

Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The National Unity Government (NUG) has expressed positive overtures towards Taliban and has been exploring and pursuing several avenues to initiate talks with the group. The Taliban while consistently refusing to hold talks, have demanded withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and amendments in the constitution. Achieving national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Afghan Taliban is the central challenge, among others, for the government. Moreover, the ongoing Taliban's offensive, Mullah Omer's death and divided opinion within Taliban over Mullah Mansoor as the new leader has underlined stark complexities in the process. The reluctance on the part of certain factions within the group to hold talks is making the possibility of the talks bleak. However, with the developments such as the Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), it still remains to be seen whether the Afghan Government will be able to make a breakthrough with the group and engage them in constructive talk. This paper focuses on the current overtures initiated by the NUG to initiate and establish peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. It also looks at previous efforts and whether, in the light of changing dynamics, a breakthrough can be achieved with the Taliban to put an end to the conflict. The paper also examines the role of Pakistan and China in the ongoing peace process in the region.

Keywords: Afghan Taliban, Insurgency, Peace Process, Afghan High Peace Council, Government of National Unity, Regional Peace and Stability.

Introduction

The challenges faced by the National Unity Government (NUG) headed by President Ashraf Ghani are manifold and daunting. Achieving

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national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Afghan Taliban are the most fundamental yet the most arduous tasks. Therefore, the future stability of Afghanistan primarily depends on the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban and its success.

During former President Hamid Karzai's protracted tenure, efforts were made to establish talks with the Afghan Taliban to achieve reconciliation. However, despite having been in office for two consecutive terms, Karzai's government was unable to make a breakthrough with the Taliban. The dual policy of pursuing negotiations amidst military operations, which resulted in major losses for the Taliban but could not convince the group to accept the peace talks. The endeavours only led to the reconciliation of the Taliban foot soldiers and a handful of Taliban members at best. The efforts to establish peace with the group at large failed.

After the formation of the NUG in September 2014, there were high expectations that a change in leadership would also imply a major change in the country's domestic and foreign policies, particularly the country's policy towards the Taliban.

Past Attempts at Initiating Peace Talks

The efforts dating back to over a decade have been made to establish dialogue with the Afghan Taliban. In 2001, Hamid Karzai as head of the interim government, declared a general amnesty for ordinary Taliban fighters.¹ In 2002, the then Chief Justice of Afghanistan, Maulvi Fazal Hadi Shinwari extended amnesty to Afghans and religious leaders who cooperated with the Taliban except those who were accused of murder or treason.² Despite stern opposition from different political and ethnic factions, amnesty was once again offered to all the Taliban fighters, from

¹Sayed Salahuddin, "Omar Vanishes as Victors Squabble Over Kandahar," *Reuters*, December 8, 2001,

<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2001/december/dec8b2001.html>.

²"Afghanistan Country Assessment," *Country Information & Policy Unit Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Home Office, United Kingdom*, October 2002, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3df4aad22.pdf>

2003 to 2004, who renounced terrorism, dissociated themselves from al-Qaeda and laid down their arms.³

Initially the programme did not succeed in convincing the Taliban members to lay down their arms and reconcile with the government.⁴ In 2005, the government achieved limited success and was able to reach out to seven hundred Taliban fighters⁵ but could not make a breakthrough with the senior Taliban members. The government continued with its efforts publically as well as through backchannels to reach out to the Taliban. As a result, in February 2005, the government managed to hold a meeting with a group of the former Taliban members, including Abdul Hakim Mujahid, Taliban's envoy to the UN, Arsullah Rahmani, former Deputy Higher Education Minister, Rahmatullah Wahidyar, former Deputy Minister of Refugees, and Habibullah Fawzi, former Chargé d' Affaires at the Afghan Embassy in Saudi Arabia.⁶ Sadly, nothing concrete emerged from the talks since the group did not represent the Taliban as a whole but the Khudam-ul Furqan (Servants of the Koran), a group that was established after overthrow of the Taliban in 2001.⁷

Initially the 'reconcilable' were limited to ordinary Taliban fighters, however, over the years the senior Taliban members have also reconciled with the government.⁸ In fact, some of them have been included in the political process, elected to the Afghan Parliament and Senate. Others have been made governors, for example, Abdul Hakim Munib, the former Governor of Uruzgan province, Khial Mohammad Husseini,

³"US offers olive branch to Taleban," *BBC News*, December 2, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4062191.stm

⁴Halima Kazem, "Amnesty Offers Taliban Chance to Come Home," *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jun/03/world/fg-amnesty3>.

⁵Amin Tarzi, "Afghanistan: Who exactly is the enemy?" *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, November 23, 2005, <http://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-who-exactly-enemy>

⁶"Former Taliban say talks with government successful," *Reuters*, February 21, 2005, <http://e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/allPrintDocs/30FAF851F0EEEB8A87256FAF00410266?OpenDocument>

⁷Ibid.

⁸Carlotta Gall, "Surrendered Chieftain Urges Taliban to Accept Amnesty," *New York Times*, June 2, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/02/international/asia/02amnesty.html>

former Governor of Zabul and member of the Wolesi Jirga and Naim Kuchi, member of the Meshrano Jirga.⁹ It is pertinent to point out that most of these Taliban have no influence over the group that is fighting on the ground.

Despite limited success, the government continued its efforts to reach out to the Taliban. In April 2007, President Hamid Karzai disclosed that his government had established contacts with high level members of the Taliban.¹⁰ President Karzai, on September 9, 2007, renewed a call for the talks with the Taliban offering positions in the government to those willing to put down their weapons¹¹ however, he ruled out talks with al-Qaeda and other foreign insurgents.¹² A major breakthrough, for the first time came when the Taliban, on September 10, 2007 agreed to hold talks with the Afghan Government for the sake of national interests.¹³ Despite personal assurances from Karzai “on providing security for Mullah Omar”, the breakthrough was short lived. The Taliban soon detracted and stuck to their earlier demand of complete withdrawal of international forces and enforcement of Shariah.¹⁴ Hence, all efforts for initiating a dialogue plummeted.¹⁵

President Karzai, a Pashtun from Popalzai tribe, failed to win trust of the Taliban who viewed him with immense suspicion as a puppet of the

⁹Masadykov, T., Giustozzi, A. and Page, J. M., “Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict,” *Working Papers Series no. 2*, Crisis States Research Centre, January 2010, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28117/1/WP66.2.pdf>

¹⁰Carlotta Gall, “Karzai Says He Has Met With Some Taliban Members in an Effort at Reconciliation,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/07/world/asia/07afghan.html?_r=1&.

¹¹“Afghanistan’s Karzai urges Taliban talks after scare”, *Reuters*, September 9, 2007, www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSSP143493.

¹²“Afghanistan’s Karzai urges Taliban talks after scare”, *Reuters*, September 9, 2007, www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSSP143493.

¹³Richard Holt, “Taliban ready to talk' to Afghan government,” *Telegraph*, September 10, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1562733/Taliban-ready-to-talk-to-Afghan-government.html>.

¹⁴“Taliban’s demands stall Afghan talks,” *USA Today*, September 18, 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-09-18-taliban-demands_N.htm.

¹⁵Ibid.

West.¹⁶ The Taliban have, on several occasions, criticized the Karzai government for “half hearted attempts”¹⁷ at initiating peace which they felt were based on “rhetoric and empty words.”¹⁸ The policy of pursuing negotiations amidst military operations against the group has over the years failed to convince the Taliban to accept peace talks. In addition, funds given by international donors to facilitate and rehabilitate former Taliban members have not been made available.¹⁹ Thus, further casting a doubt on the Karzai government.

Afghan High Peace Council – A High Water Mark

In another attempt to hold peace talks with the Taliban, President Karzai formed the ‘High Peace Council,’ the official negotiating body of the government in September 2010. Headed by former President of Afghanistan Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Council’s task was to offer amnesty, explore and pursue different options for a peaceful settlement with the Taliban.

In this regard, the Council asked the international forces to guarantee the safety of the former Taliban members, and release those being held in the US and Afghan prisons.²⁰ Subsequently, in July 2010, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Afghan Government established the ‘Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme’ (APRP) to engage in local outreach, negotiations and reintegration programmes in 33 provinces across Afghanistan and to assist the High Peace Council (HPC).²¹

¹⁶“Taliban ridicules Karzai as ‘puppet’,” *SBS News*, November 4, 2009, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2009/11/04/taliban-ridicules-karzai-puppet>.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Masadykov, T., Giustozzi, A. and Page, J. M., “Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict.”

²⁰“Karzai sets up council for peace talks with Taliban,” *BBC News*, September 4, 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11188294>.

²¹“Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP),” Project Document, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/projects/AFG/00060777/00060777_APRP_National%20Programme%20Document%202010%2006%2001.pdf

Prior to the formation of the APRP, a National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) was held in Kabul in June 2010. This gave a strong mandate to President Karzai to pursue peace with the Taliban under the APRP structure. After Rabbani's assassination in 2011, his son Salahuddin Rabbani assumed the post as head of the Council and remained the Council's head for three years until his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Council was made up of former Taliban members (including Habibullah Fawzi, Sayeedur Rahman Haqqani, Faqir Mohammad and Arsalan Rahmani Daulat), warlords, representatives of different ethnic and political factions as well as women. It failed to achieve its main objective of establishing talks with the Taliban, even though contacts were made with senior Taliban members such as Mullah Mutawakil, Mullah Zaeef, Mullah Salaam Rocketi, Mullah Khaksar. While some have alluded to the failure of the High Peace Council due to Rabbani's death, the fact is that the Council's efforts have been limited to public pledges, lacked a reconciliation strategy and holistic reintegration programme.²² Hence, the utility and overall performance of the Afghan High Peace Council has been questioned at domestic as well as international level.

The bureaucratic issues within the HPC's secretariat and that the council was without a chairman for nearly a year led to the temporary suspension of funds from international donors in February 2016.²³ Shortly afterwards, the government appointed Pir Syed Ahmad Gilani as the new Chief of the Council.²⁴

The Doha Debacle

With support of the US dating back to 2011, Qatar assumed the role of a mediator, and attempted to initiate peace talks between the Taliban

²²Masadykov T., Giustozzi, A. and Page, J. M., "Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict."

²³Tariq Majidi, "USAID, Britain Halt Financial Aid to Peace Council: Official," *Tolo News*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/23634-usaid-britain-halt-financial-aid-to-peace-council-official>.

²⁴*High Peace Council (HPC)*, Press Release, February 28, 2016, <http://www.hpc.org.af/english/index.php/news/reports/203-hpc-press-release>

and the Afghan government. In June 2013, the effort initially led to the opening of a ‘political office’ of the Taliban in Doha.²⁵ Although, the main agenda behind the opening of the political office was for the purpose of peace talks, the Karzai government felt that the Taliban had used the opportunity to present itself as an independent and alternative government to use the new embassy for diplomatic relations with countries around the world and Afghans.²⁶ This was not taken well by the government and President Karzai immediately called the talks off. In a purported statement, Sayed Tayeb Agha, highlighted that “the US and the Taliban agreed upon opening the political office of the group and exchange of Taliban detainees in Guantanamo in 2011.”²⁷ Hence, efforts failed due to “obstacles created in the implementation of the issues agreed upon by the Karzai regime.”²⁸ As a result, the little progress made in the reconciliation process was short lived. However, the US and Qatar were quick to step in and extended efforts to salvage talks, which included asking the Taliban to take down their flag and later close their office.

Despite the setback, endeavours were still made to revive talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. This resulted in a meeting between members of the High Peace Council and a breakaway faction of the Taliban led by former Taliban Finance Minister, Aga Jan Mohtism in February 2014 in the UAE. Although both sides “agreed to end the conflict through an intra-Afghan dialogue instead of working on interim formats of the solution,”²⁹ nothing concrete emerged from the talks since the group did not represent the Taliban as a whole but a breakaway faction.

Stakeholders: Government of National Unity

²⁵Reza Sayah, “At their office in Doha, Taliban make changes,” *CNN*, June 21, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/20/world/meast/qatar-afghanistan/>.

²⁶Alissa J. Rubin and Rod Nordland, “US Scrambles to Save Taliban Talks After Afghan Backlash,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/world/asia/taliban-kill-4-americans-after-seeking-peace-talks.html?_r=0.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹“Afghan group confirms talks with Taliban faction,” *Dawn*, February 22, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1088760>

While expectations from President Ashraf Ghani's government are enormous, so are the challenges. What makes President Ashraf Ghani's election to office so pivotal is that he is the president of Afghanistan — a country whose stability is essential not only for the region but also for the international community at large. It has taken policy makers in Afghanistan and the international community almost 15 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. Hence, learning from the mistakes of the previous government, President Ghani has made serious efforts to establish peace with the Taliban to put an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

To meet this end, the government has been pursuing several official and unofficial avenues to initiate talks with the dissident group. During his inaugural address, on September 29, 2014, President Ghani reached out to the Taliban as well as Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's *Hizb-e-Islami* to enter into talks with the government.³⁰ In fact, it is believed that during his presidential campaign, aides of Ashraf Ghani were already instrumental to touch base with the Taliban.³¹

President Ghani has advocated for and asked the Taliban to join an inter-Afghan dialogue.³² To meet this end, he has been pursuing efforts domestically and has also sought assistance from the international community.³³ At the [d]omestic front, he has been instrumental in seeking national consensus and support for the peace process which

³⁰“New Afghan President Ashraf Ghani calls for Taliban peace talks,” *Dawn*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1135067>.

³¹Thomas Ruttig. “Talks with the Taleban, Again: This time for real?” *Afghan Analyst Network*, March 17, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/talks-with-the-taleban-again-this-time-for-real/>.

³²“Afghan President Calls On Taliban To Join Peace Process,” *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, October 31, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-china-taliban-pakistan-tajikistan-turkmenistan-kyrgyzstan-iran/26667593.html>.

³³Shashank Bengali and Ali M. Latifi, “Afghan president pursues peace with Taliban — his way,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/afghanistan-pakistan/la-fg-afghanistan-ghani-us-20150322-story.html>.

includes reaching out to ethnic-political factions, and civil society groups independently, as well as through the High Peace Council.³⁴ On the international front, Ghani has sought support from members of the international community, particularly, Pakistan, China and the Arab world for establishing talks with the group. Subsequently, cognisant of Pakistan's key role, Ghani has made efforts to improve ties with Pakistan – another major priority of his government.

Efforts by President Ghani have gained traction, as members within the Taliban group have acknowledged Ghani's overtures as sincere,³⁵ by showing flexibility and expressing willingness to open talks with the government. However, this noticeable shift in the Taliban's stance continues to be undermined by the surge in violence and initiation of the Taliban's newly announced offensive 'Omari'.³⁶ The continuing presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan, inconsistency on the part of the Afghan Government to devise a viable national reintegration programme and reach out to the Taliban continue to stall peace talks.

Apart from voices from the civil society and within the Ghani administration, there is strong opposition towards initiating peace with the Taliban and many members oppose the inclusion of Taliban in the political process.³⁷ Hence, political and national reconciliation continue to be major hurdles in pursuing peace talks with the Taliban. Although the current Afghan leadership has expressed confidence in the ongoing efforts that "Afghanistan is closer to achieving peace".³⁸ It still remains

³⁴Ali M. Latifi and Carol J. Williams, "Taliban attack kills 17 Afghan police during peace talks in Qatar," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-afghanistan-taliban-attack-peace-talks-20150504-story.html>.

³⁵"Pakistan's role in peace talks deserves credit: Ghani," *Dawn*, February 21, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1164977>.

³⁶Borhan Osman, "Operation Omari: Taleban Announced 2016 Spring Offensive," *Afghan Analyst Network*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/operation-omari-taleban-announces-2016-spring-offensive/>,

³⁷Thomas Ruttig, "Direct US-Taleban talks and the Bonn 2 conference (amended)," *Afghan Analyst Network*, May 18, 2011, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/direct-us-taleban-talks-and-the-bonn-2-conference-amended/>.

³⁸Ali M. Latifi and Carol J. Williams, "Taliban attack kills 17 Afghan police during peace talks in Qatar."

to be seen whether the government will be able to make a breakthrough with the Taliban and engage them in a constructive dialogue process.

Taliban's Casus Belli

Despite major losses and setbacks to the Afghan Taliban, including defections, and reconciliation of certain senior members, the overall strength, resolve and capability of the group has not been adversely affected. The Taliban have remained united, more or less intact with Mullah Omar as their ideological leader. It has taken more than a decade to acknowledge what former US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robin Raphel, had stated regarding the Taliban,

“The Taliban are a significant factor in the Afghan equation and one that will not simply disappear any time soon. The Taliban have established significant control throughout the country and the fact that they have sustained themselves demonstrates their staying power. The reasons they have succeeded so far have little to do with military prowess or outside military assistance. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security even with severe social restrictions, it is not in the interest of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated.”³⁹

It is significant to note that her assessment of the Taliban still holds true.

Initially restricted to their traditional heartland in the south, over the years the Taliban have taken advantage of the United States' mismanaged war in Afghanistan. The weak and ineffective policies of the previous and current government have allowed them to expand to the

³⁹“Cease-fire can and should begin immediately, says Asst. Secy, ” (Raphel Text: US statement at UN on Afghanistan peace process), November 25, 1996, <http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/press/state/archive/november/sd21126.htm>

northern parts of the country.⁴⁰ In fact, if one looks at the Taliban's offensive in Kunduz in 2015, 'poor governance, weak and corrupt leaders, lack of coordination and infighting'⁴¹ are reasons cited for the groups' growing success in the province. The Taliban are believed to control 65 per cent of the province⁴² as against 40 per cent initially.⁴³ The reasons cited for the Taliban's growing influence are not specific to the Kunduz province alone, but apply throughout the country.

While claims of major differences arising within the group had surfaced, they do not hold much weight as the Taliban have continued to demonstrate political and military resilience, on and off the field, amongst themselves and have been able to make up for their military losses easily. Thousands of fighters continue to join the group, making the Taliban's insurgency stronger than ever before. The Taliban have managed to recuperate, retaliate and transform into a highly superior adversary and achieve significant 'tactical victories'⁴⁴ over international forces and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Taliban's growing power presents a grave challenge to the Afghan government and ANSF. Although the ANSF have achieved certain successes against the Taliban on the field, these have been temporary and limited as they lack requisite capacities as a counterinsurgent force.⁴⁵

The overall outlook and conduct of the Taliban has gradually undergone a major shift. While still heavily relying on warfare, the group has altered its strategy by moving away from practices that alienated

⁴⁰Christopher Harress. "Could The Taliban Retake Control Of Afghanistan?," *International Business Times*, September 27, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/could-taliban-retake-control-afghanistan-1695833>.

⁴¹Bethany Matta, "The Failed Pilot Test: Kunduz' local governance crisis," *Afghan Analyst Network*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-failed-pilot-test-kunduz-local-governance-crisis/>

⁴²"Afghanistan Taliban: Police resist siege of HQ in Helmand's Sangin," *BBC news*, December 22, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35157785>

⁴³Bethany Matta, "The Failed Pilot Test: Kunduz' local governance crisis."

⁴⁴Amina Khan, "Afghanistan: Still at a standstill," *Strategic Studies (Quarterly Journal)*, XXVIII, no.1 (Spring 2008), http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1303370014_43617371.pdf

⁴⁵Lauren Mc nally and Paul Bucala, "The Taliban resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's security", *Afghanistan Report 1* (March 11, 2015), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AFGH%20Report.pdf>

them from the community at large. The Taliban have openly denounced and asked its fighters to avoid the “killing of innocent people, including women, children and the elderly.”⁴⁶ Apart from the launch of the Taliban’s mobile Radio station *Radio Shariat* in August 2007, the group has also been active through their website with the purpose to reach out to the common man.⁴⁷ While focusing on ‘the thrill of battle, religion and nationalism,’ themes such as ban songs, images of wine, powerful women, legend and pastoral beauty and desire for non-violence are also covered.⁴⁸

More recently, the group has also declared a more open stance towards women. Despite the Taliban’s brutal attitude towards women which was shrouded in ignorance and obscurantism, the group now openly supports women’s right to education (up to the university level), the right to work “in male-dominated professions” as well as the “right to choose their spouse”.⁴⁹ This apparent change in stance along with pledges made by the Taliban come with a fair amount of suspicion and cannot absolve the group of its previous atrocities towards women. Nonetheless, considering the ‘rigid and extreme’ mindset of the Taliban, it is certainly a positive development that warrants some recognition.

Similarly, the group has also been actively trying to transform its tarnished image globally, and has kept the option of diplomacy open by holding meetings with delegations from the US, Germany and Japan. In an attempt to cast themselves in a more favourable light and at the same time muster up support for their cause, the Taliban have paid visits to

⁴⁶“Afghan Taliban condemn Peshawar school attack,” *Dawn*, December 17, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151407>

⁴⁷“Taliban Propoganda :Winning the war of words?” *Asia Report N°158*, International Crisis Group (July 2008), http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/Afghanistan_08_07_24_Taliban_Propaganda_a_Winning_the_War_of_Words.pdf

⁴⁸Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *Poetry of the Taliban* (London: Hurts and Company, 2012).

⁴⁹Heather Barr, “Dispatches: Too Early to Cheer Taliban Support for Women’s Rights,” *Humans Rights Watch*, May 8, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/08/dispatches-too-early-cheer-taliban-support-womens-rights>

Germany, Qatar, Japan, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, China, Iran,⁵⁰ Norway⁵¹ and recently Pakistan.

With the new government in Kabul, there were hopes that the Taliban would accept the government's positive overtures for peace and reconciliation and abandon their offensive. Though the group initially agreed to some degree of engagement, it has so far refused to hold meaningful talks and continues to wage its insurgency and have consistently stuck to their principle demands discussed earlier. Subsequently, escalation in violence and bloodshed has not only highlighted reluctance on the part of Taliban to abandon its military campaign and hold talks but continues to undermine efforts for establishing peace talks. Moreover, differences and divisions within the Taliban have also played a key role in impeding talks. There are numerous groups and factions operating under the garb of the Taliban, with varying political agendas. Those members of the Taliban who are suffering from war fatigue and are willing to talk do not have influence at the operational level over those who are opposed to talks, for example Abdul Qayum Zakir, and Mohamed Rasool, influential military commanders.⁵²

A significant factor that could convince the Taliban to accept the government's overtures is the growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in the region and its penetration into Afghanistan. In January 2015, the group's spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani, announced the IS' decision to expand its influence into the Khorasan which covers Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban have rejected the IS, and its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.⁵³ Mullah Akhtar Mansoor is believed to

⁵⁰“Remarks of spokesman of Islamic Emirate regarding visit by high-ranking delegation to Iran,” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 19, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/remarks-of-spokesman-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-visit-by-high-ranking-delegation-to-iran/>

⁵¹“Afghan women hold historic talks with the Taliban,” *BBC News*, June 6, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33035268>.

⁵²Jibran Ahmad and Mehreen Zahra-Malik, “Secret meetings in Pakistan expose obstacles to Afghan peace talks,” *Reuters*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/12/us-afghanistan-taliban-talks-idUSKBN0M81A720150312>.

⁵³Thomas Joscelyn, “Islamic State's ‘Khorasan province’ threatens Taliban in latest video,” *Long War Journal*, June 4, 2015,

have written a letter to Baghdadi, warning the IS to halt its activities stating that there is “room for only one flag and one leadership”⁵⁴ which is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under its Amir, Mullah Omar Akund.⁵⁵

Although the Taliban have been known to converge with other terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, a possible convergence with the IS does not seem plausible since differences in their ideological agenda. The Taliban are an indigenous group, following the Deobandi school of thought with a local agenda—limited to Afghanistan alone.⁵⁶ Whereas the Islamic State follows the Salafi Tufkirism, and has a global agenda to establish Islamic Caliphate beyond Syria and Iraq.⁵⁷ Despite limited presence and influence, many Taliban fighters and commanders such as Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, Mawlawi Najib, Syed Emarati and Mawlawi Qahar have deflected and joined IS. This poses a grave “strategic threat to the very survival of the future of the Taliban in Afghanistan”.⁵⁸ In fact it is believed that the Taliban have initiated a “recruitment commission”⁵⁹ to win back the defected members.

Subsequently, differences within the Taliban over leadership and peace talks have resulted in divisions within the group those members who are opposed to talks are believed to be more susceptible to join IS.

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/islamic-states-khorasan-province-threatens-taliban-in-latest-video.php>.

⁵⁴Mirwais Harooni and Kay Johnson, “Taliban urge Islamic State to stop ‘interference’ in Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, June 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/16/us-afghanistan-islamicstate-idUSKBN0OW19220150616>.

⁵⁵“Taliban warn IS leader not to interfere in Afghanistan,” *Dawn*, June 16, 2015, accessed June 16, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1188553>.

⁵⁶Emma Graham-Harrison, “Taliban fears over young recruits attracted to Isis in Afghanistan,” *Guardian*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/07/taliban-young-recruits-isis-afghanistan-jihadis-islamic-state>.

⁵⁷Hekmatullah Azamy, “Afghan Taliban Scrambling With The Rise of Islamic State,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 30, 2015, <http://gandhara.rferl.mobi/a/afghanistan-taliban-scrambling-with-the-islamic-state/26987259.html>

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Abdul 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/>.

Increasing divisions will not only undermine the Taliban's presence and influence but could also result in a possible vacuum for IS to fill. Realizing that they cannot operate in isolation and in order to capture any means of political power and counter the threat posed by IS, they will have to reach a political compromise with the government. It was in this scenario that, despite major ideological differences, the Taliban headed by Mohammad Tayyab Agha visited Iran in late May 2015. Hence, the visit is believed to be an effort on the part of the Taliban "to create an alliance between Iran and the Afghan Taliban which would serve as deterrence against IS".⁶⁰

Pakistan's Constructive Role

While President Ghani has advocated for an 'Afghan-owned and Afghan-led' campaign to negotiate with the Taliban. He has also made improving ties with Pakistan, a major priority of his government, expressing that "partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan's foreign policy." Aware of Pakistan's key role, there appears to be a noticeable shift in the Afghan leadership's approach towards Pakistan which revolves around improving and strengthening ties between the two neighbours. Despite opposition from various quarters within Afghanistan, President Ghani has reached out to Pakistan and solicited for Pakistan's support and assistance in establishing talks with the Afghan Taliban.⁶¹

Pakistan has welcomed and proactively reached out to the Afghan leadership headed by President Ghani who is looked upon favourably by the political and military leadership in Pakistan. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have witnessed a marked improvement not only in the political arena but ties between military and intelligence agencies have also undergone a "qualitative transformation."⁶² Under the

⁶⁰Farhad Peikar, "Why did the Taliban go to Tehran?," *Guardian*, May 22 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/22/taliban-delegation-official-visit-tehran-iran-isis>

⁶¹"Ghani dubs Pakistan 'important pillar' of Afghanistan foreign policy," *Dawn*, November 15, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1144677>

⁶²Abdul Manan, "PM expresses satisfaction over army chief's visit to Afghanistan," *Express Tribune*, March 2, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/846509/pm-expresses-satisfaction-over-army-chiefs-visit-to-afghanistan/>.

current Pakistani leadership, new Afghan policy is governed by “a peaceful, stable and united Afghanistan which is in Pakistan’s vital interest.”⁶³ As acknowledged in the policy-making circles; “Pakistan’s future has high stakes in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.”⁶⁴ To meet this end, there is also growing realisation and acceptance to establish relations with all the different ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan. In this regard, Pakistan has resolutely supported an ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ peace and reconciliation process,⁶⁵ and has pledged to assist the Afghan Government in pursuing an “intra-Afghan dialogue that Pakistan would like to support and not lead”⁶⁶ To follow up on their pronouncements, Pakistan has released more than 40 members of the Afghan Taliban, including several ‘high profile’ Afghan Taliban detainees, such as Mansoor Dadullah⁶⁷ and Mullah Ghani Baradar, who were released in 2013.⁶⁸

Publicly, the political leadership in Pakistan has also reached out to the Afghan Taliban and, in private, has exerted pressure on them to “halt their offensive, sort out their differences”,⁶⁹ and “engage in the reconciliation process”.⁷⁰ However, the Taliban have ignored all appeals for a ceasefire and in fact have continued to step up attacks. This surge in

⁶³Hasib Danish Alikozai, “Pakistan Pledges Support for Afghan-Taliban Peace Talks,” *Voice of America*, December 2, 2013,

<http://www.voanews.com/content/pakistan-pledges-support-for-afghan-taliban-talks/1801998.html>.

⁶⁴Mateen Haider and Irfan Haider, “Nawaz Sharif pledges support in Afghan fight against Taliban,” *Dawn*, May 13, 2015,

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1181502/nawaz-sharif-pledges-support-in-afghan-fight-against-taliban>.

⁶⁵Ibid..

⁶⁶Mirwais Adeel, “Pakistan urge Afghan Taliban to cease spring offensive and join talks,” *Khaama Press*, May 3 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/pakistan-urge-afghan-taliban-to-cease-spring-offensive-and-join-talks-1064>.

⁶⁷Tahir Khan, “Pakistan releases seven low-ranking Afghan Taliban prisoners,” *Express Tribune*, October 16, 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/618924/pakistan-releases-seven-low-ranking-afghan-taliban-prisoners/>.

⁶⁸“Pakistan frees top Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar,” *BBC News*, September 21, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24185441>.

⁶⁹“End rifts or talks won't take off, Pakistan tells Afghan Taliban,” *Dawn*, March 13, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1169317>.

⁷⁰Mateen Haider, “Afghanistan's enemy is Pakistan's enemy, says army chief,” *Dawn*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1164189>.

violence and bloodshed, considered to be the worst in years, has resulted in strong criticism against the group from Pakistan's political and military quarters. Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, during a visit to Afghanistan on May 12, 2015, "strongly condemned the surge in attacks," which Pakistan termed as "an act of terrorism," and that "any effort by any militant or group to destabilize Afghanistan will be dealt with severely."⁷¹ Similarly, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif said that the "enemies of Afghanistan will be considered the enemies of Pakistan."⁷² However, there are concerns that Pakistan's seemingly tough stance on the Afghan Taliban could backfire and could have dire consequences domestically, particularly, in its tribal region and Balochistan. But this is a risk Pakistan is willing to take. This clearly reflects Pakistan's commitment and sincerity towards a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

An important development towards improved relations between the two countries was signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) on May 18, 2015. It entails intelligence sharing, complementary and coordinated intel operations on respective sides.⁷³ While this unprecedented agreement clearly indicates growing cooperation between the two states, the element of mistrust continues to undermine their relations. Certain quarters within the Afghan intelligence agency and the National Directorate of Security (NDS) have persistently blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban and strongly opposed improving ties with Pakistan. It was reported that Rahmatullah Nabil, chief of the NDS, was a stern opponent of the intelligence-sharing deal and refused to sign the deal, which was later signed by a deputy director general at the NDS.⁷⁴

⁷¹Mateen Haider and Irfan Haider, "Nawaz Sharif pledges support in Afghan fight against Taliban,".

⁷²Mateen Haider, "Afghanistan's enemy is Pakistan's enemy, says army chief,".

⁷³DG ISPR, Major General Asim Bajwa tweeted at @AsimBajwaISPR, <https://twitter.com/AsimBajwaISPR/status/600361808981929984>

⁷⁴Jon Boone & Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Afghan backlash over security deal with Pakistan," *Guardian*, May 19, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/afghan-backlash-over-governments-security-deal-with-pakistan>.

Despite Pakistan's commitment and visible change in the approach towards the Afghan Taliban, authorities in Afghanistan continue to have unrealistic expectations from Pakistan. This was made evident from the strongly worded message that President Ghani sent to Prime Minister Sharif in May 2015. The letter included a list of security demands that Pakistan fulfilled, and "an official declaration condemning the Taliban offensive; a directive by the military leadership that sanctuary will be denied to the Taliban and effective measures by the security forces and civil authorities that the directive is carried out."⁷⁵ Domestic pressure has been building up on President Ghani due to his overtures towards Pakistan and rise in violence due to the Taliban's offensive. As frustrating as it may be, the Afghan leadership must understand that Pakistan's role is only limited to supporting the peace process, facilitating talks and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of national consensus and prerogative. The outcome of the peace talks should not govern and determine Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan. President Ghani by putting conditions on Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban let alone the peace process. It will only jeopardise the gains made so far between Pakistan and Afghanistan in their fragile relationship.

China's Role

Traditionally, China has maintained a limited role in Afghanistan and has deliberately kept away from the politics of the country. However, its close ties with Pakistan and its neutrality in Afghanistan affairs has prompted President Ghani to reach out to China for a bigger role in Afghanistan. He has asked China to "wield its influence over Pakistan to abandon support for the Taliban and convince them to open dialogue with the Afghan Government."⁷⁶ In February 2015, for the first time, China agreed, "it is ready to play a constructive role and provide

⁷⁵Kathy Whitehead, "Ghani Reportedly Sent List Of Security Demands To Sharif," *Tolo News*, May 30, 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19767-ghani-reportedly-sent-list-of-security-demands-to-sharif>

⁷⁶Ismail Khan, "Ghani seeks Pakistan's help for talks with Taliban" *Dawn*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1176452>

necessary facilitation” to the Afghan government in “realizing reconciliation with various political factions including the Taliban.”⁷⁷

In November 2014, China unofficially hosted a delegation of the Afghan Taliban in an attempt to create a potential avenue for dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan Government. The delegation included former Minister of Planning, Qari Din Mohammad Hanif. During the initiative, the Taliban presented several proposals, including amending the Afghan Constitution, besides including the group in the political process. It was also decided that in case talks further materialized, China would be the host.

China’s persistent efforts materialized in a meeting between representatives of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council and the Taliban from May 21-22, 2015, in Urumqi.⁷⁸ Representatives of the Taliban included: former Foreign Minister, Mullah Jalil; former Interior Minister, Mullah Abdul Razaq; and former Governor of Kandahar Province, Mullah Hassan Rahmani. The efforts facilitated by Pakistan, aimed at “discussing preconditions for a possible peace process.”⁷⁹ However, the Taliban disregarded the talks as rumours, stating that members of the group had not held talks with “representatives of the fake Afghan Peace Council”⁸⁰ and those that had taken part were “not Afghan Taliban officials.”⁸¹ The interaction once again underlined the grave difficulties involved and the persistent divided opinion within the Taliban, one that

⁷⁷Abubakar Siddique, “China assumes leading role in Afghan reconciliation,” *Dawn*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1164186/china-assumes-leading-role-in-afghan-reconciliation>.

⁷⁸Edward Wong and Mujib Mashalmy, “Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/world/asia/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html?_r=0

⁷⁹Margherita Stancati, “Afghan Peace Envoy Met Taliban in Secret China Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-peace-envoy-met-taliban-in-secret-china-talks-1432486585>.

⁸⁰“We strongly reject propoganda of meeting with representatives of Kabul administration in China,” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 25, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/54870-we-strongly-reject-propoganda-of-meeting-with-representatives-of-kabul-administration-in-china>.

⁸¹Edward Wong and Mujib Mashalmy, “Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China,”

favours talks but has relatively less influence over the process compared to those influential members opposed to talks.

Recent Initiatives

Despite the Taliban's ongoing insurgency and opposition to the talks, efforts to reach out to the Taliban by Ghani government gained some traction. In May 2015, unofficial talks, termed as "Intra-Afghan Research Conference" by the Taliban, were held between representatives of the Taliban and Afghan Government. This signal some shift and flexibility in the Taliban's approach. The talks were hosted by the government of Qatar and the Pugwash Council, a global conflict resolution group. The Taliban participants included Mr. Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai, Maulawi Jan Muhammad Madani, Maulawi Sayed Rasoul Haleem, Maulawi Shahabuddin Delawar, Qari Deen Muhammad Haneef, Maulawi Abdul Salam Haneefi, Mr. Sohail Shaheen and Mr. Hafiz Aziz Rahm.⁸²

Although 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."⁸³ Either way the fact that members of the Taliban attended and openly talked to representatives of the Afghan Government, including female representatives was a breakthrough in itself and certainly raised hopes.

Though the talks did not achieve tangible results, the Taliban, for the first time acknowledged, the need and expressed their inclination for an "intra-Afghan dialogue" and their support for such efforts.⁸⁴ They also

⁸²“Clarification regarding participation by delegation from Political Officer of Islamic Emirate at conference by Pugwash International Organisation in Qatar,” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* May 2, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/54407-clarification-regarding-participation-by-delegation-from-political-officer-of-islamic-emirate-at-conference-by-pugwash-international-organisation-in-qatar>.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Qari Yousuf Ahmadi , “Islamic Emirate believes in intra-afghan dialogue,” May 7, 2015, *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*. <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/comments/54546-islamic-emirate-believes-in-intra-afghan-dialogue>.

called for certain preconditions such as the removal of the names of important Taliban members from the UN terrorism blacklist, release of Taliban prisoners, and the need for the group to have a political office.⁸⁵ The group also expressed a certain degree 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, highlighted a convergence amongst all the delegates on the re-opening of Taliban's political office in Doha.⁸⁶ Hence, through the Pugwash initiative, a fair degree of progress was made on reaching out to the Taliban, where the group clearly demonstrated a shift in its policy (which has traditionally been rigid) and expressed confidence in the process.

The interaction was shortly followed by another welcoming development. The talks were held between a Taliban delegation led by Sohail Shaheen and the first Afghan all-female delegation headed by Shukria Barakzai, a member of parliament, in Oslo, from June 3-4, 2015.⁸⁷ During the interaction, both sides agreed that the ongoing war in Afghanistan was futile and that, in order to reach a peaceful settlement, talks were essential.⁸⁸ This interaction resulted in a second round of talks between representatives of the Afghan government-headed by Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Khalil Karzai-and the Taliban- headed by Syed Tayeb Agha- took place in Oslo from June 16-17, 2015.⁸⁹

The Murree Peace Process

In an unexpected turn of events, representatives of the Afghan Government met with Afghan Taliban representatives, in "2+2+1 or the

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Amena Bakr and Jibrán Ahmad, "Afghan talks agree on reopening Taliban political office," *Reuters*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/04/us-qatar-afghanistan-idUSKBN0NO0M920150504>.

⁸⁷"Afghan women hold historic talks with the Taliban," *BBC News*

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹"News analysis: Intra-Afghan talks in Oslo may serve as gateway for direct dialogue with Taliban," *Xinhua*, June 17, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2015-06/17/content_35838524.htm.

Murree Peace Process” in Murree from July 7-8, 2015. The interaction marked the ‘first officially acknowledged’ round of talks between the two. The Afghan Government delegation included Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Haji Din Mohammad, Mohammad Asem, members from the High Peace Council as well as advisors to the NUG. The Afghan Taliban were represented by Mullah Abbas Akhund, Maulvi Jalil Mullah Hasan and Qari Din Muhammad.⁹⁰ More importantly, the participation of Ibrahim Haqqani, Jalaluddin Haqqani’s younger brother did not only give the meeting credence but has also highlighted the Haqqani network’s willingness for pursuing the talks. The talks facilitated by Pakistan, supported and attended by Chinese and the US officials who took part as observers are believed to be a result of the talks held in Urumqi in May 2015.⁹¹

During the Murree talks both sides expressed their desire for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan and acknowledged the need to develop confidence building measures among all stakeholders. It was reported that the Taliban also agreed to a tentative ceasefire “if Pakistan and China guaranteed that a united national government would be formed in Afghanistan”.⁹² It was also reported that although the Taliban demanded the inclusion of its first-tier leadership in the government, Afghan officials agreed to include the third-tier leadership of the Afghan Taliban.⁹³

The officially acknowledged peace talks were considered a success and welcomed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the international community at large. Afghan authorities expressed hope that the process

⁹⁰Margherita Stancati and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Afghan Government, Taliban Begin Two-Days of High-Level Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/kabul-and-taliban-begin-two-days-of-high-level-talks-1436282016>.

⁹¹Joseph Goldstein and Mujib Mashal, “Afghan Officials and Taliban Meet in Possible Step Toward Peace Talks,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/asia/taliban-leaders-are-said-to-meet-with-afghan-officials.html?_r=0

⁹²Kamran Yousaf, “Afghan Taliban seek ‘united national govt,’” *Express Tribune*, July 9, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/917517/afghan-taliban-seek-united-national-govt/>

⁹³Ibid.

would end bloodshed and ensure durable peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's efforts to facilitate the talks were also appreciated.⁹⁴ The talks concluded with both sides conforming to resume the talks on July 31 in Murree.⁹⁵ Subsequently, Mullah Omar, in a purported annual Eid message, also endorsed the talks as "legitimate, if they could help end US-led foreign occupation of Afghanistan and establish an Islamic system in Afghanistan."⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷

Disruption of the Talks

While the talks ended with immense optimism, the news of Mullah Omar's sudden death which was disclosed by Afghan authorities in late July 2015, just before the second round of talks scheduled for July 31, 2015, led to suspension of the talks. This was immediately followed by a surge in violence in Kabul in which scores of people were killed which further complicated matters between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghan authorities reverted to the blame game, "accusing Pakistan of being complicit"⁹⁸ and of "not doing enough to control the Haqqani Network allegedly operating from Pakistani soil."⁹⁹

⁹⁴Tahir Khan, "Murree meet-up: Kabul hopes Pakistan talks will end bloodshed," *Express Tribune*, July 9, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/917521/murree-meet-up-kabul-hopes-pakistan-talks-will-end-bloodshed/>

⁹⁵Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Another round of Afghan talks to be held on 31st," *Dawn*, July 25, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1196219>

⁹⁶"Eid Felicitation Message of Amir-ul-Momineen, Mulla Mohammad Umar Mujahid," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, July 15, 2015, ""HYPhhttp://shahamat-english.com/message-of-felicitatation-of-the-esteemed-amir-ul-momineen-mullah-akhtar-mohammad-mansoor-may-allah-protect-him-on-the-eve-of-eid-ul-odha/

⁹⁷Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan peace deal: Islamabad, Beijing ready to become 'guarantors'," *Express Tribune*, July 22, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/924172/afghan-peace-deal-islamabad-beijing-ready-to-become-guarantors/>.

⁹⁸Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan, Afghanistan Weigh Resumption of Taliban Talks," *Voice of America*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/pakistan-afghanistan-weigh-resumption-of-taliban-peace-talks/2943579.htm>

⁹⁹Ibid.

Another key factor that led to disruption of the second round of talks is the leadership struggle and divided opinion within the Taliban over the newly announced leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor. However, 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.¹⁰⁰ Moulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani were appointed as the deputy heads of the group.¹⁰¹ Initially, Mullah Omar’s son, Mullah Yaqoob and his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan refused to accept Mullah Akhtar Mansoor’s appointment, but later on, they declared their allegiance to Mullah Mansoor.¹⁰²

It was the persistent efforts by Pakistan which resulted in the ‘first officially acknowledged’ ‘Murree Peace talks’ between Afghan Government and the Taliban in 14 years. Yet during a press conference in August 2015, President Ghani said “he no longer wanted Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the table, but 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.”¹⁰³

Regardless of 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. By using “whatever influence it has with the Afghan Taliban to

¹⁰⁰“Declaration of the Leading Council of the Islamic Emirate regarding the appointment of new Amir (leader) of the Islamic Emirate,” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, July 31, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/declaration-of-the-leading-council-of-the-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-appointment-of-new-amir-leader-of-the-islamic-emirate/>.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²“Mullah Omar’s family declares allegiance to new Taliban chief,” *Express Tribune*, September 16, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/957513/mullah-omars-family-declares-allegiance-to-new-taliban-chief/>.

¹⁰³Mujib Mashalug, “After Kabul Attack, Afghan Leader Points Finger at Pakistan for Failing to Stop Taliban,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/world/asia/suicide-car-bombing-kabulairport.html?_r=0.

persuade them to engage with Kabul.”¹⁰⁴ Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz paid a visit to Kabul in September 2015, to attend a regional conference but more importantly met 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 authorities were less forthcoming on both issues.

Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference

The Fifth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference held in Islamabad on December 9, 2015 attended by Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif, Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken was a welcoming development. President Ghani’s visit not only led to the resumption of ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which had been strained since July 2015, but also to the resumption of the reconciliation process.¹⁰⁵ During his visit, President Ghani held meetings with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as well as with Pakistan’s COAS, General Sharif. During both interactions, President Ghani was assured of Pakistan’s full support for peace and stability in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶ President Ghani also voiced optimism that serious peace talks with the Afghan Taliban were expected which would produce desired results.¹⁰⁷

However, Ghani’s outreach to Pakistan and decision to resume peace talks with the Taliban once again faced domestic opposition and were not taken well by certain sections of his administration who have

¹⁰⁴“Pakistan Rejects Afghan Allegations on Parliament Attack,” Ayesha Tanzeem, *Voice of America*, June 25, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/kabul-blames-haqqani-network-pakistan-for-parliament-attack/2836385.htm>

¹⁰⁵Tahir Khan “Ghani returns hopeful after Heart of Asia,” *Express Tribune*, December 12, 2015, 2015,file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Amina%20Khan/Desktop/HOA%20Dec9/Ghani%20returns%20hopeful%20after%20Heart%20of%20Asia%20-%20The%20Express%20Tribune.htm.

¹⁰⁶“Army chief assures Ashraf Ghani support for peace in Afghanistan,” *Express Tribune*, December 9, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1006920/army-chief-assures-ashraf-ghani-support-for-peace-in-afghanistan/>.

¹⁰⁷Tahir Khan “Ghani returns hopeful after Heart of Asia.”

vehemently opposed improving ties with Pakistan and talking to the Taliban. On December 10, Rahmatullah Nabil resigned from his post as Director of the NDS due to differences with President Ghani over his decision to attend the Ministerial Conference in Pakistan and Pakistan's role in the reconciliation process.¹⁰⁸ Despite facing pressure and criticism, President Ghani defended his decision that "trusts among the two nations for combating terrorism is a key element to end the undeclared war between Afghanistan and Pakistan,"¹⁰⁹ and that "Pakistan's cooperation was key to the peace process."¹¹⁰

Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)

In an attempt to revive the peace process between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, the first meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-US-China, the QCG, was held in Islamabad on January 11, 2016. The group included Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Richard G. Olson and China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Ambassador Deng Xijun. The meeting highlighted "the need for immediate resumption of direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban" as well as "adopting a clear and realistic assessment of the opportunities for peace and reconciliation."¹¹¹

The meeting was a result of a previous quadrilateral (2+2) meeting held on the sidelines of the Fifth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference, where all four countries had pledged their commitment "to facilitate an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation

¹⁰⁸Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan spy chief resigns after fallout with president," *Reuters*, December 10, 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-resignation-idUSKBN0TT1K720151210>.

¹⁰⁹Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks," *Tolo News*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

process.”¹¹² So far, four meetings of the QCG have been taken place, in which all four countries reiterated their support for the Afghan peace process. During the last meeting in Kabul on February 23, 2016, the QCG called out to “all Taliban groups to participate in the first round of direct peace talks with the Afghan government” scheduled to take place in the first week of March in Islamabad.¹¹³ It was also announced that Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed “to form a joint bilateral working group to work with the Ulema of both countries for their support to the peace and reconciliation process.”¹¹⁴ Hence the meeting ended with immense optimism that the QCG had succeed in paving the way for direct peace talks between the government and Afghan Taliban.

However, the optimism generated from the QCG was short lived as the Taliban refused to hold talks with the Afghan Government. In a statement, the Taliban not only declined to take part in the peace process but also questioned the relevance of the QCG. They reiterated that talks would only take place when all principal demands of the group were met.

Conclusion

Despite the Taliban’s refusal to enter into talks, the formation of the QCG is a good initiative and welcoming development. While similar initiatives have been seen in the past that have not been able to deliver. However, what makes this initiative special is that the US and China have once again maintained its support to the peace and reconciliation process. This has not only added credence to the process but has also

¹¹²“Statement from the Quadrilateral Meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan,” *The Embassy of Afghanistan*, Washington DC, December 9, 2015, <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/article/statement-from-the-quadrilateral-meeting-in-islamabad-pakistan>

¹¹³“Taliban refuse to take part in Afghanistan peace talks,” *Guardian*, March 5, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/05/taliban-refuses-to-take-part-in-peace-talks>

¹¹⁴Joint Press Release: The Fourth Meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, February 23, 2016, <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/joint-press-release-the-fourth-meeting-of-the-quadrilateral-coordination-group-qcg-of-afghanistan-pakistan-the-united-states-and-china>

generated immense hope and confidence that the QCG may be able to develop a roadmap for engagement between the Afghan Government and Taliban for a possible deal in due course.

Pakistan's supportive role makes this process more plausible on many counts. However, for the process to succeed, all sides will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other's views. In short, both principal stake holders — the Afghan Government and Taliban — will have to move beyond the rhetoric, find the middle ground and be willing to compromise on their initial and maximalist positions. Kabul now must move beyond giving statements and instead focus on galvanizing domestic support from forces opposed to the peace process. It not only has to convince the Taliban to enter into talks but must also accommodate them in the political process through a holistic and viable national reintegration programme that is acceptable to all. At the same time, the Taliban too, must ensure a visible reduction in their attacks against the state. While the group continues to justify its ongoing offensive 'to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control'¹¹⁵ it is no longer advisable for them to do so as they are no longer fighting a 'foreign enemy.'¹¹⁶

With changing regional dynamics and threat of the IS, neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban can afford to miss this opportunity of starting at least a dialogue process, as force is no more the solution. Although, the Taliban have not yet shown their willingness to talk the group knows that they cannot operate in complete isolation and, therefore, they will have to eventually reach a political compromise with the government. At the same time, both Pakistan and Afghanistan must keep the gains they have made in their fragile relationship independent of the peace process. Continuing violence on the part of the Taliban and the slow progress on peace talks must not be allowed to hamper

¹¹⁵“Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen, ” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-of-mujahideen/>

¹¹⁶“Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen, ” *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-of-mujahideen/>

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improvement in bilateral ties. Pakistan, the US and China must continue to play a supportive and facilitative role. That said, the process is essentially intra-Afghan, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. The real challenge for the government and the Taliban, is to find a solution that eliminates violence and promotes peace and reconciliation