



NO OPTION BUT TALKS TO BRING STABILITY TO AFGHANISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The state of affairs in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, with a marked increase in violence and insecurity, weak and ineffective governance, corruption and a growing Taliban insurgency which has gained immense momentum and continues to escalate.

While there were hopes that with the formation of the Government of National Unity, and takeover of security by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the state of affairs in Afghanistan would improve. However, Afghanistan is far from being stable. President Ashraf Ghani, like his predecessor, has struggled to achieve stability, bring relief to the masses or make any progress with the Afghan Taliban regarding the peace process. In the first nine months of 2017, there has been a 52% increase in civilian casualties in air strikes by the US coalition and Afghan forces compared with the same period in 2016.¹ Additionally, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 338,000 people have been displaced in this year alone.²

Subsequently, the Taliban have taken more territory in Afghanistan in 2016 than at any time in their 16-year fight and have achieved military successes in Kunduz, Lashkar Gah and Tarinkot to name a few.³

¹ Idrees Ali, "Taliban increases influence, territory in Afghanistan: U.S. watchdog," *Reuters*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-militants/taliban-increases-influence-territory-in-afghanistan-u-s-watchdog-idUSKBN1D026N>

² "UN says 338,000 Afghans internally displaced in 2017," *US Muslims*, November 13, 2017, <http://www.usmuslims.com/un-says-338000-afghans-internally-displaced-in-2017-34619h.htm>

³ Taimoor Shah & Rod Nordland, "Taliban Gain Ground in Afghanistan as Soldiers Surrender Their Posts,"

According to the latest report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Taliban have increased the amount of territory that they have influence over or control in Afghanistan, with an increase of 3% since February 2017, and in total, 43% of Afghanistan's districts are either under Taliban control or being contested.⁴ Their growing presence is one of the many indications of their growing power and thus also the urgent need for a peace and reconciliation process which is currently at a standstill. Afghanistan continues to stand highly divided on the issue of the Taliban and has yet to develop national consensus, and a national narrative.⁵ President Ghani has been unable to galvanize and win domestic support for peace talks (particularly from within his fragile government which openly oppose talks) and devise a viable national reintegration programme.⁶

Hence, questions of uncertainty continue to revolve around the future of Afghanistan and whether enough of a state structure and institutions have been created over the past decade for the Afghan state to sustain itself. Apart from internal challenges, the presence of Daesh/the Islamic State (IS), is another major issue of concern not only for Afghanistan, but the region as a whole.

While the challenges faced by Kabul are certainly manifold and daunting, achieving national reconciliation and establishing peace with the Afghan Taliban are the most fundamental, yet the most arduous tasks as the future stability of Afghanistan primarily depends on the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban and its success. While a number of attempts have been made at the regional, as well as international level to achieve a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, so far all attempts have failed to deliver. This is primarily due to ambiguity of intent and unwillingness of certain elements within and outside Kabul to pursue peace talks. Every time a breakthrough in talks with the Taliban is eminent, the process has been jeopardized, be it the case of the opening of the political office of the Taliban in Qatar, the Murree Process or Mullah Mansoor's death, in what has become a repeated pattern over the last few years. While the Murree peace talks of 2015 ended with immense optimism, the disclosure of Mullah Omar's demise by Afghan authorities in late July 2015, just before the second round of talks scheduled for July 31, 2015, led to the suspension of the

New York Times, October 30, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-army.htm>

⁴ Idrees Ali, "Taliban increases influence, territory in Afghanistan: U.S. watchdog," *Reuters*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-militants/taliban-increases-influence-territory-in-afghanistan-u-s-watchdog-idUSKBN1D026N>

⁵ Amina Khan, Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan, *Strategic Studies Journal*, Volume 36, No.1, 2016, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2-Amina_Khan_SS_Vol_36_No.1_2016.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

talks. Similarly, it has been learnt that Mullah Mansoor had agreed to join the peace talks, but was targeted by a US drone strike before he could make the announcement.⁷

Hence, it is clearly evident that a deliberate effort is at play on the part of certain quarters within and outside Kabul to disrupt the peace process. There is no doubt that Afghanistan stands highly divided on the issue of pursuing peace with the Taliban.

While a number of processes have been initiated to find a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, with the exception of the Murree peace process, all have subsequently failed to deliver due to the exclusion of the Taliban - one of the most important components to end the Afghan stalemate. Until the Afghan Taliban are not recognized, taken on board and involved in constructive engagement and dialogue, hopes for peace and stability will remain elusive. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without the Taliban, therefore excluding them is counterproductive and jeopardizes any chances of bringing stability in Afghanistan.

Another major factor that has led to the disruption of talks is the strained Pak-Afghan relationship which has been trapped in a downward spiral of antagonism and mistrust due to unfulfilled expectations, counter-terrorism differences, reignited border disputes, and failure of the peace talks. Unless and until Kabul and Islamabad do not move beyond their current state of relations, no headway can be made in the Afghan peace process. Afghan authorities need to realize that Pakistan can only do so much. Blaming Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban, let alone the peace process. Kabul must understand that Pakistan's role is only limited to supporting the peace process. Reaching out and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of Afghan prerogative and consensus.

There is only one path to attaining peace and stability in Afghanistan which is through Kabul, and between the two principal stakeholders, namely the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. Hence, multiple processes and lack of coordination, with little clarity of the authority of one process over the other further complicates the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan. There must be an overall commitment (on the part of all stakeholders) to follow and implement one workable solution (process) instead of multiple/ simultaneous, and at times, contradictory initiatives, as one has seen in the past i.e. US, India, and Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue which took place in September 2016, and was followed by the Trilateral Dialogue between Russia, China and Pakistan in December 2016.

⁷ Tahir Khan, "Mullah Mansoor was 'about to join peace talks' when killed," *Express Tribune*, July 11, 2016

In this regard, the initiation of the Kabul Process on June 6, 2017, by the Afghan government marked the beginning of the first Afghan-owned and led initiative to “build regional security alliances to counter the threat of terrorism and revive the peace process.”⁸ The process is a welcoming development and step in the right direction which, according to Kabul, is a result of the failure of several “bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and multilateral” attempts to initiate peace talks with the Afghan Taliban.⁹ The move is a clear indication of Kabul’s growing assertion of resolving its issues unilaterally, and a visible sign of its tendencies towards independent policy decisions, while at the same time reducing its dependence on key regional participation.

If this is the course of action Kabul intends to follow, the international community and regional countries must extend full support to the process to make it successful. At the same time, by doing so, the Afghan state also needs to take ownership of the responsibilities and failures associated with the peace process instead of shifting the blame. Talking to the Taliban and finding a plausible solution to the conflict is an Afghan prerogative and responsibility. It is for the Afghan leadership to determine how and when to proceed with the peace process. Subsequently, whatever outcome is achieved in the peace process (if at all) should be solely Afghan-owned. However, despite President Ghani's renewed call for peace talks with the Taliban at a mutually agreeable location, and assurance that the group would eventually be allowed to open a representative office if significant progress was achieved, the Taliban were not a part of the Kabul Process. While the Kabul initiative may have raised hopes of the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, in the larger context, it appears that this initiative, like previous ones, will not bear any results until the Taliban are taken on board and included in the process. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue.

For any process to succeed in Afghanistan, be it trilateral, quadrilateral, or multilateral, there needs to be collective willingness on the Afghan side to acknowledge the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate stakeholder and a national willingness to accommodate them in the political process/future of Afghanistan. The initiative needs to be Afghan-owned and supported by the international and regional stakeholders. A regional approach needs to be adopted, and regional rivalries need to be buried. In particular, both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to move beyond the past and adopt a pragmatic and holistic approach to address the key irritants in their strained relationship, with the aim to find solutions that addresses their concerns and maximises their interests. Subsequently, all

⁸ “Ghani Officially Opens Kabul Process Meeting,” *Tolo News*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-officially-opens-kabul-process-meeting>

⁹ Bismillah Alizada, “Kabul Process Faltering as Taliban Support Rises,” *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/kabul-process-falters-as-taliban-support-rises/>

principal stakeholders will have to display immense patience, maturity and openness to accommodate each other's interests, otherwise any initiative will be an exercise in futility.