



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Afghanistan Peace Process Conundrum: Influence of External Actors



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Afghanistan continues to be in a tumult, writhing in the throes of the “New Great Game” being enacted, with little hope of any end in sight. Its geo-strategic location has, over the ages, proved to be a boon and a curse, with the ancient Silk Route passing through it; it was also used as a passage by scores of kings and raiders alike, for access to India and subsequently in the nineteenth century, bore the brunt of the “Great Game” played between the British and Russian Empires.

Afghanistan is located at the cusp of West, Central and South Asia. On the north, it is the gateway to the ‘energy-rich’ Central Asian Republics (CAR) while on its west, it provides access to West Asia and onwards to Europe. It has energy and trade corridors passing through it and there is a potential for these to grow exponentially if the situation stabilises. The geo-strategic importance of Afghanistan makes it an area where competing interests are prompting countries to jostle for importance. While Russia tries to regain a strategic hold in this Region and

### Key Points

- Afghanistan’s geo-strategic location makes it an area where competing interests are prompting countries to jostle for importance and it is fast becoming the next ‘Zone of Instability’.
- The security situation inside Afghanistan is volatile and fragile with a continuing upward trend of the violence spiral, while the Taliban continues to take advantage of a divided government.
- ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan’ signed between the US and Taliban seems to be self-imploding despite the US keenness to exit from Afghanistan after nearly two decades.
- India’s ability to turn its soft power advantage into strategic gains in Afghanistan has been stymied by Pakistan and its policies.
- No military solution can be found in Afghanistan and consensus-building towards a political solution is the only way forward.

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## Afghanistan Peace Process Conundrum: ...

maintain its hold on CAR, China is investing heavily in the Region through its Belt and Road Initiative. It is counting on this Region to provide a safe and easy source for its energy security needs as well as to be a gateway for Europe and the Middle East. The US is a major player in this Region and its troop presence, since 2001, ensures its relevance in the Region and assists it in checking the Chinese and Russian influences, while increasing its influence on the CAR. An isolated Iran is looking at preventing a radicalised Sunni expansion and maintaining its leverage on the Shiite/non-Pashtun population. Pakistan also wants to remain relevant and is a key player in the Region. This Region is, therefore, an active chessboard of the global power play for influence and is fast becoming the next “zone of instability”.

On February 29, 2020, US and Taliban signed a historic peace deal that looks well on its way to self-implosion. While US is a major stakeholder (on the ground) in Afghanistan, both in terms of military and economic aid, can it broker a peace deal without getting other regional and extra-regional players onboard? More importantly with varied conflicting interests, can these players' interests ever align to ensure stability in Afghanistan?

### Present Situation

Afghanistan's internal environment bears testimony to the four decades of Civil War which has torn the basic framework of Afghan society and acts as a catalyst for the instability in the Region. The security situation inside Afghanistan is volatile and fragile with a continuing upward trend of the violence spiral. It is no wonder that, according to the *Global Terrorism Index 2019*, Afghanistan has replaced Iraq as the country most affected by terrorism, recording a 59 per cent increase in terrorism deaths and the Taliban has overtaken the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) as the world's deadliest terrorist group.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the Afghan affiliate of ISIL, has been ranked as the third most deadly terrorist group in the world.<sup>2</sup>

While figures about how much territory is controlled by the Taliban is subject to interpretation and varies greatly, there is no doubt that the Taliban are in control of or are contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001, though many, once-public conflict metrics, are now withheld by the US military.<sup>3</sup> Most estimates put Taliban in control of or contesting more than half of Afghanistan, with it having greater control in the rural areas. The IS-KP, despite being targeted by the Security Forces and the Taliban, continues to expand its footprint and was responsible for more deaths in Kabul, Kunar and Nangarhar provinces than the Taliban last year.<sup>4</sup> It is also acting as a home base for expanding the activities of the Islamic State over the balance of South Asia.

The quality of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), despite the progress made, remains questionable. The Afghan National Police (ANP), in particular, continues to suffer from many problems and deficiencies. The Afghan National Army (ANA) despite having made huge strides, not only in size, but also in quality, continues to be plagued by ethnic divide, a high desertion rate, corruption and ineffective leadership.

The political situation is no less complex and the 2020 Presidential elections controversy has only exacerbated the situation with both President Ghani and Mr Abdullah claiming to be the legally elected presidents. While the political impasse is likely to be resolved with a working agreement between the two, the situation is a grim reminder of the political mess that the country is in and how slim are the chances of a strong political leadership leading the country out of the violent quagmire that it is currently embroiled in. The Taliban, meanwhile, continues to take advantage of a weak and divided government and refuse to talk to it, calling it an “illegal government”.

The Afghan economy is heavily dependent on foreign aid; thus, the government needs to improve the security environment to attract foreign investments as well as lay additional emphasis on the generation of tax revenues and energising mining projects. The deteriorating economic situation coupled with corruption is one of the major causes of unrest in the country. The government

in the near future, hastened by the economic slowdown due to COVID-19, will have to manage the economic transition, as aid levels begin to fall and this is likely to have a crucial bearing on the security situation.

## Peace Talks

Against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating political and security situation in Afghanistan and an increasingly bleak prospect of arriving at any military solution to the problem, the US for the last 18 months has been relentlessly pushing for a peace deal with the Taliban. As far back as January 2012, talks with the Taliban had started which collapsed after opposition from the US Congress. Post that, intermittent efforts have been made to have talks with the Taliban but without any positive outcome, despite the Taliban offering to hold peace talks in February 2017, after Donald Trump was elected as the President.<sup>5</sup> The first round of talks between Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, and the Taliban were held in October 2018 in Doha and after a number of rounds and nearly a 3-month withdrawal of the US from the talks, due to the killing of a US soldier, an 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' was finally signed in February 2019.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Agreement, the US is to reduce its troop presence from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all of its forces within 14 months.<sup>7</sup> The US is to remove sanctions on Taliban members by August 27, 2020 and facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government culminating in the government releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners and the Taliban releasing 1,000 Afghan security force prisoners. The Taliban has committed to not allow Taliban members or other groups, including Al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten US or its allies and that they will start intra-Afghan negotiations on March 10, 2020.

However, the Peace Agreement, despite some progress, has run into heavy weather, with the Taliban increasing the intensity of attacks against the ANSF and President Ghani now declaring an offensive against the Taliban.<sup>8</sup>

The prisoner exchange has become a major stumbling block, with the Afghan government saying that it would decide which prisoners to release and they would be released in tranches, while the Taliban insists that all 5,000 (Taliban prisoners) have to be released before any talks can commence and that the prisoners released should be according to their list. The US meanwhile seems to be sticking to the timeline of reducing its troops to 8,600, despite no intra-Afghan talks happening and violence levels escalating, perhaps an indication of their keenness to exit Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of fighting. The problems have been further compounded by the political crisis arising from a disputed Presidential election which has damaged the legitimacy of the government, as also the health crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Peace Process: Major Actors and their Influence

Peace seems to be eluding Afghanistan for the last four decades and it has constantly been in internal turmoil. The common thread has been the influence of foreign powers exacerbating the situation, be it the erstwhile USSR, Pakistan or US. In today's context too, all these countries and some others are relevant if a peace process has to be successful. The recent peace deal was greeted with outright enthusiasm to guarded optimism by various regional and extra-regional powers having a stake in Afghanistan; however, let us take an overview at the major pulls and pressures at play there.

The US is engaged in its longest war in history in Afghanistan and it is undoubtedly one of the most important external actors there, based on its military capabilities, wealth, international influence and present levels of commitment. Relations between Afghanistan and the US dates back to 1919, when King Amanullah, dispatched the first Afghan envoy to Washington, following its independence from Britain.<sup>9</sup> While US physically entered Afghanistan post 9/11 attacks, their interference in Afghanistan started post Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and continued till the Soviets left in 1989. An idea of US' involvement can be gauged from the fact that on March 31, 2020,



US had appropriated approximately US \$137.05 billion for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since 2002, out of which the bulk, i.e. US \$86.37 billion, has been appropriated for security.<sup>10</sup> They have also suffered 2,439 fatal casualties and a total of 20,663 personnel have been wounded in action.<sup>11</sup>

The US policy related to its involvement in Afghanistan and drawdown of forces, has oscillated under the present regime. President Trump commenced his term with thoughts of pulling out of Afghanistan, but in August 2017 laid out his new Afghanistan-South Asia policy which included increasing the strength of troops there and then barely a year later appointed Khalilzad to lead the peace talks with the Taliban sans the Afghan government. With the US Presidential elections scheduled for November 2020, the lure to exit from Afghanistan is very high, but the question remains at what cost? Would it be worth squandering the gains achieved in the last two decades especially in nation-building; moreover, how would it be ensured that Afghanistan does not become an ungoverned space, ripe to provide shelter to terrorists from the world over, especially with the drug trade available to finance it? It would take a “calamitous incident of epic proportions” for the US or its allies to re-enter Afghanistan if they exit now and the Taliban are aware of the same. However, US is likely to pull out all stops to make the present peace deal work, at least till November 2020.

Pakistan-Afghan bilateral relations are a captive of historical complexities. Issues related to Durand Line, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Afghan refugees, Taliban insurgency, border crossings, illegal trade, growing Indian influence, etc. all leads to a trust deficit and have had a negative impact on Pakistan-Afghan relations. Thus, despite manifold overlaps of religion, history, civilisation and culture, the two countries have never succeeded in establishing tension-free bilateral relations. Pakistan, for the last four decades, has been a key player in Afghanistan, first providing sanctuary, weapons and training to the Mujahideen and later to the Taliban. Despite that, it does not enjoy support among the common populace in Afghanistan, who view it as one of the main reasons for instability in

the country. Pakistan, due to its hold over the Taliban, enjoys significant say in any peace process and it would like to continue leveraging the turmoil for economic aid, as well as to check India's influence in the Region. A successful peace deal offers Pakistan a chance to rebuild its strategic relations with the US, relieve refugee pressure, settle a boundary dispute with Afghanistan, and in doing so, relieve troops from its Western borders. Thus, remaining relevant in all configurations related to Afghanistan, is of primacy to Pakistan and would dictate its actions; rather than what is in the best interests of Afghanistan.

Iran has great similarities with Afghanistan in the form of a common religion, history and culture and this provides Tehran with a substantial amount of political leverage, especially among the Shias. Iran tends to view itself as the protector of Afghanistan's embattled minorities and keeping its geostrategic interests in mind, it has aimed at expanding Iranian influence in the Region through an increased Shia role.<sup>12</sup> It thus, envisages a role for itself as a natural counterweight to Pakistan and a supporter of the non-Pashtuns. However, Iran has established links with the Taliban too and there are indications that it is providing sanctuary and weapons albeit at a much lesser scale than Pakistan to them. In all probability, it views the emergence of the sectarian IS-KP as a greater evil and is thus keeping its options open. Despite that, Iran is not likely to be comfortable with Taliban calling the “shots” in Afghanistan as it would mean a much lesser or no role for the non-Pashtuns and the same was evident when it dismissed the peace deal, saying that the US had no legal standing to sign such a deal.<sup>13</sup> Iran, like Pakistan, wants to remain relevant post a US pull out from Afghanistan and the present deal marginalises its chances. In addition, at the moment, Iran would prefer that the US remains embroiled in Afghanistan, thus getting drained economically and in terms of men, material and most importantly morale. Iran has the potential to play a very important and stabilising role in the Afghan situation; however, the present geopolitics makes it very difficult for Iran to play a visibly positive role, especially due to the stance taken by the US under the present dispensation.

While historically Afghan-China relations dates back to ancient times when the Silk Route was in use, China traditionally, amongst all of Afghanistan's neighbours, has the fewest links with Afghanistan's domestic affairs and society. Afghanistan has been a low priority for China, while it has built its economic and military powers and concentrated on securing its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Thus, for very long it did not have a strong influence in Afghanistan. However, in the last few years, China has increased its engagement in Afghanistan reflecting its economic interests in the Region and growing security concerns. Instability in Afghanistan impacts Xinjiang, where the Uyghurs want to establish an Islamic State and are known to have bases in Afghanistan and links with Al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it jeopardises its Belt and Road Initiative in the Region. China, while engaging economically and diplomatically with the Afghan government, has opened channels of communication with the Taliban using its influence with Pakistan. It had organised talks with the Taliban as way back as 2015 and has supported multi-lateral initiatives to resolve the problem. China would like to see a stable Afghanistan sans the presence of US and has thus welcomed the deal. However, China fears that a hasty exit by US would further worsen the situation and impinge on its security and economic considerations. Thus, while it would like to see the US' presence removed from its neighbourhood, it is likely to favour a calibrated transition.

Russia, for the last three centuries, has been intricately involved in Afghanistan. In the nineteenth century, the Anglo-Russian rivalry resulted in the "Great Game", being fought for dominance of Afghanistan and then again from 1979 onwards, for a decade, the Russians directly intervened in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, this time, became a battleground for Russia-US Cold War, with the Mujahideen's being the US proxy in fighting the Russians, till Russia had to finally pull out at a heavy cost, resulting ultimately in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The CAR countries were always considered to be Russia's soft underbelly and thus under its influence in the economic and security domain. However, this area has been witnessing a key rebalancing of power, with Russia declining and China now engaging

with the CAR countries in the security domain too, after having completely overshadowed Russia in the economic one. Russia, after its successes in Ukraine and Syria, seems to be re-energising its policy towards the Region including Afghanistan, in the political, economic and security spheres. It has opened direct talks with the Taliban and organised multiple meetings with them and has also been accused of supporting the Taliban with weapons and resources. Russia perhaps views the Taliban as a potential ally in the fight against the Islamic State and checkmating the US. It perceives the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), positioned in Afghanistan for nearly two decades, as a threat to its influence and would like to see a pull out by the US, preferably in a similar manner to its pull out in 1989. Russia, thus would be happy with a peace deal which sees the US exiting and has signed a joint statement with the US, during the peace deal, giving a commitment to ensure women's rights and a refusal to recognise Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, thus effectively making it the security guarantor of the Region.<sup>15</sup> Russia is keen to regain, what it considers its right, a place in the global power equation, and its actions in Afghanistan would be dictated by the same.

Saudi Arabia has been a major supporter of Taliban and thus wields considerable influence over it. However, it continues to exercise this influence through Pakistan and as of now has a similar approach. Similarly, the NATO countries deployed in Afghanistan are in sync with US initiative and are likely to follow its lead. The CAR countries, despite sharing the northern borders with Afghanistan and having cultural linkages, do not exert too much influence on the outcome.

### Indian Role

India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links, which have steadily been strengthened by India's commitment to building capacities and capabilities for Afghanistan according to their requirements. India's objectives in Afghanistan stems from a carefully calculated

assessment of its domestic, regional and global interests. Its fundamental aim is to have a stable Afghanistan and prevent it from being used as a base for Pakistan supported extremists, to launch terrorist attacks in India or against Indian interests. It has already provided assistance of more than US \$3 billion in projects, is developing an alternate trade route through Chabahar and provides training to the Afghan National Army, bureaucrats, doctors and other professionals in India.<sup>16</sup> All this should have assured India a chair on the high table, whenever Afghanistan's future is discussed. However, while India enjoys tremendous goodwill in Afghanistan, especially with the common public, it has failed to figure in any strategic calculus about Afghanistan's future. This is partly due to it being a strong proponent of an 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process' which has not found much traction with the other powers. Moreover, it is now one of the few countries with influence in Afghanistan, which is not talking directly to the Taliban, unlike US, Russia, China and Iran. This may have endeared it to the Afghan government, but has reduced its say in the peace process and left it with very few alternatives.

India's ability to turn its soft power advantage into strategic gains in Afghanistan has also been stymied by Pakistan, which views India's involvement in Afghanistan as a means to surround and tie it down. Pakistan is in a unique position due to its links with the Taliban and the Haqqani network and it has leveraged this to keep India out. However, with improved US-India strategic relations, India's involvement has marginally improved, but not enough to make a major difference. President Donald Trump in his South Asia strategy, unveiled in August 2017, had sought a major role for India in bringing peace in Afghanistan; however, during the peace talks, India was not part of the regional formulation.

The United Nations Secretariat, in April 2020, held a meeting of what it calls the "6 + 2 + 1" group on regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan, a group that includes China, Iran, Pakistan, US and Russia amongst others. India, despite its historical and strategic ties with Afghanistan, was not invited.

India, thus, stands at a watershed moment with respect to its foreign policy in Afghanistan; it can either take proactive steps to ensure that it does not get marginalised in Afghanistan or it continues with a 'wait-and-watch policy', essentially looking at a 'stovepipe approach' and dealing with the Afghan government only, primarily on reconstruction and development projects. At present, India faces a major dilemma—how to leverage its standing in Afghanistan for strategic advantage?

With a weak and divided polity in Afghanistan, it may no longer remain in India's interest to only bank on it and not talk to the Taliban. It needs to be viewed through the prism of the emerging reality in Afghanistan, where all other regional and extra-regional powers have opened channels of communication with the Taliban for some time now and have already provided them the legitimacy they have been seeking. Khalilzad while visiting India in May 2020, had said that India should directly engage with the Taliban and the Taliban too have indicated that they would like to build ties with all neighbouring countries, including India.<sup>17,18</sup> However, as of now India has been insisting that it does not wish to talk directly to the Taliban, who have refused to recognise the present Afghan government and not commence the intra-Afghan talks. While opening direct talks with the Taliban comes with its pitfalls, maybe it's time to explore the feasibility of talks with the Taliban albeit with certain preconditions, which would ensure Taliban's engagement with the Afghan government.

India also needs to take a call on the nature and scope of its future involvement in Afghanistan. The Afghan National Security Adviser, during a visit in January 2020, apparently asked for Indian troops to be deployed as peacekeepers post the US pull out.<sup>19</sup> While India has rightly been refusing to put boots on the ground till now (in Afghanistan), would it continue to do so if a mission is constituted under a UN mandate? Though the chances of the Taliban agreeing to a UN mission, for implementing any peace deal are slim, India needs to be ready to cater for all eventualities.

The dilemma confronting India on Afghanistan is not merely limited to the country's specific interests and



engagements in the reconstruction activities, but stems from India's quest to play a larger role in regional and global affairs. India needs to leverage its historically good relations with Russia and Iran to play a more strategic role in the Afghan peace process. It cannot just depend on the US to involve it, but can be the bridge between countries with differing priorities and vision like the US, Iran and Russia. By playing a critical role in Afghanistan's security and economic development, India can hope to shape regional development and project power throughout South Asia and beyond. India thus needs to keep its national interest in mind while formulating a strategy that prevents a Taliban takeover whilst keeping its door open to them, if they join mainstream politics.

### Way Forward: Consensus Building

Afghanistan's future continues to be shrouded in uncertainty. The overview brings out the conundrum facing any peace process in Afghanistan as it today stands, perhaps at another crossroads of its destiny, while passing through a critical phase of political, military and insurgent activities. The air of uncertainty, as to how events will unfold, appears to be omnipresent as it continues to face an insurgency that is externally enabled and very resilient, thus making the security situation highly volatile.

The Taliban who are eager to see the exit of all foreign forces and claim victory, are not targeting the US-NATO forces and thus claim to be adhering to the Peace Deal, while still attacking the ANSF. The US seems ready to pull out at whatever cost, despite the US President acknowledging the possibility of a Taliban takeover post that. Various regional and extra-regional powers have their strategic interests at heart and this is creating pulls and pressures which make the peaceful resolution of the conflict a near impossible task. India's present policy of not engaging with the Taliban, limits its strategic options, especially if Taliban's role is accepted in conventional politics and administration. Thus, there is no easy way ahead, but what is clear is that no military solution can be found and consensus-

building towards a political solution is the only way forward.

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