliban and internal desertions of Afghan soldiers and the emerging threat of ISIS.

While the importance of the regional countries in the stabilisation of Afghanistan cannot be neglected, it still depends entirely on the national government to reconcile the Taliban. The Taliban and splinter groups that have showed interest in negotiations must be included as such and after a certain time period, they must be incorporated into the ruling setup as recognized political factions. Their infusion into the mainstream is a pre-requisite to a peaceful future in Afghanistan. The government must consider placating them by accepting some of their reasonable demands and by including them in the process of constitutional development. Pakistan has reiterated this suggestion as a solution to the Afghan conundrum, time and again, as it is the only sensible way out of this quagmire. Pakistan has also played a significant role in convincing the Taliban leaders to join peace talks so that both sides can cease the warfare and join hands to rebuild their country.

Afghan government also needs to adopt a more objective approach towards analysing the role of Pakistan in this dispute. President Ashraf Ghani has said on several occasions that, "Pakistan is the key to peace in Afghanistan", and both governments need to address mutual misunderstandings to build a joint narrative for peace in the region. Pakistan's role on war on terror has been wrongfully projected as manipulative and negative by the international community and India on numerous occasions. Afghan resentment towards Pakistan is also a result of this carefully thought out strategy to malign Pakistan. However, all such attempts have been thwarted by Pakistan's sincere efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan which have been acknowledged most recently by the US Senator Jon McCain on a visit to Pakistan. Thus it is imperative that the Afghan government adopts a policy towards Pakistan which is independent of Indian manipulation. If Afghan government is to carve out a reconciliation strategy with the Taliban, it needs to involve Pakistan in the process of pacifying them and to bring them to the dialogue table. The next step must be a mutual undertaking on ending violence and inculcating the sidelined Taliban groups into the nation building setup. Regional and international countries can provide assistance as the US has stationed about 10,000 troops to aid with the security setup but the actual responsibility to maintain peace and unity lies with the Afghan government and the people. The road to peace will have to be paved from within the Afghan society itself.