

# Afghan Peace Process Future Prospects



**Amina Khan**



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# **Afghan Peace Process: Future Prospects**

**Amina Khan\***

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## **Abstract**

*Since 2001, Afghan history has been beset by half-hearted attempts at achieving a peace agreement between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul. The year 2018 and onwards, however, stands out as a unique time period which has showcased exceptional progress towards the Afghan peace process. An internal shift within the Taliban to become more receptive to dialogue, Kabul's unprecedented overtures towards the Taliban, the US support for a peaceful settlement and increasing role of regional actors in the peace process are all part of a series of ground-breaking positional pivots that make the prospects of a negotiated settlement plausible. Unfortunately, the road to end the Afghan war is not without its pitfalls as several hurdles continue to block the path to a durable peace process. From certain spoilers within Kabul as well the Taliban that oppose peace and as a consequence continue to take advantage from the status quo to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) which benefits from the continued conflict between Kabul and the Taliban, there are many actors diligently working against the peace process in Afghanistan. This study aims to recognise the ongoing critical developments in the peace process and focus on their impacts on Afghanistan. The study also aims to focus on stakeholders — Russia, China, and Pakistan and their increasing role in the peace process. Moreover, the paper discusses the challenges that stand in the way of the Afghan peace process.*

## **Introduction**

Although the past eighteen years have been missing any meaningful progress towards a comprehensive settlement between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban, the events in 2018 and onwards proved to be the most promising. Even though a negotiated settlement with the Taliban remains elusive, a number of unprecedented developments have taken place that warrant recognition.

These can be narrowed down to three aspects:

- Change within the Taliban.

- US and Kabul's tilt towards peaceful settlement.
- The growing role of regional actors.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan, there have been numerous attempts to establish a meaningful dialogue with the Taliban in an effort for peace. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, most of them have failed to deliver in what is now a history of failed dialogues and missed opportunities.

In Afghanistan, peace efforts have been made as early as 2001 when Hamid Karzai, as the interim head declared an amnesty for common Taliban fighters.<sup>1</sup> He did so despite vehement opposition from different ethnic and political factions and continued to do so from 2003 to 2004 to those fighters who forewent terrorism, disarmed and disassociated from al-Qaeda. In another attempt to strengthen the peace programme, President Karzai set up the Takhim-e-Solh (PTS) in February 2004 to promote reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

Despite numerous attempts at peace, President Karzai's presidency was marked with failed attempts to convince top Taliban members to reconcile. Despite making multiple calls for dialogue and offering positions in the government, the government received limited success as some Taliban fighters including some senior members did reconcile. However, the majority of the Taliban openly voiced their distrust of the Karzai administration's disingenuous attempts at peace as well as labelling Karzai as an American puppet.<sup>3</sup>

In the year 2007 (September), a temporary breakthrough was witnessed when the Taliban indicated their willingness to talk to the

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Watt and Julian Borger, "Taliban Promise to Surrender Kandahar," *Guardian*, December 7, 2001,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/07/afghanistan.julianborger1>

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Gossman and Sari Kouvo, "Tell Us How This Ends," *Afghan Analyst Network*, February 2013, [https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2013-06\\_AAN\\_TransitionalJustice1.pdf](https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2013-06_AAN_TransitionalJustice1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Nick Paton Walsh and Masoud Popalzai, "Taliban Will Not Talk Peace with Karzai Government, Spokesman Says," *CNN*, February 14, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/14/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban/index.html>



Afghan government.<sup>4</sup> However, the Taliban soon backtracked, sticking to their original demands of a complete withdrawal of foreign troops followed by the establishment of Shariah.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the strategy of pursuing dialogue whilst carrying out military action against the negotiating Taliban along with Karzai's stern opposition towards the establishment of the group's Doha office<sup>6</sup> failed to win the group's confidence towards a peace agreement by the Afghan government. In the same light, funds donated by the international community for the reformation and reintegration of Taliban factions are missing creating further misgivings about Kabul in the minds of the Taliban.<sup>7</sup> Hence as a consequence, the government's amnesty programme was not able to deliver.

In 2010, in an attempt to move away from the past history of failed dialogue, Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, established the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) headed by the former Afghan President, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the HPC was the official arm of the government responsible for negotiating peace.<sup>8</sup> The council was tasked with using the offer of amnesty to search for a multitude of

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<sup>4</sup> Talatbek Masadykov, Antonio Giustozzi and James Michael Page, "Negotiating with the Taliban: Toward a Solution for the Afghan Conflict," Working Paper no. 66, *Crisis States Research Center*, January 2010, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csrc-working-papers-phase-two/wp66.2-negotiating-with-the-taliban.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ashley Jackson, "Perspectives on Peace from Taliban Areas of Afghanistan," Special Report, No 449, *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2019, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/perspectives\\_on\\_peace\\_from\\_taliban\\_areas\\_of\\_afghanistan.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/perspectives_on_peace_from_taliban_areas_of_afghanistan.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Max Ehrenfreund, "Karzai Objects to Peace Talks with Taliban in Doha After Kabul, Bagram Attacks," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/karzai-objects-to-peace-talks-with-taliban-in-doha-after-kabul-bagram-attacks/2013/06/19/a1daac70-d912-11e2-a9f2-42ee3912ae0e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/karzai-objects-to-peace-talks-with-taliban-in-doha-after-kabul-bagram-attacks/2013/06/19/a1daac70-d912-11e2-a9f2-42ee3912ae0e_story.html)

<sup>7</sup> "Donors Suspend Financial Aids to HPC," *Ariana News*, February 6, 2016, <https://ariananews.af/donors-suspend-financial-aids-to-peace-council/>

<sup>8</sup> Samson Desta and Matiullah Mati, "Afghanistan Unveils List of Peace Council Members," *CNN*, September 28, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/09/28/afghanistan.taliban.reconciliation/index.html>

alternatives for a peaceful solution with the Taliban. However, the HPC has also failed to deliver.

## **Kabul's Role Since 2014**

Headed by President, Ashraf Ghani, the National Unity Government (NUG) was tasked with reaching out to the Afghan Taliban and initiating dialogue with the Taliban. Ghani even in his inaugural address on September 29, 2014, called upon the group and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar to engage in dialogue with Kabul.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, President Ghani made serious and renewed efforts domestically by independently engaging with different ethnic and political factions within civil society. On an international level, he reached out to China, the Arab world and in particular Pakistan, seeking support for establishing a dialogue with the group. Hence, in this aspect, several international and regional initiatives took place to look for peace and promote dialogue, these include amongst others, talks in Doha from 2011-2013, track two initiatives like Pugwash in May 2015, Urumqi in June 2015 and multilateral ones such as the Murree Peace Process in July 2015, Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference in December 2015 and the 2016 Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) to name a few.

Except for the Murree Peace Process which stands as the first official round of direct Taliban-Afghan government talks<sup>10</sup> including Qari Din Muhammad, Mullah Abbas Akhund, Maulvi Jaliland Mullah Hasan,<sup>11</sup> other talks failed to either include the Taliban or produce results. These series of failures highlighted that a lack of clarity and coordination over which process takes precedence over

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<sup>9</sup> Kay Johnson, "Afghanistan Swears in New Leader Amid Dispute, Violence," *Reuters*, September 29, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics/afghanistan-swears-in-new-leader-amid-dispute-violence-idUSKCN0HN0XA20140929>

<sup>10</sup> Mateen Haider, "First Round of Afghan Govt, Taliban Dialogue Concludes in Murree," *Dawn*, July 7, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1192941>

<sup>11</sup> "Murree Peace Initiative and Future Course," *News*, July 22, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/52287-murree-peace-initiative-and-future-course>

the other has remained a major flaw in the approach so far adopted towards the Afghan peace process.<sup>12</sup>

As a coordinated effort among the officials of Kabul, Islamabad, Washington and Beijing, the QCG was formed to revive dialogue between Kabul and Taliban in January 2016.<sup>13</sup> Despite having several rounds of talks urging Kabul and the Taliban to resume direct talks,<sup>14</sup> no headway could be made in the process as the Taliban not only refused to engage with the government in Kabul but questioned the significance of the QCG.

Resultantly, the NUG initiated the Kabul Process in June 2017 when numerous peace initiatives towards the Taliban failed to deliver.<sup>15</sup> This development paved the way for the first “Afghan-led and -owned” modality of establishing security cooperation at the regional level curbing the menace of terrorism and reinvigorating the otherwise stalled peace process.<sup>16</sup>

This unique Afghan-led initiative highlighted the NUG’s shift towards unilateral and independent resolution of its own issues, independent from the influence of external actors. However, the Kabul Process’s hallmark of being an inclusive Afghan-led and owned initiative fell short as the all-important Afghan Taliban were not included. This absence proved that an inclusive and definitive solution to the Afghan peace process is impossible without constructive political engagement and dialogue with the Taliban.

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<sup>12</sup> “Initiatives Focusing on Afghanistan — A Pakistani Perspective.”

<sup>13</sup> “Joint Press Statement First Meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation,” January 11, 2016, <https://af.usembassy.gov/joint-press-release-quadrilateral-coordination-group-afghan-peace-reconciliation-january-11-2016/>

<sup>14</sup> “The Fourth Meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China,” US Embassy in Kabul, February 23, 2016, <https://af.usembassy.gov/fourth-meeting-quadrilateral-coordination-group-qcg-afghanistan-pakistan-united-states-china-february-23-2016/>

<sup>15</sup> “President Ghani’s Remarks At The Kabul Process Conference,” June 6, 2017, <https://president.gov.af/en/SOKP>

<sup>16</sup> “Ghani Officially Opens Kabul Process Meeting,” *Tolo News*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-officially-opens-kabul-process-meeting>,

To remedy the shortfall caused by the Taliban's absence, President Ghani tried to cajole them towards peace talks by offering to hold the talks at a mutually agreeable place, as well as pledging the group an opportunity to open a representative office in Kabul once tangible progress is made in the talks.<sup>17</sup> However, the Taliban rejected Kabul's offer, terming it as an attempt to not only endorse but prolong the foreign occupation of Afghanistan,<sup>18</sup> perhaps because Kabul's prerequisites for the peace talks were "recognition of the Afghan constitution, continuity of the reforms of educating and advancing the rights of women, as well as the renunciation of violence and links with terrorist groups."<sup>19</sup> While the first Kabul process was an applaudable initiative in a long time by the Afghan government, unfortunately, in terms of the peace process, practically it did not achieve much, as the Taliban continued to stay clear from the prospects of initiating peace talks.

The second round of the Kabul initiative in February 2018, however, redeemed the failures of its predecessor and marked the beginning of the peace process with the Taliban. During the second round of Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, President Ghani proposed:

- To recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political group.
- To give the Taliban an autonomous office in Kabul.
- To release the Taliban prisoners.
- To remove the Taliban from international blacklists.
- To give them security guarantees.
- To ensure a ceasefire along with giving offers to reintegrate and provide support for employment if they were willing to join the peace process.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Afghanistan Holds Peace Conference Amid Violence and Protests," *Guardian*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/06/afghanistan-peace-conference-violence-protests-kabul-bombing>

<sup>18</sup> "Ghani Officially Opens Kabul Process Meeting."

<sup>19</sup> "Pakistan Waging 'Undeclared War of Aggression' Against Afghanistan, Ghani Tells Kabul Process," *Dawn*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1337775>

<sup>20</sup> "'Accept Peace To Safeguard Afghanistan,' President Tells Taliban," *Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty*, February 28, 2018,

More significantly, for the first time in the history of the peace process, Ghani offered to hold new elections with the Taliban and a constitutional review, an issue that has been on the Taliban's agenda for a long while.<sup>21</sup> In return for these momentous reforms, the group was expected to recognise the Ghani administration as legitimate and uphold the rule of law particularly women rights.<sup>22</sup>

Ghani's labour paid off on June 5, 2018 when he offered a temporary and unconditional ceasefire from June 12-19, 2018 to the Taliban in respect of Eid. Ghani claimed that the offer presented an opening for the group to rethink their policy and move towards peace<sup>23</sup> and, on June 9, it seemed like he was right as the Taliban announced a three-day ceasefire, honouring Ghani's offer.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban Spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, even used the unique moment of cooperation to layout the Taliban's demands and their moral positioning in justification to those demands. He stated that it is evident by the ceasefire that the Taliban's aspirations and demands align with the Afghan people – removal of foreign elements and establishment of Islamic government<sup>25</sup> and this proves, he maintained that they are a coherent group that can be trusted.<sup>26</sup>

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<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-ghani-kabul-conference-taliban-lets-build-together/29067287.html>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "Framing the Kabul Conference of February 28, 2018," *Pajhwok*, February 28, 2018, <http://peace.pajhwok.com/en/startegies/framing-kabul-conference-february-28-2018>

<sup>23</sup> "Ghani Announces Temporary Truce With Afghan Taliban," June 7, 2018, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-ghani-announces-truce-with-taliban/29277791.html>

<sup>24</sup> "Afghan Taliban Announces Eid Ceasefire For First Time Since 2001," June 9, 2018, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/afghan-taliban-announces-eid-ceasefire-time-180609055631419.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ben Farmer, "Taliban to Resume Fighting as it Ends First Ceasefire in 17 Years," *Telegraph*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/17/taliban-resume-fighting-ends-first-ceasefire-17-years/>

<sup>26</sup> Hamid Shalizi, "Taliban Rejects Pleas by Afghan Elders for a Ceasefire Extension," *Reuters*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security/taliban-rejects-pleas-by-afghan-elders-for-a-ceasefire-extension-idUSKBN1JL1TL>

Moreover, the Taliban rejected Kabul's offer to extend the ceasefire by 10 days based on their long-standing demand of foreign military presence in Afghanistan. The Taliban said "they were not interested in talks while foreign forces continued to be on Afghan soil ...and would resume operations against them and their internal puppets."<sup>27</sup> Despite this setback, Ghani pursued the Taliban to accept his peace proposal of February 2018 and engage in a formal dialogue.

## **Taliban**

Despite having being crushed by the US-NATO invasion in 2001, the Taliban continued to sustain their identity as a pivotal player in the Afghan conflict. In spite of incurring major losses in terms of strength through loss of fighters, internal cohesion through defections and leadership through reconciliation of senior leaders with Kabul, the Taliban continued to expand their authority and control in Afghanistan. They retained this level of control and actively strived to exert further control over other sections of the country by effectively recovering in strength from their military losses and maintaining their overall strength, resolve and capability.

With the spiritual and ideological teachings of the late Mullah Muhammad Omar Akhund at their helm, since the group's birth in 1994, the Taliban have remained unified and fairly consistent. In fact, even though their current hierarchy puts Mullah Haibatullah Akhonzada as the acting and third Amir of the group, they continue to seek guidance from the ideology and teachings of Mullah Omar who seems to be their Amir-ul-Momineen (Commander of the Faithful).<sup>28</sup> Despite their apparent unity, however, the group has had important deviations and divisions within its senior leadership.

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<sup>27</sup> "Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani Ends Ceasefire with Taliban," *Deutsche Welle*, June 30, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-president-ashraf-ghani-ends-ceasefire-with-taliban/a-44467901>

<sup>28</sup> Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "SalatullIstisqa Performed as Per Amir ul Momineen Directive," November 8, 2018, <http://www.alemarah-english.org/?p=37288> for bibliography of Mullah Omar Akhund

The first such division, after Mullah Omar's death, arose when many in the senior leadership opposed the appointment of his close aid, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor, as head of the group in August 2015. Despite objections, the Taliban's leading council declared Mansoor the new Amir of the group.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, the position of deputy heads of the group was allotted to Sirajuddin Haqqani and Haibatullah Akhunzada.<sup>30</sup> At first, Mansoor's appointment caused many influential figures within the group such as Mullah Yaqoob (Mullah Omar's son) and Mullah Abdul Manan (Mullah Omar's brother) to denounce his leadership. However, both eventually accepted Mansoor and declared their allegiance to him.<sup>31</sup> Some important commanders such as Abdul Qayum Zakir and Mullah Rasool Akhund also broke away from the main group in retaliation, however, even Zakir later reconciled with Mansoor in 2016 and declared him as the Amir of the Taliban.<sup>32</sup>

Many believe that Mullah Mansoor wanted the Taliban to disassociate from their tarnished image of a barbaric violent group in favour of a more pragmatic social and political faction capable of governing a diverse country such as Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Hence, despite relying on warfare, during his tenure, there were major shifts away from such practices that distanced the Taliban from the larger Afghan community. Despite introducing major changes within the group, Mullah Mansoor could not lead the Taliban for long since he

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<sup>29</sup> Shereena Qazi, "Taliban Leaders Dispute Appointment of Mullah Mansoor," *Al Jazeera*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/taliban-leaders-dispute-appointment-mullah-mansoor-150731151533576.html>

<sup>30</sup> Taimoor Shah and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Pick New Chief and 2 Hard-Line Deputies," *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/asia/taliban-leader-announcement.html>

<sup>31</sup> Daud Qarizadah, "Afghan Taliban: Mullah Mansoor's Battle to be Leader," *BBC*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34189855>

<sup>32</sup> "Top Dissident Mullah Zakir Pledges Allegiance to Mansoor," *Pajhwok News*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/03/31/top-dissident-mullah-zakir-pledges-allegiance-mansoor>

<sup>33</sup> Ashley Jackson, "The Taliban's Fight for Hearts and Minds," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/12/the-talibans-fight-for-hearts-and-minds-ghanistan/>

was killed in a targeted US drone strike in May 2016.<sup>34</sup> Hence, a new leader was needed and the Taliban moved quickly to appoint Mullah Haibatullah as the new Amir.<sup>35</sup> The Taliban had intentionally appointed a more temporal leader to coax many factions that had opposed Mullah Mansoor to reconcile and return to the main fold of the Taliban which worked as many factions returned.

When Haibatullah was elected, many feared that focus would be laid on bolstering the Taliban's military capabilities which would derail the peace process. However, under Haibatullah's leadership, the group has exhibited unprecedented overtures towards a peaceful settlement. The group voiced its willingness to engage with the US directly by writing a letter in February 2018 to President Trump and the American people, calling for "peaceful dialogue."<sup>36</sup> Since then, this was further followed by several significant developments such as the group's acceptance of a three-day ceasefire in June 2018,<sup>37</sup> several rounds of negotiations with the US in Doha,<sup>38</sup> Taliban's active and public participation in the Moscow Format and Moscow talks.<sup>39</sup> Hence, under Haibatullah, the group has made larger strides towards Afghan peace than any other previous leader. The Taliban of today denounce the killing of civilians.<sup>40</sup> The group appears to

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<sup>34</sup> [https://twitter.com/hashtag/Pakistan?src=hash&ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dw.com%2Fen%2Fafghans-confirm-death-of-taliban-leader-mullah-akhtar-mansour-after-us-drone-strike%2Fa-19275872](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Pakistan?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dw.com%2Fen%2Fafghans-confirm-death-of-taliban-leader-mullah-akhtar-mansour-after-us-drone-strike%2Fa-19275872)

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, "Taliban Names Molvi Akhuzada as Their New Leader," *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-names-maulavi-haibatullah-as-new-leader-1464156389>

<sup>36</sup> "Letter of the Islamic Emirate to the American people," The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, February 14, 2018, <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=25640>

<sup>37</sup> Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan Taliban Announces Ceasefire with Taliban until June 20."

<sup>38</sup> "US-Taliban Talks End in Doha with 'Some Progress': Taliban," *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/taliban-talks-doha-progress-taliban-190509150545009.html>

<sup>39</sup> "Moscow Meeting Wrapped Up With A Joint Statement," *Tolo News*, May 30, 2019,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=9&v=v69PVYbavkc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=v69PVYbavkc)  
<sup>40</sup> "Taliban Official: 'War in Afghanistan Should End Soon,'" *BBC News*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk2QhECbTtI>



have moved beyond its callous and brutal attitude towards women exercised in the 1990s, in favour of an ideology that favours women's right to education, work and the right to choose their spouse.<sup>41</sup>

From the beginning of the Taliban insurgency, their demands have remained consistent focusing on the withdrawal of foreign forces and the implementation of an Afghan system based on Islamic Sharia.<sup>42</sup> Other demands have included recognition of the group as a legitimate party, right to establish an official office,<sup>43</sup> a guarantee of free movement by releasing their prisoners,<sup>44</sup> and their removal from international blacklists. More recently, they have also asked for<sup>45</sup> a new constitution independent from foreign influence (a point they show more flexibility on) and negotiations with the US to be kept independent from Kabul who they will engage with once peace talks with the US are done.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the past, however, the Taliban do not foresee monopoly of power but rather have shown willingness to a system of power-sharing in the future Afghan political arena.

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<sup>41</sup> Frud Bezhan, "Afghan Taliban Open To Women's Rights — But Only On Its Terms," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghanistan-open-women-s-rights-only-terms/29755102.html>

<sup>42</sup> "Transcript of Speech Delivered by Delegation of Islamic Emirate (Afghan Taliban) at Moscow Conference", *Security Risks Asia*, December 10, 2018, [https://www.security-risks.com/security-trends-south-asia/afghanistan/transcript-of-speech-delivered-by-delegation-of-islamic-emirate-\[afghan-taliban\]-at-moscow-conference-11926.html](https://www.security-risks.com/security-trends-south-asia/afghanistan/transcript-of-speech-delivered-by-delegation-of-islamic-emirate-[afghan-taliban]-at-moscow-conference-11926.html)

<sup>43</sup> Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Afghan President Offers Taliban Local Office, but Group Wants Doha Instead," *Reuters*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics/afghan-president-offers-taliban-local-office-but-group-wants-doha-instead-idUSKCN1PZ0G5>

<sup>44</sup> "US-Taliban Talks," *News*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/407787-us-taliban-talks>

<sup>45</sup> "REFEED: Interview with Head of Taliban Delegation Following Afghanistan Peace Talks \*EXCLUSIVE\*," *Ruptly*, November 9, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD\\_S20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD_S20)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

They have abandoned their demand for a military victory, instead of pushing for an end to the conflict and withdrawal of the US forces through talks.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, while the Taliban's principal demand has been the withdrawal of the US forces, more recently, the group has indicated inclination towards developing cordial ties with the US as well as allowing the US presence (on Afghan terms) for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Similarly, they have budged on their demand for a constitution embedded in the rigid Islamic principles, Afghan nationalism, historical achievements, national interests, social justice, that is committed to human rights and guarantees the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and its citizens."<sup>48</sup> They have even focused on a more open foreign policy and have had meetings with countries they opposed in the past such as Russia. Considering these were the same Taliban that refused to acknowledge basic human rights, Afghan nationalism and the rights of women, their recent statements and gesture seem to indicate a rapidly evolving organisation that is staking its claim as a political and social entity disassociated with its violent past.

## **Recognition for a Peaceful Settlement**

One of the most important factors that have led to strong prospects for successful peace dialogue in Afghanistan is the US divergence from their old stance of not directly negotiating with the Taliban. Previously, the US had pushed for a direct bilateral dialogue between Kabul-Taliban. Unfortunately, it took the US policymakers years of bloodshed and violence to understand something Pakistan had been espousing for a while: there will never be peace in Afghanistan without honest political reconciliation with the Taliban. However, with the US change of stance and willingness to accept the Taliban's demands for direct talks resulted in the meaningful manifestation of direct US-Taliban talks what is known as the Doha Peace Talks eventually leading to the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal on February 29, 2020.

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<sup>47</sup> "Taliban Official: War in Afghanistan Should End Soon."  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk2QhECbTtI>

<sup>48</sup> "Complete transcript of speech delivered by delegation of Islamic Emirate in Moscow Conference," *Alemarah English*, February 5, 2019,  
<http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=41268>

## Doha Peace Talks

Supported by the US, Qatar has risen to the role of the mediator between the Taliban and Kabul since 2011. In 2013, the initiative was able to reach a major milestone as it was successful in opening up a political office for the group in Doha to pursue peace talks.<sup>49</sup> The milestone was short-lived, however, as the Karzai government, fearing that the office was being exploited by the Taliban to showcase themselves as a viable and independent alternative to Kabul to major stakeholders, immediately called the talks off.<sup>50</sup> This led to a growing sentiment within the Taliban that they had been deceived by the US and more so by the Karzai government — thus derailing any hopes of talks.<sup>51</sup> Even though the US and Qatar made several attempts to salvage peace talks, the efforts failed to deliver until more recently, with the initiation of the Doha talks in July 2018.

The first round of Doha talks took place in Doha in July 2018, between the US representatives, led by Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice Wells and members of the Taliban's political office led by Sher Abbas Stanakzai.<sup>52</sup> Although the talks were initiated to push the peace process in a meaningful direction, as if they were foreshadowing the future of further talks, they failed to achieve tangible progress. On September 5, 2018, the Trump administration appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as a Special Representative for Afghanistan to spearhead the peace process with Taliban.

As a result, in October 2018, the second round of the Doha talks took place where both sides discussed issues about the peace

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<sup>49</sup> “Afghan Taliban Opens First Office In Doha As U.S. Plans Talks,” *RFE/RL*, June 18, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-us-taliban-talks/25020991.html>

<sup>50</sup> Dan Roberts and Emma Graham-Harrison, “US Races to Mollify Hamid Karzai Over Plans for Peace Talks with Taliban,” *Guardian*, June 19, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/us-karzai-peace-talks-taliban>

<sup>51</sup> Afghan Taliban Opens First Office in Doha as US Plans Talks, *RFE/RL*, June 19, 2013, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/51d6caf42a.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “Khalilzad Holds Direct Talks with Afghan Taliban in Qatar,” *Dawn*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1438880>.

process, however, nothing tangible was achieved apart from promises to continue talks.<sup>53</sup> The third round of Doha talks which took place in November 2018, suffered a similar fate and it ended without tangible gains. The fourth round of Doha talks, which took place in January 2019, appeared to have taken the peace process in a more positive direction as Zalmay Khalilzad stated that the “meetings were more productive than they have been in the past”....<sup>54</sup> and that “both sides made significant progress on vital issues<sup>55</sup> such as counter-terrorism assurances, troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire.”<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, both sides failed to capitalise on the positive momentum of the fourth round as it also failed to achieve any tangible progress. Khalilzad summed up the stumbling blocks regarding the failure of the fourth round stating that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and everything must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire.”<sup>57</sup> The fifth round of talks took place between February and March 2019. Lasting for 11 days, these were among the highest level of talks between the two sides, since Khalilzad met the Taliban’s co-founder and top political leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.<sup>58</sup> Despite Baradar’s participation, the talks ended without any major breakthrough.

Hope for peace was once more reignited in May 2019 during the sixth round of talks, when Zalmay Khalilzad met with Mullah Baradar where talks continued to revolve around “full withdrawal of foreign forces” and “preventing Afghanistan from harming

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> <https://twitter.com/us4afghanpeace/status/1089194660218785792?lang=en>, January 26,2019.

<sup>55</sup> <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1089194660218785792> , January 26,2019.

<sup>56</sup> <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513780375625730>, March 12, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1089194661573480449>,January 26, 2019

<sup>58</sup> “Afghan Peace Talks: Taliban Co-Founder Meets Top White House Envoy”, *BBC*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47351369>

others.”<sup>59</sup> Although the presence of Baradar was highly significant in the peace process, the talks failed due to Taliban’s persistent refusal to talk to Kabul.

The seventh round of talks took place on July 1, 2019, with the air of urgency and criticality as one US official called it a “make or break” moment for the peace process and Taliban officials termed it a “critical” round.<sup>60</sup> However, the most important development in the seventh round was the announcement of an intra-Afghan dialogue on July 7-8, 2019, between a sixty-member delegation from Kabul consisting of members of the Ghani government in a personal capacity and different political factions and a 16 member delegation from the Taliban including Sher Abbas Stanakzai, Salam Hanafi, Amir Khan Mutaqi and Shahabuddin Delawar.<sup>61</sup>

During the interaction, not only did both sides recognise the pain and suffering on both sides<sup>62</sup> but the Taliban also announced a reduction in violence by vowing to cease attacks on schools, hospitals, places of worship, markets etc.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the Taliban agreed to support women’s rights in all fields of public life i.e., political, economic and social within the context of Islamic values.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Khalilzad Meets Mullah Baradar as Doha Peace Talks Resume,” *Al-Jazeera*, May 1, 2019 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/1/khalilzad-meets-mullah-baradar-as-doha-peace-talks-resume>

<sup>60</sup> “Taliban Official Calls Latest round Peace Talks with US ‘critical’,” *TRT*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/taliban-official-calls-latest-round-peace-talks-with-us-critical-27895>

<sup>61</sup> “Doha Conference: Taliban Agrees To Reduce Violence,” *ToloNews*, July 09, 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/doha-conference-taliban-agrees-reduce-violence>

<sup>62</sup> Mujib Mashal, “Afghan Talks With Taliban Reflect a Changed Nation,” *New York Times*, July 07, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/07/world/asia/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban.html>

<sup>63</sup> “Doha Conference: Taliban Agrees To Reduce Violence,” *ToloNews*, July 09, 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/doha-conference-taliban-agrees-reduce-violence>

<sup>64</sup> Unofficial translation of the resolution, Resolution of Intra Afghan Peace Conference, July 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1148388647357636608>

The eight round of talks took place from August 3-12, 2019, in which both parties voiced confidence towards a prospective peace agreement.<sup>65</sup> This was shortly followed by the ninth round which took place from August 22, 2019.<sup>66</sup> Following the 9th round, on September 2, 2019 Zalmay Khalilzad declared that both the US and Taliban had “an agreement in principle.”<sup>67</sup> He further stated that if the Taliban honoured their conditions (in the agreement), the US will withdraw 5,000 of its troops from Afghanistan within 135 days.”<sup>68</sup> Although that both sides appeared to have reached an understanding regarding the US troop withdrawal and counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban, neither side spoke about the two other core issues so pivotal for peace, namely, a ceasefire and intra-Afghan dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban.

After 18 years of unprecedented violence and bloodshed, it seemed that the Afghan conflict was once and for all coming to an end, rekindling hope for a political solution in Afghanistan. However, on September 7, 2019, President Trump cancelled a clandestine meeting with the Taliban, as well as a separate one with President Ghani at Camp David due to the killing of a US soldier by the Taliban.<sup>69</sup> Thus, two days later, the expectation of a peaceful

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<sup>65</sup> Shereena Qazi, “Peace Deal is Near’: What We Know So Far About US-Taliban Talks,” *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/taliban-talks-peace-afghanistan-190510062940394.html>

<sup>66</sup> Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Sayed Hassib, “Taliban Says Near Agreement on US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-talks/taliban-say-near-agreement-on-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-idUSKCN1VI0UZ>

<sup>67</sup> “Shereena Qazi, Afghanistan’s Taliban, US Sign Agreement Aimed at Ending War,” *Al Jazeera*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/afghanistan-taliban-sign-deal-america-longest-war-200213063412531.html>

<sup>68</sup> Mujib Mashal, “To Start Afghan Withdrawal, US Would Pull 5,400 Troops in 135 Days,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/asia/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-taliban.html>

<sup>69</sup> [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1170469618177236992?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1170469618177236992&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.usatoday.com%2Fstory%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2F2019%2F09%2F07%2Fdonald-trump-suspends-afghan-peace-talks-camp-david-taliban%2F2224106001%2F](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1170469618177236992?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1170469618177236992&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.usatoday.com%2Fstory%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2F2019%2F09%2F07%2Fdonald-trump-suspends-afghan-peace-talks-camp-david-taliban%2F2224106001%2F), September 7, 2019.

settlement was further put in jeopardy when President Trump declared talks with the Taliban dead.<sup>70</sup>

## Revival of Talks

Despite breakdown, the attempts to revive the US-Taliban talks continued, as a result of which a breakthrough was finally achieved. An agreement was signed between the US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Doha on February 29, 2020.<sup>71</sup> Aimed at ending nearly two decades of bloodshed, the momentous agreement was based on four main issues: (i) temporary ceasefire, (ii) withdrawal of foreign forces within a fourteen month period, (iii) talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and (iv) assurances that the Taliban will not participate in or aid others in threatening the security of the US and its allies.<sup>72</sup> It was agreed that intra-Afghan talks between Kabul and the Taliban would take place on March 10, 2020, before which both sides would release prisoners in what was termed as a prisoner swap. While the agreement was signed in an atmosphere of immense optimism, there have been a number of stumbling blocks in its implementation. These included political uncertainty emanating from the Ghani-Abdullah vendetta over the presidential elections as well as the inclusion of additional preconditions set by President Ghani in the initial release of prisoners. Moreover, the additional challenge triggered by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that has claimed 807 Afghan lives<sup>73</sup> led to delays in the talks.

Despite the delays, certain developments have taken place, generating optimism towards the implementation of the deal. On May 17, 2020, Abdullah Abdullah was appointed as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) not only ending months of political uncertainty but also giving the peace process the attention it so badly needed. As chairman of the HCNR,

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<sup>70</sup> “Trump says U.S.-Taliban peace talks are ‘dead,’” *PBS*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4DQU4cGX-Y>

<sup>71</sup> “Afghan Conflict: Trump hails deal with Taliban to end 18-year war,” *BBC News*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51692546>

<sup>72</sup> “Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban Sign Deal to End 18-year War,” *BBC News*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>

<sup>73</sup> “Current Cases of Covid-19,” *Tolo News*, July 3, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/>

Abdullah's sole responsibility is to be at the forefront of the Afghan peace process. This was followed by the Taliban declaring a 3-day ceasefire during Eid celebrations from May 24-26, 2020<sup>74</sup> which was reminiscent of the ceasefire that took place in June 2018. Despite creating initial delays in the release of prisoners, President Ghani reciprocated by pledging to release 2,000 Taliban prisoners on May 25, 2020 as a gesture of good will.<sup>75</sup>

It appears that the gestures exhibited by Kabul and more importantly the Taliban played a constructive role in pushing both sides to engage in intra-Afghan talks. This was witnessed in June, when the Afghan government as well as the Taliban expressed their willingness to engage in intra-Afghan talks.

Hence, after months of uncertainty and utter confusion, the Afghan Government and the Afghan Taliban finally engaged officially, in direct talks for the first time on September 12, 2020, in what has been termed as "a truly momentous occasion,"<sup>76</sup> initiating the highly anticipated intra-Afghan talks. The Afghan government was represented by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), whereas the Taliban were represented by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar . Hosted by Qatar, an opening ceremony attended by 15 major stakeholders, with the exception of Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE took place, during which statements were made by the multiple stakeholders, including the Taliban, the US, the Afghan government, as well as Pakistan.

Following the ceremony, contact groups were established between the Afghan Government and Taliban for direct

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<sup>74</sup> "Afghanistan: Taliban prisoner release amid Eid al-Fitr ceasefire," *BBC News*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52791870>

<sup>75</sup> "Ghani Responds to Taliban's Gesture of Goodwill, Vows to Release 2000 Prisoners," *Khaama Press*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/ghani-responds-to-talibans-gesture-of-goodwill-vows-to-release-2000-prisoners-08860/>

<sup>76</sup> Adela Suliman, "Taliban and Afghan government meet for 'historic' talks, raising hopes for peace," *NBC News*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-afghan-government-meet-historic-talks-raising-hopes-peace-n1239950>



negotiations, focusing primarily on achieving a ceasefire as well as determining a future political set up that is acceptable to both sides. However, so far all interactions have been limited to rules, regulations, and logistics leading to limited progress. The fact that both sides have been struggling to overcome minor issues clearly demonstrates the inherent mistrust between the two, as well as the obstacles both parties will have to overcome to achieve any meaningful progress for the future of Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup> The fact remains that this will be a complex and long-drawn process, and deep cleavages and several long-standing issues of mistrust and suspicion will need to be overcome for the talks to succeed.

While news of intra-Afghan talks is no doubt a much needed step in the right direction, it must be realised that they are only the beginning of a highly sensitive and complex process that will require patience and compromises from all sides. After all, as the recent past has shown us, the highs can quickly be replaced by the lows. At present, Afghanistan is possibly growing through one of its most important and rather critical phase. While there is no doubt that the ongoing intra-Afghan discussions are a historic opportunity for Kabul as well as the Taliban to rewrite history, it must be understood that the interaction is an ice breaker at best. However, at the same time, their importance should not be undermined. The fact that both sides, particularly the Taliban agreed to engage with Kabul whom they have always referred to as a puppet regime is a breakthrough in itself and war rents recognition.

At present, Afghanistan, is once again, at crossroads, and even though immense optimism has been generated from the ongoing intra-Afghan talks, the fact remains that the future of the peace process primarily depends upon the success of these talks. it..

### **Assertion of Regional Actors**

Perplexed by the poor state of affairs in Afghanistan as well as the concern to prevent any further spill over from the conflict in

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<sup>77</sup> Karim Amini, "Contact Groups Meet in Doha, Preliminary Issues Still Unresolved," Tolo News, September 23, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-166537>

Afghanistan, the regional actors — China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states — have come to the realisation that they can no longer stay on the sidelines. For the moment, it seems that these regional stakeholders are doing just that by recognising the role of the Afghan Taliban in the peace process, the fight against Daesh and in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. No one has taken a more substantive role in the peace process recently than Russia.

### *Russia*

Russia which has previously shown little involvement in the Afghan peace process, has taken a leadership role by hosting the November 2018 talks in Moscow, followed by the intra-Afghan talks in February and May 2019 in Moscow. These developments highlight that the regional stakeholders are coming out of the woodwork to assume a more substantive role in the peace process to finally deliver on the long overdue peace in Afghanistan.

With the exception of the Russia-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan which held its first session in 2013,<sup>78</sup> Russia has been minimally involved in the Afghan peace process in the past. However, Moscow's involvements, since 2018, warrant renewed praise and attention. Russia has been quite open in its stance that there can be no peace in Afghanistan without the involvement and inclusion of the Afghan Taliban. In this aspect, Moscow has actively been participating as well as organising talks in Moscow between Kabul and the regional stakeholders (India, China, Pakistan) as well as between the Taliban and different Afghan factions. On November 2018, the first instalment of these talks took place in Moscow, known as the Moscow Format, amidst an air of excitement and hope.<sup>79</sup> For the first time, the Taliban, a group that had shown little interest in talks unless they were with the US, openly engaged and expressed their demands to key

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<sup>78</sup> "The China- Russia-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, April 4, 2013, <http://mofa.gov.pk/the-china-russia-pakistan-trilateral-dialogue-on-afghanistan/>

<sup>79</sup> "Afghanistan Peace Conference Kicks Off in Moscow," *Al Jazeera*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/afghanistan-peace-conference-kicks-moscow-181109083021481.html>

stakeholders such as Afghan opposition and countries like Russia, China, India and Pakistan. Furthermore, in February and May 2019, intra-Afghan talks took place in Moscow promoting an Afghan-led and-owned process in which Russia encouraged all Afghan factions to get engaged in talks.<sup>80</sup> The May 2019 intra-Afghan dialogue was especially a breakthrough because for the first time, since his release from a Pakistani prison, Mullah Baradar, made his first public speech, outlining many of the Taliban's crucial pre-requisites for peace.<sup>81</sup>

Even though the Moscow talks failed to achieve any concrete and tangible outcomes for peace, there were several key takeaways that will aid the peace process: The Taliban showed a willingness to engage and present their demands with the Afghan opposition. At the same time, they showcased flexibility and pragmatism on an international level by engaging with countries like Russia who they have historically been fighting against. More significantly, the group appeared to agree on several key points: US withdrawal, interim political set up, amendments in the Afghan constitution as well as upcoming elections.<sup>82</sup> In return, the regional stakeholders such as Russia, China, Pakistan and India showed increased interest in taking more responsibility in the peace process.

By recognising the role of the Afghan Taliban in the peace process and fight against Daesh or Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as well as bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, the regional stakeholders such as Russia have taken a substantive leadership role in the Afghan peace process. Another reason behind Moscow's keen involvement in the peace process is its desire to showcase itself as a leading player and advocate for peace, a

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<sup>80</sup> "Hosting Taliban Delegates, Russia Calls For Withdrawal Of Foreign Forces From Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-envoys-arrive-in-moscow-to-meet-afghan-politicians-tribal-elders/29967224.html>.

<sup>81</sup> "Taliban Wants Peace: Mullah Baradar," *Tolo News*, May 28, 2019, <https://youtu.be/Fu-wAAImawQ>,

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Brown, "Taliban and Afghan Officials Issue Joint Announcement from Moscow," *National*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/taliban-and-afghan-officials-issue-joint-announcement-from-moscow-1.822802>

position that has been undermined by the US unilateralism. By hosting the Intra-Afghan dialogue, Russia is positioning itself to be on diplomatic parity with the US. This development is particularly crucial as regional stakeholders need to levy their newfound influence and interest to make sure that the US works towards a durable peace settlement that addresses the concerns of all stakeholders rather than a hasty peace settlement which is prone to collapse.

### *China*

Since 2014, China has moved away from its limited role in Afghanistan, to a more proactive one by not only supporting but also facilitating the Afghan Peace process. In the past, China has been involved in landmark events in the peace process, be it unofficially hosting Afghan Taliban delegations to being a part of the Murree Peace Process in 2015, member of the QCG, Russia-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue and the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue. However, in the recent years, China has taken on a far more significant role in Afghanistan's peace process. This was exemplified in the June 2018 Taliban-Kabul ceasefire in which Beijing played the role of a mediator.

China has become more proactive in hosting direct dialogue with the Taliban with regards to the Afghan peace process, highlighting its role as a regional stakeholder in the future of Afghanistan. This new role of China became more apparent in June 2019, when Mullah Baradar headed a Taliban delegation to Beijing to discuss China's role in the region.<sup>83</sup> While much is unknown about the meeting, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Lu Kang, confirmed that Baradar, along with a Taliban delegation visited China, where both sides discussed the need and significance of the peace process for Afghanistan as well as to combat terrorism.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Tahir Khan, "Afghan Taliban Wrap up Talks with Chinese Officials," *Daily Times*, June 18, 2019, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/414019/afghan-taliban-wrap-up-talks-with-chinese-officials/>

<sup>84</sup> "Taliban Delegation Holds Talks in China as Part of Peace Push" *Reuters*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan/taliban-delegation-holds-talks-in-china-as-part-of-peace-push-idUSKCN1TL0V9>

Interestingly, the talks in Beijing took place a few days before the seventh round in Doha, which the Former Chief Spokesman of the Taliban, Abdul Hai Mutmayen, from Kandahar province, pointed out was a conscious effort on the part of the group to hold consultations and exchange views with key stakeholders ahead of the next round of talks.<sup>85</sup> Hence, by holding talks with China, it appears that the Taliban have signalled Beijing amongst the key stakeholders with an indispensable role in the future of the peace process.

The Taliban even went one step further to indicate their support for Beijing's inclusion in the peace process by suggesting that they would be open to China's role as a guarantor in case of a peace deal with Washington.<sup>86</sup> This development is highly significant as one of the major pitfall in the negotiations has always been the question of who could serve as the guarantor of a brokered peace deal within Afghanistan when there are such deep rifts between the Taliban, Kabul and the US. A neutral third party guarantor has always been a possible solution to this issue but the Taliban had never out rightly named a country that could play that role with the exception of Beijing. By doing so, the Taliban openly acknowledged their confidence in China as well its role as a key stakeholder in Afghan peace process.

Similarly, China appears to be more open in its policy towards Afghanistan and is actively pivoting its foreign policy to receive this newfound importance as a regional stakeholder with open arms. China's increasing engagement in Afghanistan was resonated by Xi Jinping to his Afghan counterpart, in Bishkek in June 2019. The Chinese premier reiterated Beijing's stance to firmly support a comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led and owned peace and reconciliation process. Moreover, he expressed that China would continue to actively encourage and promote intra-Afghan talks.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "Taliban Delegation In Beijing Ahead Of Doha Talks: Report," *Tolo News*, June 17, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-delegation-beijing-ahead-doha-talks-report>

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Shadi Khan Saif, "China, India Pledge Support for Afghan Peace Process," *Anadolu Agency*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-india-pledge-support-for-afghan-peace-process/1504209>

Beijing is in a particularly unique position to take the lead in the Afghan peace process. Within Afghanistan and the region, Beijing enjoys a good reputation due to its balanced approach towards Afghan affairs. Hence, due to Beijing's neutrality, its growing interest and engagement has not been opposed within and outside Afghanistan.

Furthermore, unlike Russia and the US, China does not bring any historical baggage to talks with the Taliban or Kabul as it has always maintained neutrality towards Afghanistan in times of conflict within the region. Furthermore, Beijing's growing tilt towards Afghanistan can also be attributed to political, security and economic interests. Hence, it remains to be seen exactly what role China will assume for itself in the peace process. However, the only thing that is certain at the moment is that China has emerged as a major stakeholder in the process. Also, with the recent approval of its rise by the Taliban, it will retain that position in the future.

### *Pakistan*

Since the beginning, Pakistan has taken keen interest in the peace process and has for that matter, played a crucial role in helping to bring about dialogue between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. In the aspect, Islamabad has not only been a part of several initiatives but has also spearheaded initiatives to foster intra-Afghan dialogue. Apart from the Murree Peace Process of 2015, Pakistan hosted the "Lahore Process" of 2019 – an intra-Afghan dialogue in Murree in which many influential Afghan leaders took part, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Former National Security Adviser Haneef Atmar, the Former Balkh Governor, Atta Mohammad Noor, Abdul Latif Pedram, Mohammad Mohaqeq, Ustad Atta Mohammad Noor, Mohammad Karim Khalili as well as members from the Afghan High Peace Council.<sup>88</sup> While the Lahore Process, like most of such conferences, failed to secure any concrete developments in the peace process, it highlighted the need for constructive Pak-Afghan relations based on mutual trust and

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<sup>88</sup> Zara Khan, "Afghan Leaders Begin Peace Summit in Pakistan," *ABC News*, June 22, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/afghan-leaders-begin-peace-summit-pakistan-63879343>

cooperation in key areas as a crucial prerequisite for a sustainable peace agreement. A peace deal that is not inclusive of Pakistan has high chances of being unsustainable. It also became evident that the Lahore Process indicated Pakistan's understanding that as one of the main regional actors in the conflict, they must have an active yet constructive role in the process. Apart from initiatives, Pakistan played a constructive role in facilitating the Taliban ceasefire of June 2018.

Cognizant that peace in Afghanistan is essential for Pakistan's stability and the fact that while nearly all major stakeholders have appointed special representatives for Afghanistan, despite being so closely involved in Afghanistan, Pakistan has never had such a position. Hence in June 2020, Pakistan appointed Muhammad Sadiq, Pakistan's former Ambassador to Kabul, as Pakistan's Special Representative to Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup> Although the appointment has come fairly late, it is a much needed development considering the strained Pak-Afghan relationship which has numerous issues to sort out and one that has often been taken for granted that a better bilateral relationship will help pave the way for regional stability. Ambassador Sadiq paid a visit to Doha, where he interacted with Mullah Baradar and talked about preparations for the upcoming intra-Afghan talks as well as future of the peace process.<sup>90</sup>

Islamabad's recent efforts is a highly welcoming development which not only demonstrates Pakistan's commitment to the peace process but also its desire to establish a stronger partnership with Afghanistan. Moreover, in an effort to express support and commitment for the ongoing peace process, on the invitation of Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan hosted Dr Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) of Afghanistan, from September 29-30, 2020. Dr Abdullah

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<sup>89</sup> Marianna Babar, "Mohammad Sadiq Appointed as Special Envoy to Afghanistan," *News*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/669221-mohammad-sadiq-appointed-as-special-envoy-to-afghanistan>

<sup>90</sup> Kmaran Yousaf, "Pakistani envoy on Afghanistan meets Taliban political chief in Doha," *Express Tribune*, June 19, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2246065/3-pakistani-envoy-afghanistan-meets-taliban-political-chief-doha>

concluded his visit “with a very positive impression” and appreciated Pakistan’s efforts regarding the ongoing peace process.<sup>91</sup>

## **Future of Afghanistan**

While the ongoing exchange between Kabul and the Taliban is paving the way for the possibility of a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban, several impediments continue to stand in the way of peace: the ongoing violence by the Taliban; external and internal spoilers as well as differences and divisions within Afghanistan

Although, since the signing of the US-Taliban deal, compared to the Afghan government, the Taliban presented themselves as a rational actor, be it in their approach towards dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic in areas under their control or fulfilling their pledges in the peace agreement. In fact, in March 2020, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said that in contrast to the Afghan government, the Taliban were keeping their end of the peace deal by delivering to the ultimate negotiations.<sup>92</sup> While the Taliban may be delivering on the release of prisoners and appear to have agreed on intra-Afghan talks, their reluctance to abandon violence or even reduce attacks against Afghan forces continues to be a major sticking point. While the Taliban have halted attacks against the US forces as agreed upon in the US-Taliban deal of February 2020, the group continues to target Afghan forces. This is highly problematic and a non-starter, the Taliban cannot justify their attacks against Afghan forces, as they are no longer fighting a foreign enemy, but fellow Afghans who make up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

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<sup>91</sup> “Abdullah says concluding Pakistan visit with good impression,” *Express Tribune*, October 1, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2266406/abdullah-says-concluding-pakistan-visit-with-good-impression>

<sup>92</sup> Julian Borger, “US to cut \$1bn of Afghanistan aid over failure to agree unity government,” *Guardian*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/us-to-cut-1bn-of-afghanistan-aid-over-failure-to-agree-unity-government>



The group must realise that violence cannot be used as a means to further their goals. If the Taliban truly want peace, they must honor their commitment across the board and not differentiate between the US and Afghan government — those they can kill and those they cannot. The Taliban must put a halt to their hostilities towards the state, because at the end of the day its ordinary Afghans that are losing their lives. Moreover, they should do it not as a sign of weakness but as a chance to further their cause through a non-violent platform. If the Taliban can accept the US — a country that invaded Afghanistan, they should accept the legitimate Afghan government as an equal stakeholder.

Moreover, this is a historic opportunity for the Afghans to rewrite history. For a group that is going through war fatigue, the group has an opportunity to present itself as a responsible and mature stakeholder and secure for itself a legitimate place and position in the Afghan polity which is not something that has always been on the cards.

Moreover, now that the political feud between President Ghani and HCNR Chairman, Abdullah Abdullah has been settled, both should focus on delivering peace to a nation that has waited far too long for peace. The onus is now on Kabul and the Taliban to prove themselves willing to work hard for it to succeed.

While external challenges are often spoken about, little or no attention is given to the internal national challenges which by far are the greatest hurdles in the way of peace. Hence, Kabul should focus on political and national reconciliation as well as national and social healing — critical factors that have been missing from the Afghan equation. Therefore, it is essential that the HCNR is given full autonomy to pursue peace without the creation of unnecessary hurdles, be it from within the Afghan government or other quarters. The external actors can only do so much, and certainly cannot deliver peace. It is important for Kabul to take the ownership, engage with the Taliban and reach a compromise — the task at hand is certainly not easy. This is something the Afghans will have to achieve for themselves.

While many have criticised the US-Taliban deal, for being, “both truly momentous for happening at all and severely modest for what it contains,”<sup>93</sup> considering the circumstances, this is the best option the Afghans have. While it certainly is not perfect, it is better than war and is certainly a starter. Hence, this opportunity should not be missed.

The US, being a major stakeholder and signatory of the deal, shoulders the responsibility to push all sides to fulfil their part of the agreement and ensure a credible and workable agreement, an agreement that is acceptable to all and one that benefits all Afghans. As has been witnessed in the past, haphazard and hasty compromises that are prone to collapse need to be avoided.

Now that the talks are under way, critical aspects essential for peace that were overlooked in the US-Taliban deal need to be addressed and focused upon by the contact groups such as: withdrawal of troops, ceasefire and a future political structure.

## **Withdrawal**

While the US has already stated that it will reduce its military presence in Afghanistan between 4,000 to 5,000 troops the end of 2020,<sup>94</sup> on its part, the US must ensure a responsible withdrawal without undue haste. A hasty withdrawal would have catastrophic consequences not only for Afghanistan but the region as a whole, leading to a complete collapse of the Afghan state resulting in a perfect refuge for terrorist groups like the ISKP to freely operate. Since its inception in Afghanistan in 2014, the ISKP has proved to be a major threat and spoiler to the future stability of the country.

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<sup>93</sup> Kathy Gilsinan, “The US Once Wanted Peace in Afghanistan,” *Atlantic*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/united-states-taliban-afghanistan-peacedeal/607234/h>

<sup>94</sup> Ayaz Gul, “US Troop Size in Afghanistan Will Reduce to 4,000 ‘Very Soon’, Trump Says ,” *Voice of America*, August 04, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/us-troop-size-afghanistan-will-reduce-4000-very-soon-trump-says#:~:text=The%20deal%20called%20for%20all,safe%20haven%20for%20transnational%20terrorists.>

The group has unleashed a bloody campaign on the Afghan state as well as the Taliban, thus posing as threat to the survival of the Afghan state as well as the Taliban. No group has more to gain from the ongoing instability in Afghanistan as much as the ISKP does. Hence, in order to deny the ISKP any space to operate, Kabul and the Taliban must reconcile and put up a united front against the ISKP.

## **Ceasefire**

A ceasefire remains the most challenging yet immensely difficult pre-requisite of the peace process. Agreeing to a ceasefire must be at the top of the agenda of the ongoing intra-Afghan talks since a prolonged ceasefire for the duration of the dialogue is essential. While the Taliban have voiced support for peaceful solution, they need to demonstrate their commitment on the ground by reducing and ultimately halting violence. In September 2020, President Ashraf Ghani called on the Taliban to enter into a humanitarian and nationwide ceasefire.<sup>95</sup> The Taliban should accept Ghani's calls for a ceasefire not as a sign of weakness or surrender, but rather as a commitment to the Afghan people who have suffered for so long as well as to demonstrate that the Taliban responsible and legitimate stakeholders who desire peace.

Unlike the US-Taliban deal which failed to secure a ceasefire, the US should push for a sustained and credible ceasefire, which should be the key focus and outcome of the ongoing intra-Afghan talks.

## **Counter-Terrorism Guarantees**

Counter-Terrorism (CT) guarantees by the Taliban have been a critical condition of the US peace deal and for most of its part have been fulfilled by the Taliban.<sup>96</sup> While the Taliban have given CT

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<sup>95</sup> "Negotiators in Doha Struggle to Agree on Disputed Points," *Tolo News*, September 19, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-166445>

<sup>96</sup> Amina Khan and Awais Ali Syed, "Moscow And The Afghan Peace Process," Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 21, 2019,

assurances, the fact that they have resisted ISKP since its inception in Afghanistan since 2014 and have been engaged in bloody fight against the ISKP, which demonstrates the Taliban's desire to disassociate itself from such groups.

## **Future Political Set-up**

So far, there has been little or no progress let alone discussion on what kind of a political set up Afghanistan will have in the future, post intra-Afghan talks.

Hence, it is essential that the future political set-up and related issues such as the constitution, rights and role of women are earnestly addressed in the ongoing discussions and not overlooked as they were in the US-Taliban deal.

While the Taliban have time and again claimed that they do not aspire for a monopoly of power and envisage an inclusive Afghanistan, there needs to be more clarity on their part regarding what kind of government they will be willing to participate in. Similarly, the Taliban's position on the constitution remains ambiguous to say the least. Hence, it is essential that Kabul as well as the Taliban's positions are ascertained.

Without addressing such pivotal issues, the talks will be an exercise in futility. It is Washington's responsibility to ensure relative stability before they exit — including the creation of a political setup that is acceptable to all. Tentative possibilities could include a power sharing set up such as the continuation of the current political system with the inclusion of the Taliban, or an interim setup of the sort that was supported by different political players from Afghanistan in Moscow.

Afghanistan has suffered for decades be it war, political instability, corruption, and now, a new threat in the form of the corona virus. However, despite these challenges, the ongoing Kabul-Taliban talks presents a challenge as well as an opportunity for the

Afghan government and for the Taliban to come together, accommodate each other and take a chance on peace.

For its part, Kabul must remain united, honour its commitment to engage with the Taliban in talks no matter how cumbersome and most importantly, not allow personal differences (Ghani-Abdullah feud) to jeopardise the talks.

Although Washington has explicitly stated that it would like the Afghans to assume responsibility and chalk out a future for themselves at such a fragile state it would be highly irresponsible and naïve for the US to leave it to the Afghans. The US is not only a major signatory to the very deal that brought Kabul and the Taliban to the negotiating table but will always remain a major stakeholder to any outcome that awaits Afghanistan. Therefore, Washington must play its part in helping to attain a workable and acceptable agreement that benefits the country it now plans to withdraw from.

Hence in conclusion, the time now is for cautious optimism. While the ongoing Kabul-Taliban discussions are an ice-breaker. They are still a historic, unprecedented and necessary step for a stable Afghanistan. More importantly, they offer a genuine opportunity for ending decades of violence and achieving actual peace.



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