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Issue Brief

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President Ghani's Speech at the UNGA: Need to Move Beyond the Rhetoric

September 29, 2017

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Addressing the 72nd session of UN General Assembly, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani welcomed President Donald Trump's recently announced strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia, as well as plans to send more troops to Afghanistan.



He said that enduring peace in Afghanistan could only be achieved through a political settlement, and reiterated his previous call for the Afghan Taliban "to engage in intra-Afghan dialogue for a political settlement ... [since] the Taliban would not win through war and that the group could only achieve their goals through political ways."¹ Articulating further, he said that "the roots of terrorism were outside Afghanistan's borders, and that there are over 20 international terrorist groups with an imposed presence on Afghan soil."² Speaking about achieving peace in the region, President Ghani said "there was an opportunity for a dialogue between Kabul and her neighbours to work together earnestly to eliminate terrorism and contain extremism [and Pakistan should] engage with Kabul on a comprehensive state to state dialogue on peace, security and regional cooperation leading to prosperity."³

Despite President Ghani's renewed call for the Taliban to enter into an Intra Afghan dialogue, as well as resumption of dialogue with Pakistan, he did not bring anything new to the table as his policy, like previous ones, did not present an explicitly clear path on how to resolve the Afghan conflict once and for all. Rather, the same rhetoric has been heard several times before as well.

President Ghani's comments come at a time when Afghanistan is going through its most tumultuous times since the US invasion in 2001. Despite more than 16 years of international presence, and the fact

¹ "Ghani Calls On Region To Change Their Views On Afghan War," RFERL, June 22, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-us-un-say-security-worsening/28572652.html>

² "Tolo News, September 20, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-calls-region-change-their-views-afghan-war>

³ "Afghan president at UN urges dialogue with Pakistan to curb extremism," *Dawn*, September 20, 2017

that billions have been spent, the situation in Afghanistan remain "intensely volatile,"⁴ as Afghanistan continues to be confronted by violence, insecurity, weak and divided government, corruption, a thriving drug trade and an escalating Taliban insurgency that appears to have no end. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) continue to struggle against the Taliban, suffering declining numbers and high attrition rates as military casualty rates continue to increase. Apart from internal challenges, the presence of Daesh/ the Islamic State's Wilayah Khorasan (Khorasan province) ISKP, is yet another major issue of concern not only for Afghanistan, but the region as a whole. Hence questions of uncertainty continue to revolve around the future of Afghanistan and whether enough of a state structure and institutions have been created since 2001 for the Afghan state to sustain itself. While the challenges faced by Kabul are certainly manifold and daunting, achieving national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Afghan Taliban is the most arduous yet the most fundamental prerequisite for the future stability of Afghanistan which primarily depends on a successful reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban.

Afghanistan stands highly divided on the issue of the Taliban and has yet to develop national consensus, as well as a national narrative. There needs to be collective willingness on the Afghan side to acknowledge the Afghan Taliban as legitimate stakeholders, and a national willingness to accommodate them in the political process and future of Afghanistan. Despite calls for dialogue, President Ghani has struggled to spur domestic support, (particularly from within his fragile government) and develop a viable national reintegration programme. Inviting the Taliban to join the peace process is only part of the initiative that has been witnessed in the past. However, reaching out to the Taliban, establishing dialogue and finding a common ground are steps that lie in Kabul's purview. Therefore, Kabul needs to move beyond words, and develop viable proposals and be willing to accommodate the Taliban in order to make the negotiations successful.

Without clear and viable proposals, talks will remain elusive and futile. In short, a common ground needs to be agreed upon that accommodates the interests of the Afghan government, as well as the Taliban.

Similarly, Kabul needs to decide the kind of relationship it would like to have with Islamabad. Kabul must understand that Pakistan's role in the peace process is limited to supporting the process, while

⁴ "Security Situation Worsening In Afghanistan, UN, Pentagon Warn," *RFERL*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-us-un-say-security-worsening/28572652.html>

reaching out and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of Afghan prerogative and consensus. Kabul should not let the peace process govern and determine its relationship with Islamabad. More importantly, blaming Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban, let alone the peace process.

President Ghani's offer of a dialogue with Pakistan is a welcoming development and much needed step in the right direction, as a bilateral approach needs to be initiated between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the aim of resuming ties, as well as the peace process. For this, the vicious blame game and mistrust of the past must not be allowed to resurface. Kabul needs to take ownership of its own responsibilities and failures, as does Pakistan. Both countries should define the parameters of their bilateral relationship by working further to overcome differences between them. As a starter, they could focus on the possible resumption of talks for the revival of the MoU signed between their respective intelligence agencies, with the aim of building trust and confidence.

Most importantly, the only way forward in Afghanistan is through a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban through constructive dialogue and engagement. Hence, there needs to be collective willingness on the Afghan side to acknowledge the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate stakeholder, and a national willingness to accommodate them in the political future of Afghanistan. Without the Taliban, there can be no peace in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and the Taliban both will have to move beyond the rhetoric, find a middle ground and be willing to compromise on their initial and maximalist positions. Secondly, the initiative needs to be Afghan-owned and supported by the international and regional stakeholders, as was the case with the initiation of the Kabul process in June 2017, marking the first Afghan-led and owned initiative. Moreover, regional rivalries need to be buried, and in particular both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to move beyond the past and adopt a pragmatic and holistic approach to address the key issues and irritants in their strained relationship, with the aim to find pragmatic and plausible solutions which address their concerns and maximises their interests. Subsequently, all principal stakeholders will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other's interests, otherwise any initiative will be an exercise in futility.