

Political reconciliation in Afghanistan: progress, challenges and prospects

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Abstract

Despite certain tentative progress, major challenges persist in reintegration in Afghanistan, which in turn is an integrated element of Afghan political reconciliation comprising "reintegration of reconciles" and "peace talk." What's more, one could hardly be overly optimistic about the peace talk process, since contradicting terms for peace talk and insufficiency of political will stand right in the way. The big asymmetry between reintegration and peace talk, severe disagreements within each side, and the "offensives for peace-talk" mindset are major challenges for a truly meaningful political settlement of Afghan issue.

2011 marked the 10th anniversary of the US-led Afghan war. Despite huge efforts, both sides of the conflict find it extremely difficult to end the war in a decisive victory against the other side. Fed up with the heavy causality and sky-scraping cost of military conflict in a distant and unknown land, war-weariness in the United States is at present at a historical high. Reduction/withdrawal of large-scale US military presence in Afghanistan is therefore imminent. On the other hand, Afghan people have paid a very heavy price and are earnestly expecting an end of the decade-long war in their own homeland. It has therefore become a popular policy preference in Afghanistan to initiate a peace process for terminating the war by means of a meaningful inclusive political reconciliation. It is in this background that Hamid Karzai immediately claimed after his re-election that national reconciliation is of top priority for peacebuilding in Afghanistan, and he will immediately set about dialogues with militant opposition such as Taliban.¹

Afghan peace and reintegration program: an outline

During the London Conference on January 2010, Hamid Karzai made a

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high-profile statement on his Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), which is supposed to:

1. Encourage rank-and-file Taliban members and their mid-level commanders to put an end to violence and join a constructive process of reintegration in order to benefit from the opportunities generated by peace, sustained governance and economic development.
2. Lay a ground for peace dialogue at strategic level with Taliban-led insurgents' leadership.² Put briefly, it is nothing more than reintegration of rebels plus a peace talk program. Four major points could be roughly outlined from APRP.

Firstly, taking the great political efforts to publicize Kabul's sincerity and the credibility of APRP. It is known that 138 Taliban members were included in the sanction list established pursuant to UNSC resolution 1267 (1999). Although sanctions have become more a political symbol than effective blow to Taliban, lifting of sanction is generally regarded as a gesture of goodwill by most political factions in Afghanistan: not only Taliban put this as a preconditions for talk with Kabul, the Peace Jirga convened by Kabul also explicitly asked for removal of the names of Taliban members from the sanction list.³ Kabul did not hesitate in picking up such signals and has made repeated requests to UNSC of lifting sanctions against Taliban officials. Kabul even set up a senior-level working group in charge of offering information to the Committee established pursuant UNSC resolution 1267 (1999) in support of review requests. It is at the repeated request of Kabul that UNSC on July 30, 2010, August 2, 2010, and July 15, 2011, lifted sanctions on 5 (2 are believed to has passed away), 10 and 14 former Taliban officials respectively.⁴ Kabul also took its own initiatives. Hamid Karzai issued a Presidential Decree which asked for review of situation of jailed Taliban-suspects and release those detainees being arrested on unproved accusations. Kabul also tried to revitalize a national consensus in support of political reconciliation. A consultative Peace Jirga was convened in Kabul in summer 2010; another conference of national civil societies convened in March 2011 explicitly lent its support to APRP. The national religious councils in a nationwide gathering of religious scholars also called for all Afghan Muslim's full support to APRP.⁵

Secondly, establishing special institutions working for political reconciliation. Kabul on June 2010 convened a Peace Jirga in the capital city, which was participated by some 1600 representatives comprising members of parliament, provincial governors, members of provincial councils and district representatives, representatives from women societies, civil societies, academic

and cultural institutions, religious circle, ethnic groups and even refugee representatives from Pakistan and Iran. A 16-point statement was passed during the conference, calling for support of reconciliation program and suggesting Kabul in working out specific strategy for reaching a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.⁶

Only one day after the conclusion of Peace Jirga, Hamid Karzai on June 5th signed a Presidential Decree and set up a "Detention Release Committee" to review cases of suspected insurgents detained without evidence or charge. He also issued another presidential Decree on June 29th to officially kick-off the Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration Program, according to which Mr. Massoom Stanekzai, Afghan presidential adviser, was appointed to lead the Joint Secretariat which would be in charge of operating the program. The same decree also established a Financial Oversight Committee led by Afghan Minister of Finance Mr. Omar Zakhilwal as its chairman to operate the Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund, major duty of which is the placement of reintegrees.⁷

Comprising 70 members (including 12 former Taliban officials and 10 females) coming from major regions, ethnic groups, religious societies, and political organizations, the High Peace Council established on September 4 could be considered a major institution designed to offer political and strategic guidance to APRP in general and take confidence building measures and promote domestic peace and national unity in specific. Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the last Afghan President before Taliban's taking over of power in 1996, was appointed Chairman of HPC on October 10, with former Taliban official Abdul Hakim Mujahid, prominent figure from Hizb-i-Islami Mawlawi Attaullah Lodin, and incumbent presidential adviser Asadullah Wafa as its deputy chairmen.⁸ Despite being a consultative agency, High Peace Council has played a very active role in pursuing Afghan political reconciliation: it keeps calling for all sides of conflict to quit violence and engage in political dialogue; it also visited a number of provinces such as Badghis, Khost, Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand as well as major cities such as Kandahar, Khost, and Jalalabad, and discussed with provincial authorities, tribal elders, reintegrees and other stakeholders on political reconciliation. What's more, HPC has made a number of high profile visits to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, etc., in search of international support to APRP.⁹ All in all, despite being a consultative agency without any executive power, High Peace Council's high profile diplomatic manoeuvres did bring about some impacts for political reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Another noticeable progress is the establishment of "Peace and Reintegration Committee" comprising local officials and representatives from civil societies in

27 provinces. Funds were provided to such committees for operationalising their works. For example, Provincial Peace and Reintegration Committees of Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Loghar visited Parwan detention facility to observe the conditions of convicted insurgents there on February 9th, 2011. Peace and Reintegration Committee of Balkh Province also met with local leaders and former insurgent commanders in Balkh and Chahar Bolak districts and urged their support to peace process.¹⁰

Thirdly, offering substantial social and economic incentives in order to encourage Taliban members to quit violence and reintegrate into normal life. The first incentive is 90-day transition food or non-food assistance. Following incentives could be all sorts of social and economic development program for accelerating economic development on the one hand, and generating job opportunities for former insurgents in order to offer long-term guarantee of their livelihood on the other hand. The estimated 500 million USD fund for reintegrating former Taliban members could roughly be secured, as at least 140 million USD has been pledged during the London conference in early 2010.¹¹ The pledged fund further expanded into 234 million USD till March 2011, of which 134 million USD has already been put in place.¹²

Two types of program are being carried out at present by Kabul. First, the Small-sum Grant Projects (SGP), or small-scale projects aimed at facilitating local development. 47 SGPs have been worked out within 2011, and another 13 is under review. The accumulated value of such SGPs has reached 2.2 million USD. Second is the Development and Job Placement Projects, or large-scale programs employing large number of labourers. Two programmes have been approved by Financial Oversight Committee. One is the de-mining program carried out by Halo Trust in Baghlan Province, another one is the Vocational Education Training (VET) program of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD). Having received 0.4 million USD till March 2011, the Halo Program is expecting to offer job opportunities to 228 persons, including 180 reintegrees. The MoLSAMD program will generate job opportunities for around 400 persons.¹³

Fourthly, cultivating support from regional players in general and Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in particular. Having ensured an unanimous support during the London Conference in early 2010 to its initiative of reconciliation with opposition elements who had quit violence, Kabul has never been reluctant in asking for bigger international support to APRP, as was illustrated by the Peace Jirga and High Peace Council's repeated calls for bigger roles of international community in general and UN in specific, as well as HPC's meeting with Special

Representatives of UN Secretary-General for discussing enhancement of the cooperation between them.¹⁴

What's more, Kabul has taken a number of high profile manoeuvres with an aim to appeal for more support from regional players. Hamid Karzai was not reluctant to urge regional countries in support of the peace initiative and request Saudi King to lay a bridge between him and Taliban leadership.¹⁵ High Peace Council deserves special attention in this regard. It visited Pakistan, a major stakeholder for Afghan situation from January 4-8, 2011, during which both sides agreed to establish a joint peace committee for pushing forward the reconciliation process. Following month another visit was paid to Turkey from 22-25 to discuss Afghan reconciliation with regional players.¹⁶ HPC also visited Turkmenistan from May 17-21 and met with its President, foreign minister, chairperson of parliament, and local leaders and discussed cooperation between the two countries.¹⁷ It also actively asked for facilitation from Organization of the Islamic Conference and succeeded in pushing the latter in agreeing to send a representative to Kabul.¹⁸

Reintegration: big insufficiency, despite some progresses

Tentative progress on reintegration process has been made till now. Standard operation procedure is as follows: after the reconcilee expressed his willingness to surrender, a joint delegation comprising representatives from Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, National Directorate for Security, and ISAF will meet with the reconcilee; his bio-data will be recorded, his weapons will be registered and collected; a 90-day food assistance (or non-food equivalent) will be offered. Non-food assistance is said to be very popular, e.g., 30 of the 40 reconcilees in Farah Province preferred non-food assistance. Cash assistance is also used, as was in the case of 19 reconcilees in Sar-e-pul Province who choose to receive 150 USD each . Importantly, many reconcilees requested for job opportunities in general and for joining Afghan National Police or local police in particular. It is noteworthy that some progress has been made during the last 1 or 2 years: 626 former Taliban insurgents announced to quit violence, 71 illegal military organizations have been disbanded and 7929 pieces of weapons had been collected till late 2010. Another 469 reconcilees have been added up to the list in the first quarter of 2011. All in all, there were 1095 reconcilees spreading over 12 provinces in Afghanistan till March 31, 2011, and 513 among whom had received transition assistance (full assistance for 261, partial assistance for 252). The list is further expanded into 1809 reconcilees spreading over 17 provinces till late May, 2011. In addition, an unprecedented happening, the 2 reconciling

incidents in Kandahar, the stronghold of Taliban, is of extraordinary implications.¹⁹

However, huge challenges persist. First, it is hard to confirm the real identities of so-called reconcilees or "surrenderors." It is reported that some "surrenderors" have in fact never been associated with any insurgent groups.²⁰ They are just nothing other than fake insurgents with a purpose to receive the promised transition assistance and other incentives for reconcilees. This undoubtedly constitutes a major challenge to reintegration program, although one could hardly affirm the credible percentage of such "Faked Taliban." Second, Taliban would unlikely sit idly by over defections of its members. In fact, some intimidating actions have already been taken accordingly.²¹ Punitive actions would have further intensified if defections would have boomed. Third, "Trojan horse" tactics as a possibility could never be ruled out in the reintegration process, although no confirmed evidence has been found as yet. Undoubtedly, overt/covert infiltration into Afghan national and local police via faked surrendering could be a nightmare for Kabul and its allies.²² Fourth, insufficient long-term emplacement of surrenderors constitute another big challenge.²³ Project for allocating surrenderors is largely insufficient as a consequence of the tardy economic development in Afghanistan. As a result, reconcilees/surrenderors, to be frank, could hardly secure a somewhat well-off life after the transition period. As a matter of fact, since many reintegrees just surrender for assistance, they are likely to take up arms for the second time once the prospects of their livelihood turned gloomy. Last and most importantly, the overall impacts of the reintegration program could be rightly termed as considerably insufficient, or marginal, considering that 2 thousand or so surrenderors constitute just 6% of the estimated roughly 30 thousand Taliban combatants.²⁴ Defections of "wavering elements" contradictorily is likely to help "purify" Taliban and further enhance rather than weaken its combat effectiveness. Many of the said surrenderors are in fact personnel from other groups, or even faked surrenderors. It is not surprising that provincial governors also expressed their dissatisfaction over the tardy progress of peace and reintegration process.²⁵ In addition, lack of capacity in some implementing partners, and inadequate monitoring capacity, among other issues, also constitute major challenges.²⁶

Peace talk: discouraging realities and bleak prospects

While tentative yet noticeable development has been made on reintegration, peace talk with Taliban leadership, on the other hand, is by no means encouraging.²⁷ Taliban's response to Kabul's peace initiative is, roughly speaking, negative, as was illustrated by Taliban's statement on September 29, 2010 which

labelled the High Peace Council as an instrument in service of foreign interests as well as an "impractical plan to deceive Afghans", and another written statement attributed to Mullah Omar on November 15 which bluntly rejected peace talk initiative and renounced reports of Taliban's engagement with Kabul as pure publicity stunt.²⁸ However, Kabul remains enthusiastic enough about its peace initiative. High Peace Council chairman Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani and Joint Secretariat head Stanikzai have more than once openly claimed that insurgent groups have shown interest in peace talks. Kabul's informal engagement with Taliban, according to Hamid Karzai, has also started.²⁹ However, peace talk terms of each side remain miles away from each other (or in a Chinese phrase: 108 thousand Lis away). Being requested to cede its linkage with Al-Qaeda, renounce violence and abide by the Afghan constitution,³⁰ Taliban in turn asked their adversaries in Kabul (and Washington) to accept complete withdrawal of foreign troops, the return of Shariat (Islamic law), and the restoration of security (in Afghanistan).³¹

It is more than obvious that present positions of the two sides could hardly meet. Kabul could ill-afford a complete withdrawal of foreign troops before Taliban quit violence, because its own military force is largely ineffective to cope with consistent and fierce Taliban offensives, let alone control the situation in Afghanistan.³² To be frank, Afghan situation is likely to be turned into a fatal nightmare for Kabul as a consequence of a sudden and complete withdrawal of ISAF combatants, as was the case of Soviet withdrawal from the same country 32 years ago. What's more, Shariat as Taliban interpreted could hardly be compatible with the working Afghan constitutional framework. To put it straightforwardly, such preconditions could be rightly interpreted as asking for Kabul's all-out surrender, which Kabul would never accept, let alone the consent from Washington. Taliban used to insist in sharing of power. They changed mind later and expressed their disinterest with political power, on the precondition that foreign troops would be completely withdrawn and Shariat would be returned. However, the two points (especially the latter one) are just what Taliban would practice if it could take over political power in Afghanistan. It would no longer need to practice political power if the same objectives could be realized through dialogue instead of military offensives. One could logically conclude that the position of Taliban has remained largely unchanged.

The field situation in the Afghanistan could hardly encourage Taliban into serious peace talks either. Taliban remains active despite repeated large-scale surge of US military presence during the decade-old Afghan war. Washington has recently started its withdrawal schedule, as Barack Obama in June 2011 announced a withdrawal of 10 thousand US troop from Afghanistan within 2011,

followed by another withdrawal of 23 thousand before September 2012. In other words, one third of US troop, or 30 thousand of combating force will be withdrawn from Afghanistan before September, 2012. The withdrawal is said to be completed before the end of 2014.³³ In such a situation, one can hardly affirm whether Taliban are sincere in peace talk or just engaged in stalling tactics, since Taliban at present must be confident enough to believe that time is in their favour.

In all fairness, however, Kabul's 3 point pre-condition is not encouraging either. Taliban would commit suicide if they quit violence while their adversary in Kabul takes control of the Afghan National Army comprising 130-170 thousand combatants, in addition to another 100-130 thousand persons as national police.³⁴ Abiding by the present Afghan Constitution could mean acceptance of the working political framework in general and the present Kabul regime in specific, which is always perceived as an "illegitimate puppet" by Taliban. More importantly, Taliban would never accept a secular Constitution made under western (US in particular) influence, since it would rule out any opportunity of return of Shariat (as interpreted by Taliban). Ceding linkage with Al Qaeda, on the other hand, could be less-challenging, since it will not bring about substantial impact to Taliban's military actions within Afghan boundary. However, there could be potential conflicting points on a number of issues such as how to confirm Taliban's ceding of linkage; who could be in charge of overseeing the process, etc.

In addition, Kabul is evidently not as enthusiastic on peace talk as it has repeatedly publicized, as abundant details show that Kabul is much less earnest in peace talk than in reintegration. Kabul has never worked out any workable/operational specified program of peace talk, apart from laying 3 pre-conditions, although it has repeatedly called for Taliban leadership engaging with peace talk, even resorted to emotional appeals.

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peace talk, even resorted to emotional appeals. In addition, despite a number of institutions (such as High Peace Council, Peace Jirga) have been established, none of them could be expected to bring about any substantial impact to peace talk in Afghanistan till now, as they are mostly consultative agencies with no meaningful executive power. On the other hand, the Financial Oversight Committee, the only institution with substantial power in this regard, has mainly focused itself on reintegration rather than peace talks. An undeniable fact is that there is at present just some vague narratives on how to push forward the peace talks, despite the fact that the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) has laid down specified and operational stipulations on how to attract surrenderors, how to set them down, etc. Another point is that Kabul apparently has no mature considerations on how to make good use of the potential channels provided by regional players, despite the fact that it is working hard for more funding from international community for facilitating reintegration process.

As a major stakeholder, Washington has perhaps the final say over Kabul's any major decision by Kabul on peace talks. Washington used to be pretty cold on peace talks between Kabul and Taliban, as its acquiesced tactics for peace talks could be summarized as "talk while fight, and fight for talk."³⁵ In addition, Washington is also regarded as trying to employ peace talk as a political weapon to demoralize Taliban on the one hand, and to create fissures between Taliban leadership and its rank and file members as well as among its senior leaders on the other hand.³⁶ Washington recently showed enhanced flexibility and openly expressed its support to Afghan-led peace process. It even made direct engagements with Taliban. The US has made three rounds of direct engagements with Taliban, according to information from Hamid Karzai. More importantly, the US seems more willing to turn its long-held terms of ceding ties with Al-Qaeda, quit of violence, acceptance of Afghan Constitution into objectives rather than preconditions of peace talk.³⁷ This is of course one step forward, although it remains extraordinarily hard to realize the three-fold objectives (especially the latter two) by any means including negotiation. The peace talk, if being operationalized, are doomed to be extremely difficult, if not fruitless, taking the tough attitude of Washington, Kabul and the Taliban into consideration.

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Political reconciliation: major challenges

Huge challenges still persist in the Afghan reconciliation process despite certain progress having been made in this regard. Observers, to be frank, could never be overly optimistic about the prospects of the APRP.

Firstly, as integrated elements of political reconciliation, reintegration and peace talk could never take place independently of each other. It is just too obvious at present that the peace talks, as a matter of fact, have lagged much behind reintegration. There is possibly a reasonable explanation for this, since reintegration could be much easier than peace talk: it is always possible to have some defectors from a militant group of tens of thousands of personnel as well as to make attractive arrangement for such defectors. However, it could be extremely difficult to negotiate a peace deal with a political-militant group whose political aim is drastically different, since hard will, courage and marvellous wisdom would be needed to make pragmatic compromises. It is said that 70% of Taliban members just fight for rewards.³⁸ However, the tardy reintegration process and the generally undiminished solidarity of Taliban in the past one or two years would suffice to have evidenced that this is nothing other than misjudgement, despite it having perhaps misled Kabul and Washington into largely focusing on reintegration rather than peace talks. Furthermore, the present progress of reintegration, at its best, is insufficient for it to have substantial implications for the overall Afghan situation, as has been discussed above. One must bear in mind that if political reconciliation were to be realized, peace talk with Taliban leadership is always a must. This is just the biggest challenge at present. It is predictable that without meaningful peace talk, the prospects for political reconciliation will definitely be very gloomy.

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Secondly, prospects for Afghan political reconciliation are full of uncertainty as a consequence of grave disagreement within each side. Civilian groups, political figures and other powerful strongmen from the Kabul side do have strong disagreement with Hamid Karzai's peace initiative. Many in Afghanistan are suspicious about a peace deal at the cost of human rights improvements

(particularly those associated with women). Partly for pacifying women's groups, Hamid Karzai raised women's quota in Peace Jirga from 13% to 20% (or 347 female participants). More importantly, many of the major opposition figures strongly object to political reconciliation with Taliban. Their great influence was displayed in a gathering of some 1500 participants held in Kabul in May 2011.³⁹ Abdullah Abdullah, former Foreign Minister and major candidate in Presidential election 2009, openly opined that the Taliban are "fighting in order to bring the state down. So it's a futile exercise (of initiating peace talk), and it's just misleading."⁴⁰ He also summed up the sentiments heard from many Northern Alliance figures in the wake of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani's assassination that "we shouldn't fool ourselves that this group (Taliban), who has carried out so many crimes against the people of Afghanistan, are willing to make peace."⁴¹

There is grave disagreement among major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance, which has de-facto command of political power in Afghanistan, has deep and long-term hostility with Taliban. It is mainly comprised of personnel from Tajik and Uzbek background, while its Taliban counterpart is largely made up by Pushtuns. It is not surprising that prominent leaders of Northern Alliance are much more reluctant to support peace effort with Taliban. Tajik figure Ahmad Zia Massoud (younger brother of former Northern Alliance military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Vice-President during Hamid Karzai's first presidency), Haraza figure Haji Mohammad Mohaqia and Uzbek strongman Rashid Dostum openly announced a political opposition in June 2011. Negotiations with Taliban, as Masood opined, is "also a main reason we've formed this alliance." He further asked a tough question, "What will the government give up in peace talks?"⁴²

Everyone knows that Afghan territory is largely controlled by local warlords, who are mostly concerned about keeping their fiefs autonomous rather than working under Kabul or any other's control. Since their de-facto autonomy could be hazarded if reconciliation between Kabul and Taliban would have been reached, their attitude to political reconciliation could be rightly termed as, at the best, half-hearted.

Things from Taliban's side are equally discouraging. Despite limited engagements with its adversaries, Taliban always reject formal peace talk with Kabul and stick to their own preconditions. One could logically conclude that anti-peace-talk elements within Taliban are prevailing at present. There is no sign of softening of attitude as yet.

Washington's position lies roughly between Kabul and Taliban. It is not ready to make any meaningful compromise as yet, although it would neither reject a fruitful peace talk in line with its terms. The future direction of US attitude (hardened or softened) largely depends on development on Afghan battlefield rather than on a peace table.

Thirdly, all sides have taken an "offensive for talk" tactics. Afghan security situation keeps worsening as a result of all sides' simultaneous attempts to make peace talk from a position of strength. Kabul, Washington and Taliban all engage themselves in a double-game of peace talk on the one hand, and military-cum-political offensives on the other hand. US troops as the major combating force against Taliban has never de-intensified its military campaigns, although the US has announced a timetable for withdrawal. 30 thousand US troops had been sent to Afghanistan before a renewed round of large-scale offensives: such as those in Herat and Farah in the second half of 2009, and military actions in Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar provinces in East Afghanistan. It gathered another 15 thousand troops in February 2010, in order to make a big offensive against Marjah in Helmand of South Afghanistan.⁴³ Another offensive against Kandahar was under planning at the same year. Within a short duration of 1 year, military campaigns have been made across the whole territory of Afghanistan, covering its eastern, western, and southern parts.

Kabul also made its own actions in support of the US military offensives. Political campaigns were undertaken in order to recruit defectors and demoralized Taliban. Kabul has engaged in a double-game in calling for peace talk on the one hand and expanding its military force in large-scale on the other hand. The Afghan National Army, as scheduled, will be expanded from 100 thousand combatants into 134 thousand in October 2010, and 171.6 thousand in October of the next year. The Afghan National Police, moreover, is scheduled to be expanded from 94.8 thousand into 109 thousand in October 2010, and 134 thousand exactly one year later.⁴⁴ In another words, Afghan security force will make 50% growth of its man-power and will be expanded into a roughly 300 thousand troop in less than 2 years. It might be a logical observation that only strength other than anything else could be rightly termed as the starting point of Kabul's peace initiative.

The same tactics employed by Taliban resulted into a casualty of 711 ISAS soldiers in 2010.⁴⁵ Security situation in 2011 did not improve either. In addition to the Taliban's Spring offensive in May 2011, Provincial Governor's Office and Municipal Mayor's Office as well as the Intelligence Agency located within Kandahar city were bluntly attacked in the same year. More importantly, a

number of major political figures were assassinated: Ahmed Wali Karzai, chairman of Kandahar Provincial Council and younger half-brother of Hamid Karzai, was killed in July 2011; Governor of Helmand and Chief of Provincial Intelligence Agency just escaped by the skin of his teeth en route to Ahmed Wali Karzai's funeral; Jan Muhammad Khan, senior adviser to Hamid Karzai and former Governor of Uruzgan, was assassinated later; Vice Provincial Governor, Head of Provincial Police, Municipal Mayor and two Deputy Mayors of Kandahar were successively added to the list of victims.⁴⁶ The assassination of High Peace Council Chairman Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani on September 20 was perhaps the biggest achievement Taliban made in 2011.⁴⁷

Suffice to say that "offensive for talk" mindset in Washington, Kabul or Taliban would intensify rather than alleviate the field situation in Afghanistan.

Political reconciliation: prospects

All in all, the prospects for political reconciliation in Afghanistan are largely unpromising, despite some progresses having been made. Political reconciliation would die out if military means could succeed in settling the Afghan issue, no matter who wins the game. However, this is an unlikely scenario. The prevailing side, if conflict intensified, will definitely bargain for a much higher price. However, since the present price offer made by each side is too high to be accepted as perceived by the other side, higher price would of course hardly be accepted unless it is made by someone in an overwhelmingly advantageous position. Another possibility is that both sides fall in a deadlock where each side expects a breakthrough by a coup de grace. This is just the prevailing situation right now. To be frank, this could be counterproductive for serious effort in political reconciliation, since ad hocism is encouraged hereof.

However, prospects for a political settlement of Afghan conflict could be more promising if all sides understands that the present deadlock is by no means an accident and military means could hardly make big breakthrough. Serious

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political attitude and pragmatic compromise need to be taken for making substantial progress and possibly, breakthroughs. The first step toward serious peace talk should be a pragmatically flexible handling of positions in turning preconditions into objectives to be realized, and thereby lay a groundwork for further substantial peace talk. In such a situation, all sides could make comprehensive calculations of specific demands of the other side, and try everything to find a most acceptable meeting point. As mentioned above, "restoration of security" and "ceding of linkage with Al-Qaeda" could be comparatively manageable. As to the conflicting demands of "complete and immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops" and "quit violence," one would have to acknowledge that it is unrealistic and much unlikely to have unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, nor for Taliban to demilitarize itself at present. However, the US and its allies have started gradual and conditional withdrawal/reduction of their troops. If Taliban could in turn bring down their expectations in a pragmatic way and made positive response to such a latest development, and reduce its insurgent offensives as well as try to reach a transient ceasefire agreement with their adversary, the reconciliation process could thereby make a substantial step forward. Washington and Kabul also need to downgrade their expectations and accept as an undeniable fact that Taliban could hardly be forced into a comprehensive and immediate ceasefire. It would be advisable for Washington and Kabul to encourage Taliban into reduction of violent offensives as the first step forward. A transient ceasefire agreement, overt or covert, for further de-intensification of the situation should be taken into serious consideration, if situation permits.

However, the most difficult challenge could be "to abide by Afghan Constitution" and "the return of Shariat," a pair of conflicting demands determining the future framework of Afghan politics and being directly interlinked with political position and prospects of each side. Kabul would hardly quit its mostly secular and modernization-oriented Constitution, as it is of vital importance for its own survival. Taliban in turn could ill-afford quitting the "return of Shariat," a "divine" objective they have struggled for years, because this could be a price unbearable for them considering the possible loss of popularity among conservative forces, and the nightmare scenario of disbandment. However, there could be some possible ways out in this regard, despite seemingly a mission impossible. Since secularization and modernization (interpreted in a proper way) is undoubtedly the future direction of Afghanistan, the present progress in this regard, although there is a big defect, should be generally cherished. However, modernization in any country need to be seen from the specific situation in its own territory, and must be in accordance with the development of modernity as well as the acceptance of its people. The history

of Afghanistan has repeatedly proved that any abstract modal for modernization disassociating with the specific circumstance would hardly succeed, let alone the likely severe rebound. It would be advisable for Washington and Kabul to make sincere answers to the demands of traditional political forces (such as Afghan citizens) and to make proper arrangements for 'Shariat' in the working Afghan constitutional framework. Such a two-step-forward-and-one-step-backward tactics would probably bring about more sustainable despite slower progress of modernization. In addition, a more balanced political framework could be more productive for regional security. Regional players such as Russia and Iran have grave concerns over Kabul's strong linkage with the West (US in particular), while their ties with Taliban is by no means pleasant. One must bear in mind that it is unrealistic to rule out the political influence of any on Kabul and Taliban. A workable compromise could be reached with a mixture of traditional and modernization forces exercising joint command of political power on the one hand, and checking each other on the other hand. Conservative forces will strongly oppose any foreign military presence in general and US permanent military presence in particular in Afghanistan, while modernization forces could in turn effectively check the conservative forces and stop it from externalization, and thereby stop it from transforming Afghanistan into a breeding bed for regional extremism for the second time.

It would be advisable for Washington and Kabul to make sincere answers to the demands of traditional political forces (such as Afghan citizens) and to make proper arrangements for 'Shariat' in the working Afghan constitutional framework. Such a two-step-forward-and-one-step-backward tactics would probably bring about more sustainable despite slower progress of modernization.

Field situation in Afghanistan could be much intensified, if no tangible progress is made on political reconciliation in the next two or three years. Bargaining space would shrink and peace talk would be much more difficult, since Kabul would have fact-to-face clash with Taliban as security responsibility would have been shifted to Kabul at that time. Taliban might ask for a much higher price or even quit peace talk, if field situation on the Afghan battlefield is in favour of Taliban rather than Afghan National Army. The US army, of course, could reassume security responsibility in turn and slow down the withdrawal of its troop and intensify its anti-insurgency operation accordingly. This will in turn stimulate Taliban's resistance to peace talk. All in all, the next two or three years

will be of determining significance for political reconciliation in Afghanistan, and deserves special attention from all stakeholders. The battlefield will bring about a significant, if not determining, impact to the possible peace talk. One could never be overly optimistic while acknowledging the possibility of fruitful political reconciliation.

Notes & References

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