

Exploring Options of Rapprochement with Taliban on the Perpetual State of War in Afghanistan



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Abstract

Afghanistan since the Soviet Invasion in 1979 and later by the USA in 2001 on the pretext of Global War on Terrorism (WoT) has remained in a perpetual state of war even after the collapse of the USSR and before US invasion. The fragile state with a lack of central government and dysfunctional state institutions has created serious international and regional security issues with an influx of refugees, drugs, and above all terrorism. The instability in Afghanistan has created national security problems for Pakistan and despite enormous sacrifices and instability, Pakistan is in the eye of storms for not doing enough despite US active military presence. The US's willingness to engage the Taliban for an honorable exit strategy and ensuring that the government in Afghanistan is more representative, are in fact positive signals which need to be capitalized by engaging all parties to the conflict.

Key Words: War on Terror, constructive engagement, Rapprochement

Introduction

Afghanistan has always been the battleground for major powers like the Soviet Union and the United States of America. The Land of Afghanistan had been ruled mostly by the warlords and remained in chaos or in a war situation. Peace remained for very little time in Afghanistan due to various fluctuations and the instability of the state. When we look back to the era of the 1900s there were very few or no prospects of peace in Afghanistan. As it always remained busy in both inter and Intra State conflicts, the Great Powers had always used Afghanistan as their battlefield for their personal agendas and motives. Likewise, the superpowers and their allies did a lot for the prospects of peace in Afghanistan accordingly. Presently, the major goal of the USA is not only the withdrawal of their troops and making a peace deal, but they want peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Intra State conflicts can be seen in the history of Afghanistan that leads to conflicts and ultimately resulted in transnational terrorism. This is a major challenge for the USA to counter this kind of extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan, which is a spillover effect, which must be stopped. Despite the accommodating bulk of Afghan refugees, Afghanistan had never shown a sign of peace and goodwill towards Pakistan. India being the rival state of Pakistan did many investments in Afghanistan, portraying a good relationship of Afghanistan with India, as India remained away from the conflicts of Afghanistan and they were having economic relations with each other, being the neighboring states. India did nothing for the prospects of peace in Afghanistan apart from gauging its strategic interest and maximizing its personal interests. While all the regional countries are important and they have their vested interests in the stability, differing views on the future of Afghan dispensation are inhibiting them from adopting a regional approach and regionally owned peace formula. The US engagement with the Taliban if directed towards positive outcomes may lead to sustainable peace and enduring stability which is the need for time.

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Overview of Peace Overtures in Last Two Decades

2000-2004

After 9/11, which were a series of four terrorists attack by the terrorist group name as Al-Qaida against the united states on September 11, 2001. The United States decided to start operations ensuring freedom for Afghanistan against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for their refusing to give Osama bin laden to the united states. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar decided to start a nonconventional war instead of conventional warfare, the situation deteriorated in Afghanistan again and the guerrilla warfare start against the NATO forces by Taliban due to which the situation further deteriorated in Afghanistan (BBC News, 2004). The human security situation in Afghanistan was precarious and was on the positive side since 2002. The Taliban regime was overthrown, and 3-election was held, and a democratic institution was established. Some of the five million refugees were returned to Afghanistan and four million school girls were returns to their schools. At the same time, the insurgency was intensifying in the south. The government legitimacy was week because of the role of the former commander in key positions, crimes against the woman were widespread, unemployment was high. And access to public services was a week. From 2002-2005 the United Nations development program (UNDP) has assisted Afghanistan through the decades of war. In 2002 the UNDP office was in Islamabad and assistance consist largely of the peace program. United nations executed community-based programs but were mainly implemented by Afghan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In 2002 UNDP has developed one of its largest programs, its primary focus was the filling of the critical gags, with considerable speed, and managing large trust funds, which were essential for the overall international program. UNDP has also paid salaries of civil servants and the police in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban. They have also carried out a program in all key areas of importance to long term recovery, rule of law, judiciary and police, election, parliament, woman rights, sustainable livelihoods and disarmament, reintegration and demobilizations. Over 95% of programs were financed from noncore funds. During the periods of 2002 Afghanistan government has got most of the financial funds from the nongovernmental organization and some were directly from the states in order to bring peace in the region. During this period their democratic institutions were week and were unable to stabilize the country who have the long-term war. Their military institutions were also week and were not able to counter the insurgency. And the other reasons were the Taliban decisions to fought guerrilla warfare against the foreign forces who have invaded Afghanistan. which has further destructed the infrastructure of the country. The Afghan government has failed to bring peace in their country or brings the two parties in the tables for negotiations. This process is still going on between the two parties the Taliban and the US, but there are many obstacles that become a hurdle in the process of negotiation.

2005-2016 Elections

From 2003 to 2004 a Loya Jirga was formed in Afghanistan which adopted a new constitution for Afghanistan. This Loya Jirga provided a strong presidency. From October 2004 to November 2004 elections occurred in Afghanistan which chooses Hamid Karzai as their new president of Afghanistan. In September 2005 first parliamentary elections were conducted in 30 years of Afghanistan which also include women who voted for Hamid Karzai. In December 2005 parliament opens with warlords and strong men of Afghanistan for the fulfillment of seats. These people formed a new Karzai government, which was pro American in nature.

Peace talks with Taliban by Afghan Government

In October 2006 NATO took full responsibility for the security of Afghanistan taking command in the east from the US-led coalition forces. During April of 2007, President Hamid Karzai claimed that his government is in contact with the Taliban's main members. Karzai tried to make an agreement with the Taliban on the

basis of peace by offering them to be a part of the government conditional to laying down weapons and ready for table talks, maintained that Al-Qaida and others are foreign insurgents (SBS News, 2009). A major change was that the Taliban groups for the very first time on 10th September 2007 were ready for the table talks on the basis of national interests. This offer could not last long and the Taliban again came back to demand complete US withdrawal. In June 2008 President Karzai warned Pakistan that if they will not act against militants residing in Pakistan than, he will send troops to Pakistan to take action. But in 2008 US President George W Bush sent extra troops to Afghanistan to help coalition forces.

Operation Moshtarak

In February 2010, NATO-led forces and Afghan soldier launched the biggest military offensive operation, in a bid to secure the government control in Helmand province.

Lisbon Summit

In September 2010, the Heads of State and Government of the nation's contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, reaffirmed their commitment to contribute ISAF mission in Afghanistan. They reaffirmed Afghanistan's security and stability are directly linked with the security of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) member states. They agreed to hand over the security responsibility to Afghani forces at the end of 2014 (Alisa & Rod, 2013). They reaffirmed their long-term commitment to a better future of Afghan people.

Military Pact with Loya Jirga

In November 2011, President Karzai, tribal leaders, and other influential people announced its endorsement of the security deal to negotiate a 10-year military partnership with the US at a loya jirga traditional assembly. The deal named Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) was negotiated to govern the presence of US troops in Afghanistan after 2014. The US troops are to help train Afghan security forces as they struggle to cope with the country's persistent security threats without outside armed assistance. Speaking at the end of the meeting after the Loya Jirga issued its statement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai rejected the call for him to sign the deal immediately. Karzai said Afghanistan needed more time to ensure that the US was committed to peace in the country. "Peace is our precondition. America should bring us peace and then we will sign it,"

Taliban Opens Office in Dubai

In January 2012, the Taliban agreed to open a political office in Dubai to start peace talks with the US and the government of Afghanistan.

NATO Withdrawal Plan

In 2012, more than 30 non-NATO countries were represented at the Chicago Summit, endorsed the plan to withdraw foreign combat troops by the end of 2014. New French President Francois Hollande said that France will withdraw its combat mission by the end of 2012 - a year earlier than planned.

Tokyo Donor Conference

In July 2012, Tokyo donor conference pledges \$16bn in civilian aid to Afghanistan over four years, in an attempt to safeguard its future after foreign forces leave in 2014.

Afghanistan and Pakistan Peace Overtures

In February 2013 President Karzai and President Asif Ali Zardari agreed to work for peace in Afghanistan to achieve a peace settlement within six months after talks were hosted by Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron.

Election deal

In September 2014 the election dispute between the two rivals Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah was resolved and signed a power-sharing agreement, after a two-month audit of disputed election results. Ashraf becomes the president of Afghanistan and Abdullah Abdullah became chief executive.

NATO End Combat mission in Afghanistan

In Dec 2014, NATO formally ended its 13-year combat mission in Afghanistan and handover of responsibility to Afghan forces. Despite the official end to Isaf's combat role, violence persists across much of the country, with 2014 said to be the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since 2001.

2015 and 2016 Transformative Years

Afghanistan has entered a crucial and very uncertain phase. All parties had realized that a military solution, in any case, is not feasible, the fatigue of the war, have drawn the attention of Afghanistan and the international community to a possible political solution to the unending 18-year war. Grassroots action and 3-day ceasefire between the Afghan regime and the Taliban in June 2018 testify to the pervasive Afghans' desire for lasting peace. Despite hopeful developments, many issues still need to be settled down before a sustainable peace progression can be initiated, and many disturbers could ultimately thwart this process. There is also concern about the sacrifices that peace could take (Borhan, 2016). In my opinion, the main problem is that the two main Afghan parties contracting to any deal, the administration and the Taliban, anticipate concurrence in the overall distribution and balance of power in an agreement. It is widely feared that their aspirations are unable to get along and that the discussions will lead to nothing.

Analytical Debate on Interests of Regional Stakeholders

Pakistan

Pakistan has initiated efforts for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. The development of the efforts was the visit of President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani. The purpose of the visit was to overcome the past and make a new beginning of the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ashraf Ghani posed the vision of benefits that can be acquired if peace is brought back to the region. Pakistan has always rendered unstinted support for comprehensive peace in Afghanistan (Hasib, 2013). The deadlock in Afghanistan is breakable and Pakistan's efforts are necessary to do so. Pakistan's support has been very important and intensive in the political settlement of Afghanistan and it has acted whole heartedly in the peace process. It is seen that a stable neighborhood plays a significant role in bringing positive internal reforms in a state (Ayaz & Bruce, 2015). Thus, experts are of the view that Pakistan's efforts in bringing peace along with socio and economic cooperation will not only address the issues within Afghanistan but also promote regional peace as Afghanistan is need of extensive socio-economic cooperation from Pakistan. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are currently working on several economic projects, which compiles the speedy progress and rebuilding the trust gap for a durable relationship.

USA

After 9/11 state invaded Afghanistan by sending troops and dismantles the Taliban government with the help of the northern alliance. Bush administration pressurizes Pakistan to act against al Qaeda, eradicate their sanctuaries within the tribal areas. Pakistan had taken firm action against that terrorist organization which has been threatening the United state and its allies. The United States also invaded Iraq in 2003, which probably diverted US attention from Afghanistan and questioning the United state intention of war against terrorism. On January 20, 2009, Obama came into power with the slogan to bring all the American soldiers back home. Obama formulated a comprehensive strategy however, the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated with the passage of time, the Obama administration had realized the intensity of the Afghan

Taliban and send more additional 17000 troops at the initial phase. Similarly, the Obama administration also tried to engage the Afghan Taliban and bring them to the negotiation table with the help of Pakistan. Obama also targeted many Afghan leaders through drone strikes in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan tribal areas. The US had succeeded to kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, which they believe was a major victory for them at that time. Despite major military actions against the Taliban, they were succeeded in capturing more and more areas and Kunduz province was a breakthrough for the Taliban in 2015. Obama has failed to bring the Afghan Taliban on the negotiation table or eliminated them and accused Pakistan of their failures due to their alleged support to them (Kamran, 2015). The principal objective of US foreign policy in Afghanistan since 9/11 has been to never use Afghan land against US interest and eradication of terrorist organizations.

China

The neutrality of China towards Afghanistan and its close ties with Pakistan made Afghanistan prompted to ask for its help. Ashraf Ghani asked China to use its influence on Pakistan to help to bring stability in Afghanistan and influence the Taliban to abandon violence. In February 2015, China accepted to facilitate the Afghan government in such dialogues and to help in the reconciliation with the Taliban. China hosted the delegation of Taliban unofficially in 2014 in order to provide a forum and political avenue for the dialogues between the Taliban and Afghan Government. China tries tirelessly till 2015 and then its efforts became materialized when the official representatives of the High Peace Council and Taliban had a meeting at Urumqi for two days from 21st May 2015 to 22nd May 2015. But the dialogues between the Afghan Government and Taliban could not bring much fruit and regardless of the help of foreign countries, it is uncertain that when the relationships between the Afghan Government and Taliban will be improved and peace will prevail in the country (Abubakar, 2015).

India

India has historically maintained good relations with the Afghan government. During the Soviet invasion and in WoT, India preferred to remain out of conflict zone and carefully articulate foreign policy without much of sacrifices and spillover effects. India has realigned its policy towards Afghanistan and the region as a whole where significant investment is being made for reconstruction and infrastructure development apart from humanitarian assistance and institutional development. The current prime minister of India Narendra Modi has given the US \$58 million aid to Afghanistan and had also increased the investment in Chahbahaar port by the US \$ 6.5 million. The Indian approach to Afghanistan is dependent on the other benevolent, as India is only using its soft power in Afghanistan. India is trying to install the soft power in Afghanistan, as it is because of the United States security umbrella. India only working on soft power is helping Afghanistan a lot. As it wants to have its influence in Afghanistan, so ultimately it is doing great works. India is the largest aid giver in Afghanistan. Indian aid is the source of its cultural influence in Afghanistan. Apart from this India is also, making a huge investment in development in Afghanistan. India is also training the security forces of Afghanistan against the internal and external threats of the peace in Afghanistan.

Iran

In the beginning, Iran favored the US invasion as it was directly aligned with the Iranian interests. The relations with the Taliban regime were tense due to sectarian differences. Iran holds close ties with the Hazara community of Afghanistan as they share the same sect. It has participated in Afghanistan through different proxies. The tension increased in 1998 when the Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats at a consulate in Mazar-i-sharif. After the tragic event, Iran worked closely with the US and NATO. Iran supported the Northern Alliance and the extended assistance to other groups like Hezb e Wahdat. After Khatami's government, Iran became critical to US policies in Afghanistan. It thought of the Taliban as an effective counter to the great enemy, the United States of America. It opposed the long-term military presence of

the US in the country. Iran mainly played a positive role in Afghanistan. It extended economic assistance of \$500 billion dollars to the Afghans until 2001. The countries are the largest trade partners hence stable and secure Afghanistan is in the favor of Iran. It also supported the central government to extend its influence in the country. Along with financial assistance, Iran also built infrastructure, improved telecommunication and helped in irrigation and agriculture. From the historical and contemporary context, it is evident that Iran does not have any hegemonic intentions for Afghanistan. the peace in Afghanistan will help Iran secure its eastern border. The stability in Afghanistan is directly linked with the stability in Iran. The stable government can keep a check on the drug trafficking that takes place across the border and bring consequences for Iran that is one of the biggest concerns for Iran. Iran also looks for the opportunity to send back 3 million refugees that it holds to its own country. Both countries also have certain water disputes as water from Afghan mountains flows to Iran. As these relations get better chances are that these disputes can be resolved.

Central Asian Republics (CARS)

The Afghan war is one of the biggest global security concerns and no single country can fix it. Therefore, it has become a regional collective approach involving all the CARs to unite as one unite on this issue before it hurts their national interests in the future. Although these states are not playing any key role, yet they have a lot to offer for peace in Afghanistan. These states have to act efficiently on all means like in diplomatic, political and economic relations with the Afghan government to maintain peace which will have a global effect. Afghanistan is a really unstable state and needs stability by avoiding issues like financial, political and foreign relations with states. Its instability has been a major reason for insurgents to get strong and to enjoy the liberty of doing anything they want. The neighboring states of Afghanistan need to get active and play a major role in the development of Afghanistan and to provide assistance in maintaining stability in Afghanistan. A stable and developed Afghanistan will be then able to fight and retaliate against insurgency (Reza, 2013).

Analytical Debate on Challenges and Suggested Course of Action

Political

Everyone from Alexander to the British empire always wanted to conquer a relatively small landlocked central Asian country that is Afghanistan. It is to be said that; Afghanistan is easy to invade, Difficult to conquer and impossible to rule and had never been ruled by any foreign power. Afghanistan does not have any standing army and it has been a tribal society, there is no proper political structure, political parties, and tribal people are fighting each other. If we look back in the middle 20th century King Zahir Shah brought in modern reforms in the 1960s. He introduced elections, political rights and women's education. King was trying to make Afghanistan progressive and to some extent he was successful. But suddenly the King's cousin Daud Khan ousted him as the king was on a foreign tour and Daud khan took up the presidency and prime ministership during Daud khan era there was crisis and state was divided into two blocs Communist and democratic and after that, a new government emerged as communist there was a hard crackdown. USSR took full advantage and sent advisors and equipment to help the new communist government. And democratic opposition was supported by the USA. The most far-reaching and ultimately disastrous attempt to expand the penetration of the Kabul government occurred during the early years of communist rule that began in 1978 and eventually led to civil war and chaos (Alissa, 2013). From the 20th century to 21st Afghanistan has failed politically. The political structure of Afghanistan is weak that it has always influenced by the foreign political system of Afghanistan is one of the major factors that led to instability absence of peace in Afghanistan.

The USA as a Major Stake Holder

The biggest foreign obstacle in the Afghan peace process in USA, as for the USA being a compromising state is quite hard. As far as USA strategic policy concerns, they want their troops out from the soil of

Afghanistan, but peaceful deal is now not clear as much as it was before the tweet of President Trump of USA in which he halted anymore negotiation with Afghan Taliban and insurgents as after the killing of the two army personals of USA. Afghan Taliban and insurgents are determined and clear about their ambition of not having any negotiation with the USA on a table with the third party of the Afghan national government. Their prime and prior objective to attain is to have no single USA troop in the land of Afghanistan. While the USA is also facing a decline in its economy and casualties of its troops and ANDSF. In the last two years such as 2018 and 2019 Afghan Taliban had made huge popular support in rural areas but in urban areas their attacks have also been increased, it is making the USA more hesitant to sit equal on the negotiation table with the Afghan Taliban with any leverage having upon them. (Thomas, 2011)

Pakistan as Balancer and Peace Maker

In the cold war when Afghanistan was in control and influenced by the Soviet Union and Russia, the USA asked Pakistan to fight their war in Afghanistan as the US non-NATO ally. Pakistan helped the USA in Afghanistan and later right after the incident of 9/11 Pakistan was again used by the USA in the Afghan war when the USA invaded Afghanistan in the year 2001 in the name of the war on terror. The war on terror in Afghanistan was paid off by Pakistan in its own homeland heavily in the form of terrorism and suicide bombings and the death of innocent lives and civilians. USA labeled Pakistan as an untrustworthy and accuse Pakistan of providing safe havens to Afghan Taliban and not letting the USA get out of this long war of twenty years contrary to facts on the ground. Moreover, the USA had pressurized Pakistan in recent years by not giving it the aid and incentives, also threatened Pakistan of listing it in the Blacklist of FATF. Such irresponsible public statements and denial of sacrifices of Pakistan by US and Afghan governments are adding to already polluted environments and dimming the prospects on eventual peace and stability. Pakistan and Afghanistan share porous borders in form of Durand Line, also Pakistan is facing Afghan refugee's problem, these two things are irritating points due to which Pakistan has actively responded and evacuated Afghan Taliban and TTP almost in its region of FATA. But the growing influence of India in Afghanistan economically and commercially is a resistance that hinders Pakistan in achieving peace in the Afghan region. If the Afghan Taliban remain in Afghanistan and get their representation in Government, then it is more likely that India will recede back from Afghanistan and its influence is likely to recede due to less leverage. Pakistan has to use all means to keep the USA, India and Afghan governments engaged till the final reconciliation and establishment of the credible national government as Pakistan cannot afford the situation confronted at the time of Soviet withdrawal in a vacuum that has led us in the perpetual state of instability. USA should realize that without Pakistan's full effort and presence, the Afghan Taliban will less likely to sit on a negotiation table with the USA.

Iran-Russia-China as Moderators

Iran due to its position in central Asia involves in regional politics and because of America's entanglement in the Afghan war, it is saving time for Iran after all the sanctions and attention of the USA towards its nuclear ambition. So, Iran wants Afghanistan and the USA to remain entangled with each other. So does Russia the same as Russian thinks of increasing the influence like they did in the Soviet Era. China also wants to increase its trade and political influence in the Central Asian states to counter the USA and India wherever they seem together. That is why it is in favor of China if the US kept stuck in the Afghan war until China does not rise fully economically and peacefully.

Economic Stability and Functional State Institutions – A Compulsion

Economic stability is very necessary for the proper implementation of the peace agreement. In the case of Afghanistan, where right now is a deadlock in talks between the U.S and Afghan Taliban but in the future if the two parties came into any agreement then the proper implementation and effects of that agreement to citizens of Afghanistan will be under question. According to a report of World Bank half of the population

of Afghanistan is living under the poverty line. They have no job opportunities. In this report, it is mentioned that the ratio of poverty is more in rural than in urban areas. Also, in this report, it is mentioned that the regulators of the Afghanistan economy have sided their responsibilities and are paying attention to politics. Similarly, the donors to Afghanistan government have shifted their attention to a peace agreement (Shashank & Ali, 2015). Despite the U.S aid, there is a rapid increase in poverty ratio. The vast population of Afghanistan has adopted the gun culture for their living and several key players in the Afghan Taliban are earning money through conflict. So, whenever this will happen there is a serious question regarding how long this agreement will survive. With the current situation, there is a possibility that due to lack of economic instability the agreement will not survive much longer, and Afghanistan again will turn to another or similar situation.

Conclusion

Beginning from the Soviet invasion to the US invasion, till today, Afghanistan is suffering from instability and insecurity. It was assumed that the presence of the US military in Afghanistan is a part of its containment policies regarding China and Russia. But the recent geopolitical shifts have put all of them on the same page and a brighter future of Afghanistan can be seen as all stakeholders want regional approach and talks with the Taliban for reaching consensus on the future political dispensation of Afghanistan. Although the same strategy for peace has been used by major powers in the past but could produce tangible results. What is different now is that all the major powers including the USA, China and Russia and regional powers Iran, India and Pakistan amid varying perspectives on methodology have a unanimous end state that is peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. Neighbors hold a key role in the peace process. One of the major issues is to bring principle stakeholders, the Afghan government and the Taliban, on the table. Along with it, the misunderstanding among the ethnic factions should also be resolved. Both of these issues make the role of Pakistan more important than others, as it has strong ties with both the Afghan government and the Taliban. In short, both parties have to realize the changing dynamics of region and threat from ISIS, and both should move beyond rhetoric and find a middle ground for compromise. On the Taliban's side, they have to adopt moderate views regarding the form of government and should accept the power-sharing with Kabul elites. If the mistrust among parties and ongoing violence in Afghanistan continued, then the peace talks will remain in a continuous stalemate. It can also move towards complete collapse due to the involvement of regional stakeholders and the marginalization of the Afghan government. In sum, all the parties must recognize that all of them are interdependent on each other for a peaceful and stabilize Afghanistan in the future. That's why they have to restructure their priorities and should build a degree of consensus in a possible way. Afghan neighbors, Pakistan and India can use Afghanistan for their regional influence and the internal mistrust between Kabul and Taliban will disturb the power-sharing and could again lead Afghanistan towards instability.

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