

## **Afghan Peace Process and Policy Options for Regional Actors: Implications for India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A peaceful settlement to the ongoing war in Afghanistan may now be anticipated. In February 2020, the United States reached an agreement with the Taliban, and also signed a declaration with the government of Afghanistan to encourage the initiation of an intra-Afghan peace process. Many challenges still stand in the way of a success of negotiated settlement and, with the US withdrawal.

India emerged in Afghanistan as a development partner in Afghanistan. Indian approach towards Afghan peace process is less concerning as compared to security issues of Afghanistan, Indian has great security policy. Economically India is fifth largest donor for Afghanistan. Since 2011 Indian army provided military training to Afghan forces.

**Key Words:** Pakistan, United States, India, NATO, Terrorism.

### **Introduction**

After one year of talks, on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020 Taliban and US representatives agreed on a framework of peace where the US agreed to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan. According to this agreement within 135 days, the US will withdraw half of its forces and gradually in 14 months, the US will retreat all of its forces from Afghanistan. According to the agreement, the US will withdraw half of its forces in June 2020. According to the other clause of the Agreement, the US removes sanctions over Taliban leadership. But on the issue of exchange of prisoners there was a deadlock by the Afghan administration.

As per the agreement, the Taliban agreed to stop all operations against the US and Afghan forces and they will never allow any other group to use Afghan soil against US or Afghan forces. They will also decrease the training camps and funding activities. But practically both main parties of peace deal, the Taliban and Afghan administration ceasefire agreement works only for one week. Gradually by the end of February 2020 the situation escalated between both forces. Although the Afghan Administration was also the part of the negotiation but due to the Afghan presidential election of 2019, the Afghan administration seems divided on some concerned issues of peace agreement including exchange of prisoners. This situation remains to involve as deadlock. By the end of year Afghan dividend

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administration reached a consensus about the prisoners. It seems that at the end of 2020 the conditions of exchange of prisoners reach the level where talks began. (Afzal, 2020)

The Afghan administration still seems divided about the release of high profile prisoners of Taliban. It was also assumed that the US administration preferred to withdraw forces although they had a lot of political and economic interest there. Violence from both sides and Covid situation also affected the peace talks. Peace talks are not the guarantee to end of war but it seems a good achievement that both sides start the negotiation. Experts are divided on upcoming political settlement which led to both parties at the peaceful settlement. Still it's not clear that at the end of these peace talks how much it affects the US withdrawal.

To some extent, it seems that the result of US full withdrawal creates space for the Taliban. It makes them stronger and weakens the grip of the Afghan administration. Since losing their control in Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban tried to gain considerable position in Afghanistan. Ultimately the complete withdrawal of the US and NATO forces will also affect the financial aid of the Afghan administration. Intra Afghan dialogue would be a significant event if it delivered the Afghan nation a peaceful outcome, although the Taliban had long refused this negotiation. Although this dialogue is time-consuming and very complex due to the demands of both actors. Still, there is no guarantee of a long term political settlement of the conflict. (Jamal, 2020)

In 2019, the civilian casualties were at large scale. Around 10,000 Afghan civilians lost their life due to the increased violence of Al-Qaida and ISIS. The US and the Taliban decided to negotiate. Although the US exercise full of its military munitions on the ground to fight these groups. US operations were carried out in 27 provinces of Afghanistan. But in reality, the Taliban are contesting more control than 2001.

During the last 18 years, the US spent 137 billion dollars in various areas of Afghanistan like the equipping and training of Afghan forces and help them to strengthen their security system. Although this aid remains helpful for the Afghan administration to enhance its capacity but it didn't ensure the peace and stability in Afghanistan. Afghan natural resources are still underdeveloped. Afghanistan is on the way of international trade routes but still this geographical significance didn't benefits the Afghan community (Motlagh, 2020).

Peace talks are not guaranteed to end war but it seems a good achievement that both sides have started the negotiations. Experts are divided about the upcoming political settlement which led the both parties to a peaceful settlement. Still, it's not clear that at the end of these peace talks how much it affects the US withdrawal (Schroen, 2019).

## **Taliban and the US agreement**

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After more than a year of negotiation on the 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Afghan and US officials reach an agreement of withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. It also concludes the framework of talks between the Taliban and Afghan administration but raises some questions about the barriers in Intra Afghan dialogue and upcoming US policy for Afghanistan.

#### **Background of Taliban US talks**

During a speech in August 2017, President Trump indicates a revised US policy for Afghanistan. He talks about a political settlement, although he endorsed the affective military action for this political settlement. But he didn't make clear the US goals in Afghanistan. Just after one year, US officials started back door channels to negotiate with the Taliban. Afghan administration was not part of these developments. The US is still not benefitting much from its military operations so the Trump administration revised its long-term policy to the reconciliation process. So in 2018, the first official meeting between Taliban and US officials was held in Doha. The US-appointed its former ambassador Zalmay Khalil Zad as a special representative for Afghanistan.

During the whole year, Mr. Khalil Zad remains involved in Doha meetings with the Taliban. He also remains in contact with the other actors of the conflicts like Pakistan and other regional actors. During March 2019, due to the special efforts of Mr. Khalil Zad, the parties concluded a draft of the agreement by which they decided a framework of US withdrawal and assurance of counterterrorism. By this agreement, the Afghan administration and Taliban officials will start intra-afghan negotiation for comprehensive ceasefire and settlement. In September 2019, after the killing of US soldier by the Taliban, US President Mr. Trump suspended the negotiation. Three months later the negotiations again started.

A senior US official breaks this news on February 14, 2020, that the Taliban and US administration reach an agreement and agreed to stop attacking each other and reduce violence across the country. Officials seem that this framework becomes part of the official agreement. Practically violence reduces from the end of February 2020. US officials considered the efforts of the Taliban to a reduction of violence. As a result, attacks were reduced by as much as 80%.

#### **Taliban and the US agreement**

On 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020, an agreement was signed between Taliban political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani and US representative Khalilzad at Doha. During this event, US Secretary of State Mr. Pompeo and international observers were part of this event. US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani meet in Kabul to ensure the clauses of agreement. They also issue a joint statement about the negotiation. (Khan, 2020).

US commander Mr. Kenneth McKenzie confirmed that according to the agreement the US forces drawdowns from 13000 to 8600. He also said that they

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reduced the forces at level nearly a month ahead of schedule and they also confirmed that all of their forces leave Afghanistan within 24 months. They also committed to facilitating the prison exchange program between the Afghan administration and the Taliban. On 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020 US removed sanctions on Taliban members.

### **Afghan administration and Taliban talks**

This agreement was the end of US Operational efforts in Afghanistan. But this agreement was not the comprehensive peace agreement. According to the peace experts, comprehensive peace is only possible through the negotiation of the Afghan government and the Taliban. So by this agreement, both parties agree to set a schedule of negotiation. But due to a lot of complications, these talks were not held at the due date.

The first barrier towards intra-afghan dialogue was the afghan presidential election conflict between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020, both leaders reach an agreement. During the presidential election, Ashraf Ghani got 50% of the vote while Abdullah Abdullah got 40% of the vote. The supporters of Abdullah Abdullah rejects this percentage of count and declare himself a separate president. But after a few days, by the efforts of Zalmay Khalilzad and others, both leaders signed an agreement on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020. A High Council of National Reconciliation was created and Abdullah Abdullah was appointed as chairman of this council. (Kazantey, 2020)

### **US secretary of state visit of Afghanistan**

US secretary of state, Mr. Pompeo visits Afghanistan on March 23, 2020, to mediate the Afghan presidential conflict. He meets both leaders individually and in a joint meeting. He was unable to convince both of them to reach on consensus. On his return to the US, he released a statement by which he criticized both leaders about their behavior. He said that the United States is very disappointed about the current situation. He also said that the current situation also damages the relation of both states. He realized the Afghan leadership that the USA and his allies sacrificed a lot for peaceful Afghanistan. This presidential conflict can threaten US interests. He said that US administration now thinking to review its policy towards Afghanistan.

Just after the arrival of Mr. Pompeo, one billion dollars from the Afghan aid. They announced that if both leaders don't reach an agreement then the US also reduces 1 billion from the upcoming US aid in 2021. It is still unclear that this deduction effect which area of support. According to the Reuters report, the largest area of support by the USA is the assistance to the Afghan Security Forces and it might affect by that deduction. Although the Defense Secretary has not clear about the area of deduction. In further reports, it is highlighted that the deduction is not made, but the Pentagon is concerned about this deduction. (Zimmerman, 2020)

## **Barriers in intra Afghan dialogue**

The first barrier towards Intra Afghan dialogue was the pace of prisoner exchange between Afghan and Taliban authorities which delays the dialogue for months. But later on in June, the Afghan administration released 3000 Taliban prisoners. Although the prisoner who was involved in high profile attacks were not part of the deal.

Agreements between the Taliban, US and Afghan administration were signed in different languages in separate documents. So there is some confusion about the exchange of prisoners. For example in an agreement between the US and Taliban both parties had to release large scale prisoners. By 10th March 2020, both Afghan administration release over 5000 Taliban prisoners and 1000 Afghan soldiers by the Taliban. Afghan administration and the US release a joint statement by they announce that they are going to release a large scale of exchange of prisoners.

In the mid of March President Ashraf Ghani signed a draft about to release around 1500 Taliban prisoners. But each of them has assurance the government about keeping himself away from the battleground. Afghan administration imposes conditions for further release of prisoners to the reduction of violence and intra-Afghan dialogue. Taliban spokesperson announces a specified list of their prisoners and they rejected the Afghan conditions and they said it is against the peace accord which they signed.

Although the Taliban were not practicing the Afghan government conditions, the Afghan administration began releasing the Taliban prisoners. They release about 3000 Taliban, and also they announced that very soon they would release 2000 more. But the Taliban remain on their stance about to complete the arrangement of their prisoners and after it, they become the part of the negotiation. So just after a week of 5000 Taliban fighters released by the Afghan administration the Taliban start talks in Doha. Although the USA and the Afghan government did not agree to release those Taliban who was responsible for large scale violence. But the Taliban describe it as the barriers of peace talks. But all actors realized that the further delay will generate more complications for the peace process. (Kazantey, 2020)

## **Escalation of violence**

But dramatically as the Afghan administration tries to break in exchange for prisoners, the Taliban escalate the violence in the country. Although they avoid attacking against the Afghan forces during a week ago of US-Taliban agreement. On March 2, Secretary of Defense Mark Asper said that he is very optimistic about the reduction of violence in Afghanistan. Although this condition was not part of the US Taliban agreement. But the situation becomes worst about violence. According to the Afghan official in April, an average of 25 to 40 Afghan soldiers were killed by the Taliban.

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The escalation in violence put serious questions on the intra-Afghan dialogue. Although the Taliban remain in denial position about these bloody attacks. US special representative Mr. Khalilzad pointed to the third party, Islamic State is just using the situation and responsible for this violence. After this situation Ashraf Ghani orders his Defense Secretary to switch the national army to offensive mode.

At the end of the Holy month of Ramzan, during Eid ul Fitr. Taliban announced three days ceasefire in the country. Afghan administration welcomes this decision and requested the Taliban to extend the ceasefire period but the Taliban refused to extend it. Although the Taliban did not escalate the situation after the ceasefire time ended, but the third week of the June was the deadliest period for Afghan forces, during this third week around 300 Afghan soldiers were killed during the Taliban attacks. (Kazantey, 2020)

### **COVID-19 situation**

Afghanistan was one of the most affected countries by COVID. Over 30,000 cases were reported at the end of June. Although this start was very down because the Afghan Health Ministry's testing capacity was very limited. So the whole developments stopped due to the situation. All dynamics of the US Taliban impacted. During the COVID situation President Trump also supported to escalate the withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan.

COVID further spread in Afghanistan can deeply affect the peace process in Afghanistan. It might be helpful to compromise and cooperation. Afghan officials offer the Taliban that they can help them to fight against the virus in the areas of Taliban control. Although some experts criticize the Taliban behavior to escalate the violence especially when the Afghan government was fighting against the virus. Poor health structure and open borders with Iran can pump the situation to horrible stage. Around 300,000 Afghan refugees returned from Iran during the last three months.

### **US policy and prospects**

Need for a political arrangement between the Taliban and Afghan administration which can reduce the armed struggle. President Ashraf Ghani announced that he will never accept any agreement which limits the rights of the Afghan nation. He also warns the international community that any agreement of American forces withdrawal without the presence of Kabul can push the state back on the 1990s situation. When the fall of Kabul become the result of the rise of the Taliban. (Khan, 2020)

Taliban stance was not clear about the post-settlement of Afghanistan. Afghan society is divided about the feature of the peace settlement in Afghanistan. People who were working for the rights of women are very careful about the Taliban policies about working women. Still a large part of the Afghan public desire for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. People who suffered the war for a much

longer time are just desired for peace at any cost. US officials have a different type of opinion about the withdrawal of their forces. But the representatives of the US always insisted that the feature of Afghanistan would have to decide by the will of the Afghani public.

### **The security situation of Afghanistan**

In the mid-2020, around 8000 soldiers of NATO lead mission was working for peace there. This force advised and trained the Afghanistan national defense forces. These forces took control after the international forces. US combat operations have increased. Just before a month in June US operational soldier's numbers are 8600. According to some researchers, President Trump's statement about withdrawal from Afghanistan was due to the Afghan Presidential crisis. Some war experts took American decisions in the context of part of Trump policy. It seems that the American administration dealing with military progress in Afghanistan as a policy shifting. American policy shifting is also influencing the control of Afghan administration on the battlefield. Although this is effecting the control of the Afghan military over the rural areas of Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the US escalated air operations. It assumes that the Trump administration focuses on airstrikes as ground operations due to minimizing the risk of their soldier's casualties. These airstrikes become the cause of a sharp rise in civilian deaths. After 2009, 2019 was the year when a large number of civilians died by the US airstrikes in different areas of Afghanistan. According to the UN reports, during the 30 days of July over 4300 civilians were died by the US airstrikes. US airstrikes increase at the start of 2020, over 1010 strikes conducted during the first two months. Later in the start of peace talks US air force stop reporting about the attacks and casualties of civilians due to its impacts on ongoing peace dealing. (Afzal, 2020)

### **Adversaries of the US**

Taliban leadership system is based on the Islamic Emirate system. Where the leadership calls the Emir Ul Mominin. The head of Taliban leadership is Haibatullah Akhunzada. He was appointed by Shura after the death of Mullah Mansoor who was died in a US airstrike in 2016. He was appointed after the natural death of Mullah Umar who was died in 2013. Mullah Haibatullah is not a military commander. He is a religious person and also remains the part of Shariya Courts. Under his leadership, the Taliban seems more unite and they reach on some remarkable military achievements. His leadership remains consensus-oriented.

Taliban battleground capabilities in rural and urban areas are remarkable. Their full-time fighters strength is over 60.000, that have the capability to launch a strong ground attack. Although US officials measure the Taliban and Afghan power capability in a balanced way. This balance can be shifted to the Taliban if

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the United States decides to put off their military from the operational areas. By the deduction of funds of Afghan forces this balance can also affect the Afghan administration.

After the Taliban, ISIS-K is the second major victim of US operations. The operational force's strength of ISIS-K is around 2000-4000. This armed struggle was collapsed after the heavy attacks of US and Afghan forces during 2019. Although the Taliban also remained in a fight with ISIS. The leadership of ISIS was killed or arrested by the US and Afghan forces operations. The US still considers ISIS is as a threat. Although their leadership is divided.

Al Qaida network is also operated in Afghanistan. Although their leadership was arrested or killed during the last few years. But still, the network is existed in an operational capacity. Although Al Qaida is not part of the peace deals. But is reported that the senior Taliban leadership was in contact for information sharing regarding peace talks with other stakeholders. Taliban-US peace talks seem like a victory for the Taliban by Al Qaida. It is still unclear that after the US withdrawal at which level Al Qaida operated.

## **Pakistan and regional actors**

The involvement of international powers in Afghanistan and regional dynamics are the major causes of conflict in Afghanistan. So in the presence of regional dynamics, the neighbor states are considered more important. So Pakistan is also the neighbor state of Afghanistan. It plays an important and active role in Afghanistan from decades. Pakistan's strategic entrust push him to make ties with Afghan insurgents like the Haqqani group. Afghan administration and the US forces consider Pakistan as the main supporter of this insurgent group. President Trump blames Pakistan for the safe heavens of this group. Since the arrangements of current peace talks, the US administration thanked Pakistan for facilitating the talks. International think tanks perceive Pakistan's role in peace is very constructive due to the role of the facilitator.

A strong and united Afghanistan is in favor of Pakistan, along with border and strong ethnic ties are also the reason. USSR and US attacks in Afghanistan during the last three decades push millions of Afghan refugees to Pakistan which becomes the burden for the economy. The presence of these refugees complicated the situation. So a peaceful Afghanistan is in favor of Pakistan. Due to the 1600 KM shared border, Pakistan seems the Taliban more friendly. Indian strategic encirclement in Afghanistan is the reason to make the situation more complicated. India's diplomatic and commercial programs in Afghanistan and American support for India are a real problem for Pakistan. India has a major part in Afghan reconstruction.



## **Indian Entrust in Afghanistan**

India had treaty of strategic partnership with Afghanistan since 2011. Although it shows a loyalty with Afghanistan. Afghan nationals have big opportunities in India. Indian administration still didn't officially recognize the negotiation for peace with Taliban. Because Indian stance for Taliban is very clear that the Taliban are just promoting the Pakistani interest in Afghanistan. If upcoming settlement create more space for Taliban in Afghanistan then it will be a serious problem for Indian interest in Afghanistan.

## **US Aid**

Decades of wars destroy the Afghan industries. So economic development in Afghanistan is very important for its stability. Afghan economy was suffering due to the decrease of the economic aid of international donors. Afghan Gross Domestic Product is 7% since 2003, but it averaged around 2 to 3% but due to the pandemic situation of COVID it might be decreases more.

Congress approves 137 billion dollars budget for Afghanistan. With about 27% for development and 63% for security. Afghan administration requested for 2021 budget, 4 billion for security, and 250 million dollars for economic development. The administration also needs funds for anti-narcotics. These figures are out of the operational cost of US operations, which was coasted 776 billion dollars as of September 2019. In the 2021 budget, Pentagon included 14 billion dollars for direct war cost.

## **Conclusion**

Outbreak of US Taliban agreement of 29 February, 2020, is a remarkable day for the Afghan nation. Still, US officials are very conscious of the dynamics of the future. They considered it as a first step towards peace. Shift in future security dynamics can shuffle the situation. Due to the current COVID situation, it's also possible the engagement of international partners affected economically and politically.

There are two things Pakistan does *not* want in Afghanistan. The first is a hasty American withdrawal. To Pakistan, that evokes the time period after the Soviet-Afghan war, which fueled its sense of and narrative of abandonment, setting the stage for many of Pakistan's subsequent destructive behaviors.

Pakistan also does not want an unfriendly government in Kabul to be precise, it does not want a government that is more friendly with India than it is with Pakistan. And it is no secret that it has had a rough relationship with the current Afghan government.

Thus, one could conjecture that Pakistan wants some kind of power-sharing arrangement to emerge in Afghanistan. If the Taliban has a large enough role, the government is likely to be friendlier to Pakistan. Pakistan wants the Taliban in

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complete control in Afghanistan. For one, Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is not seamless. Two, Pakistan does not want an Islamic emirate in the vein of 1990s Afghanistan on its western border. That didn't work out well for Pakistan and a sequence of events led to it becoming the target of terror for years.

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