



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# Kabul Process

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*Written by: Amina Khan, Research Fellow*

*Edited by: Malik Qasim Mustafa*

In an attempt to “build regional security alliances to counter the threat of terrorism and revive the peace process,”<sup>1</sup> the National Unity Government (NUG) hosted the ‘Kabul Process’ on June 6, 2017. The first Afghan owned and led initiative was an amalgamation of 24 countries, (Pakistan, US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and India) as well as the UN, EU and NATO aimed at achieving international consensus on fighting terrorism and gaining broader support for the cause. President Ashraf Ghani highlighted that the Kabul initiative was a result of the failure of several “bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral” attempts (including the recently held Moscow initiative) to initiate peace talks with the Afghan Taliban.<sup>2</sup> While the conference was the first of its kind, as it was solely Afghan led and owned, it did not include one of the most important components of the Afghan conflict - the Afghan Taliban.

Despite their exclusion, President Ghani renewed a call for peace talks with the group at a “mutually agreeable” location and expressed that the group would eventually be allowed to open a representative office if significant progress was achieved.<sup>3</sup> However, Kabul’s offer for peace talks came with certain prerequisites such as “recognition of the Afghan constitution, continuity of the reforms of educating and advancing the rights of women, and renunciation of violence and linkages with terrorist groups.”<sup>4</sup> However, the Taliban rejected Kabul’s offer and criticised the initiative as another attempt to “endorse and prolong foreign occupation” of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

The Kabul process has come at a time when Afghanistan is possibly going through one of its most difficult times in its history and faces a plethora of challenges. With the formation of the NUG in 2014, along with Afghan security forces assuming greater responsibility for security in the country, there were hopes that the state of affairs would improve. However, Afghanistan continues to be confronted by

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<sup>1</sup> “Ghani Officially Opens Kabul Process Meeting,” *Tolo News*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-officially-opens-kabul-process-meeting>,

<sup>2</sup> Bismillah Alizada, “Kabul Process Faltering as Taliban Support Rises,” *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/kabul-process-falters-as-taliban-support-rises/>

<sup>3</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Ghani to Allow Taliban Office if Afghan Peace Progresses,” *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-kabul-process-peace-conference/3889221.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

violence and insecurity, weak, highly divided and ineffective governance corruption, a flourishing drug trade and a growing Taliban insurgency that continues to escalate. The Taliban clearly appear to be stronger than before and have taken more territory in Afghanistan in 2016, than at any time in their 15-year fight as well as fighting against the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).<sup>6</sup> According to a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the area under the government's control or influence decreased from 70.5 percent in 2015 to 65.6 percent by the end of May 2016.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, ANSF, which exert control over less than 60 percent of Afghanistan<sup>8</sup> continue to suffer declining numbers and high attrition rates as military casualty rates are historically high.<sup>9</sup>

The country also continues to stand highly divided on the issue of pursuing peace with the Taliban. It has yet to develop national consensus as well as a national narrative, as many within Ghani's fragile administration strongly oppose the inclusion of the Taliban in the political process.<sup>10</sup> President Ghani, like his predecessor, has failed to bring stability to the country or make headway with the Afghan Taliban. While President Ghani achieved a symbolic victory with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, he continues to struggle in establishing peace talks with the Taliban and has held Pakistan responsible not only for the failures in peace talks but also for the deteriorating state of affairs in Afghanistan. However, despite Kabul's outbursts and accusations, Pakistan has displayed immense maturity and restraint and has consistently tried to restore relations as well as revive peace talks.

Islamabad has used whatever influence it has with the Afghan Taliban to persuade them to engage with Kabul as was exemplified on several occasions be it the Murree Peace Process, Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), Russia-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue, China, Pakistan & Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue to name a few. Although the political leadership in Pakistan has reached out to the Taliban and, in private, has exerted pressure on them to halt their offensive and engage in the

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<sup>6</sup> Taimoor Shah and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Gain Ground in Afghanistan as Soldiers Surrender Their Posts," *New York Times*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-army.html>

<sup>7</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Report, April 2017, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-04-30qr.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "Afghan Taliban launch spring offensive as US reviews strategy," *Reuters*, April 28, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKBN17U0E9>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ruttig, "Direct US-Taliban talks and the Bonn 2 conference (amended)," *Afghan Analyst Network*, May 18, 2011, <http://www.afghanistananalysts.org/direct-us-taliban-talks-and-the-bonn-2-conferenceamended/>

reconciliation process, the Taliban have ignored all appeals for a ceasefire and in fact have continued to step up attacks.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Pakistan's efforts, Kabul continues to blame Pakistan and has unrealistic expectations from Pakistan. Blaming Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban let alone the peace process. Kabul must understand that Pakistan's role is only limited to supporting the peace process, reaching out and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of Afghan prerogative and consensus.

While the Kabul Process is the first 'Afghan initiative' of its kind, it remains to be seen whether it will have the same fate as other (unsuccessful) processes or whether it will be able to achieve progress with the Taliban. While the initiative may have raised hopes of the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, in the larger context it appears that this initiative, like previous ones, will not bare any results until the Taliban are taken on board. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue.

The Kabul Process is an indication of Kabul's growing assertion of resolving its issues unilaterally and a clear sign of its tendencies towards independent policy decisions, while at the same time reducing its dependence on key regional participation. Hence, if this is the course of action Kabul intends to follow, the Afghan state therefore needs to take ownership of its responsibilities and failures. Whatever outcome is achieved in the peace process (if at all) should be solely Afghan owned. Kabul should not let the peace process govern and determine its relationship with Islamabad. It would be prudent for President Ghani to mend Kabul's ties with Islamabad and implement what he defended a few years ago - that "trust among Pakistan and Afghanistan for combating terrorism is a key element to end the undeclared war between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that Pakistan's cooperation key to the peace process."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mateen Haider, "Afghanistan's enemy is Pakistan's enemy, says army chief," *Dawn*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1164189>.

<sup>12</sup> Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start within Weeks," *Tolo News*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-sayspeace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>.