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Issue Brief

The Future of Afghan Government and Taliban talks

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Despite the surge in violence as a part of the Taliban's ongoing insurgency and stern opposition to talks, efforts to reach out to the Taliban by the Ghani government and Pakistan gained traction and materialized in a meeting between representatives of the Afghan Government with Afghan Taliban representatives, in what is known as the "2+1+2 or the Murree Peace Process" which took place in Murree from July 7 - 8, 2015.¹ The interaction, which marked the 'first officially acknowledged' round of talks between Afghan government representatives, included Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Haji Din Mohammad, Mohammad Asem, members from the High Peace Council as well as advisors to the government of national unity.² The Afghan Taliban were represented by Mullah Abbas Akhund, former Taliban health minister 1996 to 2001, Maulvi Jalil, former Taliban deputy foreign minister, Mullah Hasan and Qari Din Muhammad.³ More importantly the participation of Ibrahim Haqqani, Jalaluddin Haqqani's younger brother, gave the meeting credence and highlighted the Haqqani network's willingness for pursuing talks. The talks, facilitated by Pakistan, and supported and attended by the Chinese and US officials who took part as "observers" are believed to be a result of the talks held in Urumqi in May, 2015.⁴

During the officially recognised peace talks, which were considered a success both sides, expressed their desire for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan and underlined the need to develop confidence building measures among all stakeholders. The Taliban also agreed to a tentative cease fire "if Pakistan and China guaranteed that a united national government would be formed in Afghanistan".⁵ It was also reported that although the Taliban demanded the inclusion of its first-tier leadership in the government, Afghan government officials agreed to include their third-tier leadership.⁶ The talks were welcomed by Afghan authorities, the US, China, and the international community at large. Afghan authorities expressed hope that "the process would end bloodshed and ensure durable peace in Afghanistan," and appreciated efforts on the part of Pakistan for facilitating the talks.⁷ Subsequently, officials from China and Pakistan expressed their willingness to play a proactive role and agreed to become 'guarantors' of a possible peace deal between the two sides.⁸ Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif termed the talks as a "breakthrough" and expressed that "the talks were overt, not covert" and that "all measures were being taken to ensure that nobody tries to derail this process." The talks concluded with both sides wanting to resume talks. Subsequently, Mullah Omar's purportedly annual Eid message endorsed the talks as "legitimate," if they can help end "U.S.-led foreign occupation of Afghanistan and establish an Islamic system in Afghanistan."⁹

Hence while the talks ended with immense optimism, the sudden news of Mullah Omar's death which was disclosed and confirmed by Afghan authorities in late July 2015, just before the second round of talks scheduled for July 31, 2015 led to the suspension of talks and cast a shadow on the future prospects of peace talks. This was immediately followed by a surge in violence in Kabul in which more than 50 people were killed which further complicated matters between Pakistan and Afghanistan. While a fair degree of progress had been made in reaching out to the Taliban, particularly after the Murree talks, and while relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan had also witnessed a marked improvement, both were short lived as Afghan authorities reverted to the blame game, accusing Pakistan of being complicit in the recent wave of attacks and of not doing enough to control the Haqqani Network allegedly operating from its soil. Unfortunately, President Ashraf Ghani wasted no time in blaming Pakistan for sending "messages of war", that the "attacks in Kabul were designed and planned by terrorists based in Pakistan, and carried out by mercenaries from bomb-making factories and training camps."¹⁰

Ever since President Ghani came into power, he had been urging Pakistan to make efforts to facilitate talks with the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan, on the other hand had initially limited its role to supporting the peace process and insisted on an 'Afghan led and Afghan owned' peace process. However, in response to persistent Afghan requests along with the increase in violence due to the Taliban's spring offensive prompted a change in Pakistan's position to facilitating talks and bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Publicly and in private, Pakistan has spared no effort in conveying to the Taliban to settle their differences, halt their offensive and enter into a dialogue with the Afghan government. Hence, persistent efforts by Pakistan finally culminated in the 'first officially acknowledged' round of talks between Afghan government and Taliban representatives in 14 years. Yet during a press conference in August,, President Ghani angrily said that "he no longer wanted Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the table, but instead wanted it to aggressively attack the group's sanctuaries in Pakistani territory". Despite pushing Pakistan to broker a peace process with the Taliban, he said "he now wanted the process to be entirely controlled by the Afghan government".¹¹ Despite President Ghani's outburst, Pakistan has displayed immense maturity and has consistently tried to restore relations as well as revive peace talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan's civil and military leadership is determined to improve and maintain its ties with Afghanistan and is committed to the peace and reconciliation process. In this regard, Adviser to the Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz paid a visit to Kabul to attend a regional conference but more importantly also met with President Ashraf Ghani and other

Afghan officials in an effort to ease tensions and convince the Afghan government to resume talks with the Taliban. However it is believed that the Afghan Government were less forthcoming on both issues.

The civil and military leadership in Pakistan continue to exercise efforts for the resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. However, Pakistan has its limitations and can only do so much. Pakistan did what the Afghan's had asked – they brought the Taliban to the negotiating table. Talking to the Taliban and finding a plausible solution to the conflict in Afghanistan is an Afghan prerogative and responsibility. Therefore, instead of blaming Pakistan for the unrest and violence in Afghanistan and making Pakistan responsible for success or failure of the peace talks with the Afghan Taliban is unrealistic. Besides, it is further leading to the deterioration of ties. It is time for the Afghan leadership to take ownership of the issues. The Afghan government needs to move beyond the blame game, and try and make some headway with the Taliban before it is too late. To begin with, President Ghani, who still appears to be committed to the peace process and improving relations with Pakistan, must try to convince and win the support of those elements within and outside his administration towards the peace process and towards improving ties with Pakistan. The Pakistani government is determined to do all it can to facilitate peace efforts in Afghanistan, and has been using “whatever influence it had” with the Afghan Taliban to “persuade them to engage with Kabul”¹² but at the end of the day it is up to Afghan authorities to decide how and when to proceed with a peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban. In fact, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif, used his Defence Day speech to reach out to the Ghani administration with his call to “revitalize the goodwill generated with the Afghan leadership” and hoped that “forces inimical to reconciliation would remain unsuccessful”.¹³

Another key factor that has led to the disruption of talks is the leadership struggle and divided opinion within the Taliban over the newly announced leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor. Despite opposition and difference of opinion within the Taliban, on July 31, 2015 the Taliban posted a declaration of the Leading Council of the Islamic Emirate regarding the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor as the new leader of the Islamic Emirate.¹⁴

Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada, and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani, were appointed as the deputy heads of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.¹⁵ Initially, Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqoob and his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan had refused to accept Mullah Akhtar Mansoor's appointment. But now both Yaqoob and Manan have publicly declared their allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansoor.¹⁶

With the continuation of the Taliban's insurgency, infighting, divisions within the Taliban over Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, coupled with divisions and reluctance within the National Unity Government over its ties with Pakistan and talks with the Taliban, it remains to be seen whether peace talks can evolve and make some headway. One will also have to wait and see whether the Taliban can overcome their differences and consolidate their position under Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor and develop a collective negotiating stance. Similarly, only time will tell whether President Ghani, will be able to galvanize support from forces opposed to the peace process and improving relations with Pakistan.

In such a fluid situation, unless some middle ground is found, a peace settlement between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government remains elusive and while the talks are certainly not a substitute for peace and reconciliation, a process has been initiated. How successful that process will be is anybody's guess. In this regard, the key factor is to continue the process of constantly engaging with the Taliban and sustaining all efforts made in this regard. Only through dialogue and engagement will both sides be able to remove their doubts and misunderstanding. Dialogue is the only way to end the turmoil in Afghanistan, and while the process is complex, long and frustrating, all principal actors involved, such as the Afghan government, the Taliban and other Afghan political factions will have to demonstrate patience and maturity if they really want to put an end to the conflict. Despite the setbacks, as long as Afghanistan and Pakistan remain committed, a tentative peace process can be revived.

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