

AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

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 Analysis

Recently Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced an unconditional truce with the Taliban on the occasion of Eid, hoping it would help end the destructive violence to the nation. To everyone's surprise, The Taliban agreed to the ceasefire and stopped all offensive operations against Afghan security forces during the holiday. The move was celebrated across the country; millions began to have hopes that peace was not a distant dream.

War-torn Afghanistan is in desperate search of peace. On July 10-11, 2019, representatives of China, Russia, and the United States held their third consultation on the Afghan peace process in Beijing, China. Previously Taliban's political chief Mulla Abdul Gani visited the country. It is safe to say that both the Afghan government and the Taliban agree on one thing, that they are in favor of peace. Sadly all the peace talks and negotiations have not changed anything on the ground. There has been no compromise in

Taliban's stand towards the Afghan government and the group's position regarding the United States' stay in Afghanistan. Despite many rounds of talks and months of lobbying, The United States has failed to produce any concessions from the Taliban. The Taliban leadership has put some preconditions for the peace talks. Firstly, the Taliban leadership maintains the stand that the Afghan government is not a legitimate party to the peace process. Secondly, the Taliban continues to demand the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

Despite the Afghan government and United States' willingness to offer some concessions to the Taliban, both are reluctant to clear their stand on the plan for the withdrawal of International forces from the country. The deadlock in the process is precisely due to the incompetent answer to the question of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.



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This deadlock will potentially remain in the near future. There are two major reasons that play the most important reasons for the ongoing deadlock. First, Afghanistan has given rise to two major blocs when it comes to the country's political leadership's relationship with the international community. The current Afghan government is heavily dependent on the United States for its survival. The Ghani administration is aware that as soon as the U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the former's influence or chances of survival in the country are going to take a significant blow. The United States did try to exclude the Afghan government from peace talks a number of times to deal with the Taliban directly. So far this strategy has not worked, as the Afghan government has put Washington under pressure for excluding it from the peace process.

Second, the Afghan Taliban and some other political groups are involved in a considerable diplomatic buildup when it comes to improving ties with regional states particularly China and Russia, Pakistan and Iran. The Taliban's leadership participated in conferences in Russia and China, where the group demanded the US immediate withdrawal from their land.

The Taliban's political spokesperson's recent visit to China was held when the United States was involved in another round of talks with the group. In China, the spokesperson said, "It is clear that when the Americans announce their decision on the timeline of the withdrawal of their forces [from Afghanistan], it will open the way for intra-Afghan talks so that we can decide on the future government and intra-Afghan talks." This indicates that Beijing's influence has not only grown significantly in Afghanistan's politics but also in terms of the country's ties with the Taliban.

In Afghanistan, opposition political parties and leaders are aware that the United States' stay in Afghanistan is likely to come to an end in the next few years. Due to this reason they are collaborating with regional power centers to boost their chances of coming to power. The

situation has forced Afghanistan's domestic politics to become a competing ground for various national and international powerbrokers. While Washington is gearing up to withdraw its troops, regional states such as China, Russia and Pakistan are preparing to work with local political groups, including the Taliban, to ensure that the dicey transition would happen peacefully.

The Talks

This year, despite peace negotiations between the Taliban and numerous world actors that have been ongoing for months, no ceasefire was achieved. Taliban leader Mullah Akhundzada's annual message on Eid stated, "no one should expect us to pour cold water on the heated battlefronts of jihad or forget our forty year sacrifices before reaching our objectives". In other words, they are willing to talk about peace but they do not mind to continue the fight.

Since the Afghan government's withdrawal of its previous preconditions and the United States appointment of special representative Zalmay Khalilzad to seek reconciliation last year, negotiations have been ongoing. There have been a number of rounds of talks between the US and the Taliban in Doha, as well as other meetings among the Taliban, certain government officials and representatives of regional nations in Moscow and Beijing. There have also been bilateral meetings between Khalilzad and regional nations such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and India. Peace negotiations are always time consuming and Afghanistan is no exception, no one is expecting any decision to happen anytime soon. However, there are a number of challenges with the current negotiations that makes one wonder whether peace is too much to ask.

One main impediment in the peace process is the severe legitimacy crisis faced by the National Unity Government. Power struggle within the government is clearly shown with Ghani's former allies speaking out against the government. There are questions being raised

about the Electoral Commissions neutrality. Elections have been postponed, causing criticism by the opposition of it being “opportunistic and deceitful”. Parliamentary elections, which were finally held in October 2018, were marred by allegations of fraud. This has resulted in the failure to improve the government’s legitimacy and build faith in the democratic system of governance.

Another hurdle in the peace process is the attitude of the United States. The USA has miserably failed to stabilize Afghanistan in spite of spending billions of dollars in the country for over two decades. The Taliban has repeatedly stressed that it would continue fighting until all foreign forces leave the country. This adds pressure on the US, who actually has been trying to extract themselves from the region steadily since 2014. They need to leave in order for the Taliban to stop fighting, however this is a risky step to take, as their departure would most likely cause an increase in violence due to the Taliban’s pursue of more territory control before making any negotiation.

The Trump administration is also reportedly planning to pardon US soldiers accused of war crimes in Afghanistan. According to some reports over 1.17 million war crimes claims have been filed by the Afghans, but it remains uncertain whether The Hague will launch an investigation into these claims following intense pressure from Washington. Should this happen it would certainly outrage the Afghan citizens who have been victimized by the brutal war.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has instituted a judicial system for areas under their control and pride themselves on being able to deliver “swift and fair justice” to the people. Moves to pardon those guilty of war crimes against Afghans would be like a major propaganda tool for the Taliban served on a platter; they would be more than happy to point out US atrocities against citizens and the injustice they received.

But the most challenging issue is the US’ failure to include Pakistan in the peace process. Without Pakistan, surely peace negotiations are going to fail miserably. Whether the US likes it or not, Pakistan geopolitically is the most important player in this matter; it can play its unique role to bring peace in Afghanistan.

The key for peace negotiations lies in the demands of Afghan Taliban. It is vital for the US and its allies to accept the Taliban’s conditions if these countries are serious in creating peace in the dying country. The Taliban has consistently made four major demands regarding a negotiated settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan: direct talks with the US, withdrawal of international forces, the formation of an interim government, and revision of the Afghan constitution.

Peace in Afghanistan is paramount for the peace in South Asia. The Afghan people have suffered too much in the last 40 years. Around 250 casualties a day is simply too cruel to be overlooked. The countries included in the negotiations only need to put themselves in Afghanistan’s shoes, only then the negotiations would focus to reach peace above all else.