

WHY IS AFGHAN PEACE SO ELUSIVE?

Ambassador (Retired) Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry

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Abstract

In 1979, Afghanistan witnessed a super power contest between the erstwhile Soviet Union and the United States. Soviets withdrew in 1988, the US left soon thereafter, and the Mujahideen, who had fought Soviet forces, started fighting with each other, producing in the process large ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban government collapsed in 2001, the group continued to maintain an active presence. Instability ruled. India maneuvered to increase its influence in Afghanistan, essentially to create a two-front situation for Pakistan. Afghanistan, once again, is at a crossroads. If the peace process does not resume, the fratricidal politics of the country and the geopolitics of the region would continue to intersect in disastrous ways, peppered with lethal proxy wars. Indeed, Afghanistan's stability, or the lack of it, does impact regional and global peace. Hence, there is a dire need to address this imperative.

Keywords: United States, Soviet Union, Proxy Wars, Geneva Accord, Taliban, 9/11, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia, South Asia.

Introduction

Allama Iqbal, the poet philosopher of Pakistan, once described Afghanistan as the 'heart of Asia.'¹ President Ashraf Ghani has rightly characterized his country as a 'regional roundabout'², where nations come to connect. The past four decades have certainly witnessed global and regional interests profoundly intersecting in Afghanistan and affecting not only its stability but also that of the region and the world. In 1979, Afghanistan witnessed a super power contest between the erstwhile Soviet Union and the United States. Of all the countries, Pakistan bore the brunt of that war, saddled with millions of Afghan refugees and an influx of arms, drugs, smuggled goods, and a host of other challenges. Once the Soviets withdrew, the US left soon thereafter, and the Mujahideen, who had fought Soviet forces, started fighting with each other, producing in the process large

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ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan. As a consequence, and aided by a period of global indifference to Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and other militants of the world found ideal sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The world came to pay a heavy price for this neglect. Tragically, Afghanistan did indeed become a 'roundabout', but not for peace and connectivity but rather for militancy and instability.

After 9/11, the United States decided to invade Afghanistan. Tora Bora, located in the mountains near the Khyber Pass along the border with Pakistan, was bombed heavily in hunt for Al-Qaeda operatives. Although the Taliban government collapsed, the group continued to maintain an active presence. Instability ruled. Proxy wars continued. India maneuvered to increase its influence in Afghanistan, essentially to create a two-front situation for Pakistan. Moreover, an uneasy relationship between Pakistan and the governments of Afghan presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani also continued.

By 2018, the United States came to realize that its war in Afghanistan had become its longest since the Vietnam war, and there was no end in sight. In the process, the war has cost the US around 975 billion US dollars,³ a loss of 2,400 military personnel⁴, as well as 20,000 wounded. Similarly, the cost/losses for NATO were adding up, with up to 1,100 troops killed in combat⁵.

Despite progress towards a peace settlement between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul, a breakthrough appeared in 2018 when the Trump administration decided to open direct talks with the Taliban. This kindled a serious attempt to secure peace in Afghanistan. The talks proceeded well, and by end August 2019, an agreement in principle had been reached between the US and the Taliban. However, the US President had second thoughts, and on September 7, 2019, he tweeted that the peace talks were 'dead',⁶ temporarily halting hopes for a peaceful settlement.

Despite the temporary halt, efforts continued for the revival of talks and a breakthrough was witnessed on February 29, 2020, when an agreement was signed between the US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Doha.⁷ The historic agreement, aimed at ending nearly two decades of bloodshed revolved around 4 principal issues:

- Temporary ceasefire
- Withdrawal of foreign forces within a fourteen month period
- Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government

- Assurances that the Taliban will not participate in or aid others in threatening the security of the US and its allies.⁸

Since the signing of the agreement, there have been a number of hurdles in the actual implementation of the deal. Political uncertainty stemming from the Ghani-Abdullah feud over the outcome of the presidential elections led to a delay in the highly anticipated intra-Afghan talks between Kabul and the Taliban scheduled for March 10, 2020, before which both sides had to complete a prisoner swap as part of the US-Taliban peace. Additional conditions set by President Ghani in the initial release of prisoners led to further delays in the intra-Afghan talks, not to mention the threat caused by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that has not only claimed 446 Afghan lives⁹ but has also played a role in shelving talks.

However, despite the hurdles, in June 2020, statements were given by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, President Ashraf Ghani, and the Taliban, indicating that the highly anticipated intra – Afghan talks between the Taliban and government would be taking place soon, with President Ghani’s spokesman going as far as saying talks were expected to begin in July.¹⁰ While news of intra Afghan talks is no doubt a much needed step in the right direction, it must be realized that if they do take place, it will be the beginning of a highly sensitive and complex process that will require patience and compromises from all sides.

Today, Afghanistan, once again, is at a cross-road. Even though significant progress has been made, the future of the peace process primarily depends upon the outcome of the intra–Afghan talks. If the peace process does not reach its logical end, the fratricidal politics of the country and the geo politics of the region would continue to intersect in disastrous ways, peppered with lethal proxy wars. Indeed, Afghanistan’s stability, or the lack of it, does impact regional and global peace. Hence, there is a dire need to address this imperative.

It is Important to Understand How the Present Peace Process Evolved, and How it ended up Where it is

In the past few years, a number of attempts were made to start the process of reconciliation in Afghanistan. Pakistan tried to facilitate the process through the Murree talks in 2015 and Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) in 2016. There were, and remain, forces within Afghanistan’s Nation Unity Government (NUG), which did not favor reconciliation with Taliban. The US, too, was not prepared to

talk directly with the Taliban at that time, as the US regarded them as a terrorist group and wanted Pakistan to do the job for them.

During his election campaign in 2016, President Trump expressed his inclination to walk away from 'costly wars in far-away lands.'¹¹ However, upon assuming office, he received advice to the contrary. Consequently, the South Asia policy of August 2017 was announced which iterated America's resolve to stay in Afghanistan until US objectives had been met.¹² India was also given a special role in Afghanistan. However, it soon became evident that the 2017 strategy was failing to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

In December 2018, President Trump tweeted his plans to recall half of the 14,000 US troops from Afghanistan and all of 2,000 troops from Syria.¹³ There was a negative reaction to this news within American quarters, which was reflected in the resignation of US Secretary of Defense, General Mattis.¹⁴ There was also a backlash from the US Congress. The US Senate adopted a resolution on February 4, 2019 rejecting President Trump's plan to pull troops out of Afghanistan and Syria.¹⁵ Nevertheless, President Trump remained determined, and initiated direct talks with the Taliban. The latter welcomed the change of policy in the US, and in return accepted the US condition of not allowing Afghan territory to be used against other countries by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other outside terrorist groups.

The talks, led by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad on the US side and Mullah Bradar and Mullah Abbas Stanekzai on the Taliban side, lasted several months, culminating in an agreement reached during the ninth round of talks with Taliban in Doha in late August 2019.¹⁶ The two sides agreed, in principle, on the broad contours of the deal.¹⁷ Khalilzad reached Kabul early September to brief the NUG, which was not a part of the talks. Reportedly, in the draft deal, the US agreed to the withdrawal from Afghanistan of about 5,400 US troops (out of a total of 14,000) over a period of 135 days.¹⁸ In return, the Taliban pledged to cut ties with Al Qaeda and other outside militant groups.¹⁹ The deal did not require the withdrawal of all foreign forces, which was the initial demand of the Taliban, nor did it require the Taliban to declare a ceasefire. The deal was also silent about the democratic elections, Afghan constitution, or the rights of Afghan women. Apparently, these subjects were to be discussed in the intra-Afghan dialogue, (scheduled for March 10, 2020) referred to as part two of the agreement.

Pakistan's role in facilitating the peace talks was appreciated, and had a modest salutary effect on Pakistan's ties with the US. China too was supportive of

the talks. The Chinese had earlier even convened a meeting with the Taliban and Pakistan to advance the process of reconciliation. Russia was also forthcoming in this process. In February 2019, Russia had hosted a round of intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and major Afghan leaders, including former President Hamid Karzai.²⁰ Conspicuous absence was the NUG leadership, which was not invited. While hopes were rekindled for a peaceful settlement between the US and the Taliban, the 7th September 2019 tweet from the US President surprised everyone. Citing an attack by the Taliban on 3rd September 2019 that killed an American soldier and 11 others, President Trump tweeted that he “cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations.”²¹

The meeting he was referring to was planned for September 9, 2019 at Camp David where President Trump was to meet senior Taliban leaders as well as President Ashraf Ghani. President Trump’s tweet further said that “What kind of people would kill so many in order to seemingly strengthen their bargaining position? ... If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don’t have the power to negotiate meaningful agreement anyway.”²²

President Ashraf Ghani reacted to this announcement by saying that real peace would only be possible when the Taliban agreed to a ceasefire and direct talks with the Afghan government. The Taliban appeared undeterred and said that the Americans would “lose the most” for cancelling this meeting²³. There were reports that it was actually the Taliban who were not ready to come to Camp David until after the signing of the deal.²⁴ This irked President Trump who seemingly wanted a photo-op to showcase his role as a peace-maker. Before the Taliban could announce their reluctance to come to Camp David, President Trump cancelled the meeting as well as the talks, citing violence by the Taliban.

Why did the US President Cancel the Talks When Considerable Progress had been made?

The deal should have been clinched. The geo-political environment could not have been more propitious given the circumstances. The bulk of the major powers and Afghanistan’s neighbors had reached a conclusion that a peaceful Afghanistan would serve well the interest of peace and prosperity in the region. Why then did the talks fail just when several elements had been agreed upon? The US blames the Taliban for instigating violence, citing the killing of a US soldier at a time when negotiations were taking place. Notably, however, none of the parties

had yet agreed on a ceasefire. The Taliban, the Afghan and US forces were all still active on the battleground. President Trump's rationale for cancelling the talks is, therefore, not quite as convincing. If the real reason was the Taliban's insistence that the peace deal should be signed before the Camp David meeting, the cancellation was not the answer as it tantamounted to throwing the baby with the bathwater. Or was there a broader dynamic in play? Was the US shifting goal posts by demanding additional conditions from the Taliban? It appears that apart from the procedural issues, the differences on at least three elements of the peace process - namely, withdrawal of US troops, ceasefire, and role of the NUG - were running deep and had not been fully reconciled.

At the moment, the current status and future of the Afghan peace process remains ambiguous to say the least and will only be clear once the highly anticipated intra Afghan talks take place. The fact that all sides have expressed willingness to engage with each other along with the appointment of Abdullah Abdullah as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), to spearhead the talks, indicates that there is genuine willingness for peace. Moreover, positive overtures by President Ghani, including the release 2,000 Taliban prisoners as a good will gesture, along with the 3-day ceasefire which took place during Eid celebrations from May 24-26,2020,²⁵ have genuinely set the ground for intra -Afghan dialogue.

Withdrawal of Troops

Whether the US would withdraw its troops entirely or draw down was, understandably, not an easy decision. In the closing stages of the talks with the Taliban, President Trump said that "we are always going to have a presence". He told *Fox News radio* that "we are going down to 8,600 (from 14,000) and then will make a determination from there as to what happens."²⁶ However, the entire premise behind the Taliban's nearly two-decade insurgency has been the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which was agreed upon in the US-Taliban deal of February 2020. Under the deal, it was decided that during the next 135 days (after the signing of the deal), US troops would be reduced to 8,600 after which a complete withdrawal will take place in the next fourteen months. However, the drawdown, as noted in the deal would solely depend on the security situation of Afghanistan, the Taliban's reduction of violence, ceasefire and the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. The above clauses have not been met since the Taliban has continued to wage attacks against Afghan forces and apart from a 3 day ceasefire during Eid celebrations in May 2020, the group has not declared a

permanent ceasefire. Despite statements of willingness from the Taliban and Afghan government on intra Afghan talks, the talks are yet to take place.

The US has also expressed its desire to maintain counter terrorist units in the region and assert its right to attack Al Qaeda or other terrorists wherever they are. Many analysts have echoed concerns of a hasty withdrawal and the consequences it could have on Afghanistan in terms of a complete collapse of the government and a civil war that would make Afghanistan a perfect refuge for terrorists.

In this regard, even though the Taliban have continued to emphasize the withdrawal of US forces, at the same time, the group has stated that they would like to have friendly ties with the US and would want the US to come back and help build the country through reconstruction and development,²⁷ clearly indicating that the remaining US soldiers and contractors could continue to operate in the five military bases in Afghanistan. More importantly, this highlights the Taliban's subtle inclination for accepting US presence in the country on their terms. However, for now any reduction in troops will solely depend on the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks.

Ceasefire

The other critical element of the US-Taliban deal is the ceasefire. The Taliban claim that a ceasefire in the whole of Afghanistan was to be part of a comprehensive political settlement. In actual effect, the Taliban, the NUG, or even the NATO forces never observed any ceasefire during the course of the talks. Critics of the peace deal have rightly argued that an agreement without a ceasefire would mean that the Taliban would have a free hand to launch further attacks against the Afghan security forces. It was clear that the Taliban wanted to secure a deal from a position of strength on the ground. The argument does have merit. The level of confidence of the Taliban has grown as the talks have progressed. While the Taliban have demonstrated flexibility and pragmatism on certain issues as they had been accepted by the US, Russia and others as a political entity and an important stakeholder, at the same time they have continued with their kinetic actions on the ground. Although the group did demonstrate a reduction in their attacks from February 22 to 29, 2020 leading to the signing of the peace deal, the group wasted no time in resorting back to violence. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated on March 2, that "the reduction in violence has ended now and our operations will continue as normal ... and that the group will not attack foreign forces but operations will continue against the Kabul administration forces."²⁸ With

the exception of a brief 3-day ceasefire in May 2018, the Taliban have refused to halt attacks against Afghan security forces. Their ongoing violence continues to be a major stumbling block in the way of long-term peace.

Future of the Government in Kabul

Another much talked about element of the peace process has been the exclusion of the Afghan government from the peace process. From Kabul's perspective, the US talks accorded a kind of legitimacy to the Taliban. During the talks, the Taliban made it clear that they would not hold direct talks with the NUG, which they regarded as a 'puppet government.'²⁹ The US dropped its insistence on Taliban-NUG dialogue, and in fact signed a deal with the Taliban without the inclusion of Kabul, leaving the subject of intra-Afghan dialogue for the second phase. According to the US-Taliban agreement, intra Afghan talks were meant to begin on March 10, 2020, and it has since been unclear if these would ever begin.

Since the beginning of the process, the Taliban's refusal to engage with Kabul has been a major sticking point and stumbling block in the way of a peace deal. Moreover, it has been problematic. The Taliban's narrative holds no substance since the group has not only engaged with the puppet master - but in fact has signed an agreement with them.³⁰ Intra-Afghan talks and reconciliation is the need of the hour, particularly in the current state of affairs where the country is not only suffering from instability and violence but also a global pandemic.

However, recent announcements in June 2020 from Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, President Ashraf Ghani, and more importantly the Taliban on their willingness to engage in intra Afghan talks is a much needed step in the right direction and a highly welcome development. While no specific date has been given President Ghani's spokesman did state that the talks were expected in July. Moreover, the Taliban's willingness to engage with Kabul³¹ is pivotal since they have traditionally refused to do so in the past.

Where to Now?

The future of the Afghan peace process still remains uncertain. According to the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020, intra Afghan talks were meant to begin on March 10, 2020, and it has since been unclear if these would ever begin. However, statements coming from Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, President Ashraf Ghani, and the Taliban indicate that the much awaited intra - Afghan talks between the

Taliban and government may finally be taking place, but until they do, the future will remain unclear.

The talks between the US and Taliban had a limited agenda and the agreement they reached before President Trump called off the talks focused only on the drawdown of the US troops and the reciprocal counter terrorism guarantees by the Taliban. Many other pieces of the puzzle were not addressed. Some analysts believe that there are also larger reasons why peace has eluded Afghanistan for so long. The Afghan leadership is perpetually viewed as having been imported from abroad. The warlords still control most of the political parties, and there is lack of clarity on the place of Taliban in any future political set up. Moreover, the US has been pursuing an arguably unrealistic objective of converting Afghan society into a western democracy. Hence now that intra Afghan talks are finally on the verge of occurrence, critical aspects essential for peace that have often been overlooked in the past agreements i.e. the US-Taliban deal need to be addressed and focused in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks:

- **Withdrawal:** The withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan has been a primary condition of the Taliban and now is a key component of the US-Taliban deal signed in February 2020. However, focus should be laid on a gradual and responsible withdrawal, instead of a hasty and full withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan that could very well instigate a violent power struggle and a fratricidal civil war. Under the prevailing circumstances, the deal that was reached between the US and the Taliban was probably the best compromise possible. However, the withdrawal of troops should be a key aspect of the intra Afghan talks. Any troop reduction should only commence once progress has been made as a result of intra -Afghan talks and its outcome.
- **Counter-Terrorism Guarantees:** Counter-terrorism guarantees by the Taliban is a critical condition of the US for any peace deal to be successful. The US has linked the phased withdrawal of its troops to Taliban's efforts to countering terrorism in Afghanistan. In this regard, attaining assurance from the Taliban has for the most part been achieved. The Taliban have on several occasions stated that they will not allow their soil to be used against any country, including for attacks on the US and its allies.³²The Taliban have not been collaborating with any terrorist group, and this has been exemplified by their resistance to the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan. In fact the Taliban have been engulfed in a

bloody fight against the ISKP since the Daesh's emergence in Afghanistan as early as 2014/2015. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo has recognized the Taliban's commitment to the peace agreement and future of Afghanistan, by stating that the Taliban were keeping their end of the peace deal by working towards the reduction of violence and delivering their team to the ultimate negotiations."³³

- **Ceasefire:** Agreeing to a sustained ceasefire, and ensuring that it holds, remains the most difficult pre-requisite for any durable peace process. The Taliban believe that their ability to sustain and hold out for a long drawn-out fight is the critical card that they hold. Even if and when the parties finally do reach an agreement on a ceasefire, it will require a monumental effort to enforce and sustain it, given the high level of mutual distrust among the warring Afghan factions. For instance, in 1988, when the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, there was little focus on ensuring an enforcement mechanism in the Geneva Accords. Consequently, the warring factions resumed fighting soon after the Soviets left Afghan soil. From 1988 to 1996, the Mujahideen made several pledges for a ceasefire but could not ensure that it was observed by all. However, it is note-worthy that the Taliban draw their strength from their performance in the battlefield, not politics. The Taliban worry about losing battlefield momentum if they agree to a ceasefire. They are concerned that if they agree to a ceasefire, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would gain position on ground. Hence, they are inclined towards the ceasefire being the last element of a peace settlement. Pushing for a sustained ceasefire would be a key focus and outcome of the upcoming intra-Afghan talks.
- **Future Political Setup:** The question of what the future political setup would look like, and associated questions, would be another essential element of the peace settlement and upcoming Taliban-Kabul talks. So far, little to no progress has been made on envisioning what kind of a political set up Afghanistan would have in the future. Likewise, power sharing arrangements between different political factions, constitution of Afghanistan, rights of women, and other subjects have yet to be agreed upon, let alone discussed. Hence the status of such critical issues so pivotal to Afghanistan's future are expected to address in the talks between the Taliban and Afghan government. There is no shortcut to these thorny

issues, except through intra-Afghan dialogue and a realization by all Afghans that they must give peace a chance as the only way forward.

- **A Regional Consensus:** A regional consensus on the peace deal is also crucially important. By a welcome coincidence, the US, China, Russia and Afghanistan's neighbors all have a shared interest in seeing Afghanistan become peaceful and stable. There remain, however, elements that are using Afghan soil for their own strategic objectives. For a lasting peace, Afghanistan's neighbors and near neighbors would need to agree that there would be no outside interference in Afghanistan, nor would any country use Afghan soil against the other.

Addressing the Internal and External Challenges to a Peace Settlement in Afghanistan

Internal challenges are a determining factor for peace within Afghanistan. Not all parties in Afghanistan are on the same page when it comes to reconciliation with the Taliban. The NUG led by President Ashraf Ghani, which just concluded its five-year term, included elements which have traditionally opposed Taliban and would be reluctant to share power with the Taliban, as they have a different ideology and a different world view. President Ashraf Ghani was feeling marginalized and irrelevant to the peace process. Towards the end of his term, he started gathering around him a cabal of figures, who, like him, were threatened by a peace settlement. However, now that he has secured a second term for himself, and has reached a political compromise with Abdullah, it is hoped that both leaders will focus on the future of the country and not indulge in petty politics. Moreover, the Afghan government's heavy dependence on American support will be one more factor to prevent him from actively opposing any peace deal that the Americans finalize with the Taliban.

It is true that the Taliban are not the movement it was during the nineties. Years of war fatigue and internal fissures have made them realize that they cannot take over the entire territory of Afghanistan. They seem more willing to talk about co-existence with other Afghan factions and oppose the use of Afghan soil by Al Qaeda or other terrorist entities for terrorism elsewhere. The Taliban seem to have become pragmatic in their approach, and during the course of talks had been giving indications that they were not looking for monopoly of power and would be amenable to an inclusive political set up.³⁴ The Taliban realize that this is not the nineties. Times have changed, and they cannot sweep the entire country

effortlessly. At the Moscow meeting held in February 2019, the Taliban listened as Afghan women addressed the meeting³⁵. As of now, there is no agreement or even clarity on a potential future political set up, power-sharing formula, or security arrangements. The agenda and format of the intra-Afghan dialogue is yet to be worked out. Future status of the Afghan Constitution is also not clear, as the Taliban have not accepted it.

External challenges involve regional and international state actors. While the region, as a whole, benefits from peace in Afghanistan, there are some regional states which could end up becoming embroiled in proxy fights, so as not to be overshadowed by their rivals. Scores of intelligence agencies have played proxy games in Afghanistan for decades. The US itself is also quite divided on this question. While President Trump has been keen to withdraw from what he calls “endless wars of unlimited spending and death”³⁶, not everyone in the US is on board on the complete pull-out, particularly the Pentagon. The US Senate, too, has opposed the withdrawal plan. Many American analysts, like Ryan Crocker, have termed it as ‘surrender’³⁷. On balance, the US seems quite determined to cut its financial losses, end the war, find a face-saving peace settlement, make provision for a Counter Terrorism force, and leave Afghanistan.

Russia, too, has more to gain from a stable Afghanistan than an unstable and vulnerable Afghanistan. The Russians are deeply concerned about terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, as well as narcotics. Russia and the Central Asians are concerned about the spill-over of the so-called ISKP into Central Asia. Russia would also like to serve as a trade route for goods to and from Afghanistan. Therefore, Russia is likely to remain supportive of a stable but politically neutral dispensation in Kabul. Iran has historical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic links with Afghanistan. It has been home to two million Afghan refugees.³⁸ Traditionally, Iran has kept close ties with the erstwhile Northern Alliance, especially Tajiks and Shia Hazaras. Of late, Iran has also cultivated links with Taliban, ostensibly to keep Daesh away from its borders. However, Iran’s ambitions should not be viewed as hegemonic. Iran essentially wants to protect its interests: securing its eastern border, countering narcotics, preserving flow of waters from Afghanistan, economic partnership with Afghanistan, and conduit for transit trade of Afghanistan. Iran would, thus, benefit from a stable Afghanistan provided Kabul is not entirely in Taliban hands. India has invested huge sums (about US \$ 3 billion) on development of infrastructure in Afghanistan.³⁹ However, it can be argued that Indian presence in Afghanistan is not totally benign, as it has found it expedient to use the instability in Afghanistan to pursue its double-squeeze policy against Pakistan.

India has also been traditionally opposed to reconciliation with Taliban. However, there are signs that both India and the Taliban are now adjusting to the changing realities. Indications are that India may not actively oppose the peace settlement. However, it would like to see a political set up that includes the elements of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, with which India enjoys a degree of ideological congruence and historical comfort. As and when the US eventually withdraws from Afghanistan, India could step up its subversive activities against Pakistan unless a reasonably robust regional consensus is secured on non-interference in Afghanistan.

China, being a neighbor, regards itself as a stakeholder in Afghanistan. The advent of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a possible extension of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan, increases China's strategic and socio-economic influence in the region. A stable Afghanistan also opens up doors for China to exploit the former's rich mineral resource potential. Peace in Afghanistan will also help China counter the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). China, thus, has direct stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. Pakistan and China are likely to continue working together in this regard. On September 7, 2019, the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan met in Islamabad to reaffirm their efforts for peace in Afghanistan. In due course, this could set the stage for the involvement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to advance the cause of peace in Afghanistan.

The Arab countries of the Gulf have indirectly benefitted from the Afghan war, as Americans have established their main bases in the Gulf countries. If the American troops are withdrawn, the Gulf countries are likely to see Afghanistan in the context of the economic potential it offers. Qatar could have more leverage since the Taliban office had been hosted by it for years. Given the years of conflict, a kind of "Marshal Plan" would be required for reconstruction in Afghanistan, for which the Gulf countries could play an important role, provided of course the oil prices come out of the present downturn. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), however, would observe closely on what Iran does or does not do in Afghanistan, and vice versa. On balance, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are also likely to remain supportive of the peace settlement.

How should Pakistan Manage these Challenges?

Pakistan has the most to gain from peace and stability in Afghanistan. Islamabad has continued to exert efforts publicly as well as privately to push for a

peaceful settlement.⁴⁰ Close relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan remain the most effective way to deal with the spoilers of peace within Afghanistan and the region. Both countries should work on the issues that continue to stall ties: political, security, military, economic and social. Pakistan has, for some time now, pursued a policy of having no favorites. That is a wise policy. Pakistan, being a neighbor, must maintain contacts with all relevant Afghan factions. Recognizing that peace in Afghanistan serves its own interest, in June 2020, Pakistan appointed Muhammad Sadiq, Pakistan's former Ambassador to Kabul, as Pakistan's special representative on Afghanistan.⁴¹ The move is a highly welcome development which not only demonstrates Pakistan's commitment to the peace process as well as establishing stronger ties with Afghanistan.

A focused effort in improving and reinforcing the existing economic and trade cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan is also the need of the hour, and could help define the future parameters of a strong bilateral relationship. Transit trade framework must be improved to facilitate Afghan trade through Pakistan. In this regard, Pakistan's decision to operationalize the Gwadar port for Afghan transit trade in May 2020 again is a highly welcome development, marking the beginning of a new era of trade via sea route from Gwadar to Afghanistan.⁴²

Pakistan's image amongst the Afghan population, which has suffered over the years, must be turned around as an important enabler of a mutually beneficial relationship. To that end, Pakistan must reinforce its soft power by completing the ongoing socio-economic projects in Afghanistan, facilitating visas and border crossings for traders, medical cases, students, divided families, and promoting people to people contacts.

An unstable Afghanistan is a matter of concern to all regional states. Few benefit if terrorist entities like the ISKP flourish in Afghanistan by using ungoverned spaces to stage terrorist attacks, or narcotics drugs are cultivated and exported. All regional states would, therefore, benefit from peace in Afghanistan, making it crucial to bring all regional countries on board regarding a peace settlement. Pakistan should also maintain close contact with all regional players, including China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian Republics.

One major issue is the use of Afghan soil against Pakistan. Islamabad must impress upon the US to weigh in on India to desist from anti-Pakistan moves. This should also be made clear to all Afghan factions that Pakistan wants friendly ties with Afghanistan, and that if they show sensitivity to Pakistan's security interests, it

would help maintain good neighborly relations. Regarding Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) and other terrorist groups, Islamabad needs to make it clear to the US and Taliban upfront that these anti-Pakistan entities must not be allowed any space once the peace settlement happens and some consensus political set up is formed. This should remain a non-negotiable point.

An effective management of the border (completion of fencing and effective handling of the crossing points) and close contacts with the tribes and leaders living on both sides of Pak-Afghan border could help counter negative moves of internal Afghan spoilers and their foreign backers. Daily, thousands of people cross the 2,600 kilometers Pak – Afghan border.⁴³ Finding an appropriate solution to re-settlement of Afghan refugees would also be important.

Pursuing regional cooperative and development frameworks would increase interdependence, and all Afghan factions are likely to support them. A case in point is Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) gas pipeline, where Turkmenistan received utmost cooperation from all Afghan factions during the survey and other activities inside Afghanistan. Central Asia South Asia (CASA-1000) too would build stakes of participating states in Afghan stability. Likewise, extension of CPEC to Afghanistan can unleash enormous opportunities for peace. These regional frameworks could restrict the influence of regional spoilers. The SCO forum could be used to build regional consensus against terrorism and against cultivation of narcotics in Afghanistan.

There are growing tensions between Iran and the United States and Saudi Arabia. If the US goes for any kinetic use of force against Iran, the latter would most likely hit back in every direction, creating a crisis in the world energy systems. Iran could also make it costly for the US in other theatres such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Proxy wars in Afghanistan could increase, and so could the casualties of the American soldiers remaining in Afghanistan.

Taking everything into account, war in Afghanistan serves no one. The history of modern Afghanistan is replete with lost opportunities, hence the sooner all major and regional players realize and acknowledge this, the better. Given its enormous natural resources, Afghanistan indeed has every potential to become the heart of Asia or serve a regional roundabout, bringing countries closer for common good. Afghans have suffered for far too long. They deserve peace. So does the region.

END NOTES

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