

Peace Prospects in Afghanistan

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Introduction

It has been more than a decade and a half since the United States of America invaded Afghanistan by launching operation 'Enduring Freedom,' but peace still continues to elude Afghanistan. Ever since the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) officially ended its combat mission on December 28, 2014, leaving behind a residual of US and International forces under the auspices of new NATO-led advisory mission 'Operation Resolute Force,' the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. 2015 was the worst year of violence since 2009 in which 3,545 Afghan civilians were killed, and another 7,457 wounded.¹ Due to exacerbating violence, nearly 200,000 Afghans sought asylum in EU states in 2015, four times higher than the preceding year.² General W. Nicholson, commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, acknowledging the precarious security situation in Afghanistan in a Senate Armed Services Committee said that security in Afghanistan has been deteriorating rather than improving.³

Meanwhile, Taliban expanded their influence beyond their traditional strongholds by defeating Afghan government and taking control of northern city of Kunduz. Taliban also continued to 'score tactical and strategic victories' in southern Afghanistan, the focus of 2009-11 US surge.⁴ Contrary to expectations generated by the revelation of Mullah Umer's death, that it would lead to internecine war and infighting within Taliban, the latter has emerged as a stronger force that ran the insurgency much longer into the winter. Driven by its strategy to weaken Afghan security forces and undermine government institutions, Taliban under Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who had replaced Mullah Umer, launched Operation Omeri,⁵ conducting some spectacular attacks in Kabul.⁶

The chances, if any, for a negotiated settlement of Afghan conflict ended with the death of Mullah Mansour in a drone strike in Balochistan.⁷ The Quadrilateral Coordination Group, an initiative of US, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to find a negotiated settlement of Afghanistan conundrum, failed in its mission. As of now, peace process in Afghanistan is dead. New Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada

has refused to reciprocate to any government peace overtures.⁸ Pakistan is again being accused of running with Taliban and hunting with the US.

Meanwhile, Obama administration has shelved the plan of reducing US troops from 9,800 to 5,500. 8,400 US troops will stay after January 2017, to train and assist Afghan security forces.⁹ Recognizing the precarious security situation in Afghanistan, Obama said, "We have an option ofpulling out and potentially then seeing a country crumble under the strains of continued terrorist activity or insurgencies." Moreover, NATO allies will contribute nearly 6,000 troops. The have also committed to fund Afghan security forces \$1 billion annually over the next three years.¹⁰

This paper focuses on three sections: Internal dynamics of Afghanistan in the form of a resurgent Taliban and a weakened government in Kabul; understanding Pakistan's Afghan policy rationale in its historical context and evolving geopolitical situation and its impact on peace; and American strategy for Afghanistan.

A Beleaguered Kabul and Resurgent Taliban

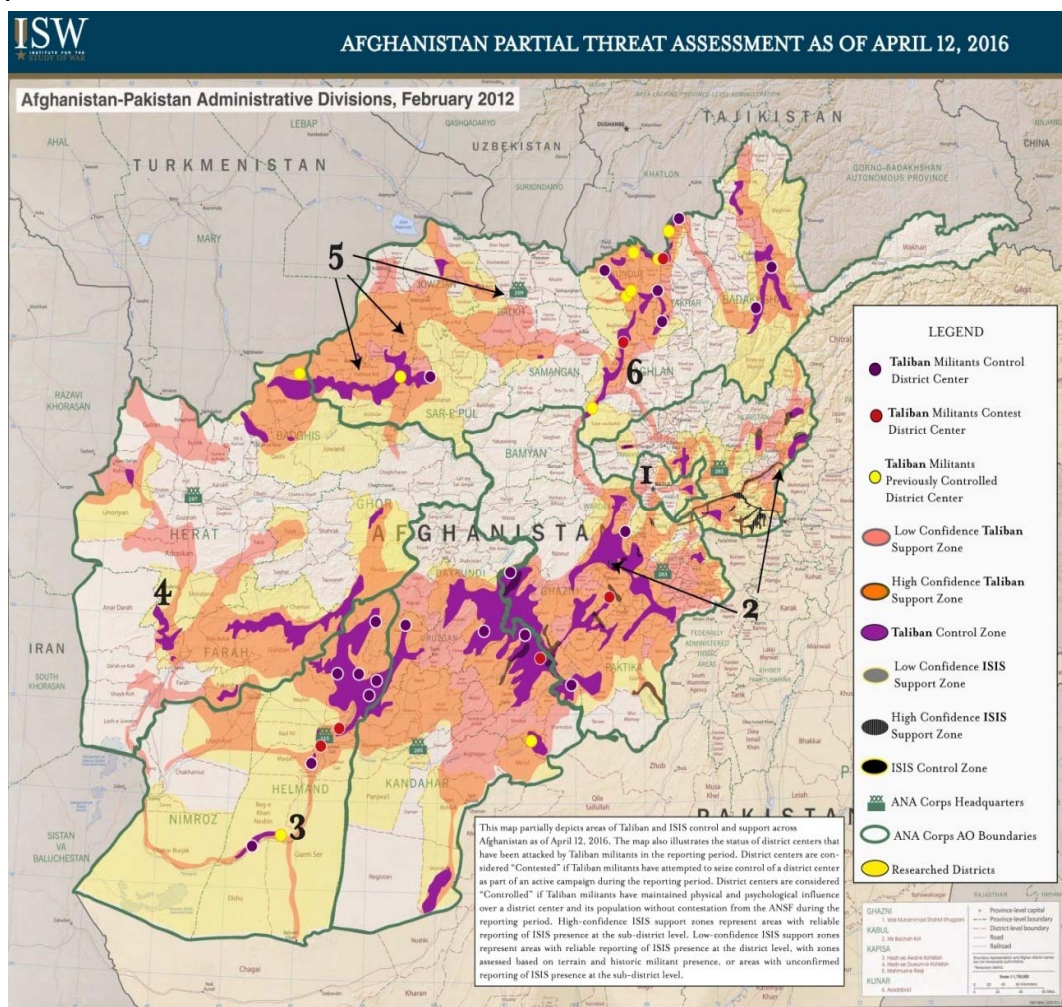
Peace in Afghanistan can be brought about either through a negotiated settlement of the conflict or defeat of Taliban on the ground. Neither of the prospects seems to be moving towards success. Multiple rounds of 'Peace Negotiations' have produced nothing and resurgent Taliban militants are reasserting themselves quite aggressively throughout Afghanistan.

Defying the earlier expectations that the revelation of Mullah Umer's death would lead to divisions in the ranks of Taliban and an enfeebled leadership, engaged in infighting and internecine warfare, would be less capable of waging successful military campaigns against Kabul, Taliban under Mullah Akhtar Mansour emerged much stronger. Mullah Mansour, selected as the successor of Mullah Umer by Taliban Shura, successfully tackled all challenges to his leadership. He made an alliance with Haqqani network by appointing Sirajuddin Haqqani as his deputy, brought under his fold both Mullah Umer's brother and son to gain legitimacy for his faction.¹¹ Even Aymen al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaida leader, pledged allegiance to the new leadership of Taliban.¹² Mansour battled and brutally crushed the alliance of Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Akhund, the latter supported by ISIS elements formerly from Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.¹³

Peace Prospects in Afghanistan

Unlike the past, the Taliban insurgency continued late into the winter of 2015, making it one of the deadliest years for Afghanistan since 2009, with more than 11,000 casualties.¹⁴ Moreover, Taliban defeated Afghan forces in Kunduz and conquered the city. It was both a spectacular victory for Taliban and a psychological blow for Afghan government. It looked as though Taliban would expand their influence by conquering provinces of Badashan, Baghlan and Takhar. Southern Afghanistan too has gone increasingly into Taliban control.

As can be shown in the following map, Taliban's gains and influence have increased



Peace Prospects in Afghanistan

The death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour and the 'decapitation of leaders' strategy is unlikely to weaken Taliban. In sharp contrast to the previous transition process riddled with brutal jostling for leadership position, this time around Taliban have maintained internal unity and smoothly completed the transition process by selecting Haabatullah Akhundzada as the new leader, with Sirajuundin Haqqani and Yaqub Umer, Mullah Umer's eldest son as his deputies.¹⁵ As Foreign Affairs put it, "this triumvirate possesses a powerful religious, military and hereditary leadership."¹⁶ These developments have countered and neutralized the perception of deep fissures within Taliban. The only silver lining is that a united Taliban could possibly be easy to negotiate with than a movement that is fractious and polarized. On the other end, it could also prove to be a hurdle for a durable peace in Afghanistan.

In sharp contrast to Taliban's internal unity the National Unity Government (NUG) of Ashraf Ghani is a mélange of opportunistic leaders, interested more in corruption and factional politics than in governance. All sorts of artificial positions within government have been shrewdly fashioned to accommodate hostile interest groups, formerly of Northern Alliance. Abdullah Abdullah has been made Central Executive Officer (CEO), Hazara leader Muhammad Muhaqiq has been given the post of Deputy CEO, while General Abdul Rashid Dostum has taken the charge of vice-presidency. The polarized and fractious political dispensation in Kabul has been a cause of fragmented and diluted central authority. The predominance of the Northern Alliance in military and civil institutions has not helped the peace process to move forward. Their aversion to reconciling to the idea of accommodating Taliban in a future political setup is an open secret. The want of centralized authority was also evidenced when Afghan intelligence forces revealed the death of Mullah Umer, with the aim of scuttling the peace negotiations. Poor governance and precarious law and order situation has disillusioned the people of Afghanistan. According to Asia Foundation, 57% of the Afghans believed their country was moving in the wrong direction. More ominously, UN special envoy in Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, stated in March 2016 that 'if Afghanistan survived 2016, the United Nations mission in the country will consider it a success.'¹⁷ In the Spring of 2016, according to United Nations, some 1000 Afghans were leaving their homes daily, displaced by conflict and war.¹⁸

On the military front, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have not fared any better. Desertions, ghost soldiers, lack of equipments and plummeting morale

are some of the serious issues afflicting ANSF. Afghan forces lack the capability to assert authority in geographically dispersed areas and neutralize threats to Kabul government. In 2014, more than 20,000 Afghan security forces were lost in combat and desertions.¹⁹ In 2015, the casualty rate in ANSF rose 28 times higher than in 2014. Giving credence to such claims, General John W. Nicholson, who took command of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan from General John Campbell, stated that 'US is behind schedule to train a self-sufficient Afghan security force.'²⁰ It is unlikely that Afghan government is to substantially improve its capacity in the foreseeable future, even with the assistance of international supporters. Taliban can only be amenable to some sort of a negotiated settlement if they become enfeebled on the ground, a distant prospect. But as long as these endogenous sources, and these are not the only sources, of instability are tackled with, peace in Afghanistan will remain a distant dream.

Pakistan and Afghanistan

History of Animosity

Historically, Pakistan and Afghanistan have not enjoyed cordial relations. Afghani irredentist claim over large portions of Pakistan's territory and calling for establishing greater Pakhtunistan was the main reason for the unfriendly relations between the two neighbours. The chequered history of bilateral relationship has been more of animosity than cooperation. Kabul has never accepted the Durand Line as the official border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.²¹ Pakistan and Afghanistan had covertly supported and helped movements and groups against each other even prior to the coup d'etat of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978 and the Soviet invasion the next year. Pakistan hosted Burhanuddin Rabbani, Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud during Daoud's regime in Afghanistan to purportedly neutralize his polemics of a 'Greater Puktunistan.' Meanwhile, Daoud supported the insurgency in Balochistan and gave Baloch insurgents sanctuary in Afghanistan.²²

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan increased during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It then coordinated and played the role of intermediary between USA, Saudi Arabia and Jihadi forces.²³ Pakistan became the conduit for weapons, money and resources to groups fighting in Afghanistan against Soviet Union. This not only helped Pakistan to have greater influence over groups fighting in Afghanistan but

also shaped Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan. After the defeat and withdrawal of Soviet Union, Pakistan put its weight behind Gulbadin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-i-Islami, but began supporting Taliban after they had emerged as a potent force in 1994 and helped it secure control over Kabul.²⁴

After 9/11 and the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan was forced to change its policies in Afghanistan. Pakistan provided America with logistics support and air bases. Pakistani authorities also tightened the noose around fleeing Taliban and arrested some of their prominent leaders. Mullah Zaif, former Ambassador of Afghanistan to Pakistan, Mullah Jalil, former Deputy Foreign Minister and considered a close ally of Mullah Umer and Latif Hakimi, spokesman of Taliban were arrested by Pakistani law enforcement forces.²⁵ Moreover, hundreds of al-Qaeda members were arrested and handed over to CIA.²⁶ But there was also evidence that some Taliban leaders continued to operate from Pakistan and used it as a 'logistics rearguard' for their operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan was either covertly supporting these groups or turning a blind eye to their activities. Quetta Shura operated from Pakistan's largest province and Taliban fighters injured in operations against NATO forces received treatment and recuperated in hospitals in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan was also accused of doing little to stem the flow of Madrassa students going for Jihad in Afghanistan.²⁷ Pakistan could not have completely disengaged itself from Taliban owing to its long association with them and its strategic objectives in Afghanistan. But at times Pakistan was blamed for the failures of Afghan government and International Forces which overlooked the endogenous factors of insurgency in the region.

Policy Rationale of Pakistan

To make sense of this policy, one needs to understand the key determinants of Pakistan's Afghan policy. The determinants are both endogenous and exogenous. Pakistan's Afghan policy cannot be decontextualized of its historical animosity with India and its growing influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan and India have a history of multiple wars, covert operations against each other, unresolved disputes and more importantly, conventional force asymmetry.

From 2001 to 2014 India officially pledged \$2 billion in assistance for infrastructure development in Afghanistan.²⁸ Moreover, India considerably increased its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan by opening consulates in

Jalalabad, Kandahar, Kabul, I and Mazar-i-Sharif. Pakistan has accused India of sponsoring the Baloch insurgency, in its Balochistan province through its consulates of Kandahar and Jalalabad. The presence of Brahamdagh Bugti in Afghanistan was a proof of it. The arrest of Kul Yadav Bhoshan, in Indian Naval intelligence officer working for Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's premier intelligence agency, has substantiated and given credence to Pakistani claims that India is fomenting unrest in Pakistan. Moreover, India has signed with Afghanistan a Strategic Partnership.²⁹ In December 2015, Modi inaugurated the Afghan Parliament built by India and handed over three Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghan government. In May 2016, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a three-way transit agreement on Iran's Chabahar Port.³⁰

Pakistan's foreign policy is premised on the ground that Pakistan has greater influence in Afghanistan relative to India to compensate for asymmetrical conventional forces and financial investment. Thus, the use of non-state actors is rationalized as a less expensive tool to achieve foreign policy goals. How effective it has been and what have been its hidden and indirect cost are altogether different questions.

As alluded to before in the paper, Durand Line and the issue of Greater Pukhtunistan are causes of contentious relations between Kabul and Islamabad. Then there are endogenous factors. Decision-making in Pakistan is highly militarized and its foreign policy is largely determined by its security policy, controlled largely by Pakistan army.³¹ The thinking within the institution looks at foreign policy through the prism of realpolitik and zero-sum game. This approach has isolated Pakistan in the region and has been a source of much opprobrium for it. The point is not to externalize Afghanistan's security and political problems, but to make an attempt to understand Pakistan's Afghan policies in regional politics and internal dynamics and link them to peace in Afghanistan.

Then there are genuine Pakistani security concerns in the evolving geopolitical environment in the region that somehow do not attract sufficient consideration in the discourse on Afghanistan. Security situation in Pakistan is fragile; it has a tense eastern border; fierce skirmishes between Afghan and Pakistani forces over the fencing of the Durand Line give a peep into the nature of bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan has been battling Taliban in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) for more than a decade and faces

internal instability in Balochistan. Given these circumstances, Pakistan cannot afford to open a new military front against Afghan Taliban and increase its security challenges manifold. Pakistan also claims it cannot be battling Taliban and pushing them for talks concurrently which the international community demands. Putting the entire blame on Pakistan for the worsening security situation in Afghanistan obscures the failure of Afghan and International Forces to provide a modicum of stability to Afghanistan.

That Pakistan no longer adheres to the concept of strategic depth, at least not in the conventional understanding of the word, is obvious.³² Moreover, a stable Afghanistan accrues to Pakistan many benefits. Not only a precarious security situation in Afghanistan endangers peace in Pakistan, but will likely prompt a new wave of refugees, putting a heavy toll on Pakistan's weak economy and social infrastructure. But Pakistan's official posturing has not helped its case and standing in global community. Pakistan has presented itself as the linchpin for a negotiated settlement of Afghan conflict, because it has influence on Taliban, as acknowledged by Sartaj Aziz, adviser to Prime Minister on Security Affairs.³³ But time and again Pakistan has failed to live upto its commitments. It has been more a matter of overplaying one's hand. Moreover, the small window of opportunity that opened when Ashraf Ghani visited Pakistan and met with its civilian and military leadership and agreed to training Afghan forces in Pakistan, was squandered when attacks in Afghanistan did not stop and Pakistan failed to nudge the Taliban to the negotiating table.

America's Strategy in Afghanistan

America's strategy in Afghanistan has been to achieve its strategic objective of neutralizing threats to its security by ensuring that the country does not become a safe haven for the terrorist groups. When International Assistance Security Forces (ISAF) officially ended their combat mission on December 28, 2014, they were far from bringing in a semblance of durable peace in Afghanistan. Neither had they left behind a capable Afghan military force that could help maintain peace in Afghanistan without the presence of international troops.

Moreover, the emergence of ISIS in Iraq 2014 and its dramatic routing of US-trained Iraqi government forces forced America to make a sobering assessment of

the precarious security situation in Afghanistan. So, a residual of American and International Forces were retained for two years under the auspices of the new NATO-led advisory Resolute Support, focused on training and assisting Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

As of now, America has 9,800 troops serving in Afghanistan. Obama administration's decision to reduce US troops to less than 6,000 has been shelved. Former US special representatives to Pakistan and Afghanistan, such as Dan Feldman, James Dobbins and Mary Grossman, had been urging US government not to reduce troops in Afghanistan.³⁴ There was pressure to change US mission in terms of drawdown strategy, but there are indications that America is, as evidenced by its special forces fighting alongside Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) against Taliban in southern Afghanistan,³⁵ drone strike in Balochistan and air strikes in Kunduz, expanding the role of US troops from just 'advising and training' ANSF. There are fears that an abrupt and steep drawdown and a reinvigorated Taliban insurgency would encourage regional states to jockey for greater power and influence in Afghanistan, further destabilizing the region.

ISIS also has some roots in eastern Afghanistan and fierce battles have been reported between ISIS and Afghan government forces, resulting in many casualties on both sides.³⁶ These ominous developments along with the failure to nudge forward the peace process in Afghanistan have pushed America into a quandary. The paradox of diminishing support within America for its mission in Afghanistan and the need for international support to a compromised and a weakened government in Kabul, makes the situation much more difficult for US. In 2014, almost half of Americans polled by Gallup thought that US should have never sent troops to Afghanistan. In 2015, United States committed to cover nearly three-quarters of Afghanistan's security budget.³⁷ A sudden decline in the assistance could possibly have grave consequences for Afghanistan. These dole outs have not been able to extract an iota of good governance from Kabul. Even a long-term commitment, both in terms of money and troops, is no guarantee for establishing a durable peace in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, security situation in Afghanistan is extremely fragile; peace process is dead at least for now and Taliban have not been battered on the

battlefield so as to become amenable for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Policy divergences of the relevant actors in the Afghanistan conundrum have not helped stabilize the situation either. Despite this grim picture, there are commonalities, shared threats and the element of geographical proximity which should make cooperation between the stakeholders in Afghanistan inevitable. Total chaos and breakdown of law and order situation will benefit no country, all states will be vulnerable to the negative consequences of such an eventuality. The rise of Islamic State (IS) in eastern Afghanistan and its links with the Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan (IMU) is a common threat faced by both regional and international actors. Despite policy divergences and a history of bitter relations, Pakistan and Afghanistan share a border of 2,200 km. This geographical proximity necessitates a modicum of cooperation and mutual understanding of each other's position and security threats. Important, no doubt, these factors are, but as long as the Afghan government is weak on governance front and ANSF is unable to assert its authority in geographically dispersed parts of Afghanistan, peace in Afghanistan will remain a mirage. Secondly, the commitment of the international forces to Afghanistan could possibly go to any extent to avert a total control of Kabul by Taliban and maintain the status quo. As long as this grim realization does not set in with the leadership of Taliban that they cannot win in Afghanistan, there is little incentive for them to negotiate.

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Endnotes

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