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Issue Brief

PEACE PROCESS IN AFGHANISTAN

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While the challenges faced by the national unity government headed by President Ashraf Ghani are manifold and daunting, achieving national reconciliation, and establishing peace within the Afghan state are the most difficult. The future stability of Afghanistan primarily depends on the reconciliation process with the Taliban and its success. Since its formation in September 2014, the political set up in Kabul has made overtures to the Taliban and has been exploring several official and unofficial avenues to initiate talks with the group. However, the Taliban have been less forthcoming. The group has agreed to some degree of engagement but has so far refused to hold meaningful talks and continues to wage its insurgency. Consistently sticking to their principle demand that negotiations will only take place once all foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and that changes are made to the constitution.

Efforts, dating back to as early as 2001 have been made to reach out to the group. During former President Hamid Karzai's protracted tenure, efforts were made to establish talks with the Taliban and achieve reconciliation through an amnesty programme. However, despite having been in office for two consecutive terms, President Karzai was unable to make a breakthrough with the Taliban. The dual policy of the Karzai Government in pursuing negotiations amidst military operations against the Taliban, which resulted in major losses for the group, failed to convince the Taliban to accept peace talks. The endeavours only led to the reconciliation of Taliban fighters or foot soldiers and a handful of Taliban officials at best. Efforts to establish peace with the group at large failed.

Although it has taken policy makers in Afghanistan and the international community more than 13 years of violence, instability and bloodshed to realize that peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue. It is a welcoming change that establishing talks with the Afghan Taliban is a key priority of the national unity government. In this regard, President Ashraf Ghani has advocated for and asked the Taliban to join an 'inter-Afghan dialogue'¹. During his inaugural address, on September 29, 2014, President Ashraf Ghani reached out to the Taliban as well as Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami 'to enter into talks' with the government.² In fact, it is believed that during his presidential campaign, aides of Ashraf Ghani were already reaching out to the group.³ Hence, learning from the mistakes of the previous government, President Ashraf Ghani has put his political career on the line by attempting to do what the former President Karzai could not; put an end to the conflict in Afghanistan by establishing peace with the Taliban. To this end, President Ghani has been pursuing efforts domestically, and at the same time has also sought assistance from the international community and Afghanistan's neighbours.⁴ Domestically, President Ghani has been instrumental in seeking national consensus and support for the peace process by reaching out to

different sections of the society including ethnic, political factions, and civil society groups independently as well as through the High Peace Council.⁵ On the international front, President Ghani has reached out to the international community, and in particular Pakistan, China and the Arab world for support in establishing talks with the group.

Aware of Pakistan's key role, President Ghani has made improving ties with Pakistan another major priority of his government, expressing that "partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan's foreign policy." Also despite opposition from within Afghanistan, Ghani has solicited Pakistan to exercise efforts to facilitate talks with the Afghan Taliban.⁶ Similarly, the government in Pakistan looks upon the Ghani government favourably. Hence relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have witnessed a marked improvement not only in the political arena, but military to military and intelligence ties have also undergone a 'qualitative transformation'⁷

Under the current civilian and military leadership, Pakistan's Afghan policy is now governed by "a peaceful, stable and united Afghanistan which is in Pakistan's vital interest."⁸ There has been a growing sense of realisation and acceptance amongst policy makers in Pakistan that "Pakistan's future has high stakes in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan"⁹ In this regard, Pakistan's government is determined to improve its ties with Afghanistan and has resolutely supported an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace and reconciliation process. Pakistan has also publicly and in private conveyed to the Taliban to sort out their differences,¹⁰ abandon their spring offensive and accept the government's offer of dialogue.¹¹ However, the Taliban have been less forthcoming and have shown little response. An escalation in violence and bloodshed due to the Taliban spring offensive and no response from the group has prompted a change in Pakistan's position towards the group. Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, has 'strongly condemned the surge in attacks' by the Afghan Taliban', as "an act of terrorism". He added that "any effort by any militant or group to destabilise Afghanistan will be dealt with severely and such elements will be outlawed and hunted down."¹² This unprecedented change clearly indicates Pakistan's sincerity and commitment towards the peace process and future of Afghanistan.

While Afghanistan has welcomed Pakistan's efforts in 'paving the ground for peace and reconciliation."¹³ Afghan expectations from Pakistan vis-a-vis the Afghan Taliban need to be based on ground realities and conceivable expectations. Afghan authorities need to realize that Pakistan can only do so much. Those within Afghanistan that continue to doubt Pakistan's sincerity and have unrealistic expectations from Pakistan must realize that there are deep divisions and divergences within the Taliban group. Initiating talks with the group is one thing, which has been done in the past, but convincing the Taliban and

accommodating them in the political process is solely an internal matter and lies in the hands of the Afghans alone. Hence pinning the responsibility of success or failure of peace talks on Pakistan is unrealistic and is not grounded in reality. And while the peace process is an important factor in improving Pak-Afghan ties, it should not be the sole factor. The outcome of the peace talks should not govern and determine Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan.

However, despite the hurdles, mistrust, accusations and unrealistic expectations from Pakistan, the Afghan and Pakistan leadership seem to be enjoying some level of confidence regarding the peace process and appear to be on the same page as both sides have acknowledged that "Afghanistan and Pakistan have overcome obstacles of 13 years,"¹⁴ And if they continue on this path, it is hoped that a breakthrough might just be possible with the Taliban. However for this both sides will have to demonstrate a great amount of patience and resolve.

Despite the Taliban's ongoing insurgency, recent efforts to reach out to the Taliban by the Ghani government have gained traction as there appears to be a noticeable shift in the group's approach towards talks. The group has shown flexibility and has indicated its willingness to open talks with the government, generating a fair amount of optimism. This was witnessed in the recently held unofficial talks, termed as 'intra-Afghan research conference' by the Taliban, and scientific discussions' by Afghan officials, between representatives of the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government, hosted by the government of Qatar and the Pugwash Council, a global conflict resolution group, in May 2015. The Taliban participants included Mr. Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai, Mr. Maulawi Jan Muhammad Madani, Mr. Maulawi Sayed Rasoul Haleem, Mr. Maulawi Shahabuddin Delawar, Mr. Qari Deen Muhammad Haneef, Mr. Maulawi Abdul Salam Haneefi, Mr. Sohail Shaheen and Mr. Hafiz Aziz Rahm.¹⁵ While the Taliban clarified on their website that 'participation by members from the Political Office of Islamic Emirate should not be misconstrued as peace or negotiation talks.' Either way, the fact that members of the Taliban attended and openly talked to representatives of the Afghan government, including President Ghani's uncle as well as female representatives of the government is a breakthrough in itself and has certainly raised hopes.

While the talks did not lead to a concrete outcome, the Taliban spoke openly and exchanged views. For the first time, the Taliban acknowledged the need and expressed their inclination for an 'intra-Afghan dialogue' and said that they would support such efforts.¹⁶ The group also called for certain preconditions such as the removal of the names of important Taliban members from the U.N. terrorism blacklist, release of Taliban prisoners, and the need for the group to have a political office.¹⁷ The group also

expressed certain degrees of flexibility on issues pertaining to the structure of the political system in Afghanistan and education for both men and women. A statement issued by the Pugwash Council stated that there was also a convergence amongst all the delegates that the Taliban should 're-open its political office in Doha'.¹⁸ A fair degree of progress has been made on reaching out to the Taliban through the Pugwash initiative, whereby the group seems to demonstrate a shift in policy and expressed confidence in the process. While hope and optimism has been generated, sharp differences over the presence of foreign forces, structure of the Afghan constitution and continuation of the Taliban's recently launched spring offensive, continue to pose serious hurdles and undermine efforts. More importantly, lack of a clear indication by the Taliban on a possible ceasefire continues to cast a shadow over the future of peace talks.

It is important to note that recently China with the help of Pakistan, facilitated talks between representatives of the Afghan government, headed by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai with former Taliban officials, including Mullah Jalil, former foreign minister; Mullah Abdul Razaq, former interior minister; and Mullah Hassan Rahmani, former governor of Kandahar Province, in Urumqi from May 21-22, 2015.¹⁹ However, the Taliban termed the talks as rumours, and stated that members of the group had not held talks with 'representatives of the fake Afghan peace council'²⁰ and those that did take part were not Afghan Taliban officials²¹. This highlights the stark complexities involved in the reconciliation process, as well as divisions and reluctance on the part of certain factions within the group to hold talks.

So while the Taliban have not given an indication of a ceasefire, and continue to justify their insurgency and ongoing spring offensive as a 'means to liberate Afghanistan and establish an Islamic emirate free of foreign control',²² it is yet to be seen whether the group will be able to sort out internal differences and divisions, and consolidate. Furthermore, now that the responsibility of national security lies with the Afghan National Security Forces, with majority of foreign forces out of the country, it remains to be established whether the Taliban will be able to rationalize and uphold their armed struggle against the Afghan state. However, the current Afghan leadership continues to express optimism that "Afghanistan is close to achieving peace".²³ President Ghani is also expected to travel to Qatar in the weeks to come in continuing efforts to pave the way for peace talks. However, it still remains to be seen whether the government will be able to make a breakthrough with the Taliban and engage the group in constructive talks that can lead to a peaceful settlement.

Everybody recognizes that the Taliban are a formidable militant force. The Afghan government is trying to engage the Taliban through their presumed political persona. This exercise is proving quite frustrating, because the Taliban are not responding politically in full measure, and continue to pursue their armed operation. Despite this obstacle, it is imperative for the Afghan government and its supporters like the US, Pakistan and China to persuade the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, because it is evident that peace and stability in Afghanistan will not be delivered on the battlefield. The Afghan government and its allies should continue to invest their full political capital to bring the Afghan Taliban around for negotiations.

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