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Issue Brief

Afghanistan: Implications of the decisions of the Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference

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The recently held 'Heart of Asia' ministerial conference, held in Islamabad on December 9, 2015, has been a welcoming development. President Ghani's visit to Pakistan has not only led to the resumption of ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan which had been strained since July 2015, but also, hopefully, to the resumption of the dialogue for peace and reconciliation process between the Afghan Government and Afghan Taliban.¹

President Ghani held meetings with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as well as Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif. During both interactions, President Ghani was assured of Pakistan's full support for peace and stability in Afghanistan.² Meetings were also held between Pakistan, Afghanistan, United States and China regarding a possible time frame for the resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. The US and Chinese officials have been using their influence with Pakistan and Afghanistan for the resumption of ties as well as peace talks. These efforts seem to have paid off.

Upon his return to Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani voiced optimism that "serious peace talks with the Afghan Taliban were expected in the coming weeks which would produce desired results."³

However Ghani's outreach to Pakistan and his decision to resume peace talks with the Taliban have not gone down too well with certain sections within his administration who have vehemently opposed improving ties with Pakistan as well as talking to the Taliban. The National Directorate of Security (NDS), has always been wary of Pakistan's role. It has persistently blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban insurgency and hence has strongly opposed President Ghani's efforts to improve ties with Pakistan. On December 10, Rahmatullah Nabil resigned from his post as director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) due to differences with President Ghani over his decision to attend the ministerial conference in Pakistan as well as Pakistan's role in the reconciliation process. In fact it is widely believed that Rahmatullah Nabil was a stern opponent of the ISI-NDS intelligence-sharing deal which he refused to sign, and was subsequently signed by a deputy director general at the NDS. However, despite facing immense domestic pressure, opposition and criticism, for his outreach and positive overtures towards Pakistan, President Ghani defended his decision to not only resume relations with Pakistan but include Pakistan in the peace process. He said "boosting trust among the two nations for combating terrorism is a key element to end the undeclared war between Afghanistan and Pakistan,"⁴ and that "Pakistan's cooperation was key to the peace process."⁵ Similarly, there is a strong opposition towards initiating peace with the Taliban with many members within the Ghani administration unwilling to include the

Taliban in the political process, let alone share power with the group. Hence political and national reconciliation continues to be major a hurdle in pursuing peace talks with the Taliban.

While optimism has been generated from the recent Heart of Asia conference, the continuation of the Taliban's offensive, sharp differences over the newly appointed leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, leadership struggle, infighting, presence of foreign forces, and differences on the structure of the Afghan constitution still shadow the process. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether peace talks can evolve and make some headway. An important factor that will determine the future course of talks is whether the Taliban can overcome their differences, stop the infighting and consolidate under Mullah Akhtar Mansoor and adopt a united negotiating stance. Although the presence and influence of the Islamic State or Daesh is limited compared to that of the Taliban, many fighters and members from the Taliban including commanders such as Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mawalwi Najib, Syed Emarati and Mawlawi Qahar have deflected to the IS, which poses a grave 'strategic threat to the very survival of the future of the group in Afghanistan.'⁶ . In fact it is believed that the group has initiated a "recruitment commission" to reach out to those members who have defected to the IS in an attempt to win them back.⁷

Subsequently, those members who are opposed to talks are believed to be more susceptible /inclined to join the IS. Hence, increasing divisions will not only undermine the Taliban's presence and influence but could also result in a possible vacuum for the IS to fill. The Taliban know that in order to capture any means of political power they cannot operate in isolation and therefore they will have to eventually reach a political compromise with the government. Therefore, President Ghani must waste no time in galvanizing and winning domestic support, particularly from within his government and devise a viable national reintegration programme for talks to be a success with the Afghan Taliban.

Hence, in such a situation, unless some middle way is found, a peace settlement between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government remains elusive. While the talks themselves are certainly no substitute for complete peace and reconciliation, a dialogue process needs to be initiated.

How successful the process will be is still not clear. The key factor is to continue the process of constantly engaging with the Taliban, sustaining all efforts made in this regard and not giving in to spoilers. Subsequently, both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to be engaged in a continued dialogue and not indulge in the blame game. Only through dialogue and engagement will both sides be able to remove their doubts and misunderstandings. Dialogue is the only way to end the turmoil in Afghanistan,

and while the process is complex, long and frustrating, all principal actors, such as the Afghan government, the Taliban, Afghan political factions, Pakistan and the international community will have to demonstrate patience and maturity if they really want to put an end to the conflict. Despite the setbacks, as long as all parties remain committed, the peace process can be revived and made productive.

Notes and References:

- ¹ Tahir Khan "Ghani returns hopeful after Heart of Asia," *The Express Tribune*, December 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1008460/ghani-returns-hopeful-after-heart-of-asia/>
- ² "Army chief assures Ashraf Ghani support for peace in Afghanistan," *The Express Tribune*, December 9, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1006920/army-chief-assures-ashraf-ghani-support-for-peace-in-afghanistan/>
- ³ Tahir Khan "Ghani returns hopeful after Heart of Asia," *The Express Tribune*, December 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1008460/ghani-returns-hopeful-after-heart-of-asia/>
- ⁴ Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks," *Tolo News*, 11 December 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>
- ⁵ Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks," *Tolo News*, 11 December 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Abdul Basit, Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban's IS predicament," *Express Tribune*, May 12, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/884582/al-qaeda-and-the-afghan-talibans-is-predicament/>